



DISPLACEMENTS AND RECONSTRUCTIONS GARTH FOWDEN

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In September 2012, I traded a view of Mt Parnassos for one of the Weiße Villa. The Greece I left was in a state of social unrest: colleagues at the Institute of Historical Research of the National Research Foundation in Athens were working without basic tools like toner for the photocopier machine, and shopkeepers in my village were closing their doors for good. Everyone was talking about a return to the basics; but we all knew that generations raised in the city have no idea how to go back to the country to plant broad beans.

Syria too – an enduring focus of my scholarly interests – was coming apart, but no one spoke of their hope for a return to a simpler way of life. In April, a blast destroyed the minaret of the Umayyad mosque of Aleppo, a famous tribute in stone to the layering and intersection of cultures. In the same month, my friend and host when I lived in Aleppo,

Mor Grigorios Yohanna Ibrahim, was taken hostage and as I write no one knows whether he is still alive.

There was an urgency to finish my book *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* and write as much of its narrative complement *The First Millennium: From Augustus to Avicenna* as I could before the end of June 2013. The urgency was personal since I underwent a transformation unique in Wiko history (or so I was told): arriving as a Greek researcher and departing as a Cambridge professor, but one with considerably reduced time for writing. This was not just a personal deadline, as my vocation as a historian is to present a view of the world from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan in the First Millennium AD in which religious and philosophical culture among Jews, Christians and Muslims matured through controversies that created the foundations for the world of both conflict and creative encounter in which we live today.

Research is a solitary affair. Like any affair of the heart it demands time, hard work and, above all, empathy. This empathy makes it possible for us to work as scholars across the constrictions of time. Here at the Wiko I may have spent more time with Gibbon and the eleventh-century Syrian historian Elias of Nisibis than with my contemporaries, but one of the strongest impressions left on me from this year is how ideas sparked in conversations around the lunch table belong to the on-going conversations at tables across time and space. Conversations with the Rektor were always stimulating, in particular one about Alois Riegl and a few passing discussions about the Berlin museums. Here the subject of reconstructions comes into my year's work and experience. An essential part of my First Millennium project is to rethink the relationship of the Islamic world to European history. The question of how we represent artefacts goes to the heart of this challenge. The carefully cultivated connections linking the Wiko and EUME to scholars in Berlin and further afield who are engaged with the problem of Europe and the Middle East constitute another tangible cooperation across time, now with figures such as Alois Riegl, Josef Strzygowski, Wilhelm von Bode and Carl Becker. The latter's vision of the mediating role Islamic civilization played between Antiquity and the medieval and Renaissance art of Europe is a palpable presence in the "Archaeological Promenade" of the Museumsinsel. While the arts of Asia and Africa are destined to be moved from the Dahlem complex to the resurrected Berlin Palace – Humboldtforum (whose foundation stone was laid by the Federal President on 12 June 2013), those of the Islamic world remain symbolically embedded in the Pergamonmuseum.

Embodied in this reorganization of the Berlin museums is a potential shift in how we think about Islamic and European cultures. It also makes us reconsider our use of space to formulate cultural connections. We are moving beyond the rigid essentializing of Islamic artistic production as depicted in Banister Fletcher's famous "Tree of Architecture", published in 1924 and widely reproduced in histories of art, in which the strong, straight trunk leading from Greek, Roman and Romanesque grows ever upward to modern European and American architecture, while "Byzantine" and "Saracenic" architecture figure merely as exotic, static, medieval offshoots. But the tree can also be seen as a more flexible image of creative encounter, as in Kendall Baker's photographic and sculptural installation entitled "Unmaking the Center", about which he wrote: "Over the year, the studio philosophy of un-making and un-centering expanded to include the relationship between human markings on natural forms. I became interested in the ubiquitous rectangles painted on roadside trees as measured markings. The tree grows, the marks stretch, are repainted, stretch again as new growth sprouts chaotically and is cut back. And yet, these markings are 'on' the tree even as they do not belong to it." A better image of the robust tree of First Millennium encounters would be hard to find.

Thanks to the Wiko's generous definition of *Wissenschaft*, our tables included not only neuroscientists and anthropologists, but also poets, composers and musicians. This year another visual artist also gifted as a sculptor of words, Kamal Boullata, affirmed the place of art in scholarly conversations that grow outward to engage the wider public. His work, springing not from trees but from the living rock of Jerusalem, also forces us to keep shifting our spatial conceptions in a way surprisingly similar to my own efforts to open the geographical horizons in which we think about European history. It is perhaps the lightness of touch and considered discretion so distinctive of the Wiko leadership that places such a diverse group of people together for one year of *wikotium*, an inspired and only seemingly effortless orchestration in which we were all happy and grateful players.