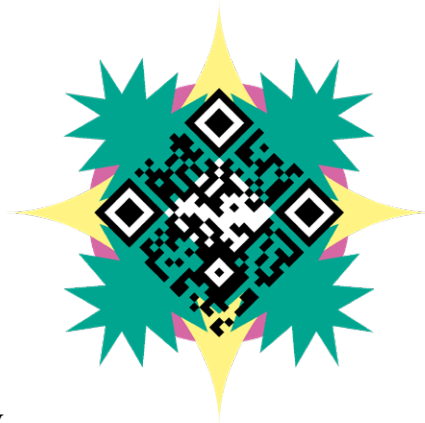


# Traces of the Middle East in Leiden

The Middle East has been studied at Leiden University for over four hundred years. For today's purpose we extend the term Middle East to include North Africa and parts of Central Asia in order to refer to an area that has been under the influence of Islam for a long time. We refrain from the term "the Islamic World" because so much of what we encounter is not at all or not solely determined by Islam. The connection between Leiden and the Middle East is visible throughout city, but of course you have to know where to look in order to recognize it...



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*Text: Birte Kristiansen / Universiteit Leiden*

*Photos: Pim Rusch*

*This Leiden World Walk is offered to you by*



## 1 Museum of Ethnology, "Volkenkunde" Steenstraat 1

Leiden houses thirteen museums. When taking the size of the city into consideration that is remarkable, but no coincidence: it is directly related to the long presence of the University in Leiden. The museum's large collections contain plenty of objects from the Middle East, which is an outcome of the fact that scholarship, diplomacy and trade have created a centuries-old connection between Leiden and the Middle East.

We start our tour in front of the National Museum of Ethnology. This museum has a semi-permanent exhibition devoted to the Middle East. An important collection is that of the well-known Leiden diplomat-scholar Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, whom we will encounter another time during this tour. Another notable collection is the one of Albert Hotz, a Rotterdam businessman and trade pioneer in Iran (1855-1930). That collection consists of more than a thousand Iranian artifacts (wood, metal, pottery, textiles).

## 2 Matthias de Vrieshof 4

We are now entering the domain of the humanities in Leiden – often regarded as “language studies”. The Middle Eastern languages are amply represented. Both ancient “dead” languages, such as various Egyptian languages and cuneiform script, as well as living languages such as Arabic, Persian and Turkish are studied here. “Language studies” should not be regarded as some kind of comprehensive “language course.” The language is indeed a necessary tool in providing access to cultures and

source material in other languages and scripts, but the research being done here is very diverse: it stretches over several millennia, and varies in subject matter from linguistics, to culture, religion, literature and politics. Some of the methods used are still very classic, but modern digital techniques such as text mining are also used extensively.



## 3 Leiden University Library, Witte Singel 26-27

The collection of Oriental manuscripts in the university library is world famous. This has everything to do with Leiden's 400-year tradition in Oriental languages. When collecting for more than 400 years, it adds up! Centuries before travel was considered ‘normal’, Leiden scholars would already travel to the Middle East, and in many cases these adventurous individuals would fill the roles of scholar, diplomat and trader simultaneously. The objects they took with them largely ended up in the museums of Leiden. The written sources ended up here in the university library.



Voorbeeld van een manuscript uit de collectie van de Leidse Universiteitsbibliotheek, met dank aan de afdeling Bijzondere Collecties. (Uit "Kitab al-furusiyya wa'l-baitara" van al-Khuttuli)

## 4 Old Observatory

From the Witte Singel you have a nice view of the Old Observatory. In Medieval times, the Arabs made enormous progress in mathematics and astronomy. Many stars and star groups still bear Arabic names and our numbers are called “Arabic numerals” for a reason. With that in mind, it becomes easier to apprehend that in 1629 professor Golius was appointed professor of mathematics alongside his appointment as chair of Arabic. At the initiative of Golius in 1632, a platform was erected on the Academy Building to make observations. Two centuries later, this initiative resulted in the construction of the observatory you are looking at today, thanks to the efforts of Frederik Kaiser. Knowledge of the Arabic language and thus access to Arabic sources on astronomy and mathematics lays at the very foundation of astronomy in Leiden.



## 5 Clusius Garden, Hortus, Rapenburg 73

In past centuries, plants from all over the world ended up in the botanical garden (hortus botanicus) of Leiden. Plants were examined for their medical use, but also for a variety of other purposes, including esthetics. The latter was also the main attraction of a particular plant from the Middle East that was important and profoundly influenced Dutch history: the tulip! Brought by a diplomat from the palace of Sultan Süleyman I, the tulip, which is now associated with the Netherlands all around the world, began its 'conquest' very modestly here in the Clusius Garden.



The tulip is not the only plant from the Middle East that influenced Dutch history. Nowadays, half our pantry consists of products we know from the Arabic world. We see this in their names too: the Dutch words for sugar, tea, coffee, alcohol and spinach are a few examples of words that seem 'typically Dutch', but in fact have their roots in Arabic.

## 6 House of Snouck Hurgronje, Rapenburg 61

Of the many Arabists who have walked through the streets of Leiden over the last more than four hundred years, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje is the most famous one amongst the larger population. Why? It is probably because 'Snouck' was a real adventurer who, it turned out, led a double life. In Leiden he was a respectable diplomat and scholar, in Indonesia he sometimes disappeared off the radar for months. He was secretly married there to not one, but two native women, and fathered several children with those secret wives. He converted to Islam, another long-kept secret from his Leiden connections, in order to go on Hajj, but was deported from the country just before the Mecca pilgrimage commenced because he got associated with illegal trade in antiquities. Although 'Snouck's "fame" amongst the larger population should probably be attributed to his adventurous life, he did in fact contribute greatly to scholarship as well. His very colonial mindset and behavior, however, does create some discomfort to modern scholars, concerning how to deal with his scholarly legacy.



## 7 National Museum of Antiquities, Rapenburg 70-74

Visiting the entrance hall of this museum is free of charge and there you can see a real Egyptian temple. The temple was a gift from the Egyptian government to the Netherlands, because the Dutch government helped bring many ancient Egyptian treasures to safety when they were in danger of flooding due to the building of the Aswan Dam. The temple may seem like a textbook example of 'ancient' heritage from the Near East. However, if you look closely, you can see all kinds of man-made dimples and scratches in the stone. For centuries the local Egyptians - Jews, Christians and Muslims alike - scraped bits of powder off the stones because they attributed magical properties to the stones. A wonderful example of how ancient Egyptian customs survived for centuries when monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and later Islam took over.



## 8 Arabic Poem

In a famous twelfth-century Persian textbook, four professions are mentioned that were indispensable for the administration of an empire: the secretary, the astronomer, the physician and the poet. It was believed an empire could not function without a court poet. Poetry still fulfills a very important role in daily life in the Middle East. The poem you are looking at here by the Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis lets us think about the concept of loss. Adonis approaches loss as something that, though associated with sadness, can also be seen in a more positive light: the void created by loss also offers room for new experiences. The poem was painted in 2013 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Arabic chair in Leiden.

## 9 The house of Erpenius, Breestraat 25<sup>1</sup>

This house was inhabited by Thomas van Erpe, better known as Erpenius, who became the very first professor of Arabic in Leiden in 1613. Incidentally, he was not the first Leiden professor to master the Arabic language. The well-known Leiden scholars Scaliger and Raphalengius and the lesser-known Philippus Ferdinandus preceded him. The latter would have been given the position, had he not died from a sudden premature death. A replacement was not easily found. People who could read Arabic were still a rarity in Europe at the time. However, this early history of the university shows that the importance of Arabic was understood almost from the moment the university was first founded.

## 10 The gilded Turk, Breestraat 84

Leiden has been linked to the Middle East for centuries not only through the university, but also through trade. On the monumental building of Breestraat 84, we find the carving of a man wearing a turban - 'the gilded Turk'. Right next to him

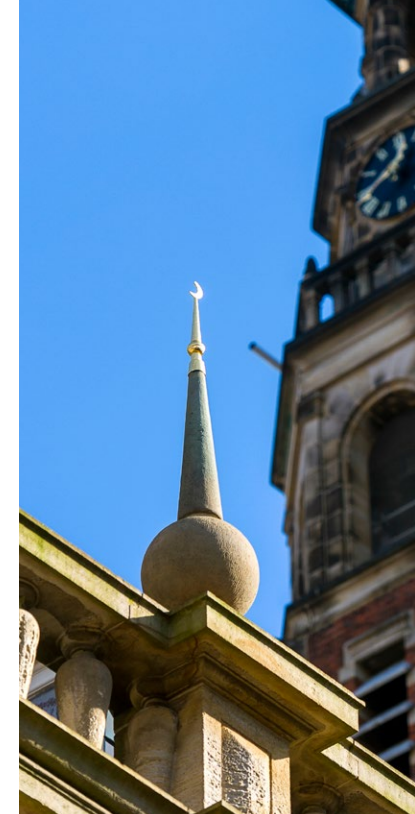


is a goat, representing the angora goat (goat from Ankara) responsible for the mohair that made up an important ingredient of the textiles that Leiden was famous for at the time. Jan and Adriaen le Pla made their fortune in this textile trade, particularly by trading

with the Levant. Apparently they considered this carving an appropriate tribute to the "Turks" who facilitated their trade when they erected this building as their family home in 1673. And perhaps there was a second reason why they wanted the Ottoman sultan to feature so prominently on their house, as will become clear in the context of the next building.

## 11 Crescent moons on the Town Hall, Breestraat 92-104

After the Eighty Years' War against Catholic Spain, Leiden flourished as a Protestant stronghold. A very peculiar embellishment, applied on the spherical decorations right above the roof edge of the Town Hall, surprisingly has to do with this: crescent moons. This Islamic decoration refers to the motto of the Sea Beggars: 'Rather Turkish than Papist'; indicating that the early Protestants felt more connected to the Ottoman Sultan than to the Catholic Pope. While a fierce battle raged between Protestants and Catholics in many places in Europe, the Ottoman Empire allowed a considerable degree of religious freedom, with the sultan presenting himself as the patron of the Jews and Christians in his empire.



## 12 Textile Research Centre, Hogewoerd 173

We are now standing in front of one of Leiden's lesser-known museums. Within the field of textiles, however, this collection is considered one of the top collections in the world. Founder Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, who still runs the center, travelled all over the Middle East in search of a research collection of clothes and textiles. The oldest pieces in the collection date back many centuries, but contemporary pieces are just as welcome. Although the collection initially held mainly Oriental pieces, it has now been supplemented with textiles from all over the world.

note: open Monday to Thursday, free admission (gift appreciated). Not only the changing exhibitions are worth a visit, the funny shop in the back of the building is also a must-see. Numerous craft workshops are organized in the center – also for a non-scientific audience. A real Leiden treasure for the enthusiast!

### 13 Greinhal, Hooglandse Kerkgracht 19

We will stay with textiles a little longer, as Leiden was the most important textile city in the Netherlands for centuries. In the seventeenth century, a woven woolen fabric known as Turkish cloth (turks laken or “grein” in Dutch, thus explaining the name) was immensely popular. Mohair was the ingredient that distinguished the cloth from ‘normal’ woolen fabric. In the mid-seventeenth century there were about nine thousand weavers who made a living from this lucrative trade product. In the



streets of Leiden the special ingredient was not called mohair, however, but was referred to as camel hair. Mohair, of course, does not come from camels at all, but apparently it was the camels from the East that captured the imagination of the ordinary people in Leiden. The ‘Greinhal’ was one of the places in Leiden where cloth was dyed. Its bigger brother ‘de Lakenhal’ is currently an art museum that is well worth a visit.

### 14 E.J. Brill, Oude Rijn 33A

Trade, textiles, scholarship and diplomacy have all been mentioned, but there is one more thing that cannot be overlooked when discussing the history of Leiden: publishers. With the early establishment of Leiden University, Leiden became a very attractive place for printing houses/ publishers to establish themselves. Visa versa, distributing scholarship in print was an essential part of scholarship and the presence of world-class printing houses added to the attraction of Leiden University, a perfect symbiosis so to say. Leiden can boast a whole range of firsts in the field of scholarly printing and publishing and that pioneering role extended to the field of printing in non-Western scripts. Today, Elsevier and Brill are probably the most famous of the original Leiden publishers. We are standing here in front of the old publishing/ printing company of Brill. Although Brill now conducts business from a building on the outskirts of Leiden, it remains an important publisher in the field of Oriental languages to this day.

### 15 Perzisch poem - Clarensteeg

We end our tour with a Persian poem. Persian, also known as Farsi, is the language spoken in Iran. Farsi is written using the Arabic script (using a few extra letters), but is otherwise an entirely different language. In fact, the two languages do not even belong to the same language family (Semitic versus Indo-European). 1400 years of cultural exchange have ensured that many Arabic loanwords have ended up in Persian, and visa versa many Arabic words have been borrowed from Persian, but that by no means makes these languages interchangeable (as some Westerners think based on the similarity of the script). Arabic has been the lingua franca of a vast area for 1400 years. This has had its effect on the languages in the area.

Conversely, we should not underestimate how great the influence of Persian culture -and certainly Persian poetry as well- has been on Arabic culture. In short, cultural interaction leaves its traces, something we have witnessed today as well!



*Traces of the Middle East in Leiden of the Leiden City World Walks was created by Leiden University Center for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS)- Faculty of Humanities in collaboration with LeidenGlobal (author Birte Kristiansen). This walk is largely based on the information in the booklet ‘Walking guide through Islamic Leiden’, written by Josien Boetje, Kasper van Ommen, Cor Smit and Arnoud Vrolijk.*