

## 150 Years of Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari

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# Forty-Nine Years of Aramaic and Semitic Philology at Layard's Home, Ca' Cappello

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**Abstract** Semitic Philology has been taught at Ca' Foscari for almost fifty years in the unique setting of Ca' Cappello, former Venetian residence of the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard. There, in a most inspiring environment for Semitists, from 1969 to present, seven specialists have taught Semitic languages and culture to generations of students. The broad scope of the subject represents the appeal of Semitic Philology to Ca' Foscari students: to those interested in the history and languages of the Ancient Near East and to students who concentrate on modern Semitic languages and contemporary issues.

**Keywords** Semitic Philology. Aramaic. Austen Henry Layard. Near Eastern Studies. Ancient and modern Semitic Languages.

Teaching and studying Semitic languages at Ca' Cappello-Layard, the place that was the Venetian residence of the celebrated discoverer of Nineve, Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894) is a unique experience. In 1884 Layard retired to a place that was particularly suitable to him, in the final part of his adventurous life.<sup>1</sup> As Julian Reade wrote, in the concluding remarks of a paper he delivered at the 1983 Colloquium *Austen Henry Layard*

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For Giuliano Tamani, Mentor and Friend, with profound gratitude.

**1** Layard first came to Venice in 1839. He later returned in 1866 and 1867 when he created the Venice and Murano Glass and Mosaic Company in collaboration with Antonio Salviati (1816-1890). In 1871, on holiday in Venice from the Legation in Madrid with his wife Enid, he asked Rawdon Brown (1803-1883) to find him a Venetian home. That place was Ca' Cappello, where he moved permanently in July 1884 (cf. Arnott 1987, 150-1).

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*tra l'Oriente e Venezia*, organised by Frederick Mario Fales and Bernard Hickey: "Here, as near the Orient as anywhere in western Europe, he could without incongruity display his collection of Assyrian sculptures and Italian paintings on the walls of one palazzo. Poised still between the exotic and the familiar, between rebellion and respectability, he could watch equably as Venice, with ice-floes on the Grand Canal, displayed her own unpredictable felicities" (Reade 1987, 53). Unfortunately, there are no tangible traces of such an illustrious predecessor in the building, where also the internal layout has changed in the course of time, in order to accommodate classrooms and offices. There are no pieces of the original furniture, nor archaeological artifacts. Ten Assyrian relief fragments and two Neo-Babylonian bricks were donated by Layard to the city of Venice and they are housed today in the Museo Civico e Raccolta Correr (Favaretto 1987, 233). At Ca' Cappello, only rare examples of the original decorative elements survive.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is an inspiring experience to offer classes and lectures in the very place where the celebrated discoverer of Nimrud and Ninive spent part of his life.

The teaching of Semitic languages at Ca' Foscari dates back to 1962, when Arabic language was first offered by Maria Nallino. That course was later followed by the creation, in 1965, of a university degree in Oriental Languages and Literatures (Corso di laurea in lingue e letterature orientali), that included the Chair of Hebrew, while the first course in Hebrew language and literature was offered in the academic year 1965-66. The teaching of Semitic Philology was added to the curriculum on 3 February 1969 (ASCF, Organi Collegiali, Consiglio di Facoltà di Lingue). The first to offer a course on the subject was Franco Michelini Tocci, Professor of History of Religions at Ca' Foscari, who was officially put in charge of the teaching of Semitic Philology (*Professore Incaricato*). The next academic year (1969-70), Fabrizio Angelo Pennacchietti joined the former Department of Hebrew, today Department of Asian and North African Studies (DSAAM) at Ca' Cappello and was appointed Professor (*Professore Ordinario*) of Semitic Philology. Pennacchietti, a Semitist and an Aramaic scholar, whose broad interests spanned from Aramaic epigraphy to lin-

2 For example, the frescoed ceiling in a small ground floor office, or the stucco decorations and mirror-framed fireplace in the corner classroom next door. This last room was vividly described by Lady Gregory, a close friend of the Layards and a frequent guest at Ca' Cape pello (Hickey 1987, 162). The original stained-glass windows on the first floor hall (now part of the library) one sees in the portrait of Enid Layard have been replaced (for an image of the portrait, Hickey 1987, tav. XXIV, British Museum Society). For another Ca' Cappello scene, see the 1891 portrait by Passini depicting Layard at his desk at Ca' Cappello, with a library background (Favaretto 1987, tav. LII, National Portrait Gallery). After the death of Lady Layard, in 1912 the palace was bought by the illustrious jurist and lawyer Francesco Carnelutti, Professor of Commercial and Civil Law at the University of Milan Bocconi, later in Padua and Rome. The palace was bought by Ca' Foscari in 1967.

guistics, including Neo-Aramaic dialects and Esperanto, spent ten years in Venice, from 1969 to 1979, and later joined the University of Turin. In 1973-74 the course was offered by Carlo Zaccagnini. The next year (1974-75), Frederick Mario Fales joined the Department and continued to offer the course in the following years. In 1982 he was appointed Associate Professor (*Professore Associato*) and taught Semitic Philology at Ca' Foscari until 1987. In 1988 he joined the University of Padua and from 1989 to 1990 he offered courses in Semitic Philology at Ca' Foscari as an external temporary professor (*supplente esterno*). In 1990 Riccardo Contini joined the Department at Ca' Cappello first as temporary professor (*supplente*) and, from 1992 onward, as Associate Professor (*Professore Associato*) of Semitic Philology. He remained at Ca' Foscari until the academic year 1998-99 and then joined the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples. From 1999-00 to 2005-06 the course was taught by Eleonora Cussini, as an Adjunct Professor (*Professore a contratto*) and for one year, in 2006-07 by Fiorella Scagliarini. From 2007-08 to the present academic year (2017-18), the course has been held by this writer.

The first available Ca' Foscari course guide (*Notiziario guida per lo studente*), that of the academic year 1973-74, records that Carlo Zaccagnini offered a course on Comparative Semitic Linguistics and another on the history of Semites in the Ancient Near East.

In 1974-75, Frederick Mario Fales taught a general introductory course on the grammar of Semitic languages, another on the Aramaeans and an Assyriological seminar on Akkadian language. While the general introductory course and the Assyriological seminar were offered every year, the second or monographic course focused on different topics within the realm of Semitics, i.e. mainly on Old Aramaic and Imperial Aramaic dialects and inscriptions. Akkadian was the object of the monographic course in 1977-78, while the seminar dealt with the history of the Ancient Near East in the pre-Islamic period. In 1979-80 there were two courses: the general one on Ancient Near Eastern languages and relevant writing systems, with a focus on Ugaritic and Phoenician, while Egyptian-Aramaic texts from Elephantine, in comparison to Biblical Aramaic, were analysed in the monographic course.

In 1980-81, a course divided in three parts was reintroduced. In the general course one finds a discussion of Semitic phonology, and a focus on the different writing systems of the Semitic languages in the monographic course. Moreover, a text-reading Assyriological seminar on Neo-Babylonian letters was offered. In the following academic year the general course addressed third millennium BC cuneiform documents from Fara, Abu Salabikh and Ebla, while the monographic course focused on Arabic. A choice of Neo-Assyrian letters were read in the Assyriological seminar. In 1982-83 the monographic course dealt with the theme of the wise courtier in the framework of Biblical wisdom literature and the Aramaic story of

Ahiqar, while the general course was on Old Aramaic dialect and its documents. In the Assyriological seminar bilingual dictionaries from Ebla were discussed. In 1983-84 Mesopotamian literature, and specifically the Epic of Gilgamesh, was the object of the general course, while the monographic course offered an introduction to Ugaritic language and documents. The seminar dealt with Neo-Assyrian letters and court epistolography as a literary genre. In 1984-85 the general course addressed literature and politics in the Ancient Near East. The monographic course focused on archaic Semitic languages: Old Akkadian, Eblaite and Amorrean and their relation to Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic. In the seminar, Ugaritic poetic and historical texts and late cuneiform royal inscriptions were examined.

In 1984-85, besides an inter-departmental joint-seminary, two courses were offered: one on the myth of Neo-Assyrian empire in Eastern antiquity, in the classical world and in the nineteenth century, and an advanced class on Old Aramaic inscriptions. The following year, in addition to the inter-departmental joint-seminary, there was one introductory course on Comparative Semitic Grammar, with further study of Akkadian Royal inscriptions on one hand, and of Imperial Aramaic documents on the other. The courses offered in 1987-88 were the inter-departmental joint-seminary and a class on the morphology of Semitic languages. The monographic course addressed the sources of Ancient Near Eastern history.

Semitic Philology was not offered in the academic year 1988-89 and students of Hebrew, Persian and Arabic had the possibility to take courses in Medieval Hebrew Philology and Islamic or Iranian Philology. Given the great relevance of the subject in the curriculum, after a one-year pause, the teaching of Semitic Philology was resumed in 1989-90, and taught by Fales, as an external temporary professor (*supplente esterno*).

In 1990-91, Riccardo Contini joined the Department. In 1991-92 his course was divided in three parts: a general introduction to Comparative Semitic linguistics, elements of Syriac and examination of a choice of texts and, finally, an introduction to the Neo-Aramaic dialect from Ma'alula (Syria). With the same pattern, the 1992-93 course focused on the languages of pre-Islamic Arabia and on Aramaic epistolography. In 1993-94 Contini offered an introduction to Qumran Aramaic and Turoyo (Neo-Aramaic) and Arabic dialects from Anatolia. The study of Qumran Aramaic texts continued in 1994-95, while the third part of the course consisted in an introduction to Syriac language. Besides the usual first part of the course devoted to an introduction to Comparative Semitic linguistics, in 1995-96 the monographic course treated Targumic Aramaic. Elements of Epigraphic South Arabian, with examination of a choice of texts, were offered in the third section of the course. In 1996-97 the course was divided in two parts: a monographic section featuring an introduction to Western Neo-Aramaic and a seminar on Jewish Aramaic, with selected readings from the Targumim.

Semitic Philology was not offered in 1997-98. In 1998-99 in addition

to an introduction to Comparative Semitic linguistics, Contini offered a course on the *Peshitta*, the Syriac translation of the Old Testament, and a seminar on Syriac sources on the Crusades.

Finally, the academic year 1999-2000 was the last year Contini taught at Ca' Foscari. He offered a course on the Aramaic literary work *The Story of Ahikar* between Elephantine and the Old Testament, and a seminar on Nabataean dialect.

From the academic year 2000-01 Semitic Philology was offered by this writer. In 2000-01 the course included a general introduction to Comparative Semitic linguistics and a monographic course on Palmyrene Aramaic.

As a result of the curriculum reform, from the academic year 2001-02 the course was divided in two parts or units (*primo* and *secondo modulo*). The first part consisted of a general introduction, illustrating Semitic languages, their phonology and morphology, with a focus on the distinctive features of Middle Aramaic. The second unit was devoted to a study of role and representation of women according to Middle Aramaic epigraphic and iconographic records. The topic of the 2002-03 course (first part) offered an introduction to Aramaic epigraphs on cuneiform tablets of the Neo-Assyrian, Neo and Late Babylonian and Achaemenid periods; in the second part a choice of inscriptions from the cuneiform archives of Murashu (Nippur), the Kasr archive (Babylon) and Neirab (Syria) was discussed. In 2003-04, besides the first introductory course, the second part focused on Middle Aramaic, with a discussion of chosen Nabataean, Palmyrene and Hatran inscriptions. In 2004-05 the second part of the course dealt with Imperial Aramaic and specifically with features of the Egyptian-Aramaic contracts from Elephantine, and an analysis of the legal language. The 2005-06 second part of the course centred on Aramaic documents from the second century BC to the third century AD. In 2006-07 the course was taught by Fiorella Scagliarini, with the usual introduction to Semitic Languages and a seminar on pre-Islamic inscriptions from North-Arabia.

From the academic year 2007-08, the course was taught by this writer and divided, as customary, into two parts: an introduction to Semitic languages and a monographic course on the Aramaic language of sale: from fifth century BC and later contracts, including legal formulae embedded in Nabataean and Palmyrene monumental inscriptions. In 2008-09 the second part of the course centred on Old Hebrew epigraphs, while in 2009-10 the second part was devoted to an introduction to Old Aramaic dialect and a presentation of its most significant epigraphic records.

In 2010-11 two Semitic Philology courses were offered: for the first degree course (*Corso di laurea triennale*), an introduction to ancient and modern Semitic languages (thirty hours) and, for the second degree course (*Corso di laurea magistrale* = MA degree course), a study of food and drink consumption according to Aramaic epigraphic sources (thirty hours).

From the academic year 2011-12, the course of Semitic Philology was

reorganised as one single unit for a total of thirty hours. In addition to the introduction to ancient and modern Semitic languages, their different writing systems and a discussion of relevant documents, attention was given to this writer's area of research, that is Aramaic epigraphy and aspects of social history and legal language from Imperial Aramaic to middle and late Aramaic documents. Whenever possible, given the amount of time now allocated to the course, additional in-depth analyses were offered: in 2012-13 on the study of samples of Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions from the Syrian site of Dura Europos, in domestic buildings and from the local synagogue; in 2013-14 on an introduction to Aramaic and North-Arabic pre-Islamic funerary inscriptions; in 2014-15 on a close-up examination of the different writing systems of the Semitic languages; in 2015-16 on a lexical study of names of professions and official roles according to Aramaic inscriptions and, in 2016-17, special attention was given to the mobility of Jews and to the networks the Jewish communities in Syria, in ancient Aramaic-speaking contexts.

Following the tragic events that led to the murder of the foremost Syrian archaeologist Khaled al-As'ad, and to destruction of monuments of Palmyra, to name just some of them, the temples of Bel and Baalshamin, the tower tombs, and artefacts in the former local museum, two conferences were held in Warsaw (April 2016) and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (May 2016). Issues from the two papers delivered by this writer at those conferences were discussed in the 2016-17 and 2017-18 Semitic Philology course, alongside other themes developed in other papers delivered at recent congresses on Aramaic and Palmyrene Studies.

The choice to draw attention to Middle Aramaic material, was especially done to meet the interests of Ca' Foscari students majoring in Arabic. Together with those majoring in Hebrew, they form the core audience in Semitic Philology classes, while other students major in Persian, Turkish or Archaeology, Ancient Near Eastern History and Assyriology.

Over the last fifteen years, Erasmus students from Spain, Germany and Belgium have been a welcome addition to the Semitic Philology classes. Ca' Foscari students participating to the Overseas and Erasmus Programmes have conducted small epigraphic research and activities abroad, in Museum collections, or on funerary epigraphs, as part of their Semitic Philology individual exam programme.

Moreover, examples of both first and second level degree originated from materials discussed in the Semitic Philology classes. Two recent thesis can be cited: the work of Francesca P. De Stales (2017) on the making of the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul started from the analysis, in Semitic Philology classes, of the Palmyrene collection housed in that Museum and on the origin of that and other collections of Ancient Near Eastern artifacts from territories that formerly belonged to the Ottoman Empire; and the thesis of Alice Salvadego (2017), whose research

topic was suggested during the presentation of stories of Aramaic fugitives during the Bar Kokhba anti-Roman revolt. She later used that ancient example as a model to investigate the theme of estrangement and exile in modern Palestinian narrative.

The broad scope of the subject of the course of Semitic Philology represents its appeal to Ca' Foscari students, not only to those interested in the Ancient Near East, but also to students interested in modern Semitic languages and contemporary historical and social issues. The course in Semitic Philology (especially as it was conceived by Pennacchietti and Contini, with attention to Neo-Aramaic and modern Aramaic dialects, or Scagliarini's and this writer's focus on pre-Islamic, Middle Aramaic and Nabataean or Palmyrene epigraphy) and an introduction on the general features of Semitic languages are fundamental methodological tools for Ca' Foscari students. Moreover, thanks to Semitic Philology, students acquire a better understanding of the phonological and morphological features of the language they major in and an awareness of the complex picture of Semitic languages in their chronological framework and wide geographical setting.

In his 1991 discussion on the teaching of Arabic at Ca' Foscari, Eros Baldissera concluded that he felt a pressing need for a course in Philology and History of Arabic language. He deemed important that this teaching could "free itself from Semitic Philology, so far oriented towards the ancient" (Baldissera 1991, 86). He also considered Semitic Philology "not so useful for students of Arabic", because "so far it has mainly treated theoretical and practical aspects of Semitic languages too early than Arabic".<sup>3</sup>

This view certainly does not reflect the objectives, the methodological approach and the topics of the courses in Semitic Philology that have been offered at Ca' Foscari, from its very beginning, almost fifty years ago, and especially over the last thirty years.

<sup>3</sup> Baldissera 1991, 86 in the original text: "E in tema di esigenze sentite val la pena di ribadire quella di un insegnamento di una filologia dell'arabo, una storia della lingua araba, per emanciparsi dalla filologia semitica, finora orientata verso l'antico in quanto nel suo ambito finora sono stati trattati per lo più aspetti teorico-pratici di lingue semitiche troppo anteriori all'arabo risultando quindi di non grande utilità per lo studente arabista senza interessi specificamente semitisti".

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