

# Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 21. South-western Europe (1800-1914)

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# Adolfo de Rivadeneyra

Adolfo Rivadeneyra y Sánchez

DATE OF BIRTH 10 April 1841  
PLACE OF BIRTH Valparaiso, Chile  
DATE OF DEATH 6 February 1882  
PLACE OF DEATH Madrid

## BIOGRAPHY

Adolfo Rivadeneyra y Sánchez was born in Valparaiso, Chile, on 10 April 1841 and died in Madrid in 1882. His father worked as a publisher in a number of countries and in consequence Adolfo had a cosmopolitan upbringing. He studied first in Spain and later in France, Belgium, England and Germany, becoming fluent in French, English, Italian and German, and later learning Arabic, Turkish and Persian. He began his career in the Spanish diplomatic corps in Beirut (1863, 1867) and Jerusalem (1866). He went on to be vice-consul in Colombo (1867-8), Damascus (1868-70) and Tehran (1874-5), and his last posting was as consul in Morocco in 1879.

Although he did not belong to the academic world, his works are important because they are indications of a first systematic approach to the Middle East. *Viaje de Ceylan á Damasco* ('Journey from Ceylon to Damascus') and *Viaje al interior de Persia* ('Journey in the interior of Persia') are more than travel literature. They include a series of studies covering various disciplines, which represent the seed of Orientalism in Spain by breaking with past patterns of Christian anti-Muslim polemics. As José Manuel Goñi points out (*Viaje de Ceylan á Damasco*, p. 85), Rivadeneyra makes clear in his notes to these that his approach is not based on conjecture or impressions but on analysis derived from observations and historical knowledge. Unfortunately, in the Spain of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, neither their character nor their importance were recognised. It is only relatively recently that their exceptional nature, which places Rivadeneyra among the great European Orientalists, has been properly acknowledged.

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## WORKS ON CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

*Viaje de Ceylan á Damasco*  
'Journey from Ceylon to Damascus'

DATE 1871

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Spanish

## DESCRIPTION

Adolfo de Rivadeneyra wrote *Viaje de Ceylan á Damasco* (in full, *Viaje de Ceylan á Damasco. Golfo Pérsico. Mesopotamia, ruinas de Babilonia, Nínive y Palmira, y cartas sobre la Siria y la Isla de Ceylan*, 'Journey from Ceylon to Damascus. Persian Gulf. Mesopotamia, ruins of Babylon, Nineveh and Palmyra, and letters on Syria and the island of Ceylon') after he was appointed vice-consul in Damascus in 1868. Following a suggestion from his father, he set out from Ceylon to make the journey to Damascus through the Persian Gulf and then overland. His intention was 'to write down and copy faithfully everything I find on my way' (1871 edition, p. 89; the references that follow are to this edition). He compiled information on a large number of subjects including geographical, anthropological, historical, economic, commercial and philological, as well as valuable notes on archaeological sites. His notes demonstrate his thoroughness in carrying out research and recording, and any remarks betraying social or religious partiality are completely absent. Nevertheless, he does not miss the opportunity, when appropriate, to point out inequalities and social injustices in the communities he encountered. His descriptions offer a modern perspective without prejudice, and attempt to follow a systematic methodology in the collection of data.

Social customs and religious practices form a considerable part of what Rivadeneyra reports. He describes the features of Muslim and Christian communities as he observes, reads and is told about them (e.g. Maronites pp. 237-49, Druze pp. 270-83, Alawites or Nusayris pp. 284-99), and also provides analyses of them in his notes. Thus, he comments that the Alawites pretend to be Muslims or Christians by quoting the Qur'an or the Gospels in order to hide the mysteries of their religion, or because common people have only a confused mixture of ideas (p. 293). He also makes comparisons between the customs he observes, for instance on the position of woman in various communities (pp. 241-2). He is objective in his comments on Islam, though he does highlight the social injustices he observes in Muslim societies. The knowledge of Islam, Christian communities and



smaller religious groups that he already possessed enabled him to offer an extremely detailed picture of the societies of the Middle East in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The work is arranged in two sections. The first, 'Journey from Ceylon to Damascus', is divided into ten chapters, each covering a stage of his journey. The first chapter, 'From Ceylon to Bombay', includes a description of the various religious communities in Bombay, including the Parsis or Zoroastrians of India, and the second, 'From Bombay to Bassora', includes an account of the rise of the Wahhābīs in Rivadeneyra's description of Muscat. Following these come a series of chapters containing descriptions of important pre-Islamic archaeological sites: 'From Bassora to Baghdad'; 'Baghdad', where he tells of the Shī'ī majority in the city and of the other religious groups there; 'The ruins of Babylon'; 'From Baghdad to Mossul', where he refers to the 'devil worshippers', the Yazidis; 'From Mossul to Diarbekir'; 'From Diarbekir to Aleppo'; 'From Aleppo to Damascus', where he includes a translation of Islamic prayers following the explanation given by the Muslim scholar Iça de Gebir of Segovia (see *CMR* 5, 462-8) in *Breviario Sunnī* of 1462; finally, the tenth chapter, 'The ruins of Palmyra', contains a description of the city of Palmyra.

The second part, 'Letters and articles on Syria and the Island of Ceylon', is divided into twelve chapters and includes letters and reports that Rivadeneyra had written long before his arrival in Ceylon and the start of his journey. This second section collects together and describes a wide range of ethnological and cultural aspects, with engaging descriptions of archaeological sites. Among the information included, the socio-religious descriptions and analyses of the religious communities of the Middle East are particularly noteworthy. The first chapter of this second section, written in 1864 and entitled 'The Maronites', provides a description of the Maronite community of Lebanon and a comparison of the religiosity and customs of Maronites and Muslims. This is followed by four descriptive chapters on cities and their people: 'Beirut and Damascus'; 'Sidon and Tyre', where he refers to the structural parts of a mosque in Sidon; 'Balbek. The Druze', where, in addition to archaeological descriptions, he refers to ethnic and religious aspects of the Maronites; 'Tripoli. The Nessairiyes', where he gives a description of the religiosity and customs of the Ismā'īlī Muslim community (the Nizāriyya), the second most numerous Shī'a community. There is also a description of Islamic funeral rites and customs; ch. 6 is entitled 'A bath in the Dead Sea'; 'The mosque of Hebron' contains a description of the tombs of biblical characters including Isaac, Jacob and Rebecca; the following chapters deal with Ceylon;

ch. 8, 'Miscellaneous news and observations on the Island of Ceylon', ch. 9 'Colambo' (Colombo), and ch. 10 'The Kalani Temple', with a description of what he saw in this Buddhist temple and the rites and customs.

What really makes this work interesting, in addition to these details, is its updating of knowledge about the Arab world, which goes beyond what was known in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spain about the Arab presence in al-Andalus. Islam and Muslims occupy a particular place, and the descriptions of the various Islamic communities Rivadeneyra encountered bear none of the hallmarks of the anti-Islamic polemics of previous centuries. For him, Muslims continue to maintain 'fanatical and absurd customs' in a dying civilisation (p. 214), but the cultural and artistic output of the Islamic past leaves him absorbed and amazed. Further, he has no hesitation in extolling the politeness of those he encounters, as when he praises the good manners of the Bedouins:

It is generally believed in Europe that the Bedouins are savages, always ready for robbery and murder, perhaps because they do not know the telegraph and steam, without taking into account that men must be judged everywhere under the double principle of knowledge and feelings, all the more easy to hurt, the less they have been worn out in the field of conflicting passions. Europeans who in their dealings with the Arabs mock and criticise them, can be compared to those people who, tired of living, expect those who are not tired of living to look at the world through the same prism as they do. (p. 175)

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Although there was a second printing three years after the first, *Viaje de Ceylan á Damasco* never circulated as widely as it deserved, despite the praise that was heaped on Rivadeneyra after his death.

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*Viaje al interior de Persia*

## 'Journey through the interior of Persia'

DATE 1880

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE Spanish

## DESCRIPTION

*Viaje al interior de Persia*, published in 1880-1, is considered the first work on Iran to be written in the wake of the intense diplomatic and religious relations that had been active between Spain and Iran during the 16<sup>th</sup> and

17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Published in three volumes, it was intended as a descriptive study of the economic and commercial possibilities of the country, though the data it provides go far beyond the simple compilation of commercial information. Rivadeneira lived in Iran from April 1874 to the end of 1875. A few months after he took up his post as vice-consul in Tehran on 11 April 1874, he embarked on a fact-finding trip through the country. But, as was already the case in *Viaje de Ceilán á Damasco*, economic and commercial findings were almost an excuse to gather information about many different discoveries, from ethnological to architectural, archaeological and religious.

Throughout the work he offers insights into the differences between Persians and Arabs, and also other groups, highlighting the most characteristic elements of each. Thus, for example, he says in his final reflections:

What is undoubtedly true is that the Persian has not the force of the Arab, who imposed Mohammedanism on half mankind; but no one has succeeded in erasing his [the Persian's] primitive language, and they astonished the world when a Cyrus, an Anushirvan, an Abbas or a Nadir guided its destinies; proof that the greatness of nations, so long as they have no common political bond, hangs on a single man. The Persian is an artist, the Arab is a merchant; Zoroaster is far above Mohammed. (1880-1 edition, vol. 3, p. 365; the references that follow are to this edition)

In the work he compiles information about both the Shī'īs and other Iranian communities.

In the first volume, he describes his journey from Madrid to the new Qajar capital of Tehran and also his preparations to travel around Iran, while in the second and third volumes he describes the journey itself. In the second volume, he traces his way from Tehran to Hamadan, Kermanshah, with an interesting description of the customs related to the deceased (pp. 18-23), Khorramabad, Dizful, Shushtar, Failieh near Khorramshahr in Khuzestan Province, and lastly Bushir. In the third volume, he continues his journey to Shiraz, Kerman and Yazd, where he comments on the 'gue-bros' or Zoroastrians (pp. 178-83), going on to Isfahan, where he comments on the Armenians of Julfa (pp. 255-8) and the Jews (p. 256), though his comments and observations on these three groups are not limited to single mentions; they appear throughout the text. The final chapter contains some of his reflections on the current state of Iran (vol. 3, pp. 361).

Here, as in the earlier *Viaje de Ceilán á Damasco*, Rivadeneira brings together detailed information and reflections on everything he observes during his journey. On matters of religion he follows the methods he sets

out at the beginning (vol. 1, p. IX), of only reporting what he sees without intruding any evaluations of his own. Thus, when he describes the funeral rites he has observed in Kermanshah, he does so with great fidelity to Shīrī practices (vol. 2, pp. 130-4). He follows the same approach with the customs of the Zoroastrians, and the Armenians and the Jews of Isfahan.

His account contains many anecdotes that help to convey a very varied picture of the religious character of the Iranians. Among them is the story of a *mujtahid* (a religious scholar) who visited him in Yazd to question him about his mission, believing that he had come to proselytise (vol. 3, pp. 187-90). In the final chapter, he puts forward a very interesting idea about the continuity of Persian civilisation from pre-Islamic times to the Islamic era. Years later, this guided the work of Henry Corbin in *Corps spirituel et terre céleste. De l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shī'ite* (Paris, 1979), and also Ehsan Yarshater's chapter 'The Persian presence in the Islamic world', in R.G. Hovannisian and G. Sabagh (eds), *The Persian presence in the Islamic world* (Cambridge, 1998, 4-125). Rivadeneyra asserts that 'the Iran of today is the Iran of three thousand years ago' (vol. 3, p. 367), and in support he adduces three kinds of evidence: the form of government, religion, and customs (vol. 3, pp. 367-73). This idea of continuity of identity at all levels including the religious, of no rupture between the pre-Islamic past and the Islamic present down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrates Rivadeneyra's great critical and analytical acuity and objectivity.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Adolfo Rivadeneyra's contribution to awareness of Iran is of vital importance in the history of Spanish Orientalism. His *Viaje al interior de Persia* marks a definitive break from the approaches to Islam and Muslims of previous centuries. His objective and analytical vision of Islam compares with attitudes that are attested in works being written in other parts of Europe at the same time. The work can be considered pioneering both in Spain and in Europe generally for its descriptions and analysis of Iranian society. The analysis Rivadeneyra makes of everything he observes and collects together on Islamic customs and Islam, and the comparison between it and Christianity and the other religions of Iran, is, as he himself points out, free of all the partial understandings and prejudices derived from ideas about Islam that had been built up in Spain since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

This is a text that could be one of the precursors of the later study of Iran and Oriental studies in general in Spain. Unfortunately, it did not have the influence it should have had in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is only relatively recently that its exceptional nature, which

places Rivadeneyra among the great European Orientalists, has been acknowledged.

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