Fredrik Thomasson


The Swedish scholar Johan David Åkerblad has long held a place of honour among the Egyptologists and archaeologists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His extraordinary gifts as a linguist were universally recognised—the antiquarian Henry Salt, who served as British consul in Egypt and met Åkerblad in Rome, said that Åkerblad’s knowledge of languages was “confined to twenty-three.” His travels in Europe and the Levant have attracted some attention, but he has never been the subject of a true biography. Fredrik Thomasson’s book is thus particularly welcome. The result of exhaustive research in the archives of Sweden, Denmark, France, and Italy, it contains a mass of hitherto unknown information and brings to life a fascinating (albeit not always prepossessing) scholar in the historical and intellectual context of his time. Abundantly illustrated (even if one sometimes marvels at the publisher’s generosity in duplicating many of the illustrations, in colour at the start of the book and in black and white in the text), it is also a pleasure to read and to possess.

Much of Åkerblad’s resentment of the Swedish political system, his sense of never having received his due, and his final decision to abandon his country for ever, can be attributed to his relatively humble social origins. The son of a mirror-maker in Stockholm, where he was born in 1763, he could never aspire to a place in the diplomatic hierarchy which would have been his had he been born into the nobility. As it was he studied at Uppsala where he was taught oriental languages by Carl Aurivilius (an accomplished Arabist and Turcologist who was himself the pupil of Christian Benedikt Michaelis in Halle, Étienne Fourmont in Paris, and Albert Schultens in Leiden), and in 1783, with a good command of Arabic and Turkish, he left Stockholm for Istanbul to act as apprentice interpreter at the Swedish embassy. On his way he stopped in Göttingen and made the acquaintance of Johann David Michaelis, Christian Benedikt’s son and one of the best known Orientalists in Germany. It was in Istanbul, where his daily life can be reconstructed from his letters to the publisher Carl Christoffer Gjörwell, a member, like Åkerblad’s parents, of the Herrnhuter community, that Åkerblad met the Italians Domenico Sestini, professor at the university of Pisa and the author of letters describing Turkey, and Gian Battista Toderini who, at the time, was writing what would be the first survey of Turkish literature. He also became friends with the translator Jacques Delille and above all with Jean-Baptiste-Gaspard D’Ansse de Villoison
who were in the entourage of the new French ambassador Choiseul-Gouffier. Villoison in particular shared Åkerblad’s interest in collecting manuscripts.

During his first stay in Istanbul Åkerblad obtained funds for further travel in the Ottoman Empire and managed to visit Greece, Greater Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. On other excursions, which took him to Cyprus and again to Egypt and the Holy Land, he started to study Phoenician—he was one of the very few scholars to do so—and published an inscription he discovered in Cyprus. In 1789 he returned to Europe by way of Tunis. He made the acquaintance of the Abbé Raynal in Marseille and, in Paris, had what Thomasson calls "his first experiences of French oriental scholarship." Once he was back in Stockholm he succeeded in being promoted to Turkish interpreter and protocol secretary in the foreign service and, stationed at the Swedish war headquarters in Finland, he played a part in negotiations with the Turks during the joint Turco-Swedish war with Russia. After that he was again dispatched to the Ottoman capital, first in 1791 and once more in 1794. On the second occasion he stopped off on his way east in Holland and in France where he seems to have lost some of his initial sympathy for the Revolution. It was on his last visit to Istanbul that Åkerblad ran foul of one of the more interesting figures of the time, the Armenian Ignace Mouradgea d’Ohsson, known for his splendid Tableau général de l’Empire ottoman published between 1787 and 1820. Mouradgea d’Ohsson, the son of an interpreter at the Swedish consulate in Smyrna, had once acted as Swedish chargé d’affaires in Istanbul and was subsequently appointed Swedish minister. Why Åkerblad took such a dislike to him is not clear, but he did all he could to discredit him in the eyes of the Swedish authorities, claiming that, as an Ottoman subject, he was acting with duplicity and could not be trusted to serve Swedish interests.

In 1797 Åkerblad was recalled to Sweden. He left Istanbul for good, but on his way home he explored the site of ancient Troy and was one of several scholars to locate it correctly before the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann. He then visited Athens and continued his archaeological research, condemning outspokenly the removals effected by Lord Elgin and others. His research bore fruit in a dissertation on Greek magical inscriptions. Åkerblad’s next port of call was Rome where he met the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen and above all improved his knowledge of Coptic under the tuition of the Danish scholar Georg Zoëga. While he was in Rome Åkerblad also met the French mathematician Gaspard Monge who tried to recruit him for the team of scholars who would accompany Napoleon to Egypt. Åkerblad, however, declined. In Venice he wrote a dissertation on what he thought were runic inscriptions on one of the Greek lions by the main entrance of the Arsenale. It would lead to considerable polemics. He extended his network of learned acquaintances in