

# Orientalism on the Margins: The interest in Indian Antiquity in Nineteenth Century Italy

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“Man who has travelled widely” was the ironic meaning which Flaubert attributed to the word “Orientalist” in his *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, thus denouncing the banality and indefiniteness the term had acquired by 1880.<sup>1</sup> “Orientalists” were mostly men who studied anything that could be remotely described as being related to the “Orient”. The frontiers of this “Orient” were also fluid and unstable, encompassing a great part of the world that only had as its common denominator not to be western, and to be placed in the east or the south of Europe. “Orientalists” were all those who concentrated their gaze on a wide variety of aspects of the non-western world. They could be specialized in languages, or in history, archaeology or anthropology. Contrary to what occurred with those scientific disciplines that dealt with European subjects, with regard to the “Orient” the geographical criteria was more important than the thematic one. Any historian, law expert or archaeologist who worked on the “Orient” was described as an orientalist or, at most, as a sinologist or indianist.

The persistence of expressions such as “orientalism”, “orientalists”, “oriental”, was consolidated during the second half of the 19th century by international congresses, museums, collections, institutions of knowledge, specialised journals, or self-denomination of individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues* was supposed to be a part of the second volume of *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, the book that Flaubert left unfinished when he died in 1880: cf. Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet. With the Dictionary of Received Ideas*, translation and introduction by A. J. Krailsheimer, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1976, p. 320. This article is part of a larger work that has recently been published as a book: Filipa Lowndes Vicente, *Outros Orientalismos: a Índia entre Florença e Bombaim*, Lisboa, ICS, 2009.

Even if later this term was defined by the critical approach of Edward W. Said in his book *Orientalism*, the meaning of the word has always been characterised by its diversity. Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the term started to be used more frequently and up to 1978, when Said's book was published, the orientalist discourse should be understood as heterogeneous, covering a variety of perspectives and a multiplicity of meanings, that contain conflicts and contradictions.<sup>2</sup> From the moment when the word "orientalism" turned into the title of a book it became more difficult to use it in an uncritical or non-acknowledgeable way. However, it has to be kept in mind that this happened mainly within the Anglo-Saxon world, where the book had an immediate impact. In fact, Said's *Orientalism* did not reach all countries at the same time, and if in some places his ideas were immediately discussed, in other countries this happened later and in a more fragmented way. This was the case of Italy or Portugal, where the first translation of *Orientalism* was done in 2004 – one generation later.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the influence of the book was not the same in all academic disciplines. It was greater on history, literary, cultural or post-colonial studies than on the traditional contemporary "oriental studies".

However, acknowledging Said's critical approach to orientalism does not necessarily imply giving it a monolithic meaning made of

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<sup>2</sup> Lowe, Lisa, *Critical Terrains. French and British Orientalisms*, Ithaca / London, Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 105, 127, 128.

<sup>3</sup> Said, Edward E., *Orientalismo: representações ocidentais do Oriente* (translated by Pedro Serra), Lisbon, Livros Cotovia, 2004. The fact that the Portuguese translation of Said's *Orientalism* only came out in 2004, twenty-six years after the book was first published, reveals quite a lot about Portuguese historiography, as Rosa Maria Perez has already noticed, "Introdução: os portugueses e o Oriente", in Rosa Maria Perez (ed.), *Os Portugueses e o Oriente. História, itinerários, representações*, Lisbon, D. Quixote, 2006, pp. 11-36, *maxime*, p. 25. The Italian case, for example, is also characterised by the late impact of Said's book, even if its translation was done before the Portuguese one [Said, Edward E., *Orientalismo*, translated by Stefano Galli, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991]. See, for example, Franci, Renato Giorgio (ed.), *Contributi alla Storia dell'Orientalismo*, Bologna, CLUEB, 1985. Another Italian book, published in 2006, recognises Said's contribution but refuses to acknowledge the negative value of the term "orientalism", reattributing it to the meaning it had in the context of French culture at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Minuti, Rolando, *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranze nella cultura francese del primo '700*, Col. «Studi e Testi per la Storia della Tolleranza in Europa nei secoli XVI-XVIII», Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2006.

negative and colonial connotations. For a long time historiography on orientalism has been centred on the British India colonial context, mainly from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This perspective naturally favoured the identification of a single discourse – of colonisers and colonised, of those who write and those about whom one writes, of those who detain power, and those who are powerless. In recent decades, however, many studies have been published on the widely used category of “colonial knowledge” that demonstrate a multiplicity of voices, contradictions, concessions, silences, hesitations, in other words, the heterogeneity of the “orientalist” discourses. However, if we cannot fall into a linear relationship between coloniser and colonised, neither can we fall into the hybridism that can hide the power relationships at stake, making us ignore concepts of subordination, racial prejudice, class or gender violence, and different forms of humiliation and authority.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I will analyse the interest in Indian antiquity and Hindu culture in the context of Florence in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the interactions between Europeans and Indian scholars beyond a colonial context. By focusing on an Italian orientalist working from a city like Florence which, in this period, became a centre of studies on India, I shall attempt to move beyond the intellectual paths between the metropolis and the colonies. Florentine Orientalism is an example of an institutional, intellectual and exhibiting complex which problematizes the association of European orientalism with colonial metropolis such as London or Paris. In fact, the Florentine experience demonstrates that orientalist knowledge circulated outside a colonial or imperial space, questioning the links between production of knowledge and discourses of power. Mainly during the decades of 1870s and 1880s, Florence became a global, transnational and transcolonial “contact zone”: a place to which both Indians, or Europeans living in India sent letters and objects, while showing interest in being linked to the initiatives of the Italian Orientalist Angelo De Gubernatis (1840-1913) and participating actively in the elaboration of knowledge on

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<sup>4</sup> Lowe, Lisa, *op. cit.*, p. 105. The author, within a literary approach, has in mind the Indian written reactions to Forster’s novel *A Passage to India*, but her analysis can be used for other kinds of writings.

India. Florence witnessed the creation of institutions, journals, travel narratives, spaces of display and other instruments of knowledge on India. It also reveals how orientalism is not a static phenomenon, even when the places and characters that form it are the same: Florentine orientalism underwent many transformations over the second half of the 19th century, going from the “innocent” orientalism of the first decades, centred on an egalitarian dialogue with the “others”, towards a kind of empowering and useful orientalism inseparable from the new Italian colonial projects of the end of the century. In a secondary city of a recently-formed nation, marginal to the centres of European colonial power, Florentine orientalism can contribute to question, but mainly to enrich, many of the categories used to discuss the concept of orientalism in the last thirty years, since Said published his innovative book.

### **Florence as a Centre for Oriental Studies**

What was the wider context that witnessed the flourishing of oriental studies in Florence? Among others we could underline the conjugation of two factors: firstly, the choice of Florence as capital of the Italian nation, between 1865 and 1870, and secondly, the congregation in this same city of a wide group of Italian intellectuals from different areas and different geographical regions.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, these two factors were inseparable. The nomination of Florence as the Italian capital, after Turin, represented a cultural and material investment that enabled the creation of many academic institutions and the consequent attraction of the better prepared men to occupy the newly created positions.<sup>6</sup> Even

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<sup>5</sup> The links between German orientalism and the birth of a German national sentiment, which have already been studied, could be also useful to analyse the Italian case, see: Cluet, Marc, “Avant-propos”, in Marc Cluet (ed.), *La Fascination de l’Inde en Allemagne 1800-1933*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004, pp. 11-24, 12, 13, 23.

<sup>6</sup> For some examples of the bibliography on “Firenze Capitale” see: Vannucci, Marcello, *Firenze Ottocento*, Rome, Newton Compton Editori, 1992; Spadolini, Giovanni, *Firenze Capitale Gli anni di Ricasoli*, Florence, Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1979; *Idem, Firenze Capitale*, Florence, Felice Le Monnier, 1967; Pesci, Ugo, *Firenze Capitale (1865-1870) dagli appunti di un ex-cronista*, Florence, R. Bemporad & Figlio, 1904.

having in mind that the project of a Florence-capital was soon abandoned in favour of Rome this brief period had enduring repercussions that went far beyond its time.

In the years that anticipated the International Congress of Orientalists, which took place in Florence in 1878, the city witnessed an intense activity within the subject of oriental studies. In opposition to what happened in countries such as Germany, Great Britain and France, this was a late orientalism that could only flourish after the country had solved its own internal major political and social conflicts. Before 1852 – year in which the first university chair of Sanskrit was created in Turin by Gaspare Gorresio – any Italian subject who wanted to study an “oriental language” would have to travel to the northern European cities to continue his studies with some central figures in the field. These orientalist centres in places such as Berlin, Vienna, Paris, or London, associated with universities or with scientific societies, had already established what was known as “oriental studies” and could attract the men that very often returned to their countries of origin to become prominent and pioneering names in the field.<sup>7</sup> In 1859 the *Regio Istituto di Studi Superiori Pratici e di Perfezionamento* was founded in Florence, the first university institution in a city where culture did not have an academic tradition.<sup>8</sup> The orientalist section of the *Istituto* occupied a privileged space among the established knowledges.<sup>9</sup> The quantity of different courses and people well prepared to administer

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<sup>7</sup> Cimino, R. M.; Scialpi, F. (eds.), *India and Italy*. Exhibition organised in collaboration with the Archaeological Survey of India and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Rome, I.s.M.E.O., 1974, pp. 136, 137; Pascale Rabault – Feuchrahn, *L'archive de origines. Sanskrit, philologie, anthropologie dans l'Allemagne du XIXe siècle*. Paris, Cerf, 2008; Roland Lardinois, *L'invention de L'Inde. Entre ésoterisme et science*, Paris, CNRS, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Garin, Eugenio, “Un secolo di cultura a Firenze. Da Pasquale Villari a Piero Calamandrei”, in *La Nuova Italia*, Florence, 1960, p. 3; Rosi, Susanna, “Gli studi di Orientalistica a Firenze nella seconda metà dell’ 800”, in Gallotta, Aldo; Marazzi, Ugo (eds.), *La Conoscenza dell’Asia e dell’Africa in Italia nei Secoli XVIII e XIX*, vol. I, Tomo I, Naples, Istituto Universitario Orientale “Collana Matteo Ripa”, 1984, pp. 103-120, *maxime* pp. 103-105.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the names that became part of this group of orientalists working in Florence are Carlo Puini, dedicated to studies on China, oriental religions and religious art; Anselmo Severini, responsible for Japanese

them led Angelo De Gubernatis to declare in 1876 that there was no better place in Italy to study “oriental languages” than in Florence.<sup>10</sup>

Angelo De Gubernatis, from Turin, was one of the names of a heterogeneous group which was in the midst of the cultural building of a united Italian nation. During this phase, the creation of a common identity was also dependent on the establishment of intellectual relationships with a Europe from which Italy had felt removed. Gubernatis’ pledge in reinforcing the links with other European cultural centres had a double manifestation: while he was trying to export the idea of Florence as a site for oriental and literary studies, his main research interests, he was also trying to import home what was being done and written in Europe on these subjects. The development of Italian Orientalism, scattered throughout different cities of the young nation, but with Florence’s prominence, was thus inseparable from this post-unitarian context, where Italy was trying to find its new place in a cultural and intellectual Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the fact that the Orient studied in Florence has other names and other geographies, Angelo De Gubernatis and India became its

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<sup>10</sup> Angelo De Gubernatis quoted by Susanna Rosi, “Gli studi di Orientalistica a Firenze nella seconda metà dell’ 800”, in Gallotta, A.; Marazzi, U. (eds.), *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 103-120, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> Angelo De Gubernatis himself historicised “Italian orientalism” or the Italian travellers in the “Orient” in various articles and books: *Memoria intorno ai viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie orientali dal secolo XIII a tutto il XVI*, Florence, Tip. Fodratti, 1867; *Idem*, “Cenni sopra alcuni indianisti viventi”, in *Rivista Europea*, vol. 4 (1872), pp. 44-59; *Idem*, *Storia dei viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie orientali*. Livorno, Vigo, 1875; *Idem*, *Matériaux pour servir à l’histoire des études orientales en Italie*, Turin, Loescher, 1876; *Idem*, *Gli scritti del padre Marco della Tomba, missionario nelle Indie orientali*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1878; *Idem*, “Gli Studii indiani in Italia”, *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana*, vol. V, 1891, Rome, Tip. della R. Accad. Dei Lincei, 1891, pp. 102-126; *idem*, *Roma e l’Oriente nella storia, nella legenda e nella visione*, Rome, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1899. On the subject see Solitario, Francesco, “Angelo De Gubernatis storico dell’Orientalismo italiano”, in Taddei, Maurizio; Sorrentino, Antonio (eds.), *Angelo De Gubernatis. Europa e Oriente nell’Italia Umbertina*, vol. IV, Naples, Istituto Universitario Orientale, “Collana Matteo Ripa”, 2001, pp. 499-525.

For some examples of recent studies on Italian Orientalism see: AA.VV., *Gli Studi Orientali in Italia negli ultimi cinquant’anni (1861-1911)* [Indological Section edited by A. Ballini], in *RSO*, V (1913-27); Flora, Giuseppe, “L’India nella cultura storica e civile italiana della prima metà dell’Ottocento”, in Ugo Marazzi (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 27-101; Carratelli, Giovanni Pugliese, “L’Indianistica a Napoli tra l’Otto e il Novecento”, in Gallotta, A.; Marazzi, U. (eds.), *La Conoscenza dell’Asia e dell’Africa in Italia nei Secoli XVIII e XIX*, vol. II, tome I, Naples, Collana “Matteo Ripa”, Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1985, pp. 5-17; Campana, Andrea, “«Sino-Yamatologi» a Firenze

main protagonists. Like other Italians, Gubernatis also benefited from a study grant that led him from Turin to Berlin in order to study with Albrecht Weber and meet scholars like Franz Bopp.<sup>12</sup> His individual success associated with the shortage of specialists in oriental languages may have contributed to the invitation he received to become Professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Mythology at the *Istituto di Studi Superiori* of Florence, a function he occupied between 1863 and 1890, the date when he finally moved to Rome. It was therefore from Florence that Gubernatis consolidated his career as an academic and a writer, while becoming both a participant and a result of the new united Italy. With numerous interests and an intense civic life, literary studies and Indian studies became his major subjects of research.<sup>13</sup> The literary and linguistic component also assumed an important role in his approach to India, but Hindu religious culture, on the whole, was, as he repeated on many occasions, major interest. Gubernatis' India took many different forms: he began by concentrating on the Vedas, translating them and analysing them from a literary and historical point of view, to subsequently write historical books on the history of Italians in India, fictionalised "Indian" plays, mythological analysis, or the travel narrative of his journey to India.<sup>14</sup> From an early stage, he also started to write on the history of Orientalism, not only within Italy,

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fra Ottocento e Novecento", in Boscaro, Adriana; Bossi, Maurizio (eds.), *Firenze, il Giappone e l'Asia Orientale*. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi [Florence, 25-27 March 1999], Florence, Leo S. Olschki, 2001, pp. 303-348; Solitario, Francesco, "Angelo de Gubernatis: pioniere dell'Orientalistica Italiana nell'Ottocento", in Marchianò, Grazia (ed.), *La Rinascenza Orientale nel pensiero Europeo. Pionieri lungo tre secoli*, Pisa/Rome, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1996, pp. 165-199.

<sup>12</sup> Cluet, Marc (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2004; Pollock, Sheldon, "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power beyond the Raj", in Breckenridge, Carol; Van der Veer, Peter (eds.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, pp. 80-96.

<sup>13</sup> Taddei, Maurizio, "Angelo de Gubernatis e il Museo Indiano di Firenze. Un'immagine dell'India per l'Italia Umbertina", in Taddei, Maurizio (ed.), *Angelo De Gubernatis. Europa e Oriente nell'Italia Umbertina*, vol. I, Naples, Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1995, pp. 1-37.

<sup>14</sup> Without intending to indicate the vast number of orientalist writings by Angelo De Gubernatis, here are some examples: *I primi venti inni del Rigveda per la prima volta tradotti in italiano e annotati*, Florence,

but in an international perspective, not only on the past but also on the contemporary situation.<sup>15</sup>

The name of Angelo De Gubernatis became, therefore, inseparable from the many institutional and editorial initiatives which enabled him to explore his double interest in the intellectual relationships between Italy and the rest of Europe and internationalize the role of Italian scholars within oriental studies. In 1872, Florence witnessed the creation of the *Società Italiana per gli Studi Orientali*;<sup>16</sup> while in 1877, between the International Congress of Orientalists in 1876 and that of Florence, in 1878, the *Accademia Orientale* was created, probably with the forthcoming Florentine congress in mind and as a way of justifying the orientalist character of the city.<sup>17</sup> After his trip to India, many times postponed, Gubernatis created in Florence the *Società Asiatica Italiana* and the *Museo Indiano*, both in 1886.

Apart from the organisation of scientific institutions and exhibitions, the launching of specialised publications became one of

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Polverini, 1864; *La vita ed i miracoli del dio Indra nel Rigveda*, Studio, Florence, Tip. dell Muse, 1866; *Fonti vediche dell'epopea illustrate*, Turin, Loescher, 1867; *Piccola Enciclopedia Indiana*, Florence, 1867; *Studi sull'epopea indiana*, Florence, Fodratti, 1868; *Zoological Mythology*, London, Trübner, 1872; *Lecture sopra la mitologia vedica*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1874; *Storia dei Viaggiatori italiani nell'Indie Orientali*, Livorno, Vigo, 1875; *Lecture di archeologia indiana*, Milan, Hoepli, 1880; *Letteratura Indiana*, Milan, 1883; *Peregrinazioni Indiane. India Centrale*, vol. I, Florence, L. Niccolai, 1886; *Peregrinazioni Indiane. India Meridionale e Seilan*, vol. II, Florence, L. Niccolai, 1887; *Peregrinazioni Indiane. Bengala, Pengiab e Cashmir*, vol. III, Florence, L. Niccolai, 1887; *Vita e civiltà vedica (confrontate con la vita degli antichi romani)*, Rome, Forzani, 1906.

<sup>15</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Cenni Sopra alcuni indianisti viventi*, Florence, Tipografia Editrice dell'Associazione, 1872.

<sup>16</sup> The first volume of the *Annuario* da *Società Italiana per gli Studi Orientali* was published in 1872-73; Taddei, Maurizio, "Angelo De Gubernatis e il Museo Indiano di Firenze: Un'immagine dell'India per l'Italia umbertina" in Taddei, M. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 1-37, p. 29; Solitario, Francesco, "Angelo de Gubernatis: pioniere dell'Orientalistica Italiana nell'Ottocento", in Grazia Marchianò, (ed.) *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 165-199, p. 172; Rosi, Susanna, "Gli studi di Orientalistica a Firenze nella seconda metà dell'800", in Marazzi, U. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 103-120, p. 105.

<sup>17</sup> Its statutes were approved on 13 January 1877, "Accademia Orientale", *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Anno I (25 January-10 February 1877), Nos. 14, 15, p. 295; The official opening ceremony of the *Accademia Orientale* took place on 7 March 1877, in Gubernatis' own house and in the presence of D. Pedro II, Emperor of Brazil, who, among many other interests, also dedicated himself to "oriental



the most visible instruments of Florentine Orientalism. Gubernatis was closely linked to many of these oriental journals which had the advantage of having inherited the typography of oriental characters that had been created by the Medici in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the well-known “Tipografia medicea-orientale”. In the *Rivista Orientale* published already in 1867, Gubernatis announced his aim of putting Italian oriental studies in dialogue with other European nations. For economic reasons the *Rivista Orientale* only published one issue but, in the subsequent decades, this editorial dimension of orientalism consolidated itself through other titles: in 1876, the *Bollettino degli Studi Orientali* came out, and finally, in 1885, the *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana*. This journal, characterised by its diverse array of themes, became the main source of information, national and international, to the Italian community of orientalists, while also being read by an international readership that had access to all the journals published in a specific area.<sup>18</sup> The interchange of reviews with similar institutions in other countries was one of the manifestations of this orientalist cosmopolitanism. Those who published and sent abroad would also receive, and the Florentine library enriched itself with innumerable oriental journals coming from a variety of places.<sup>19</sup>

To study India did not mean renouncing to an European identity. As Gubernatis was eager to underline, India had a lot of value in

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studies”, namely to the learning of Sanskrit, and who participated, as listener, in the international congresses of orientalists: “Accademia Orientale”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Anno I, (25 February 1877), n° 16, pp. 302-309; Angelo de Gubernatis narrates his encounters with that “ideal prince”, namely at the International congress of orientalists which took place in St. Petersburg in 1876: De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Fibra. Pagine di Ricordi*, Rome, Forzanie, 1900, pp. 384, 385. See correspondence between D. Pedro II and Gubernatis: BNCF – Manoscritti – Carteggio Angelo De Gubernatis – Corresp. Pedro d’Alcantara para Angelo De Gubernatis, Cass. 2, n° 50 (1879-1890, 8 letters).

<sup>18</sup> The first series of the *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali* was published in 1876/1877, while the new series would go from 1878 to 1882. Despite all the economic difficulties, the *Giornale* was published annually between 1887 and 1920; after an interval of 8 years, the first volume of the new series would be published again in 1928; the second, in 1930; and the third and last in 1934. In Rosi, Susanna, “Gli studi di Orientalistica a Firenze nella seconda metà dell’ 800”, in Marazzi, U. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 103-120, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, pp. 103-120, p. 111.

itself but “its value for us lays mainly in how it relates to ourselves”. One of the functions of the Indianist should be, according to Gubernatis, to establish a relationship between East and West, that of bringing the antique world into the modern world, that of being modern while studying the ancient. After reflecting on the role of the contemporary indianist, Gubernatis evaluated the situation of the studies on India in different European countries by the early 1870s.<sup>20</sup> Greece and Spain had, respectively, only one indianist. In contrast, in England there was no shortage of those who wanted to know everything in relation to those people they “should administer” and even some British women who went to India dedicated themselves to the study of her languages, customs and history. Even if Gubernatis does not stop to reflect on the benefits of knowledge in the exercise of power, he leaves as implicit that a good administration of the British colony was inseparable from the knowledge they had about it. Despite recognising the protagonism of Germany, England and France in relation to the studies on India, he concentrated on Italy, namely on its main scholars, making the genealogy of their works, and reaffirming the strength that they were assuming in the intellectual formation of the young nation. Italy, as he referred, was the only country in the South where India was an object of study. These studies were not practised in Turkey nor in Albania or Portugal.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Cenni Sopra alcuni indianisti viventi*, Florence, Tipografia Editrice dell'Associazione, 1872, p. 5-24.

<sup>21</sup> The *Bollettino* reproduced the decree which created the first course of “Língua e literatura sânscrita védica e clássica” in Portugal in 1877, a few years after Gubernatis wrote this text: “From the *Government Diary* of Lisbon, we have the pleasure to refer to the Decree which institutes a Chair of Sanskrit, giving it to sir Vasconcellos, who studied in Munich with Haug, and in Paris with Bergaigne”, in *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Nuova Serie, II volume, n° 1, Florence: Le Monnier, 1877-1882, pp. 19, 20. A few issues afterwards, the journal reports on the progress of oriental studies in Portugal: “(...) along with the Chair of Sanskrit, rightly attributed to Vasconcellos, it was created another one of Glottic studies with Prof. Francisco Adolfo Coelho”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Nuova Serie, II volume, n° 6, Florence: Le Monnier 1877-1882, p. 117.

In 1874, one year after Gubernatis published these words on the inexistence of Portuguese orientalism, Vasconcelos de Abreu seems to want to contradict this emptiness with the creation of the *Associação Promotora dos estudos orientais e glotticos em Portugal*.<sup>22</sup> Having just returned from the International Congress of Orientalists organised in Paris, in 1873, the man that later was considered one of the main Portuguese orientalisists of this period, revealed the enthusiasm of taking to Portugal something of what he had lived and learned in the international Parisian concourse. A survey of what was happening in other European countries was inevitable: Italy was on the “good path”, France already had a “brilliant and glorious past” in all the branches of orientalism, Germany was the greatest – “the great focus of this immense light” –, while England and Russia worked “actively”. Portugal had to rush because it was more backward than France was 50 years previously, but the time would also arrive for Portugal to host an international congress of orientalisists. For now, Vasconcelos de Abreu announced, the Association aimed to create a library, an archive and a museum.

In 1877, Vasconcelos de Abreu wrote to Angelo De Gubernatis, from Paris, where he was studying with a grant, showing him his interest in transferring to Florence from Paris in order to continue his oriental studies. He knew that Florence had become “today the centre of those studies in Italy” and wanted to take some of Gubernatis’ courses in the language and literatures of India. After having studied in Munich between 1875 and 1876, Vasconcelos de Abreu was, at the time, studying Sanskrit in Paris with the support of the Portuguese

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<sup>22</sup> Abreu, Guilherme Vasconcelos de, *Exposição feita perante os membros da Comissão Nacional Portuguesa do Congresso Internacional dos Orientalistas convocados para constituirem uma associação promotora dos estudos orientais e glotticos em Portugal*, Lisbon, Associação Promotora dos Estudos Orientaes e Glotticos, Tip. Luso-Britânica de W. T. Wood, 1874, pp. 12-14; See also Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, *A responsabilidade portuguesa na convocação do X Congresso Internacional dos Orientalistas: relatório*, Lisbon: Imp. Nationale, 1892.

government. However, unhappy with the academic context and the cost of living in Paris, he started thinking of other European cities and had “thought of Florence”. London “for the time being is not convenient for me”, while the Berlin climate was not adequate for his health condition. Vasconcelos de Abreu was interested in concentrating his Oriental studies “especially on the historical side, in particular its mythology” and knowing the work of Gubernatis and his activity in Indian studies, the Portuguese orientalist wanted to work with him and move to Florence as soon as possible, something that never happened for lack of funding.<sup>23</sup>

However, the flourishing of “Oriental Florence” did not last long. It soon became evident that the protagonism of the Tuscan city was more the result of a specific set of circumstances, made up of suitable conditions and specific individuals, than of a well-rooted cultural tradition. With the end of the investment made in Florence-capital and with the move to Rome, the capital from 1870, of many of the men who were based in Florence, all the initiatives related with the oriental languages and cultures suffered an inevitable decline. The consequences of Gubernatis’ departure to Rome in 1890 revealed how much the Florentine initiatives were dependent on his person. His absence from the city, allied to the general weakening of the town in the overall map of a nation still defining its post-unification centres, help to explain the shortness and intensity of this experience of Florentine orientalism.

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<sup>23</sup> Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze – Manoscritti – Carteggio Angelo De Gubernatis – G. Vasconcelos de Abreu, Cass. 127, n° 60 (Paris, 23 de Janeiro de 1877). The correspondence between Vasconcelos de Abreu and Angelo De Gubernatis is formed by ten letters [cass. 127].

## **The International Congress of 1878 in Florence: encouraging the participation of “Oriental Orientalists”**

The young Angelo de Gubernatis was a key figure in the organisation of the International Congress of Orientalists that took place in Florence in the summer of 1878. To unite the scholars who had until then worked in isolation became one of the main aims of this kind of congress.<sup>24</sup> They congregated indianists, sinologists or arabists but placed the “oriental” denomination above the geographical specificity which distinguished them, thus contributing to consolidate the profession of “orientalist”. When analysing the conference proceedings of the orientalist congresses it becomes obvious that this Orient was far from uniform – its borders diffused, unstable, subjective, adapted themselves to the will of whoever was enunciating them.

Defined more for what they were not, than for what they were, these “oriental” frontiers could also include the African continent or South America, if justified by their relations with Asia. The programs for these international congresses assumed a geographical classification which encompassed a diversity of “orients”, but what becomes obvious, when comparing different congresses, is how each one gave protagonism to a specific area in detriment of other regions. In the first congress, which took place in Paris in 1873, for example, Chinese and Japanese Studies had a clear preponderance, while in the third one, held in St Petersburg, in 1876, the primacy was given to Central Asia.<sup>25</sup> One of the most obvious differences between the

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<sup>24</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, “Inaugurazione del Congresso”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Vol. II, nova série (1877-1882), nos. 8-15, pp. 150-158, p. 158. Gubernatis participated in many international congresses of orientalists. In 1892, for example, he was the delegate of the Italian government to the London congress, where he made one of the inaugural speeches, next to other orientalists representing an older generation: *Transactions of the Ninth International Congress of Orientalists* (held in London, 5<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> September 1892), ed. by E. Delmar Morgan, in two volumes, vol. I – *Indian and Aryan Sections*, London, Printed for the Committee of the Congress, 1893, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Congrès International des Orientalistes. Paris 1873*, Paris, 1874.

Florentine initiative and the previous ones was that of the Indian predominance, a choice that reflected the particular interests of its main organisers.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the papers given at the Florentine congress revealed a clear geographical concentration on the North of Africa and on India. The first volume contain the texts on Egyptology and African Languages, Ancient Semitic languages and Assyriology and Arabian Studies, while the second volume privileges Indo-European and Iranian Studies, Indian Studies, as well as the studies on the languages of Central Asia and, in the last section, Chinese, Indo-Chinese and Japanese studies.<sup>27</sup> China and Japan, which in previous congresses has been the main object of study, were now reunited within a single section, clearly subordinated. The official languages of the congress reflected the cosmopolitan vocation of this kind of events – Italian, Latin, French, English, German, while simultaneously illustrating one of the criteria for participation: the “orientals” who wanted to participate would have to be able to communicate in one of these European languages.<sup>28</sup> The “easterns” had, in fact, to be westernised in order to participate in the internationalised knowledge created about their own places of origin. The “oriental” languages were an object of study, not an instrument of intellectual communication between peers. The rules of the congress had other ways of exclusion: to avoid the presence of unknown amateurs, participation was dependent on an official invitation.<sup>29</sup> Women must have been considered in this group, because their presence was politely declined.

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<sup>26</sup> Amari, Michele, “Inaugurazione del Congresso”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Vol. II, nova série (1877-1882), nos. 8-15, pp. 150-158, p. 152.

<sup>27</sup> *Atti del IV Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti* tenuto a Firenze nel Settembre 1878. vol. I & II, Florence: coi tipi dei successori Le Monnier, 1880-1881.

<sup>28</sup> “Ai signori delegati italiani e stranieri corrispondenti del comitato ordinatore del quarto congresso internazionale degli Orientalisti”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Vol. II, nova série (1877-1882), n° 7, pp. 125, 126.

<sup>29</sup> “Quarto Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti – I.”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Ano I (25 November – 10 December 1876), Nos. 10-11, pp. 209-211, p. 210.

The first three orientalist congresses took place in Paris, London, and St Petersburg respectively.<sup>30</sup> In this last city, site for the 1876 congress, the governments were invited to send their representatives for the first time, which revealed a growing involvement of national official entities in a scientific and academic event. It was also in this congress that a young Angelo De Gubernatis, in his role of Italian delegate, rehearsed the proposal of Florence as the next site for the congress.<sup>31</sup> Apart from London and Paris, Italy, therefore, was the only country that hosted an international congress of orientalists twice during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but did so in different cities: Florence in 1878 and Rome in 1899. In the Congress which took place in Sweden, in 1889, the hypothesis of organising the subsequent encounter in the Orient was put aside in favour of a return to London, city which had already hosted the second international congress in 1874.<sup>32</sup> Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1904, did an orientalist congress take place in Asia, but not by chance it did so in a colonised city: Hanoi.

The 1876 Congress, in St Petersburg, was the chosen platform to invest in the application of Florence as the site for the 4th International Congress of Orientalists.<sup>33</sup> To reinforce the proposal, Gubernatis invoked many examples of recent Italian initiatives: he publicised his own books – *Storia dei Viaggiatori italiani nelle Indie Orientali* and the *Matériaux pour servir à l'histoire des études orientales en Italie* –,

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<sup>30</sup> The following International Congresses of Orientalists took place in the 19th century: Paris 1873; London 1874; St Petersburg 1876; Florence 1878; Berlin 1881; Leiden 1882; Vienna 1886; Christiania/Stockholm 1889; London 1892; Geneve 1894; Paris 1897; Rome 1899.

<sup>31</sup> “Terzo Congresso degli Orientalisti”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studi Orientali*, Primeira série, Ano I, nos. 7-8, 10-25, October 1876, pp. 154-158; De Gubernatis, Angelo, “Il terzo Congresso degli Orientalisti”, *Nuova Antologia*, vol. III, fasc. 11, November 1878.

<sup>32</sup> Pullè, Francesco L., *L'Orientalismo Internazionale. Ricordi del Congresso di Parigi*, Rome, Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1897, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Taddei, Maurizio, “Angelo De Gubernatis e il Museo Indiano di Firenze: Un’immagine dell’India per l’Italia umbertina”, in Taddei, M. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 1-37, p. 19; Rosi, Susanna, “Gli studi di Orientalistica a Firenze nella seconda metà dell’800”, in Marazzi, U. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 103-120, p. 106; Solitario, Francesco, “Angelo de Gubernatis: pioniere dell’Orientalistica Italiana nell’Ottocento”, in Marchianò, Grazia (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 165-199, p. 173.

where he stated the importance which oriental studies had always had in Italy. He referred the works of some of his colleagues, as well as the creation of the *Rivista Orientale* and the *Bollettino per gli Studi Orientali*; announced the recent purchase of more Indian typographical characters to improve the printing of works in vernacular languages; and described, in general, the progress of Indian studies in Italy and in Florence, in particular. He also carried out some diplomatic and social networking, behind the scenes endeavours that were equally relevant to obtain the complicity of orientalist from other nationalities and get ahead with the project of making Florence the next site for the international meeting.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, due mainly to an individual effort, Florence hosted an Orientalist Congress even before Berlin, a city which was much more embedded with a tradition of oriental studies, but which only in 1881 hosted such an event.

The Congress that opened in Florence in the summer of 1878 was introduced as a reinitiation of a chronology of Italian oriental studies that had its origins in the early modern period. However, the new character of this 19th century relationship meant that the aim was not to convert Asia, or looting it of its riches, but of knowing her, as Gubernatis stated.<sup>35</sup> Michele Amari, president of the Congress, also concluded his speech with the praise of the 19th century, a period when they could witness the “most wonderful movement that Europe has ever done towards the Orient”, quite different from the motivations of missionaries and merchants, for whom studies were secondary.<sup>36</sup> Political and colonial questions were simply absent from his inaugural speech. Clearly, the identity of this Italian orientalism did not want to be mistaken for the language of colonialism of contemporary India, preferring instead to underline the

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<sup>34</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Fibra. Pagine di Ricordi*, Rome, Forzanie, 1900: “Congressi internazionali”, pp. 381-387.

<sup>35</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, “Inaugurazione del Congresso”, *Bollettino italiano degli Studii Orientali*, nova série, Vol. II, n° 7 (1877-1882), pp. 154-158, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> Amari, Michele, “Inaugurazione del Congresso”, *Bollettino italiano degli Studii Orientali*, nova série, Vol. II, n° 7 (1877-1882), pp. 150-154, p. 153.



utopia of an encounter of ideas and knowledge between India and Italy which was inscribed in an early modern tradition.

The Congress of 1878 can be considered the peak of the orientalist Florentine experience, in the sense that it is both the culmination of a series of initiatives and the point of departure for others. Indian studies continued to be privileged within an idea of Orient that seemed to include half of the world. Beyond the publication of books, specialised journals, and the organisation of university courses, the post-1878 phase was characterised by the musealising of oriental knowledge, as well as by the passage from a more linguistic, philological and literary approach, to an approach nearer to the new social sciences such as anthropology. This was a tendency that characterised the cultured Italy of the 1880s.<sup>37</sup> In fact, it was in the sequence of the 1878 Congress, during which a temporary *Esposizione Orientale* was organised, that the idea of setting up an “Indian museum” in Florence was born, that would eventually enrich its collections in order to become an “Oriental Museum”. This exhibiting and visual phase of Florentine orientalism was also intrinsically associated with the figure of Angelo De Gubernatis and, as happened with other dimensions of Indian studies in Florence, his departure from the city also affected the project of an “India” exhibited in the Renaissance city.

### **Who Knows Better? Writing on India from “Here” or from “There”**

What did the 4th Congress of Orientalists that took place in Florence add to the previous meetings of specialists? What was different about this congress when compared to the others? Beyond its clear Indian character, the great Florentine contribution would be precisely to encourage the participation of the “natives from the Orient”. A few delegates were chosen with the role of serving as

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<sup>37</sup> Campana, Andrea, “«Sino-Yamatologi» a Firenze fra Ottocento e Novecento”, in Boscaro, Adriana; Bossi, Maurizio (eds.), *op. cit.*, 2001, pp. 303-348, p. 325.

intermediaries between India and the Florentine congress, and thus incite the participation of those indianists, mainly indigenous, who had no relations with European orientalism. It was not easy to reach the Indian “indianists” without going through these intermediaries who, integrated in the *British India* administrative, educational and cultural structures, dominated the studies on the colonised country, at least in its international orientalist construct.<sup>38</sup> Franz Kielhorn was the delegate for Poona; Arthur Burnell, for Madras; Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner, in Lahore; Ragendralala Mitra and William Stokes in Calcutta; R.T. Griffith in Benares; and Georg Bühler in Bombay. Almost all were British, some were Europeans who had lived in *British India* for long, and only one was Indian: Ragendralala Mitra, the distinguished archaeologist and sanskritist from Calcutta, who would become the first Indian to preside over the *Royal Asiatic Society* in his city, and whom Gubernatis would visit on his journey to India.<sup>39</sup> In a letter of reply to the organisers of the Congress, Georg Bühler, a German indianist who lived in Bombay, committed himself to attract one or two “indigenous indianists” and to search for Sanskrit manuscripts that would be interesting to the congress participants.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Comitato ordinatore, e delegati al Quarto Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Ano I, Nos. 14-15 (25 January-10 February 1877), p. 293. Many of the delegates did not participate directly in the congress, acting as a kind of intermediary representatives who were supposed to get other people involved.

<sup>39</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Peregrinazioni Indiane. Bengala, Pengliah e Cashmir*, vol. III, Florence, L. Niccolai, 1887, pp. 41, 42.

<sup>40</sup> “Lettera di Georg Bühler, Pisa, 23 Marzo 1877, Quarto Congresso Internazionale Degli Orientalisti – Continuiamo a pubblicare le Lettere de’ Signori Delegati stranieri, che hanno fatto adesione al Quarto Congresso e promesso di cooperarvi”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Ano I, n° 18 (25 March 1877), p. 359; Bühler, who was also a professor of Indian philology and of archaeology in Vienna, and a disciple of Max Müller worked for the British government between 1863 and 1880. In India he taught at the Elphinstone College and actively participated in the gathering of Sanskrit manuscripts in various parts of India: *Report of Georg Buhler’s tour in Southern Maratha in search of Sanskrit manuscripts for the Government of Bombay, 12th February 1867, contains the description of 200 mss.*; According to Rabault, Bühler had much intellectual respect for erudite Indians and it was because of them that he wrote his articles in India: published Rabault, Pascale, “Le Mahâbhârata dans l’indianisme allemand. Genèse d’un objet scientifique”, in Marc Cluet (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2004, pp. 65-89, p. 77.

The congress attempted to put in practice the idea of encounter between West and East, which had been, for more than ten years, repeated in different instruments of Florentine oriental studies, as being one of its main aims. Many scholars resident in the “orient” and who were not necessarily “oriental” answered positively to this European call, as the journal *Bolletino* made a point of witnessing, by publishing the letters received. In one of the letters which arrived in Florence after the announcement of the forthcoming 1878 congress, the Indian *Pandit* Shankar Pandurang showed his willingness to visit the “Pushpanagara (Florença, the city of flowers)” and revealed his aim of translating the *Rigveda* using the most reliable versions, were they eastern or western, and refusing any kind of conjecture.<sup>41</sup> He also wrote on the differences between the external gazes in relation to the reading of the sacred texts, while adding that between a European conjecture and a native one he would choose the latter:

the native interpreters, living as they did in and breathing as it were the atmosphere of tradition of ancient ideas, if not of ancient interpretation of each single word, and quite as able to etymologise and to analogise and analyse as European Pandits, were more likely to make correct guess than their European rival who has never lived in the same atmosphere of traditional ideas, but has on the contrary breathed a different atmosphere.

As Shankar Pandurang mentioned, the proof of the statement could be seen in his footnotes written in Marathi, “Which I am sorry are not intelligible to European Savans [sic]”. The analysis of Sanskrit texts should also take into account what he called the “walking manuscripts”, the Hindu priests who knew the Vedas by heart and who, in case of

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<sup>41</sup> “Lettera di Shankar Pandurang Pandit (Kalâdgi Districts Bombay Presidency, s.d.)”, “Quarto Congresso Internazionale Degli Orientalisti – Continuiamo a pubblicare le Lettere de’ Signori Delegati stranieri, che hanno fatto adesione al Quarto Congresso e promesso di cooperarvi”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Ano I, (10 March 1877), p. 338.

doubt, should be considered as the possessors of the most reliable versions. If for some orientalists, European as well as Indian, there was the acceptance of the complementarity of their types of knowledge, even if they assumed a hierarchy where Indian knowledge was considered less valuable; in other cases, the conflicts between those who wrote from here and those who wrote from there were more evident. The promotion of a dialogue between specialists of the same subject within a global space was not always able to dissimulate some latent conflicts in a relationship where distance was already an obstacle.

However, the initial intentions of the florentine congress were not fully fulfilled, because the only “oriental” present turned out to be José Gerson da Cunha, a Goan doctor and historian who was based in Bombay. It is possible that the practical difficulties of the journey, its significant cost, and the caste precepts that disencouraged the Brahmins to travel abroad, worked as strong dissuaders. This was not only the case for a faraway place such as India. As can be seen in the Portuguese case, the material and physical demands of the journey meant that Adolfo Coelho, the only man from Portugal who registered for the congress was not able to participate due to the lack of support from his government. Instead, he promised to do everything in his power to publicize the event within the Portuguese world.<sup>42</sup>

There were, however, many ways of multiplying the impact of such congresses beyond the limitations to global movements. Already back in India, after his participation in the International Congress of Orientalists in 1881, in Berlin, the Indian Sanskritist Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar recounted his experience to the members of the *Bombay Branch of the*

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<sup>42</sup> “I thank and accept the invitation with which the Organising Commission of the 4th International Congress of Orientalists has honoured me, although I am aware that my limited studies and little influence do not allow me to fulfil as I should the high duty of being the Delegate to the Congress. At least I will make all my efforts to make the Congress known in all the countries where Portuguese is spoken”, F. Adolfo Coelho, Almada-Lisboa, 11 de Março de 1877, “Comitato ordinatore, e delegati al Quarto Congresso Internazionale degli Orientalisti”, *Bollettino Italiano degli Studi Orientali*, Anno I (10 March 1877), n° 17, p. 340; On Adolfo Coelho see João Leal: *Etnografias Portuguesas (1870-1970). Cultura popular e identidade nacional*, Lisbon, Dom Quixote, 2000.

*Royal Asiatic Society*.<sup>43</sup> There are many examples of conferences or articles similar to this one, where individual participants of international congresses would transmit their knowledge and experience to a local wider audience who had not been able to travel. Vasconcelos Abreu, for example, did this in Lisbon after having been to the first international Congress of Orientalists which took place in Paris in 1873.<sup>44</sup>

In 1886, almost ten years after the International Orientalist congress which took place in Florence, the city witnessed the creation of a *Museo Indiano* and a *Società Asiatica Italiana*. Again, the relationship between European scholars and their Asiatic equivalents became a central theme of the written and oral discourses produced for the events. Being elected an honorary member of the new *Società Asiatica Italiana* based in Florence, the well-known Indian Sankritist and professor Bhandarkar wrote how “nothing is more gratifying to an Indian than to see European nations taking an interest in the literature and antiquities of his country”.<sup>45</sup> Only one of the authors of the letters published by the *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana* took the opportunity to make some criticism, but of another kind, that of the Indian protagonism of Italian Orientalism: S. E. Ahmed Wefyk stated how he knew many people who wanted to become members, on condition that the new journal did not become “comme ses soeurs aînées, complètement noyée dans l’Indianisme”.<sup>46</sup>

The journals specialised in oriental subjects became a vehicle of communication between different groups, often distant from each other,

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<sup>43</sup> Bhandarkar, Ramkrishna Gopal, “My visit to the Vienna Congress”, in *The Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. 1887, n° 46, vol. XVII, Bombay, Society’s Library, 1887, pp. 72-95.

<sup>44</sup> Abreu, G. de Vasconcelos, *op. cit.*, 1874.

<sup>45</sup> “Prof. Bhandarkar (December 1886), “La Società Asiatica Italiana ed il Museo Indiano. Primo Resoconto”, *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana*, vol. I, Florence: Tip. dei Successori Le Monnier, 1887, pp. iv-xxxix, p. xxvii. Bhandarkar has published an important collection of Sanskrit manuscripts of the Bombay region: *Report on the search for Sanskrit mss. In the Bombay presidency during the year 1882-83*, Bombay, Government Central Press, 1884.

<sup>46</sup> “Lettera di S. E. Ahmed Wefyk (26 December 1886), “La Società Asiatica Italiana ed il Museo Indiano. Primo Resoconto”, *Giornale della Società Asiatica Italiana*, vol. I, Florence, Tip. dei Successori Le Monnier, 1887, pp. iv-xxxix, p. xxvi.

as well as contributing to the creation of an international community of orientalists who read each other and who presented their opinions on the advantages and limitations of the places from where they approached their objects. Sometimes these written interchanges revealed the conflicts between those who wrote from here and those who wrote from there. Therefore, and somehow paradoxically, the growing spaces of dialogue and encounter – developed mainly by journals internationally interchanged between institutions or by international congresses – turned out to be also the site for confrontations, revealing conflicts that may have been less visible when knowledge was more localised.

The existence of these international networks, formally constituted by journals, publication of dictionaries and original manuscripts, membership societies, museums or temporary exhibitions, institutions and, informally, by the interchange of personal correspondence could be, simultaneously, beneficial to all. If the instruments of knowledge – written, institutional or visual – created by Gubernatis were legitimated by the presence of Indian names among Italian or European ones, the Indians also benefited locally by the fact of seeing their names projected beyond the Indian world and recognised by a branch of European knowledge which tended to be hyper-valorised in the colonial context. Both the European and the Indian contributions became part of the construction of India, even if the former benefited from the hegemony of belonging to an empowered place, colonial or non-colonial, as was the Italian case before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, when there was the need to specify the respective roles within any collaboration, a hierarchy prevailed where western knowledge, and mainly, a western approach, was often considered superior. As Christopher Bayly stated, “the most common epistemological strategy of colonial rule was, in fact, a form of syncretism in which European knowledge and technique were vaunted as superior but were required to be grafted onto indigenous stock when planted in the great extra-European civilisations.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Bayly, C. A., *Empire & Information. Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge Studies in Indian History and Society, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 370.

The relationship between who wrote in Europe or in India, but according to European methods, on the one side, and those who wrote in India, within a local framework of knowledge, on the other side, often became a subject of articles in specialised journals, of speeches or of letters. The idea that native knowledge, coming from within, should be valued and taken into account became a widely accepted one within European formations of orientalism. But most often, it came with a condition attached: in order to be valued it should obey to the criteria established by what was identified as European knowledge, considered to be the only one capable of accomplishing a critical level. This idea, present in different forms, and pronounced from various places, was not always ascribed to a colonial context. Gubernatis, writing from a part of Europe which was not yet a coloniser, did not disguise his belief in the unequal encounter between locals and Europeans: “an Indian, thanks to the practical knowledge he possesses of his language and literature will always have many advantages in relation to a European”.<sup>48</sup> Confronted with an Indian manuscript, a European was always an explorer, in need of a month to accomplish what a local would do in a day. However, the European scholars, added the Italian, would always have advantages in relation to the Indians in what concerned the “critical ability” in revealing the meaning which emanated from a manuscript. Therefore, as a practical way of saving time, the first phase of the work process should be given to the Indian – it was “their right, and our advantage” –, something which the British government should have in mind. During his trip to India, Gubernatis became a witness of what he considered to be the advantages of this relationship. In a day which he considered to be one of the most remarkable of his life, Gubernatis visited the Jain temples of Girnar, a site for Hindu pilgrimages.<sup>49</sup> The archaeologist Acyârya Valabhagi Haridatta accompanied him on an archaeological

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<sup>48</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Peregrinazioni Indiane. India Meridionale e Seilan*, vol. II, Florence, L. Niccolai, 1887, pp. 21, 22.

<sup>49</sup> De Gubernatis, Angelo, *Peregrinazioni Indiane. India Centrale*, vol. I, Florence, L. Niccolai, 1886, p. 261, 262.

excursion, reading him many of the inscriptions with an easiness that made him reaffirm how useful an Indian epigraphist would be to the European publishers and illustrators of Indian inscriptions.

In his writings, the Bengali intellectual Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) also revealed the ambivalence of these relationships.<sup>50</sup> On the one side, he appreciated the work of the European Orientalists and recognised their wide contribution to the study, for example, of Indian philosophy and, in general, to the construction of the Indian past, but that did not stop him from acknowledging the flaws of this European erudition. In the first place, he disagreed with the very persistent idea that the knowledge that the Europeans had of Sanskrit was superior to that of Indians. Language was something embodied within the culture of a people and, therefore, an Indian would always have advantage in the interpretation of a text, for all the knowledge that a European could have. Secondly, Europeans, in general, did not possess enough sympathy towards India to enable them to fully understand Hindu philosophy. European scholars were limited by their preconceptions and their racial arrogance necessarily affected all academic approaches.

Those orientalists who were neither British, nor Indian, but who wrote *from* India came to make the knowledge relationships between Europe and India more complex: they could not be placed in a typology of knowledge constructed from a colonial position, nor could they be confined to the place of the “colonised”. These figures – who for one reason or other, found in India both a place to live and a subject for their research – were, very often, natives of other European countries, sometimes outsiders to the colonisation of India, as was the case of Hungarians or Germans. In 1876, Franz Kielhorn, a scholar based in Poona, wrote to the Italian *Bolletino Italiano degli Studii Orientali* to complain about the way in which his article published in the Bombay based *Indian Antiquary*, had been received in Florence. Someone had ascribed him the idea that European Orientalists were not capable of

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<sup>50</sup> Raychaudhuri, Tapan, *Europe Reconsidered. Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 177-180.



understanding all the meanings of the Indian sacred texts.<sup>51</sup> Trying to justify himself to the readers of the journal, Kielhorn denied any advantage of the local scholars over his European counterparts, beyond a few technical aspects of minor importance in relation to liturgical and ritual texts, whose comprehension benefited from practical experience. “No one can appreciate more highly what has been done by many distinguished Sanskrit scholars in Europe, than I do myself”, he stated. However, he was eager to stop the “rashness with which *some* of them have put forth conjectures, and have cast aside the opinions of native scholars”. In a way, these foreign scholars based in India who were neither British nor Indian, occupied an in-between space that went beyond binary positions of colonial hierarchies.

With the risk of artificially simplifying the multiplicity of individual cases, I would propose three major places from which knowledge on India was written: in the first place we could consider those orientalist or indianists, as they also called themselves, who wrote from Europe. Within this Europe, one has to bear in mind the existence of many Europes, and the inevitable distinctions of someone writing from a country that was a coloniser of India, or from a country where orientalism belonged to a scholarly tradition more independent from a political and colonial setting. Writing from London or from Florence necessarily informed the writer’s approach. Secondly, one should have in mind those Europeans who lived in India because they were part of the British colonial administrative machine or because they used India as the site for their archaeological excavations or for their studies (or, often, both). Thirdly, we could identify those Indians who studied and wrote on India.

Among this group, we can find multiple ways of interaction with the European scholars who worked on India; or with what was considered to be European knowledge: from those who had little or no contact with knowledge produced by non-Indians, to those who interacted

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<sup>51</sup> Kielhorn, F., “Lettera da Poona” (25 November 1876), *Bollettino Italiano degli Studii Orientali*, Ano I, (25 November-10 December 1876), Nos. 10-11, pp. 208-209.

with Europeans, to a lesser or greater degree, in Europe or in India. There were also those Indians who dominated methods and results of the knowledge on India produced by Europeans – because they had studied in Europe themselves or, because, in India, they participated in the colonial instruments from where knowledge was produced or had direct contact with their agents. When acknowledging the multiplicity of roles occupied by Indians within a wide idea of knowledge production, I find it narrowing to use the term “native informant” to describe their many positions. If the commonly used term “native informant” may seem adequate to acknowledge the agency of those Indians who collaborated with European scholars in a secondary role – by translating or helping to translate inscriptions or texts or by accompanying them in archaeological excursions or digging the remains themselves – I find it inadequate to describe those members of the Indian elites whose agency on the multiple ways of producing knowledge on India could be far more independent and individualised.

Any way, in this plural world of knowledge production on India, in which it is difficult to identify single positions, the European orientalists knew that they also had Indian readers and non-Indian readers based in India. In opposition to the orientalists studied by Edward Said who had no intentions of having “an Oriental as reader”, there was, within this international community of orientalists, a mutual recognition even if, often, as we have seen, this encounter also served to reinforce hierarchies and prejudices. Bayly has defined the experience of “Oriental scholarship” in India as a heterogeneous arena of debate where the more powerful – the British and the Indian elite – appropriated the subjects and symbols that fitted into their political demands and that could be adapted to their intellectual references.<sup>52</sup> This definition has in mind the participation of Indians in these discursive formations, an approach where Bayly’s work was innovative, but it does not contemplate many other cases where orientalists are not British nor Indians from British India.

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<sup>52</sup> Bayly, C. A., *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 360.

In fact, neither the case of the Italian Angelo De Gubernatis, nor the case of Florence as a centre for oriental studies fit into this colonial dichotomy projected in India. When we have in mind that so many Indians became involved in the Florentine initiatives – by writing to journals, showing interest in being at the international congress of 1878, becoming members of the *Società Asiatica Italiana* or sending objects and manuscripts to be shown at “oriental” exhibitions and museums in the renaissance city – we have to acknowledge that they wanted to participate in the European construct of knowledge on India. However, we can also wonder if they wanted to participate in this orientalism *precisely* because it was outside the British Empire, marginal to the colonial space. Florence showed her interest in India, but many Indians were also interested in a city that, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was as well-known as it was innocuous in colonial terms. The ways of mobility, the flux of correspondence, the sharing and confrontation of common interests and the exchange of objects and ideas of an orientalist nature, beyond the frontiers of empire, enables us to understand the creation of knowledge about India from other perspectives.