

## Leiden Acceptance Speech

Dear Rector Magnificus,  
Dear Prof. Sijpestijn and Members of the Doctorate Board of Leiden University,  
Dear Professors of Leiden University,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am am deeply honored by the choice of Leiden University to confer this doctorate upon me, and I thank Prof. Sijpestijn for her generous words. I do hope to live to them in my future work.

I am particularly joyed by the fact that this university has chosen me for this honorary doctorate, a University I have already visited on earlier occasions, and which has brought Arabic Studies into the 21st century with a renewed attention to the earliest documents of social history, the Arabic papyri. These are studied in only very few places in the world, and in fact Leiden, under the egis of Prof. Sijpestijn, has given renewed live to this important branch of research.

Leiden is of special significance to our field, because the scholars of its university were among the first to make Arabic philology part of the European Academy as early as the 17th century: the Dutch scholars Joseph Scaliger (d. 1609), Thomas Erpenius (d. 1624), and Jacob Golius (d. 1667) laid the foundations of our field. Erpenius' Arabic became grammar standard work in Europe for learning and studying Arabic and remained in print until well into the nineteenth century. Golius wrote the first Arabic dictionary and together with and Levinus Warner (d. 1665) acquired hundreds of Arabic manuscripts for the library of Leiden University, which is today one of the prominent manuscript collections in Europe.

But today, it is a time of rapid change. In no period (besides the turn to the 20th century) have the material sources gained such prominence; I mean that Arabic manuscripts (which once took long journeys to consult) are now only a few clicks away. And this renewed look is changing the field. It is possible because of the digital age we live in, which also gives us new ways to analyze and understand complex textual traditions that would not fit into any printed book.

The field of Arabic studies has always been a small but closely interconnected international network, since we are few, but we sit in many places scattered across the globe. Today's possibilities allows us to make this contact even more immediate and accelerate the speed of research.

But this is not entirely new, since before modernity, the Arabic language as a global means of communication likewise connected people across continents, specifically Asia, Africa, and Europe. That is what attracted me and made me to try to understand a book of wisdom, which has traveled the globe since it origins in India (and changed drastically in the

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proress). In Arabic it is called *Kalila and Dimna*. But each linguistic culture gave it a new name. In its Dutch translation of 1623 of Zacharias Heyns, it is thus introduced:

*Voorbeelsels der oude wyse, handelende van trouw, ontrouw, list, haet, geswindicheyt, ende alle andere menschelijcke gheneghentheden. Uut d'Indische sprake, in d'Arabische, Hebreische ende Latijnsche overgheset, ende nu in de Duytsche vertaelt, verçiert met vele rijm-spreucken, ende figueren door Zacharias Heyns*

[“Examples of the old wise, dealing with loyalty, disloyalty, guile, hatred, speed and all human affections. Transmitted from the Indian language, into the Arabic, Hebrew and Latin, and now into Diets translated, decorated with many rhyme sayings and figures/illustrations by Zacharias Heyns)“]

The immense popularity of this work in the world up to the 19th century is astounding — long before anyone had actually coined the term of ‘word literature.’

*Kalila and Dimna* also teaches you another thing, that we should take to heart as Europeans today: that the stories and the ethics it conveys travel across cultures, each language giving them its own bend. So that it can help us to embrace a new meaning of the Europe of today, which is more diverse in languages and religions, than ever before. If a work of literature can overcome these boundaries, so can we.

But all the exciting discoveries, which have filled the last 9 years after my return from Yale University, Connecticut, USA to the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany I could not have been made on my own. With the support of the European Research Council and German Research Foundation I was able to assemble an international team. And much what goes on in our research is conversation, so that often times it is difficult to say who had which idea, since it sort of ignited in the air in between the speaking minds.

This is why it is special pleasure to me to thank my team, represented here by Dr. Jan van Ginkel and Dr. Theo Beers. You have been a blessing, an inspiration to me, each in his or her individual way, and together a group of human beings that is precious to me.

It also gives me special pleasure to greet here Professor Bilal Orfali of Beirut University, one of my first students at Yale University.

And lastly, we are nothing without our families, and I owe my family immense gratitude for their unflinching support — and patience — and it my pleasure to share this moment with my sister Nausikaa and my brother-in-law Jens. I could not have made it without you.

I thank you all for your attention.