

Michele Vallaro (1948-2023)

On January 12, 2023, the Arabist Michele Vallaro (Turin, 1948) suddenly passed away in his villa on the beautiful shores of Pergusa Lake, near Enna, Sicily. Vallaro was one of the most significant personalities of Turin Oriental studies from 1969 to 2007, the year in which he moved to the recently established “Kore” University of Enna.

Michele Vallaro was a pupil of the Roman Arabist Paolo Minganti (1925-1978), who taught at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Turin in the first half of the 1970s—in his turn a pupil of Francesco Gabrieli (1904-1996), who was a student of the Piedmontese Carlo Alfonso Nallino (1872-1938), this latter from the school of Italo Pizzi (1849-1920). Vallaro became a full member of this prestigious succession of scholars of Classical Arabic language and literature.

After holding a “Carlo Alfonso Nallino” scholarship from the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* from 1975 to 1978, in August 1980 Michele was appointed university researcher at the *Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia* of the University of Turin. From November 1990 he acted as substitute lecturer of Arabic until October 2002. With the establishment of the Faculty of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures in Turin, Michele was appointed Extraordinary professor of Arabic Language and Literature in November 2002, with confirmation in the role of Full professor since 1 November 2005. In December 2007, he moved to the University of Enna, Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences. He had recently been confirmed as a member of the university’s Board of Trustees.

A member of the *Istituto per l’Oriente* and of the *Sodalizio Glottologico Milanese*, Vallaro was a member of the Editorial Board of the scientific journal *Oriente Moderno*, director of the Arabic classics series of Edizioni Ariele in Milan, as well as the founder of *Kervan*.

Consistent with the school to which he belonged by training, Michele Vallaro’s research interests were mainly aimed at Classical Arabic, from *Detti e fatti del Profeta dell’Islām raccolti da al-Buḥārī* (“The Sayings and facts of the Prophet of Islām collected by al-Buḥārī,” by Virginia Vacca, Sergio Noja and Michele Vallaro, with a foreword by Francesco Gabrieli. Turin: UTET: 1982), to the poems of Abū Nuwās selected and translated by Michele in the volume *La vergine nella coppa* (“The virgin in the cup,” with a presentation by Francesco Gabrieli. Roma: Ipocan: 1992), to “La poesía araba: modelli e simboli” (“Arabic poetry: models and symbols”) in *Lezioni di Arte e Letteratura islamica* (“Lessons of Islamic Art and Literature,” edited by M. S. Elsheikh. Siena: Cantagalli: 2005: 11-34).

This imprint of interest in classical studies was enriched by linguistic research that goes as far as the study of the Arabic grammatical tradition and the foundations of Arabic linguistics. His in-depth work on these issues is testified by very significant articles, including “*La Hamzat Bayna Bayna Secondo i Grammatici Arabi*” (“The *hamza bayna bayna* according to Arab grammarians,” *Oriente Moderno* 67 (1987): 215–221), “*Fra linguistica e glottodidattica: la traduzione della terminología grammaticale araba. A proposito del muḩtada*” (“Between linguistics and glottodidactics: the translation of Arabic grammatical terminology. About the *muḩtada*,” *Studi Magrebini* 25 (1993-1997): 385-402), “*Sull’asíndeto tra aggettivi attributi in àrabo letterario*” (“On asyndeton among adjectives attributes in Literary Arabic”), *Kervan* 1 (2005): 73-85), and “*Qualche considerazione ulteriore sulle proposizioni aggettivali («na?t sababi») in àrabo letterario*” (“Some further considerations on adjectival propositions (*naʿt sababi*) in literary Arabic,” *Kervan* 2 (2005): 123-137).

His interest in the role of language and linguistic studies in Arab culture is also demonstrated by his translation from Romanian of the book by Nadia Anghelescu *Linguaggio e cultura nella civiltà araba* (“Language and culture in Arab civilization.” Torino: Zamorani: 1993). The importance of translating the book lies in the fact that it deals with the great themes of Arab civilization seen from a linguistic point of view, the Arabic language and Arabic literature, linguistic studies among the Arabs, the attitude towards language and its cultural dimensions, linguistic variation in synchrony and diachrony. It constitutes an introduction to this civilization from an unusual angle, as it shows the place that language has occupied and continues to occupy in Arab civilization.

The deep interest that Michele Vallaro had in classical Arabic philology did not prevent him from having important insights into the field of Arabic language teaching with particular attention to contemporary Arabic and the “language in use.” Indeed, his intuitions anticipated the most modern guidelines in terms of teaching Arabic as a foreign language, namely the importance of vernacular varieties for communicating in Arabic and consequently for teaching the language.

In fact, in the agile book *Parliamo arabo. Profilo (dal vero) d’uno spauracchio linguistico* (“Do we speak Arabic? Profile (from life) of a linguistic scarecrow.” Torino: Magnanelli: 1997)—whose title is an example of Michele Vallaro’s marked sense of humour—the author states that students’ frustration originated from the discovery of the discrepancy between their expectations and motivations—i.e. their desire to use the language the way they would use any other modern living language—and the “Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language” practices ‘can negatively impact their desire to learn.’¹ To this purpose, he very effectively adds that

¹ Original: *può influire negativamente sul loro desiderio di imparare* (Vallaro 1997: 59).

“The Arabic language,” we should put this into our heads, [...] consists from a pedagogic point of view at least of two languages, although related to each other.²

With reference to this last point he comments that

The average Arabic speaker (be he/she a Christian, a Muslim, or an atheist) is basically a “purist,” independently of his/her level of education. Difficult as it might be for him/her to speak or to write the literary language, he/she will always consider it as the ideal model of expression, and very often will not conceal his/her fundamental disesteem towards that language, the “vulgar,” to which he/she resorts for the majority of his/her communicative needs.³

Michele Vallaro’s intellectual curiosity, combined with his passion for studying, were a source of stimulus and involvement for his students and collaborators during the long years of his teaching and academic activity. We would still like to be able to say, with Leila Mohamed Said, «God keep you for us with the men of science to increase us in knowledge and learning» (*fa-dumta wa-dāma la-nā al-ʿudabāʿu yazīdūna ʿilman wa-bi-l-maʿrifati*) (*Oriente Moderno*, Nuova serie, Anno 17 (78), Nr. 2 (1998): 372-373).

Those who knew him remember a gentleman of extraordinary literary and musical culture, but also an elegant, generous, friendly and cordial man.

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² Original: *La “lingua araba”, bisogna mettersele in testa [...], sono da un punto di vista didattico almeno due lingue, anche se imparentate fra loro* (Vallaro 1997: 60).

³ Original: *Il parlante medio dell’arabo (che sia cristiano, musulmano, ateo) rimane fondamentalmente un “purista”, indipendentemente dal suo livello d’istruzione: per quanto difficile gli riesca parlare o scrivere la lingua letteraria, la considererà sempre come il modello ideale d’espressione, e spesso non nasconderà una sostanziale disistima per quella lingua, il “volgare”, in cui pure si attua la massima parte delle sue necessità comunicative* (Vallaro 1997: 58-59).