



## ROSENTHAL, FRANZ

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**ROSENTHAL, FRANZ WILHELM** (b. Berlin, Germany, 31 August 1914; d. Branford, Connecticut, 8 April 2003, Hans Heinrich Schaeder, whom Rosenthal always considered as his principal mentor, taught him [Aramaic](#) as well as Middle Persian and New Persian. He received his Ph.D. in 1935. His dissertation on Palmyrene inscriptions (*Die Sprache der palmyrenischen Inschriften ...*) was published in 1936. His second monograph on Aramaic studies, *Die aramaistische Forschung seit Th. Nöldeke's Veröffentlichungen*, which won him the Lidzbarski Medal, was published in 1939 (and reprinted in 1964).

Rosenthal spent the year 1936 teaching at a boarding school organized for the children of German emigrants in Florence, Italy, after which he returned to Berlin as an instructor in Semitic languages at the *Lehranstalt* (formerly Hochschule) für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. He was helped in his emigration to Sweden by Schaeder and his colleague, [Henrik Samuel Nyberg](#), a scholar of [Pahlavi literature](#) and Islamic mysticism. From there Rosenthal went on for a brief stay in London and Oxford and eventually came to the United States in 1940 to teach Semitic languages at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. During World War II, he worked for the government at the Office of Strategic Services in Washington, D.C. After the war, he resumed his teaching activities at the Hebrew Union College until 1948, when he was invited to join the Oriental Department of the University of Pennsylvania as a professor of Arabic. In 1956, he was appointed Louis M. Rabinowitz Professor of Semitic Languages, and in 1967 Sterling Professor at Yale University, where



he stayed until his retirement in 1985, declining invitations to professorships at UCLA, Harvard, and Princeton.

Although Rosenthal never lost interest in Aramaic studies, he began to do research on, and to publish in, Arabic literature and history already in his Berlin years, principally based on the manuscript collections that came his way, the Prussian State Library in Berlin first, then the British Museum and the Bodleian, and still later, after the war, the collections in Tunis and Kairouan, and in particular in Istanbul and a number of provincial Turkish towns. All of Rosenthal's works reflect his mastery of the arts of manuscript research and of philology, not to mention his sense of the truly significant: several of his discoveries have opened up wholly new avenues of research which have not yet been paced out to their ends. He always saw "the rules of philology [as] the indispensable prerequisites for a successful understanding of any foreign people and culture," and at the same time he viewed historical and cultural studies as his essential vocation (*Die Krise der Orientalistik*, pp. 10 f.) Rosenthal's vast oeuvre may be structured in three large fields: Islamic history proper, Graeco-Arabic studies, and the intellectual history of medieval Islam.

Two major publications stand out from the first field: *A History of Muslim Historiography* (1952, revised edition 1968), consisting of editions and translations of three important Arabic texts and a substantial introductory essay, and an English translation of Ebn Kaldun's *al-Moqaddema*, published in three volumes in the *Bollingen Series* 1958 (revised edition 1967) and remaining, until Abdesselam Cheddadi's French translation in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* (2002), without rival. Two volumes, contributed to the English annotated translation of al-Ṭabari's *History*, belong to Rosenthal's later years, vol. XXXVIII (1985) and vol. I (1989), the latter introduced by the best account of the life and works of the author that we have.

Graeco-Arabic studies are at the heart of Rosenthal's scholarship. Already his early account of Zeno of Elea (1937), his groundbreaking essay "On the Knowledge of Plato's Philosophy in the Islamic World" (1940-41), his study of the Pythagorean tradition in Islamic ethics (1941), and most significantly, his discovery of the "Greek sage" (al-Šayḵ al-Yunāni) as a witness of the Plotinian tradition in Arabic (1952-55, 1974), all show Rosenthal's mastery of Greek and Arabic philology and his sense for remote, but crucial, influences of Greek on Arabic philosophy. The same is true for his works on the history of Greek medicine in Islam (e.g., Hippocrates, 1956, 1966, 1973; Eshāq b. Ḥonayn's *Ta'rik*



*al-aṭebbā'*, 1954; Abu Bakr Rāzi, 1978; see also the essays on “The Defense of Medicine in the Medieval Muslim World,” 1969, and “The Physician in Medieval Muslim Society,” 1978), as well as his contributions to the history of astronomy, astrology, oneiromancy, and music theory. Moreover, Rosenthal retained a keen interest in that fascinating generation of Muslim scholars and intellectuals who were the first recipients of the Arabic translations of Greek philosophy and sciences: Ya‘qub b. Eshāq Kendi (1942, 1949, 1956) and his followers Aḥmad b. Ṭayyeb Saraḳsi (d. 286/899), [Abu Zayd Balki](#) (d. 322/934) and [Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Āmeri](#) (d. 381/992). Especially the student mentioned first, Saraḳsi, served as “a representative of intellectual currents in contemporary Baghdad that were about to change direction” (Rosenthal, “Sarakhsī,” in *ET*<sup>2</sup>, IX, p. 35). Rosenthal’s meticulous collection of biographical data and interpretation of Saraḳsi’s preserved fragments (1943, *addenda* 1951, 1956, 1961, 1995) may be called exemplary. Still another field within Graeco-Arabic studies which kept Rosenthal’s creative interest was the popular genre of wisdom literature, *ḥekma* (pl. *ḥekam*), which contains sayings by philosophers, sages, and wits; authors treated by Rosenthal range from Ebn Dorayd (1958) to Mobaššer b. Fātek (1960-61) and Ebn Abi 'Awn (1991). The field was then further cultivated by Rosenthal’s student Dimitri Gutas.

An anthology of texts dealing with Graeco-Arabica, either Arabic translations from Greek or Arabic works composed on the basis of the translated texts, originally published in German as *Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam* (1965; repr., 1992), gives a formidable impression of the breadth and depth of the Greek heritage in Islamic culture, and, at the same time, it shows the creativity with which the Muslim and Christian recipients acquired, adapted, and developed that heritage: “an independent and, historically, an extraordinarily fruitful achievement,” as the author says in his foreword (English edition, p. xvi).

Early in his career, Rosenthal embarked on a series of publications, mostly monographs, on the intellectual history of medieval Islam, which he himself placed under the guiding theme “man versus society in medieval Islam.” The first installment of that series was his *The Muslim Concept of Freedom Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (1960), which, on the basis of terminological and conceptual investigations and an examination of a vast array of primary sources, including poetry, documents one aspect of the ways in which the norms of a multifarious society governed by the religious law of Islam may come into conflict with the individual and his drives and interests. Other such



issues followed, including *The Herb: Hashish Versus Medieval Muslim Society* (1971), *Gambling in Islam* (1975), and “*Sweeter than Hope*”: *Complaint and Hope in Medieval Islam* (1983). The same theme, “man versus society,” is addressed in Rosenthal’s early study on *Humor in Early Islam* (1956; repr., 1976), his essay “On Suicide in Islam” (1946; cf. his article “Intihār” in *EI*<sup>2</sup>, III, pp. 1246-48), and the sixth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Conference in 1977, for which he chose the title *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*. Thus, in a span of thirty years, an array of significant aspects of the human condition and of medieval Islamic culture, as well as their mutual shapings, was assembled, all of them chosen independently from intellectual fashions or academic programs, many of them not followed up since, and all of their larger monographic treatments organized in an inimitable style: their chapters point at the central focus from different directions, which complement and substantiate each other and give account of the variety of sources and the complexity of the theme.

A final aspect of Rosenthal’s interest in the intellectual history of medieval Islam was its own attitude toward scholarship and knowledge. An early and still unsurpassed investigation into this aspect is *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship* (1947), later followed by his monograph *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (1970), apparently the *summa* of Rosenthal’s oeuvre, and still later by a sketch “*Of Making Books There Is No End*”: *The Classical Muslim View* (1995). In *Knowledge Triumphant*, Rosenthal investigates the lexicographic and definitional evidence of the term(s) and shows in four consecutive chapters the role of knowledge in Islamic theology, Sufism, philosophy, and education (“Knowledge is Society”), proving “that in Islam, the concept of knowledge enjoyed an importance unparalleled in other civilizations”—and, one might add, embodying the author’s incomparable scholarship.

When Rosenthal came to the Hebrew Union College in 1940, only a few students pursued Arabic and Islamic studies in a very few places in the United States. In the past seventy years, the field has greatly expanded. A number of Rosenthal’s students carry on what he called “text-based scholarship,” and quite a number of places practice some of the disciplines that he commanded; but he may have been the last scholar who encompassed the whole range of Oriental Studies and who upheld the ideals of European Orientalism, whose aim he defined, in his *Half an Autobiography*, as looking “beyond the culture in which one is rooted to other cultures whatever their geographical location



with respect to Europe, in order to learn about and understand them and to try to spread the knowledge thus acquired” (p. 50).

Rosenthal insisted on the autonomy of his discipline, Arabic and Islamic studies, and warned against its seeking precipitous refuge under the institutional wings of history or religious sciences. Yet he was in close contact with neighboring disciplines, which appreciated his scholarship: apart from his membership in the Accademia dei Lincei and the British Academy and his honorary memberships in the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft and the Société Asiatique, he was an active and highly esteemed member of the American Oriental Society (whom he served as president twice), the Medieval Academy, the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and of the American Academy of Jewish Research.

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