From Wellhausen to Becker. The Emergence of Kulturgeschichte in Islamic Studies

In 1927, the faculty of law at the University of Kiel in Northern Germany decided to nominate Hermann Kantorowicz, a well-known specialist in medieval law, as the recommended candidate for a vacant chair. Kiel belonged at that time to Prussia; thus it was the Prussian minister of cultural affairs who had to give his confirmation and to appoint the new professor. But the Foreign Office intervened; the foreign minister himself, Gustav Stresemann, pointed to the fact that Kantorowicz, in an expert opinion written for a parliamentary fact-finding committee, had not supported the official German standpoint in the question of war guilt. The controversy seems strange to us; ideological shibboleths look ridiculous once they have had their day. But it may have taken some courage on the part of the minister of cultural affairs to remind Stresemann of the difference between a political creed and scholarly inquiry. In fact, Kantorowicz got his chair – although with some delay and for only a few years; he emigrated in 1933, first to the United States and then to England where he taught from 1935 until his death in 1940. The man who had supported him died in 1933, two weeks after Hitler’s seizure of power which was to give the question of war guilt an unprecedented dimension; his letter to Stresemann was burnt with the archives during the bombardments of Berlin, in 1945. He was an Orientalist, one of the few figures of international renown in this discipline: Carl Heinrich Becker.

I should perhaps have said: he had been an Orientalist, for he had left the field more than ten years earlier. During World War I, in 1916, he had accepted a position in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs at Berlin, and he had stayed there after the collapse of the Empire. He never became a member of any political party; however, his competence and his liberal mind twice opened the way...
to him to the top of the Ministry, for a short time in 1921 and then again in 1925 when, in spite of changing cabinets, he managed to remain in office for more than four years. He continued giving lectures and writing articles in his field, on England’s colonial policy, on the emergence of postwar Turkey; but his disciple Hellmut Ritter was certainly right when he remarked that, in the last issue, Becker’s scholarly career had come to an end with his turn to politics. When, after his resignation in 1929, he received the chair which Carl Brockelmann had formerly held at Berlin, he did not really return to teaching, but started on a series of journeys: to England, to France, to Holland, to the United States, and even, as a member of a mission sent by the League of Nations, to China. The faculty had nominated him by a unanimous vote, but the delicate situation created by the necessity of keeping the position ready for him had provoked criticism; Brockelmann’s bitter – and slightly unbalanced – comment about the “minister against German culture” in his introduction of the Supplement to his Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur bears testimony to this.

There is no doubt that Brockelmann was the more productive scholar. When he left Berlin he felt that he was ceding his place to somebody who, in a certain sense, had never reached scholarly maturity. For when Becker exchanged his university career for administration and politics, he was just forty years old. He had never published a book; his Ph.D. thesis and the research he had done for his habilitation did not exceed the normal level. He was a good papy-

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4 “Die Türkei nach dem Weltkriege,” in Islamstudien, 11, 419–449.

5 Cf. his obituary in Der Islam, xxiv (1937), 179.

6 Cf., for this as for many other details, the biography by Erich Wende, C. H. Becker, Mensch und Politiker (Stuttgart, 1959), pp. 11 ff.

7 Cf. GAL, 1, pp. xiv f. The chronology is somewhat complicated. Brockelmann had received the chair held by Eduard Sachau in 1922 but left Berlin for Breslau a year later, in 1923 (cf. J. Fück in ZDMG, cvIII (1958), 9 f.), i.e., before Becker’s second ministerial appointment. Since that time the chair seems to have remained vacant. In the Amtliches Personalverzeichnis der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Berlin, 1925, Becker is listed as “ordentlicher Honorarprofessor” (p. 25); in 1931/32 he officiated as director of the Oriental Institute. At that time he possessed nine honorary degrees.


9 Beiträge zur Geschichte Ägyptens unter dem Islam, Heft 1–2. (Strassburg, 1902–1903).

10 This also holds true for other German Orientalists of his time. The Ph.D. dissertation