

## 150 Years of Oriental Studies at Ca' Foscari

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# Maria Nallino (1908-1974) and the Birth of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Ca' Foscari

Ida Zilio-Grandi  
(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

**Abstract** This essay, based on bibliographic and archival material, focuses on the academic figure Maria Nallino, a scholar whose voluminous body of work ranges from classicism to modernity with equal fluency and expertise. Daughter of the famous Orientalist Carlo Alfonso Nallino (1872-1938), whose work she gathered and actively promoted, her arrival at Ca' Foscari (1962) inaugurated Arabic and Islamic Studies in Venice.

**Keywords** Arabian Studies. Ca' Foscari. Nallino. Arabic language. Islamic Studies.

The story of Maria Nallino at Ca' Foscari begins on 27 October 1962, with the report<sup>1</sup> that the selection board of the competition for the first chair of Arabic Language and Literature at the Higher Institute of Economics in Venice sent to the Minister of Education. Until then, Ca' Foscari had only seen 'free' Arabic classes, held first by Raffaele Giarue, a priest from Aleppo, between 1869 and 1899, and then, between 1912 and 1929, by Garabed Tchorbadjan.<sup>2</sup>

The document is signed by prestigious names for Italian and also European Oriental Studies. The board chairman was Giorgio Levi Della Vida (Venice 1886-Rome 1967) of the University of Rome. Della Vida was among the leading experts of Semitic Studies at the time; in addition to Arabic and Islamic Studies, he was also a recognised scholar in Syriac, Jewish, and Neo-Punic Studies. Being one of the eleven academics dismissed from teaching in 1931 for refusing to swear allegiance to the fascist regime, Della Vida emigrated to the United States in 1938. He was reinstated in 1945, and during that interval was the author, among many other works, of a fundamental catalogue of the Arabic and Islamic manuscripts preserved in the

1 Preserved in Archivio Storico Ca' Foscari (ASCF), Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti.

2 "On the latter I could not find information". This is what Maria Nallino herself recalls at the end of "Venezia in antichi scrittori" (M. Nallino 1963). See below for more on this interesting article.

Vatican Library (Levi Della Vida 1935).<sup>3</sup> Laura Veccia Vaglieri (Rome 1893-1989) of the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples was also a member of the competition selection board and, in 1937, produced a theoretical-practical grammar of the Arabic language that is still widespread in Italy today in the edition partially revised by Maria Avino (Veccia Vaglieri, Avino 2011). As an example of her vast output, she also co-authored a precious Ghazalian anthology with Roberto Rubinacci (Veccia Vaglieri, Rubinacci 1970). The great Francesco Gabrieli (Rome 1904-1996) of the University of Rome, one of the most distinguished European scholars in the field of Arab and Islamic civilisation from a historical-political but, above all, literary point of view in the light of the Crocian aesthetics, was an exponent of that collective judgment; he published many masterly works on the history of Arabic literature (Gabrieli 1951), the Arab historians of the Crusades (1957), the Arab culture of the twentieth century (1983), and much more. In recognition of his high intellectual stature, he was elected president of the Accademia dei Lincei between 1985 and 1988. The secretary of the competition, Umberto Rizzitano (Alexandria of Egypt 1913-Palermo 1980), considered the heir of Michele Amari (Palermo 1806-Florence 1889), was in his turn historian and excellent translator, a scholar and a disseminator of the Arab roots of European civilisation and a pioneer of a cultural and religious dialogue between the West and Islam. The fifth member of the commission was Father Giovanni Rinaldi (Trinità 1906-Nervi 1994), theologian, semitist, and biblicist of the Collegio Emiliani in Genoa.

That distinguished commission declared Maria Nallino winner of the competition; Roberto Rubinacci (1915-1992) – another great scholar, jurist, and Islamologist – was classified second, with the same number of votes. But the commission praised Nallino in her “secure knowledge of the Arabic language, classic and contemporary” and, thanks to her numerous trips to Egypt, “the vast and precise erudition”, the “philological attitudes”, as well as the variety of her works that ranged from classicism to the contemporary world with equal fluency and expertise.<sup>4</sup> In confirmation of this last point, the commissioners quoted, on the one hand, the biography of an ancient Arab poet who converted to Islam during the Prophet’s life, al-Nābiġa al-Ġa’dī (d. 698 or 699 AD) (M. Nallino 1934), with a critical edition and a translation of his songbook; and, on the other hand, regarding the contemporary world, they highlighted her intense activity as editor (since 1939), and then director and scientific director (since 1955) of *Oriente Moderno*, the review published by the Istituto per l’Oriente,

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3 Maria Nallino would later dedicate a delicate memory to Levi Della Vida (Nallino 1968, 305-21). In 1971 she will also edit his *Note di storia letteraria arabo-ispánica* (Levi Della Vida 1971).

4 Archivio Storico Università Ca' Foscari, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti. All the quotations retrieved from this archive (ASCF) were translated into English by the Author.

founded in Rome in 1921; in addition, her press reviews from the main newspapers, her translation of documents and other political, geographical and cultural contributions from the Arab world were also taken into consideration. Finally, they observed that “a non negligible part of Maria Nallino’s scientific activity remains insufficiently put in evidence because it is dedicated to non-personal and non-autonomous works”.<sup>5</sup>

The commission made explicit reference to the six large volumes of the *Raccolta di scritti editi e inediti di Carlo Alfonso Nallino* (1939-48),<sup>6</sup> which Maria Nallino, the author’s only daughter, edited and sometimes actually completed, as in the case of the first volume and particularly the essay on Saudi Arabia (C.A. Nallino 1939; see also, on the same topic, M. Nallino 1941).<sup>7</sup> They also highlighted the almost invisible character of this demanding and patient work, a work, as the commissioners recalled, which included the Italian translation of the lessons on the history of Arab astronomy (C.A. Nallino 1944) and on the ancient Arabic literature that Carlo Alfonso Nallino had held in Arabic at the Cairo State University (1948).<sup>8</sup>

After receiving the report on the competition, the Minister of Education communicated the outcome to the Rector of Ca’ Foscari, Italo Siciliano (Campo Calabro 1895-Venice 1980), and for knowledge to the Rector of “La Sapienza” University of Rome, where Maria Nallino, after graduating in literature (1929) and obtaining the ‘libera docenza’ in Arabic literature (1948, confirmed in 1954) and in History and institutions on the Muslim world (1954, confirmed in 1957), served as an ordinary assistant to the Chair of Islamic Studies (from 16 June 1955).<sup>9</sup> So, on the morning of 3 November, the Council of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures met under the presidency of Ladislao Mittner (Fiume 1902-Venice 1975) and unanimously called Maria Nallino to hold the chair of Arabic Language and Literature in Ca’ Foscari, starting from 16 November 1962.

Once entered as a Tenured Professor at the University of Venice, taking up residence in the San Polo *sestiere*, near San Stae (not far from the current headquarters of the University, which at the time housed all the

5 ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti.

6 On Nallino’s monumental production see Capezzone 2012. On the cultural exchanges between Carlo Alfonso and Maria Nallino, I would also mention the inventory of their private papers due to the attentive care of Anna Baldinetti (Baldinetti 1995).

7 Later, she will autonomously treat similar questions (M. Nallino 1958 and again, on the peninsular States, 1961).

8 Maria Nallino would later return on the intellectual figure of her father, but in different terms, in what will be her last publication (M. Nallino 1973).

9 Before, in the same University, she had been a lecturer in charge of the Chair of Arabic Language (from 1 December 1948 to 15 June 1955).

Venetian oriental studies),<sup>10</sup> Maria Nallino worked hard to give form to a school of Arabic and Islamic Studies; and she had to create that school

from the very beginning [...] because this teaching was new to Venice, apart from the remote attempts of the last century; and this she did with exemplary zeal and competence. [...] The effectiveness of her teaching is demonstrated by the growing number of students. [...] [Among the attending] also two graduates of the University of Padua (and one of whom from the Aristotelian center) who intend to continue the study of medieval philosophy. (ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti)

This is what we read in the report drawn up by Alfredo Cavaliere (Crotona 1903-1999) and Franco Meregalli (Monza 1913-Venice 2004) on her *straordinariato* period, whose report was put on record of the Faculty Council on 16 November 1965.<sup>11</sup> During those three years, Maria Nallino was able to organise a library from nothing, a library which – as this report recites – “already consists of 1500 volumes, whose cataloging prof. Nallino, in the absence of experts, had to personally provide”.<sup>12</sup> The report continues:

It is also worth mentioning her effective collaborative work regarding the organization of the section of Oriental Languages and Literatures, which begins its activity in the present academic year 1965/66, and which in the chair so effectively covered by Maria Nallino has had its corner stone.<sup>13</sup>

In the meantime, she moved with alacrity, and not without some embarrassment,<sup>14</sup> among the meanderings of the University management; the first step was obtaining an assistant to her chair, in the person of

10 I owe this information to the courtesy of Eros Baldissera.

11 See again ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti.

12 ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti. It should be noted that, since then, that library has been considerably enriched, thanks to the diligent and generous commitment of the Arabic language and literature teachers, and also thanks to legacies of scholars, among them, Seeger Adrianus Bonebakker (Wish, the Netherlands, 1923-Zeist, The Netherlands, 2005), Professor Emeritus of Languages and Cultures of the Near East, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). On his legacy, see Ghersetti 2007 and also [https://www.unive.it/pag/file-admin/user\\_upload/SBA/documenti/BALI/Donazione\\_SA\\_Bonebakker\\_1.pdf](https://www.unive.it/pag/file-admin/user_upload/SBA/documenti/BALI/Donazione_SA_Bonebakker_1.pdf) (2018-07-05).

13 ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti.

14 In the letter dated 1 August 1964 (ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti), Maria Nallino wrote to the administrative director dr. Guido Monaco: “A letter from the Rector gives me the good news that I was assigned an assistant position to my chair. I immediately replied, telling him that I would like to ask for the competition immediately. But I do not know what kind of practice should be followed. I therefore turn to your courtesy by asking you to give me some instructions – if what I wrote to the Rector was not enough – on what I must do”.

Vincenzo Strika, who, between 1964 and 1967, helped her in teaching language and literature.

Her arrival at Ca' Foscari significantly influenced her research. She did not give up caring for her older colleagues' works: in fact, she edited the history of Tripoli and Tripolitania by the Turkologist, Islamologist, and codicologist Ettore Rossi (Secugnago 1894-Rome 1955) (Rossi 1968), and the notes of Arabic-Hispanic Literary History by Levi Della Vida (1971). But above all, she mostly turned her attention to the study of Arab historians and geographers and to their interest in Italy<sup>15</sup> and in Venice. In the spring of 1963, at the Giorgio Cini Foundation, on the island of San Giorgio, she gave a very popular lecture entitled "Venice and the Arabs until the year one thousand" (*La Venezia dei Mille* 1965, 163-72, and subsequently Branca 1979, 199-208). In the same year she published in *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, her still unsurpassed<sup>16</sup> essay on the presence of Venice in the works of ancient Arab writers (M. Nallino 1963), where, starting from the Arabic name of the lagoon city, *Bunduqiyya*, and its Greek-Byzantine etymology, she retraced the quotations referring to Venice in the geographic literature up to the fifteenth century: from the probably most ancient, in *Kitāb al-A'lāq al-nafisa* (Book of the Precious Stones) by Ibn Rusta of Isfahan (text written at the beginning of the tenth century), to *Kitāb šūrat al-arḍ* (Book of the Configuration of the Earth) of the Mesopotamian Ibn Ḥawqal (second half of the tenth century), to the so-called *Kitāb Rūḡār* (Roger's Book) of the Moroccan-Egyptian-Sicilian al-Idrīsī (d. 1251), to *Taqwīm al-buldān* (Determination of the Countries in Latitude and Longitude) of the Syrian Abū l-Fidā' (d. 1331), up to another Syrian, Ibn al-Wardī (d. after 1419) in his *Ḥarīdat al-'aḡā'ib* (Pearl of Wonders); to end in the curious lesson of good manners for the Arab interlocutors of the Doge offered in *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* (The Morning of the Nictalope) by the Egyptian al-Qalqašandī (d. 1418). Maria Nallino offered a further tribute to her adoptive city when, elected as a corresponding member in the Veneto Institute of Sciences, Arts and Letters, she illustrated for this academy, during a meeting on 6 November 1965, the result of a meticulous documentary research (M. Nallino 1965a): *in absentia*, she confirmed the existence of a printed edition of the Koran in Arabic movable type, produced in the sixteenth century in the Paganini Venetian typography, absolutely the first printed edition of an Arabic Koran, preceding all other European printed editions as well

15 See, for example, M. Nallino 1964 and the subsequent M. Nallino 1966 (this essay is often taken up by contemporary scholars: see, as an example, König 2015). Even before arriving in Venice, Maria Nallino had come to that subject (M. Nallino 1945).

16 As confirmed by its repeated quotations in the most recent studies on the history of Venice; see for example Pedani 2017, 84, 108.

as, and by several centuries, those of the Arab and Islamic world.<sup>17</sup> This edition was discovered many years later, confirming Maria Nallino's work.

The results achieved in her first three years at Ca' Foscari, with her commitment to the creation of a prominent Venetian centre of Arabic and Islamic Studies, including Islamic philosophy, are also widely praised by the report dated 22 March 1966, by the commission of Orientalists who promoted her to the role of *Professore Ordinario*; a commission, again, of all excellence: still Levi Della Vida; then the semitist, Africanist, politician and diplomat Enrico Cerulli (Naples 1898-Rome 1988), renowned among other things for his studies on the Arab-Spanish sources of the *Divine Comedy* (Cerulli 1949, 1972),<sup>18</sup> president of the Accademia dei Lincei between 1973 and 1976; and the youngest but equally celebrated Alessandro Bausani (Rome 1921-1988), scholar of Iranic Studies and of the Arab-Islamic sciences, at that time Professor of Persian Language and Literature at the Oriental Institute of Naples. As for the research, the commissioners quoted the "usual qualities of perfect linguistic knowledge and of very precise bibliographic information, and the familiarity with the scientific method also in the field of contemporary Arabic literature";<sup>19</sup> but they particularly underlined Maria Nallino's interest in the historical and cultural relations between the Arab world and, in fact, her new city of Venice; lastly, the study that she conducted on the *Diarii* by Marin Sanudo the Younger (Venice 1466-1536), on the last times of the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, "an arduous task for the delicate problems of identification that it presents, duly and successfully resolved [...], which constitutes the first part of a much wider work", a work that Maria Nallino would not have the time to complete.<sup>20</sup>

The period of her *ordinariato*, which runs from 5 April 1966 to her premature death, is more than ever intended to shape and expand the Arabic section in Ca' Foscari. To provide a wider cultural context to language and literature, additional teaching was needed; and, in order to face this necessity, Maria Nallino gradually took in hand the fundamental teaching of History of the religions of the East (from the academic year 1965-66 to 1968-69), the fundamental teaching of political history and institutions of the East (1966-67), the teaching of Geography of the Near, Middle, and Far East (1967-68), and finally, for a longer time, the teaching of Islamic Studies (from the academic year 1969-70 to 1973-74).

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17 The first appeared in Bombay (1852), followed by Cairo (1864) and Istanbul (1872) (cf. Albin 2004).

18 I remember here that Maria Nallino, too, studied the relationship between the *Commedia* and the Arabic literature, but modern (M. Nallino 1932).

19 ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti.

20 ASCF, Fascicolo Nallino Maria, Serie Docenti. For the complete bibliography of Maria Nallino, cf. Castro 1974 and Minganti 1974, especially 566.

Her work for Ca' Foscari culminated when she assumed the direction of the Seminar of Arabic literature, with a rectoral decree of 21 October 1971, a post that she kept until her death and that, after the brief interlude of the dialectologist Giovanni Montaina (? - Palermo 2012), was taken over between 1976 and 1979 by Giovanni Oman (Cairo 1922-Rome 2007).<sup>21</sup> Then, as evidence of a fruitful tradition, her legacy was worthily collected in Venice<sup>22</sup> and elsewhere; but this is a more recent history.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Giovanni Oman would then sign the dedication in *Studi in memoria di Maria Nallino nel decimo anniversario della morte* (Oman 1984).

22 In particular by Francesca Lucchetta (who followed her in the study of the relationship between Venice and the East, dedicating herself to the schools of Oriental languages; cf. Lucchetta 1984, an essay specifically dedicated to Maria Nallino), Eros Baldissera, Giovanni Canova and Rosella Dorigo, and later by Lidia Bettini and Antonella Ghersetti.

23 For this, and especially for the teaching of Arabic, see Kalati 2007, 288-90, Baldissera 1991. In general and in short, see also Gabrieli 1982, 26.

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