

Palestine in the Imagination of the Imperial German Self

Gustav Dalman and the Bavarian War Archive

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural imperialist identities that accompanied the semicolonial policy of the German Empire during World War I. It examines the imaginations that interwove representations of the German imperial self, apparent in visual and textual artefacts in the archival material of the German air force mission, as well as in the academic and institutional work of German Protestant theologian and Orientalist Gustav Dalman (1855–1941). The author shows how two aspects (the secular and the religious) of the German *mission civilisatrice*, the ideological backbone of its colonial ambitions, are reflected in the ways that the imagery of Palestine is created and connected within the struggle for power in the Near East. The author argues that the German secular mission went hand in hand with its aspirations to evangelize the Orient. The religious mission is evident in the aspirations of Dalman's social milieu by interpreting modernity against the background of biblical salvation history as the "end of times." In this regard, Palestine was perceived as both: a place of salvation history as well as a power and cultural-political influence zone.

Keywords

German colonialism; biblical Orientalism; World War I; imperial narcissism; Gustav Dalman; Bavarian War Archive; Palestine; German air force brigades.

This article explores the cultural imperialist identities that accompanied the semicolonial policy of the German Empire during World War I. It examines the imaginations that interwove representations of the German imperial self as they become apparent in visual and textual artefacts in the archival material of the German air force mission as well as in the academic and institutional work of the renowned German philologist and Orientalist Gustav Dalman (1855–1941). I show how two aspects of the German *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) – the secular and the religious, the ideological backbone of its colonial ambitions – are reflected in the ways that the imagery of Palestine is created and connected within the struggle for power in the Near East. These features are, namely: the striking neglect found in the textual and visual remnants left by the Bavarian air force, which carried out surveillance missions in Palestine during the end of World War I, and the outstanding enthusiasm visible in the academic work of German scholar Gustav Dalman in publishing a selection of their photographs in the aftermath of World War I.

The Military Representation or the Disappearance of Palestine in the Orient

In 1928, Gustav Dalman criticized the lack of visual data material displaying the “real” or “authentic” characteristics of Palestine and located its reasons in a one-sided focus on holy sites and historical places by professional photographers due to their economic dependence on touristic demands.¹ In his eyes, the German air force brigades were able to depict what these photographers missed. However, the brigades succeeded to give an encompassing visual impression of Palestine not because they were more talented or because they felt more committed to provide an accurate representation of the country. Rather, it was quite the contrary – because they were *not* interested in the visual depiction of the land. Their photographs were a side product of their military fact-finding missions that aimed at the reconnaissance of the enemy, its infrastructure, human and military resources, and strategic considerations, as the archival material shows. What peaked their interest was not the land *itself* – Palestine – but the presence of the (British) enemy *in* the land.² In the War Archive of the Bavarian State Archives we find evidence: a collection of handwritten commands to brigade officers and soldiers; information leaflets for the pilots with instructions on what to observe; forms with cryptic signs for communication with ground troops about enemy movements, forces, and intentions; and a war diary of Berthold, the lieutenant on duty, who carefully describes the daily tasks of his flight units and other matters. Above all hovers absolute concern and preoccupation with the British troops.

Even photographs of German traces in the country, such as colonies or institutions, seem to be arbitrary side effects similar to landscapes and rural as well as urban sceneries. Information about an “aerial-archaeological mission” of the German air force, as Nada Atrash puts it, is not found in the archival material.³ It looks as if no official order, as the word “mission” somehow implies, was given to the soldiers

in this regard. This does not mean that they had no such ambitions and aspirations. Schulz mentions in his article that Theodor Wiegand, director of the German-Turkish Archeological institute, asked the air force to make photographs of archeological sites, which resulted in the air force founding the aerial photograph archeology, as Gerd M. Schulz proudly announces.⁴ Due to this request, the photographs show historical traces from the biblical era, and the time of the crusades, the Ottoman occupation, and early Zionist colonization. The most famous ones are the photographs of the pyramids. Thus, we can speak of the informal task the soldiers indeed diligently fulfilled. In addition, the archival material reveals the humanistic education some of the officers must have enjoyed, an experience that gifted them with the appreciation of historical monuments. Thus, we can assume that some of the photographs were produced due to their own interest in historical monuments. This can be construed from a note in the archival material documenting their attempts to rent a ship from the maritime fleet to do some sightseeing.⁵

Nevertheless, drawing on the material in the Bavarian War Archive⁶ but also on other material, for example, a novel at the time, *Vortrupp Pascha*⁷ (Vanguard Pasha) by Richard Euringer, a member of the Bavarian air force mission, we saw no significant genuine interest or enthusiasm for biblical sites or stories reflected in the various documents of the period. Instead, the rare statements concerning non-military issues in the Bavarian archive material dismantle the general idea that Palestine was somehow dissolved into a far greater Arabia or Orient.

Heroic Guardians of the Orient

The soldier-pilots comprehended themselves to be “guardians” of this Orient. This heroic self-perception is omnipresent in Euringer’s novel and in chivalrous ideals of manhood, encapsulated in archival diplomas honoring certain officers by elevating them to the rank of knight.⁸ These ideal images of their subjectivities are inextricably linked to a certain imagination of the Orient cultivated by the soldiers. It is the legacy of the ancient Persians and Greeks (see Kyros in *Vortrupp Pascha*) they build upon for their images, desires, and ideals in the first place. To this ancient non-Christian heritage, they seem to connect their own militaristic chauvinism. This mythical manhood, on which the heroic self-perception of the German soldiers rests, sets itself apart from the ordinary of the Ottoman subject (be they Turkish or Arabic). The communication guidelines preserved in the Bavarian War Archive, instruct the soldiers how to treat and speak to Ottoman fellow soldiers and workers to increase their man power.⁹ In those guidelines, we find reflected the stereotypical deficits ascribed to the Oriental figure in general. The devaluation of the ordinary Ottoman or “Turkish” subject (as Ottomans were usually referred to by the Germans) remains juxtaposed against the idealization of the figure of the ancient hero who – since mythical – embodies the European and the Oriental at the same time, and in whose footsteps the German soldiers can therefore imagine themselves to follow. The continuity between the antiquity and

the contemporary appears to be established by the soldiers through the figure of the hero. As guardians of the Orient they were able to incorporate the Orient into Europe or rather they were able to see the Orient as partial extension of Europe, as a dark and mythical origin of the contemporary European hegemonies. Zantop describes the German strive for colonies as mirrored in the public consciousness by analyzing the colonial novel and speaks of an obsession with the colonies (*Kolonialbesessenheit*) of the society of the German Empire.¹⁰ This imagination was retrieved from the European Zeitgeist of the Belle époque, which cultivated Greek and Persian history and thought as predecessor of European culture.

Palestine – with its symbolical value for Christian identity and culture – plays a minor role in the imagination of this Orient. The archival material in Munich gives the impression that Palestine is primarily perceived as part of the Ottoman Empire or a fictitious Orient. The British archives most likely draw another picture, since Palestine played a crucial role in the divide and conquer strategy of their colonial policy, conceived already during the First World War (for example, the Balfour Declaration 1917). In comments about conversations with agents and captives (not conducted by the officers of the air force), *Arabia* – not Palestine – is clearly determined as the “object of desire” of the enemy and identified as “too much of importance for the British in political and financial regard as to be given up by them.”¹¹ *Arabia* – not *Palestine* – becomes an object of desire to the Germans due to its inimical value on the backdrop of the European trial of strength during the First World War. Palestine moved into the German spotlight only as the eastern frontier of military confrontations with the British shifted from Sinai to Palestine. Even though many representatives of the British political elites were ideologically dedicated Zionists and supported the nationalist goals of Zionist Jewish settlers for their own interests, the German emperor had always respected his close ally, the Ottoman sultan, too much to foster the already existing movement of German settlers into the Holy Land, dedicated to Christian Zionism.

Palestine as Embodiment of a Biblical Past

Nevertheless, there were German contemporaries of that time for whom Palestine had an intrinsic value, although this value was based on its embodiment of the biblical past. Gustav Dalman, a German Protestant theologian, was such a historical figure. Dalman was specialized in the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew Bible, and was a scholar of Palestine studies. He led the German Evangelical Institute for Classical Studies of the Holy Country (*Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des heiligen Landes*), called Palestine Institute (*Palästina Institut*) in Jerusalem from 1902 to 1917. The Palestine Institute was only one of several German institutions for research on Palestine on Palestinian soil. It was established in 1903, after the foundation of the German Palestine Association in 1877, and formed its intellectual counterpart. The institute differed from the association by its explicit evangelic orientation – it

represented the German Evangelic Church in Palestine, whereas the association identified itself as interconfessional. The First World War prevented Dalman from returning to Palestine until its ending. During this time he accepted a professorship for Old Testament and Palestine Studies in Greifswald (Germany), where he established the Institute for Biblical Regional and Antiquity Studies (*biblische Landes- und Altertumskunde*), now known as the Gustav Dalman Institute.

In 1921, Dalman returned to Palestine and became the provost of the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, and from 1905 to 1926 was the editor of the journal *Palästina-Jahrbuch* (Palestine Yearbook). During his time in Palestine, Dalman taught various lectures for young German theologians and explored, photographed, and documented the lives of Palestinian peasants and Bedouins. Dalman's work provides unique and unparalleled insights into the conditions of ordinary people's lives during the Ottoman era. In his second research field, Jewish studies, he published works on grammar and dictionaries of Aramaic dialects and post-biblical Hebrew language, which later became standard works in the field. The most astonishing characteristic of his scientific approach is the ideological framework he used for his research: he attempted to draw conclusions from his fieldwork about the history of Israel and the Orient in ancient times, which is why we find archeology and regional studies as so entangled in his work.

Being both a religious dignitary – or rather a representative of Protestant belief and thought – as well as a scholar interested in the topography, geography, and history of Palestine itself, Dalman blurred the commonly understood lines between the categories of (biblical) Orientalism and its metaphysical occupation of the country, disregarding the scholar's quest for accurate knowledge about the land itself. Biblical Orientalism¹² determined Palestine as *lieu de savoir* for biblical hermeneutics,¹³ that is, research about Palestine aimed not at the historical study of Palestine per se, but at biblical comprehension, putting scholarship into the service of religious and clerical interests. Studies on Palestine were thus conceived as Holy Land studies – often pursued by many interested, semi-scholarly actors such as theologians, doctors, teachers, and missionaries – and, as such, ought to be seen in the context of Christian-imperial scholarship. Dalman, on the other hand, was not only a theologian, but also a professional scientist. Even though he has to be considered representing Christian-imperial science (current 1871–1918), his critique that took aim at the romanticizing of Palestine counteracts biblical Orientalism. As we see in his introductory remarks, he regrets the lack of accuracy and will to display an authentic view of the Palestinian landscape due to a romanticized and idealized image of the country, which he even calls a sickness.¹⁴ As a consequence of this critique, his selection of one hundred photographs from *Bildsammlung Palästina* for the photobook *Hundert deutsche Fliegerbilder aus Palästina* (One Hundred German Aerial Photographs from Palestine) draws on the intention to provide different locations in Palestine.¹⁵ On the surface only, Dalman's scholarly habitus challenges predefined Orientalist notions. However, Dalman's thinking, like most others of his age, was permeated by a certain kind of Orientalism. Even though Edward Said did

not elaborate on the religious aspects of Orientalism, he clearly pointed out the close ties between Christianity and Orientalism and particularly Protestant missions and European colonial expansion by highlighting the latter's roots in Christian religious discourse.¹⁶

The Palestine Institute (German Evangelical Institute for Classical Studies of the Holy Country) was initiated by German Emperor Wilhelm II in 1898 and Dalman was its first director. The name of the institute already refers to its confessional identity and to other German archeological institutes of the German Foreign Office in Athens and Rome at the same time. This institution was established not only to represent the German Evangelic Church, but also the Evangelic position within the international research on Palestine.¹⁷ International studies on Palestine were a densely covered field, dominated by the *British Palestine Exploration Fund* that was prevailing in the production of knowledge about Palestine. The role of German research was mainly limited to the interpretation of data and knowledge produced by the *British Exploration Fund* or other field dominating actors.¹⁸ In the British context, "Palestine" referred to the country of the Old Testament. An accurate knowledge of the Holy Land, that is, the practices of secular science, should thus provide insights into the sacred text of the Bible. The interest in the Bible was not only religious. The British considered the Bible as a national epic, identified with the people of Israel. So we see Palestine regarded as an extension of England, as essential part of British identity.¹⁹ Whereas the British confined research about Palestine to illustrate the Bible, the German interconfessional approach (of the Palestine Association) pursued scientific approaches that were much more independent from the theological and ecclesial ambitions of the British. This manifested itself in focuses such as biblical research (*Bibelforschung*), that is, the method of so-called Higher Criticism (*historisch-kritische Methode*) of the Bible, as well as in the demand of a comprehensive knowledge fielded in ethnographic, demographic, and statistical explorations of contemporary Palestine.²⁰ Dalman, and the orientation of the Palestine Institute led by him, can be located somewhere in the middle between the secular tendencies of the German Palestine Association and the theological aspirations pursued by the British Exploration Fund, despite its secular identity. Dalman saw the function of the institute in the explanation of the Holy Land according to the standards of today's science ("*das heilige Land nach dem jetzigen Stande der ihm geltenden Wissenschaft zu erklären*").²¹ The institute's field of research was dedicated to regional studies (*Landeskunde*); the aim was to explore the country, using the backdrop of its relevance as holy land. Dalman considered languages and customs, flora and fauna, geology and climatic conditions, antiquities, geographies, traffic routes, sanctuaries, residential buildings, cemeteries, and inscriptions as essential parts of regional studies. The goal of the research was to connect the historical past to the landscape ("*die aus der Geschichte bekannte Vergangenheit mit der Landschaft zu verbinden*") and to discover the past in the present. The goal of the education was to give a colored background to the holy narratives ("*den heiligen Erzählungen einen farbigen Hintergrund geben*").²²

Thus, the history, which was conceived of as underlying the country's past, was, of course, the biblical. Biblical history was to discover "the hidden truth" behind the mythical landscapes and even in the customs of its people. Everything from the stones to the monuments became in this view remnants of a holy past, reminiscent of a sacredness, lost in time. Based on these conceptions, one would assume Dalman to be a pale theoretician, but contrary to these expectations he was a whole-hearted ethnographer. Multi-day excursions formed an essential part of the curricula for the theologians and were given far more priority than lectures. Dalman saw the practice of autonomous study and observation as the key to a successful learning process. The four fixed topics he regularly taught in his lectures were: Jerusalem and its environment in topography and archeology, work and customs, and geography and regional study, as well as Palestine's relationships to the New Testament. In addition, he taught Arabic reading courses and lectured on language, on the historical geography of Palestine, the architectural history of Jerusalem, the regions of the tribes of Israel, modern Islam, the Greek Orthodox Church of Palestine and the Protestant Mission.²³ Dalman was able to capture all of his experiences, studies, and teachings of those years during which he presided over the Palestine Institute, into his tremendous seven-volume opus *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (Work and Custom in Palestine), a late work, evolved in Greifswald.²⁴ With this fruitful product of his years in Palestine, he established German Palestine Studies as its own scientific discipline.

In *Work and Custom in Palestine*, Dalman starts with a detailed description of the different seasons and the daily routine, how one experiences the cold and the heat, and then proceeds to discuss: the ground conditions, agriculture, wheat harvest; the production of bread, oil and wine; useful plants and their utilization like spinning and weaving; and the farming and utilization of wool and different animal hair. He describes various categories of the Palestinian population, the Bedouin milieu with their life in the camps, livestock and milk products, hunting and fishing, sedentary farmers with their houses and their chicken farming, beekeeping, and pigeon breeding. Finally, he gives details about songs, music, and customs at times of birth, weddings, and death. A collector, with life and soul, in *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* he created an encyclopedic treasure of uncountable information on every shade of Palestinian life. The work can be read as a compendium of several handbooks on various topics – from cooking and baking to rituals, clima, and animals, as well as dictionaries for different Palestinian dialects on every possible aspect of public, private, and working life of the population, as well as of the soil, and rural and urban landscape back in time. Thus, it combines different scientific disciplines – ethnography, geography and philology among others – under the overall umbrella of the studies of Palestine and the Palestinians. The crucial idea through all of Dalman's work, and which he wants to convey, according to Julia Männchen, is the extent to which the land and its characteristics shaped its people and ingrained itself in the smallest details – from food and clothing to festivities – of their lives.²⁵

The German Mission *Civilisatrice*

I suggest to view Dalman as an anthropologist of ancient Palestine or rather an anthropologist of the sacred. His scientific approach was to reconstruct every aspect of (organic and inorganic) life from stones to humans in the biblical past – or more exactly during Jesus’ lifetime – originating from the present. In this light, we have to see also his obsessive exploration of different Palestinian dialects. He carefully intertwined them into the descriptions of the various contexts of work and life of the population he observed. In addition to the Palestinian words, he invariably adds related Hebrew, Aramaic, and sometimes even Greek words. Thus, he saw the past of the land, chosen by God to be sacred, even mirrored in the language of the people, as he saw the people and its culture deeply rooted in a land with different sacred traditions that inherited each other’s traditions throughout time. For him, past and present seem to be melting together before his eyes. He sees the divine traces of Jesus reverberated in the landscape and the people. The salvation history permeating and soaking the country’s every inch knows no past nor present. Dalman must have seen his object of research through the prism of a consciousness of “cyclical time.” As the backdrop to this, what appears to be strange on first sight becomes understandable: the study of the contemporary as a lens through which to study the past. In contrast to Israeli-European historiography much later in time, the population was not erased from time and space; rather it was regarded as an essential part of it, so essential that it served as a scientific source to research the biblical times.

But how does Dalman view the imagination shared by the air force officers who fantasied their being part of the Orient as its guardians and successors? It is a moral, or actually a mental, appropriation of the territory for their individual and collective salvation, whether in the form of conceptions of efficient militia in the footsteps of ancient, mythical Oriental kings and heroes for their identities and constructions of manhood, or in the form of the dream of the evangelization of the Holy Land. However, Palestine features as a mere part of the Orient as a whole in the former, while it played a crucial role in the latter. The differing significance of Palestine as an entity itself in the sources of the war archive, on one side, and in the sources of the photographs and writings of Dalman, on the other side, mirror the varying framework of the conditions of their creation. The missions of the Bavarian air force occurred in the context of the competing ambitions for hegemony over the Middle East among the European superpowers in the context of World War I, while Dalman’s work in general, and his selection of Bavarian air force photographs in particular, should be seen against the backdrop of the colonial interests of the German Empire in the Near East. Even though the German Empire was first and foremost interested in political solidarity with the Ottoman Empire, it was eager to intensify its influence with regard to economic and military issues, not least because the German arms industry benefited. *Pénétration pacifique* is this mixture of policies between solidarity and maximization of interests.²⁶

Thus, the imperial self-perception connected a rootedness in Hellenistic ideals – embodied in the heroic military ideals of the members of the German air force – with the reconstruction of a biblical Palestine. Both imaginaries evolved within the *mission civilisatrice* in the context of the German colonial interests in the Orient. The identification with the Hellenist legacy was transmitted by the German higher education of the nineteenth century and formed therefore a vital part of the identity of modernity in the German context. All Germans with a higher educational degree had gone through the same scholarly curricula and thus had internalized a Hellenistic “substitutional identity,” which allowed an “imperial narcissism” to see Western Anatolia, Asia Minor, the Levant, and Mesopotamia as prolongation of the German hegemonic self.²⁷ The very same ideology sought to transform the world, society, and labor into a world of technical progress and increasing efficiency.

The German secular mission, which was to enforce the nineteenth century transnational European value system known as modernity, went hand in hand with its aspirations to evangelize the Orient, that is, the religious mission, seen in the aspirations of Dalman’s social milieu. Under the secular surface of Western modernism, major European powers interpreted modernity against the background of biblical salvation history as the “end of times” – that is, an epoch of global evangelization and/or national Jewish reconstruction as a prelude to the “kingdom of God on earth.” In this regard, Palestine was perceived as both: a place of salvation history as well as a power and cultural-political influence zone. This is why the ideal of progressiveness does not contradict with the longing for the biblical past. The stagnated Orientals were expected to open up to European superiority in this regard, as we saw above in the communication guidelines for German officers on how to speak to Orientals in order to increase their work power. The Islamic history of the region and its predominantly Muslim demography appeared to many of them as an obstacle to civilizational or salvation-related “progress.” By identifying the Aramaic civilization of Jesus and his family in the concurrent culture of the Palestinian population – and by drawing parallels between the contemporary Muslim and Christian indigenous population and their Aramaic-Hebrew predecessors in antiquity – Dalman certainly breaks with many of the premises underlying the ideology of the restoration of the Jews, which equated modern European Jewry with the ancient Hebrews in the Belle Epoque. Even so, by projecting the biblical past on them, he obliterates their human presence as well.

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Endnotes

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