

“I Have To Disguise Myself”: Orientalism, Gyula Germanus, and Pilgrimage as Cultural Capital, 1935–1965

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The Muslim pilgrimage has long constituted a form of cultural capital. Throughout the dangerous journey to Arabia, and then within Mecca and Medina, scholars and non-scholars have mingled and exchanged ideas, bought books, and have been enriched by new experiences.¹ Back home, the male and female pilgrim have acquired a title, “the one who made the pilgrimage” (*ḥājj* [*ḥājjī*] and *ḥājjja*), which has informed his or her status in the community. Making a pilgrimage, in general, activates claims to piety, knowledge, and prestige—a phenomenon that continued in the twentieth century. Such claims and their limits are the subject of this chapter, which examines the doubly curious example of a Muslim Orientalist from Eastern Europe in the interwar and Cold War periods.

Gyula or Julius Germanus (1884–1979), a Hungarian Turkologist and Arabist, and a convert to Islam, acquired and claimed knowledge by making the Hajj to Mecca and also trips in the Ḥijāz. Yet his first two travels occurred in the late 1930s when technology had already transformed the nature of the pilgrimage. Inside Arabia, this was a period of slower transition because the young Saudi kingdom was relatively poor, although as we shall see, modern technology such as radio was available, and thus Nazi radio propaganda in Arabic was discussed. Germanus nonetheless attempted to experience and narrate the pilgrimage as a romantic enterprise and struggle for knowledge. The product was a series of books in which a mixture of scholarship, travel description, and popular convictions created a somewhat literary representation of the Middle East during the Cold War. What his story best exemplifies, however, is the political function of the Hajj within Eastern European-Middle Eastern entanglements.

1 F.E. Peters, *Mecca: A Literary History of the Muslim Holy Land* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). The author would like to express his gratitude for permission to publish the photographs to Dr. János Kubassek, director of the Hungarian Museum of Geography, and for research help to Dr. Katalin Puskás, chief archivist in the same institution.

By the twentieth century, the figure of the Orientalist as a scholar-traveler became an outdated public image. Germanus was one of the last nineteenth-century-type Orientalist scholars who personally attempted the Hajj. Between 1800 and 1950, around a hundred European adventurers, spies, traders, tourists, and scholars in Arabia tried,² but only a few succeeded, or even reached Mecca, usually disguised. John Lewis Burckhardt, Richard Burton, Snouck Hurgronje, and St. John Philby are the best known names.³ For them, the Hajj was an opportunity to gain information about geography, politics, commerce, and the institutions and rituals of Islam. Germanus included himself in this chain of travelers and scholars in his writings,⁴ which painted a relatively static image of “the Orient” for Hungarian readers in the 1960s. This image did not reflect much of the changing reality of Egypt and Arabia in the late 1930s, and by the 1960s, after the discovery of oil he presented it as a lost, nostalgic one to his Socialist Hungarian audience. Germanus is exceptional in his enterprise, however, not only because of his attempt to experience the last remnants of a changing past, but also because he was a convert to Islam. His conversion was advertised and accepted in the Muslim world and, as we shall see, the story of his Hajj had a following in Egypt in the late 1930s.

This example also provides an introduction into the twentieth-century entanglements of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, which have recently gained some attention in scholarship.⁵ The career of Germanus, an example of such an entanglement, starts in the shared twilight of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. Born into an assimilated Hungarian Jewish family in 1884, he converted to Protestantism in 1909, after studying history, Turkish, and Arabic in Budapest from 1902 to 1907, spending some time in Istanbul, and one postdoctoral year in England. He entered state service as a

2 Benjamin Reilly, “Arabian Travellers, 1800–1950: An Analytical Bibliography,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 1.43 (2016). Reilly, counting couples as one traveler, provides the number 91 in his period, but he does not mention Germanus.

3 F.E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), Chapter Five.

4 He refers to his “honorable predecessors” (“dicső elődök”), ranging from de Couillon to Burckhardt to Hurgronje. Germanus Gyula, *Allah Akbar!* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1984; original edition 1936), 95–114.

5 The interest of recent scholarship is still limited to Balkans–Middle East comparisons. See Karl Kaser, *The Balkans and the Near East: Introduction to a Shared History* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2011); Vangelis Kechriotis, “Requiem for the Empire: ‘Elective Affinities’ Between the Balkan States and the Ottoman Empire in the Long 19th Century,” in Sabine Rutar (ed.), *Beyond the Balkans: Towards an Inclusive History of Southeastern Europe* (Wien, Zürich, Berlin: Lit, 2014), 97–122.