



LE STRANGE, GUY

LE STRANGE, GUY (b. Hunstanton, Norfolk, 24 July 1854; d. Cambridge, 24 December 1933), scholar in Persian, Arabic, and Spanish, specially notable for his work in the field of the historical geography of the pre-modern Middle Eastern and Eastern Islamic lands and his editing of Persian geographical texts.

Born into an old landed gentry family of north Norfolk, he was educated at Clifton College and the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, but did not study at a university, although his scholarly work and his reputation eventually secured for him, in 1913, an honorary M.A. from Cambridge University. Coming from an affluent background, he was able to spend long periods abroad in Europe and the Middle East. It was during his stay in Paris, where his mother had an apartment, that he developed an interest in Middle Eastern studies through contacts with Julius [von] Mohl, professor of Persian at the Collège de France and the editor and translator into French of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*. He also learnt Arabic with Stanislas Guyard, one of the editors in the Leiden project for the editing and publication of Ṭabari's *History* (*Ta'riḵ al-rosol wa'l-moluk*) directed by [Michail J. De Goeje](#).

This initiation into Oriental studies led Le Strange to spend three years in Iran (1877-80), making himself familiar with the land, its people, its language and its culture. A product of this period in his life was his first published work in the field of Iranian studies, done in collaboration with W. H. D. Haggard, who was attached to the British Legation in Tehran. This was *The Vazir of Lankurán* (1882; [Figure 1](#)), the Persian text of a satirical comedy of the time by



Mirzā Fath-‘Ali Ākundzāda (1812-78), with a translation, notes, and vocabulary. The book’s title page describes it as ”a text book of contemporary Persian for the use of travellers,” showing that Le Strange was always concerned with the practical rather than the theoretical or philological aspect of his studies. His notes to the play had characteristic touches of humor, for instance, regarding the term *farrāš*: “there is no name in English for a servant who is at the same time ‘housemaid’ and ‘executioner’.” This was followed by the translation of another Persian play, *The Alchemist* (1886).

After his marriage in 1887 to Wanda Irene, from a Northamptonshire landed family, the Cartwrights of Aynho Park, they lived mainly in Florence, where there had long been a substantial British colony, with Le Strange himself coming back to Britain each summer. During these years, he contributed extensively to the prestigious London literary journal, *The Saturday Review*, and edited the *Letters*, from the earlier part of the nineteenth century, of Princess Lieven to Earl Grey (1890). After the death of his wife in 1907, Le Strange moved back to Cambridge, where he lived until his death there in December 1933, when he was hit by a bus. He died a few days later and was buried among his ancestors at Hunstanton in Norfolk (Gurney, p. 239).

He was attracted by the presence in Cambridge of numerous friends and relatives, but above all by the presence of the Persian scholar Professor [Edward G. Browne](#) at Pembroke College. He became a close associate of Browne’s and of other scholars in the Islamic field, such as the Arabist Professor A. A. Bevan, and the younger scholar who was to succeed Browne in his chair, Reynold A. Nicholson. He was much involved in the editorial and other affairs of the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust (see [Gibb Memorial Series](#)), set up after the death of that scholar of Ottoman Turkish in 1903 for the publication of texts and translations in the three great Islamic languages of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Of his own work in this series, he published the Persian text and a translation of the geographical part of [Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi](#)’s *Nozhat al-qolub*, a work on Iraq and Iran in the time of the Timurid Sultan Abu Sa‘id (r. 1459-69), and with Nicholson, the Persian text of [Ebn al-Balki](#)’s *Fārs-nāma* (1921).

He also kept up a stream of articles in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* and other journals on such varied topics as the legend of Ahl al-Kahf, Islamic numismatics, an inscription on the al-Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, and Serapion’s description of Iraq and Baghdad (see the entries of these listed in Behn, *Index Islamicus 1665-1905*, p. 848, and Pearson, *Index Islamicus*



1906-1955, p. 863). He later took up a serious interest in Spanish literature. He published a translation of the Castilian envoy Clavijo's mission to the capital of Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur (r. 1370-405) in Central Asia (*Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403-1406*), replacing an earlier (1859) translation by the non-Islamist Sir Clements Markham, and a translation of the *Relaciones* of Don Juan of Persia (formerly Oruj Beg Bayāt), a member of Persian delegation to Spain who converted to Christianity in the Spain of Philip III (r. 1598-1621). All Le Strange's work was done under the handicap of defective sight, and when he lost the use of his better eye in 1912, he had to cope with near-blindness in the last two decades or so of his life.

Le Strange's lasting contribution to Islamic studies lies especially in his work on historical geography and his editions of texts. He noted that "If Moslem history is ever to be made interesting, and indeed to be rightly understood, the historical geography of the nearer East during the middle-ages must be thoroughly worked out. I have made a first attempt, but how much more needs to be done, and better done than in the present volume, I am the first to recognise" (*The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, Preface, p. vi). Ferdinand Wüstenfeld had published his edition of Yaqut's *Mo'jam al-boldān* in the middle years of the nineteenth century, and many more of the materials for such research were becoming available through the publication of further Arabic geographical works by Ebn Rosta, Ya'qubi, Eṣṭakri, Ebn Ḥawqal, Moqaddasi, Mas'udi, and others, in De Goeje's *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*. Of Persian works, Nāṣer-e Kōsrow's *Safar-nāma* was available to him after [Charles Schefer](#)'s edition and translation of 1890, and he himself edited and translated later relevant Persian works (see above).

While staying in Haifa with his sister and his brother-in-law, the diplomat and author Laurence Oliphant, during the autumn and winter of 1884, he embarked on a translation of the section on Palestine and Syria in the 4th/10th century geographer Moqaddasi's *Aḥsan al-taqāsim*, and this was published in the series of the Palestine Pilgrims' Texts Society, (1886), as *Description of Syria, including Palestine*. Soon afterwards there appeared his full-scale, detailed *Palestine under the Moslems* (1890). The greater part of the book (pp. 1-378) is devoted to the various regions and their towns, with a particular concentration on Jerusalem (pp. 83-223). For this city Le Strange discusses the historical background, including the Islamic conquest of the city and its notable buildings like the Masjed al-Aqṣā and the Dome of the Rock (Qobbat al-Ṣakra), utilizing works of the geographers, the early Islamic historians, and a



visiting traveler like Nāṣer-e Ḳusrow, as well as later sources such as Šehāb-al-Din Maqdesi's *Moṭir al-ġarām* and Mojir-al-Din 'Olaymi's *al-Ons al-jalil*. Damascus and the Syrian cities are covered in much less detail, but there is an interesting chapter on "Legends and Marvels" discussing stories like that of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (Ahl al-Kahf), one of whose supposed locations was in the Balqā' of Transjordan, the cities of the plain connected with Lot/Luṭ, and the sacred sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and other towns. The second part of the book (pp. 379-556) is a useful gazetteer, alphabetically arranged, of places in Palestine and Syria, with relevant quotations from the sources for each entry; this task was also done later, in greater detail but essentially for Palestine and Transjordan only, by Augustin Marmardji in his *Textes géographiques arabes sur la Palestine* (1954).

Le Strange followed this up in 1900 with his *Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate*. In this work he tried to reconstruct the original Round City and its successive stages of development from the early Islamic historians and other sources, many of which at that time were still in manuscript. Perhaps inevitably, given the time he was writing, his documentation was not thorough, and he never visited the actual site, so that his work here has inevitably been overtaken by later studies of scholars actually viewing the site and utilizing freshly available materials. Thus Jacob Lassner in his *The Topography of Baghdad* (1970) has made telling use of the valuable topographical information in Ḳaṭīb Baġdādī's *Ta'rik Baġdād*, although this is essentially a biographical work (cf. his Preface, pp. 17-19).

Le Strange's *chef d'œuvre* is, however, undoubtedly *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (1905). As well as covering the Arab and Iranian heartlands from Iraq to Khorasan as far as what is now the eastern part of Afghanistan, it ranges, in fact, from the Rum or Anatolia of the Saljuqs and the succeeding *beyliks* (i.e., the territory ruled by a *beg*) in the west to [Chorasmia](#) and Transoxania in the east. For the earlier Islamic centuries, he utilized the standard texts of the geographers, and for the later years, up to the Il-Khanids, geographers and cosmographers like Edrisi and Zakariyā' Qazvini, his own texts of Ebn al-Balkī and Mostawfi, historians like Ḥāfeẓ-e Abru, 'Ali Yazdi, and Abu'l-Fedā, and the accounts of travelers like Ebn Jobayr and Ebn Baṭṭuṭa. He was obviously unable to use Abu Dolaf Yanbu'ī's *Second Resāla* on his travels within Iran, which was discovered by Zeki Velidi Togan in 1922 but was unavailable in a scholarly edition and translation until those of Vladimir Minorsky of 1955. Similarly, the anonymous geography, the [Ḥodud al-'ālam](#),



became known to Russian scholars towards the end of the nineteenth century, but it was virtually unknown in the West until the publication of the text by Jalāl-al-Din Ṭehrāni in 1935 and Minorsky's translation and commentary in 1937.

In his book, *Le Strange* gives details of local topography, buildings, trade and manufactures, agricultural and mineral products, and of the distances between places that were such a feature of the earlier "Road-book" type of geographical work, though he regretted that "to keep the book down to size, I have been obliged to omit translating in full the Itineraries, which our Moslem authorities give us" (Preface, p. vi). With the lapse of over a century since its publication, there have been many studies of specific provinces and districts of the area in question, but *Le Strange's* overall view of this extensive region of Western Asia remains nevertheless a valuable scholarly work that is still much consulted.

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