

Pioneering British exploration and scriptural geography: The Syrian Society/The Palestine Association

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This paper relates to a unique pioneering British association established in London in 1805, for the ‘philosophical, physical and biblical’ study of Palestine/the Holy Land. The short-lived Syrian Society/Palestine Association (PA) adopted the model of the African Association, founded by Sir Joseph Banks in 1788 for the promotion of travel and discovery in Africa. The PA was a predecessor of two important British scholarly societies: the Royal Geographical Society (RGS, founded 1830) and the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF, founded 1865). We first consider the historical, religious and scientific contextual background to the period, following the Napoleonic Wars in the Ottoman Empire and the revival of Christian religious beliefs and biblical criticism in Britain and Europe. Based on primary archival sources not previously studied, we then analyse the declared objectives of the Association, its founders, membership, structure, mode of operation, interrelations with consuls, traders, bankers and organisations (such as the Levant Company, the East India Company and contemporary missionary societies), accomplishments, and possible reasons for its failure. We discuss its closure in 1834, the transfer of its funds to the newly founded RGS, and the later establishment of its ‘daughter in spirit’, the PEF in 1865.

KEY WORDS: Palestine, Syria, exploration, imperialism, religion, Bible criticism, Royal Geographical Society, Palestine Exploration Fund, England

Introduction

On June 22, 1865, a large and distinguished body of men, [...] formally organized the Palestine Exploration Fund. As far as its aims were concerned this organization was but a re-institution of a Society formed about the year 1804 under the name of the Palestine Association. [...] it is interesting to note that the General Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund recognized an organic connection with the earlier Society. (Bliss 1903, 255–6)

This paper investigates a unique pioneering British association established in London in 1805. The short-lived Syrian Society, later named the Palestine Association (hereafter PA), adopted the model of the ‘Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa’ (African Association, AA), for the study of Palestine/the Holy

Land. Modern research has so far neglected the PA. Though mentioned in various studies concerning the history of the scientific study of the Holy Land, as well as studies dealing with British involvement in the eastern Mediterranean basin, the history of the association, its activities and achievements did not receive proper attention. Authors tended to use secondary sources, often propagating superficial or imprecise comments relating to the PA without study of the primary archival documents (e.g. Bliss 1903, 255–6; Watson 1915, 11; Ben-Arieh 1979, 40, 195; Silberman 1982, 21; Tuchman 1983, 168; Tameanko 2000; Moscrop 2000, 12). We also examine the connection between this short-lived association and the societies that were established in its wake, the Royal Geographical Society and the Palestine Exploration Fund.

Several influential contexts must be considered in assessing the background to the establishment of the Palestine Association. In the Middle East, this was

the period of the Napoleonic occupation of Egypt and fruitless invasion of Palestine, and its effect on British imperialistic interests and geo-political considerations; in Britain, it was a period of establishment of scientific organisations that served as ongoing tools in the safeguarding of the Empire, while geography became 'a science of empire' (Gascoigne 1998; Driver 2001, citation 27); and in Europe (including Britain), it was a period of revival of religious beliefs and biblical studies, leading to increased scientific interest in the Holy Land, including scriptural geography, the development of Bible criticism, and incorporation of the past into contemporary reality (e.g. Rogerson 1985, 1995; Aiken 2010). The early nineteenth century was an era of rising messianic expectations among Protestants, especially in the English-speaking world, in which the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars were interpreted as signs of the end of an era and the onset of predicted eschatological events. This also brought about renewed interest in the Jews, the prospect of their national restoration, and their eventual conversion to Christianity (Ariel and Kark 1996, 642).

Nineteenth-century British interest in the Middle East was stoked by the French invasion. The central British role in the defeat and retreat of Napoleon's army from Palestine and Egypt became a basic element in the development of Imperial policy during the first half of the nineteenth century, until the Crimean War (Webster 1969; Kutluoğlu 1998). British activities in the region, aimed at defending the borders of the Indian Peninsula, were partly a response to the alarm caused by the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt.

European geographical perception changed dramatically during and following the Napoleonic wars, which, citing Veronica della Dora, 'has passed into history as the most emblematic expression of Orientalist and colonial practice' (2007, 515). The early years of the nineteenth century led to the development of global geographical intelligence, 'Geography militant' as termed by Driver after Joseph Conrad (Driver 2001, 3–4). The interest of European powers in the Middle East was rekindled as it re-entered their sphere of strategic considerations. They viewed their inadequate geographical and military data as a significant deficiency and began sending able geographically trained army officers to obtain necessary intelligence. Surveyors of Napoleon's army undertook the first trigonometrically based measurements, including in parts of Palestine. Pierre Jacotin, commanding the army geographers-engineers, was responsible for maps published in 1810, including six sheets that cover areas within Palestine (Jacotin 1810 1818; Laurens 1989; Godlewska 1988). Following Napoleon's defeat and retreat to France, the British forces found themselves in Egypt until March 1803. The country was initially left under the rule of the Mameluk Beys, until Mehemet Ali Paşa (c.1769–1849) came to power in Egypt in 1805 (Marlowe 1954, 22–8; Fahmy 2009, 10–38).

The next imperialist confrontation soon transpired. Because of continuing French efforts in the East, and the British belief that the 'French threat to India via the Middle East had not faded with their defeat in Egypt', Britain conducted two unsuccessful military operations in 1807, a demonstration of naval power against Constantinople and a land operation into Egypt. The British expeditionary force took Alexandria, but could not advance because of Mehemet Ali's resistance, and eventually returned home (Anderson 1966, 38–40; Jackson 1995, 30–3).

A vital concern for the Empire, its existence, and its economic and strategic-political as well as military-existential priorities was maintaining and improving the connection with the Indian subcontinent, replacing the traditional passage around the Cape of Good Hope with a more efficient solution. This motivated the intensification of British involvement in the countries of the eastern Mediterranean and those that lay between the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and India. British efforts in the East, in the Middle East as well as in central Asia, were also deeply affected by fears of Russian expansion southwards (Atkin 1979).

Other major players in the region were the well-established and well-connected British trade companies, the British Levant Company (Wood 1964) and the East India Company (e.g. Edney 1997), that did everything in their power to realise their interests and to protect themselves from encroachment by competitors.

Modern research has devoted extensive attention to the link between science and imperialism in general, with particular focus on geography, including cartography, as a central theme in this connection. Much has been written on the role of science, scientific organisations and institutions, as well as 'colonial scientists' in the expansion of the British Empire, and the 'geographical and scientific making of the British empire' (Whithers 2001, 112–18), mainly during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This long-standing combination of geographical knowledge with imperial power is a key theme in dealing with European policies, struggles and expansion during that period (e.g. Stafford 1989; Gascoigne 1994 1998; Livingstone 1992; Godlewska and Smith 1994; Miller and Reill 1996; Edney 1997; Driver 2001). The PA, when established, was intended to join this pattern of dual-purpose scientific and imperial activity, here directed specifically to the Holy Land, but within the context of European expansionism and confrontation.

The implementation of British imperial policy relied on the men in the field. Edney discussed at length the role played by surveyors, such as James Rennell (member of the PA, and past surveyor-general in the East India Company) and George Everest, in the 'geographical construction' of India (Markham 1895; Edney 1997). It was due to a confluence between growing imperial interests and the presence of well-trained, capable and dedicated people on the ground

that such projects could be realised. It was only natural for geographers to be on the frontiers of imperialistic expansion. They, more than anyone else, were able to document the hitherto unknown spaces that were incorporated into the Empire, as aptly expressed by Gary Dunbar in his paper on the French intervention in Mexico: 'The compass follows the flag' (Dunbar 1988; e.g. Miller and Reill 1996; Lester 2000; Driver 2001; Whithers 2001, 112–18; Home 2002, 307–309, 328 n. 1–2).

The British scientific societies have their roots in the seventeenth century. The Royal Society, which began after 1640 in the form of meetings of learned men, was officially founded in 1660 (Evans 1956, 24–8; Henry 2005, 53–5). The significant connection between the Society and British imperialism has repeatedly been demonstrated. Here we mention Home's work indicating that the extent of election to Fellow of the Royal Society (F.R.S.) paralleled the expansion of British imperial power (Home 2002). The Society of Antiquaries of London (SA), firmly established in 1717, was chartered and took its present form in 1751 to study antiquities and the history of the UK and other countries (Evans 1956, 35; Henry 2005, 54–63). Throughout the years, the SA shared a large common membership with the Royal Society (Evans 1956, 100–6, 170–97). The Asiatic Society, founded in Calcutta in 1784 (Edney 1997, 42–3, 150–2, 301–4; Chakrabarty 2008, 2–24), was followed in 1804 by the Asiatic Society of Bombay. The roots of Kew Gardens and its collections can be traced to the 1750s, much attributable to the leading position of Joseph Banks (1743–1820) as collector as well as initiator, organiser and leader of scientific missions and scientific societies (Mackay 1996; Gascoigne 1994 1998; cf. Driver 2001, 27–46; Livingstone 2003, 54–6).

The AA, among all these organisations, turned out to be the most influential explorative body, becoming a major tool in British expansion in Africa and the geography of exploration (Hallett 1965, 167–76, 427–8; Livingstone 1992, 127–31, 158–60; Mackay 1996; Miller 1996; Driver 2001, esp. 27–37). 'Great movements rise from small beginnings: a single man turning over new ideas in his mind, a group of men coming together, talking and resolving of action' (Hallett 1965, 193); so Robin Hallett began his description of the 1788 founding of the AA. Banks led 12 distinguished men who were interested in 'the practical application of the scientific ideas of the age to the development of natural resources' (Hallett 1965, 195).

Establishment of the RGS, however, was delayed until 1830 [later than such societies in Paris (1821) and Berlin (1828)], because of the opposition of Banks, who disliked the growing trend towards specialisation, so guarding the Royal Society's monopoly. From the beginning the composition of the RGS reflected a social (though not necessarily professional) elite of peers and military and naval men. In addition

to its scientific significance, the RGS played a key role as an indispensable tool of the British Empire, in the creation of Britain's 'Empire of Science', serving from its inception also as the public arm of the various military and colonial governmental offices. All first secretaries of the society were military officers, trained in intelligence and closely connected to the War Office (Mill 1930; Cameron 1980; Freeman 1980; Livingstone 1992, 155–76; Driver 2001, 21–67).

An enduring element in the historical development of European involvement in Palestine has been its religious significance. Centuries of European biblical scholarship resulted in the accumulation of a wealth of Christian-motivated interest in the Holy Land. The area of biblical Palestine constituted a space, where geo-religious perceptions of sacredness inspired research, at least in its pioneering stages. The area was a lodestone for European scriptural geography (for a contemporary summary see Aiken 2010, 1–56; cf. Goren 1998). But, as Ben-Arieh pointed out, and as is evident from the above-mentioned imperialist strategic interests, sacredness was not the only reason for the scientific European interest in the country itself, and of course not in the bordering lands, which did not share this tradition (Ben-Arieh 1979; Goren 2003).

The underpinnings of the PA should be viewed against this backdrop of religious flux, scientific development and the establishment of learned societies, and the intensive imperialistic activity affecting the Middle East. The religious motif, interest in scriptural study and the drive to explore the geography, natural sciences and history of the Holy Land motivated the establishment of the PA in 1805 and its goals, and we suggest, in light of the governmental and political affiliations of several key members, the period and the choice of locations to be investigated, imperial interests also may have played a secondary role.

The Palestine Association and its founders

The green leather bound Minute's [sic] Book of the Syrian Society (later PA), kept in the RGS/IBG Archive in London, also contains the best – and arguably the only – dependable source for its history, as well as a list of its members. It is only natural that William Richard Hamilton (1777–1859), the person behind the establishment of the Syrian Society, had the existing scientific societies in mind when he sketched the aims and courses of action of his proposed society. Hamilton aspired to establish a society that would enhance elements from the organisations he knew. Accordingly, he planned a society based on yearly membership fees from its members, and not on generous donations.

Hamilton, F.R.S. and F.S.A., antiquarian and diplomat, served as Lord Elgin's secretary from 1799 and travelled in the East, being responsible for recovering possession of the Rosetta Stone as well as for the

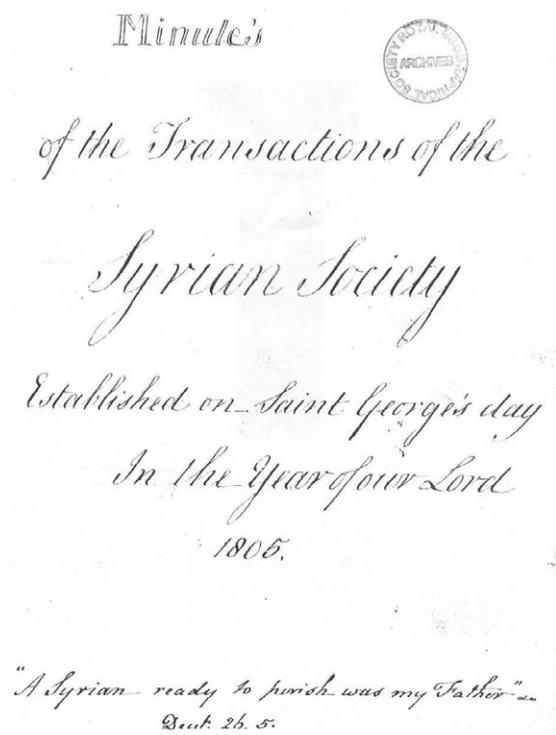


Plate 1 Title page of the Minutes book

Source: The Royal Geographical Society Archives, London (today RGS/IGB)

shipment of Elgin's Grecian marbles and the recovery of those lost at sea. From 1809 he served as Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and in 1811 was nominated Secretary of the AA, holding this office until 1822 (Mill 1930; Evans 1956, 200; Hallett 1965, 358; Fagan 1975, 80–90; Stoneman 1987, 155–79; Anderson 2004).

A communication was published on 31 March 1805 calling 'those Gentlemen who are desirous of promoting an Institution of this kind' to meet on 24 April 1805 at St Martin's Library, Castle Street. Thirteen people attended the first meeting (Minutes, 31 March and 24 April 1805), at which it was decided (with no further explanation) that the Syrian Society 'shall henceforth be denominated The Palestine Association' (Minutes, 24 April 1805). The title page of the Minutes book included a citation from Deuteronomy 26. 5: 'A Syrian ready to perish was my Father . . .' (see Plate 1). The continuation of the verse not cited is: 'and he went into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became a nation, great, mighty, and populous'. The 'Syrian' (in the original Hebrew, 'Aramean') was Jacob who was under threat from Laban, according to an authoritative interpretation. Although it is unclear what this enigmatic choice signified to the

PA initiators, a theme of this important chapter is the settlement of the Israelites in the Promised Land, blessed in its abundance, suggesting a millenarian connotation relating to the restoration of the Jewish people to their land.

The meeting started with the unanimous election of 'Reverend Anthony Hamilton D.D. Archdeacon of Colchester, F.R.S. F.S.A. &c. &c. &c. President'. An active member of the SA and a fellow of the AA, Anthony Hamilton, father of William Richard Hamilton, replaced Banks as treasurer of the AA, becoming in 1807 its secretary and holding the two offices until resigning in 1811 (Evans 1956, 219; Hallett 1965, 358).

The elected treasurer was young George Hamilton Gordon, the 4th Earl of Aberdeen. He entered St John's College, Cambridge, in 1800, and in 1802–3 conducted the traditional 'grand tour' to the East. Being a scholar of classical antiquity, he joined the SA in 1805 (president in 1811) and the RS in 1808. He was closely connected to William Pitt the younger (1759–1806, Prime Minister from 1804 to 1806), and also played an active role in some controversies concerning the Elgin marbles (Evans 1956; Stoneman 1987, 155–79; Chamberlain 2004). The elected secretary was Reverend Thomas William Wrighte, late fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, from 1790 secretary of the SA (Evans 1956, 190, 221).

Also included in the first elected committee were Reverend Henry Ryder; the wealthy writer, traveller and geologist John Hawkins; Reverend Sir William Cockburn; and Reverend John Brand. The five other 'original institutors' were hydrographer Alexander Dalrymple, traveller William George Browne, William Drummond and John Spencer Smith. Other salient personalities, out of the 24 newly recruited members at meetings in May 1805, were brothers Dudley and Richard Rider, brothers Bartholomew and William Frere, and Joseph Banks.

Twenty-one more members were admitted in the second half of 1805. The list included figures such as James Rennell, Napoleonic hero Rear Admiral William Sidney Smith, George Annesley, Viscount Valentia (and later 2nd Earl of Montnorris), and Bruce Thomas, the 7th Earl of Elgin and 11th Earl of Kincardine, renowned for his services abroad and the eponymous marbles, Pitt's protégée in his diplomatic career, and from 1799 Ambassador to the Porte in Constantinople.

There were various affiliations between members that reflect their mode of recruitment to the PA. Many of them were clergy of different levels in the Church, many belonged to other scientific organisations (predominantly related to antiquities), many came from academic institutions and some were connected politically. Two clergymen were among the founders of the association and eight more subsequently joined, accounting for 13 per cent of the members whose occupations we could identify. The involve-

ment of the clergy is not surprising in light of the goals of the organisation, described below, which foremost involved exploration of the Holy Land. This is consistent with the role of Protestant clergymen and their missionary organisations, such as the Church Missionary Society and London Jews Society, as agents of colonialism in the nineteenth century, often helping to extend British influence in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere (Kark 2004). Later in the century, clergymen would play this role in the founding and perpetuation of another, more narrowly focused cause, the Jerusalem Garden Tomb Association in which British women were the founding force, in contrast with the PA (Kark and Frantzman 2010).

A significant number of the members, the founders as well as those joining later, were graduates and also members of St John's College in Cambridge. These members rounded out the academic membership of the association, accounting for a fifth of the identified occupations of members. Another significant group included those working closely with Prime Minister William Pitt, mainly on legal and economic issues, or connected with him personally. Other SA members who joined the PA were connected with Lord Elgin and the transfer of the Greek marbles. Their interest in the PA was closely related to their interest in antiquities. Many SA, AA and even RS members joined the PA, though it seems that only a few of them participated in the meetings. A group consisted of members of Lincoln's Inn, one of the four old Inns of Court, ancient unincorporated bodies of lawyers, in London. The PA did its best also to recruit members who were famous for their travels and travel-writing, as well as leading figures in surveying and cartography. Unusual for an organisation such as the PA was that among the businessmen who joined the association were three Jewish members of the Goldsmid banking family. Conspicuous in their absence from the founding core and from leadership functions were active army and naval officers who were to play so prominent a role in the later-established RGS (see Table 1).

Aims, structure and mode of operation

The first document calling for a meeting in order to 'establish a Society for the purpose of promoting the knowledge of the Geography, Natural History, & Antiquities of Palestine and its vicinity, with a view to the illustration of the Holy Writings', printed and distributed in March 1805, listed the topics that should attract the inquiries of the Society:

- the natural and political boundaries of the several districts within these limits;
- the topographical and characteristic situations of Towns and Villages;
- the courses of the Streams and Rivers;
- the ranges of Mountains;

Table 1 Members by main occupation

Occupation	Founders	Joiners	Total
Clergymen*	3	13	16
Politicians	1	9	10
Academics/physicians	6	15	21
Businessmen/traders	0	8	8
Consuls/diplomats	4	2	6
Researchers	2	3	5
Explorers/travellers	1	7	8
Civil servants	0	4	4
Naval officers	0	3	3
Unknown occupation	5	9	14
Total	22	73	95

*Includes six men with title of Reverend without additional information

Source: Compiled by the authors from Minute's [sic] Book of the the Syrian Society, 1805–1808 and from ODNB, OUP, Oxford

- the natural productions of the Holy Land and its confines;
- each peculiarity of its soil, climate & minerals;
- elucidation of Jewish and Syrian antiquities. (Minutes 31 March 1805)

This document was issued in the belief that 'the undertaking will meet with the approbation and generous encouragement of all who are sensible that the elucidation of Scriptural history is an object worthy attention of Christians' (Minutes 31 March 1805). The only existing organisation mentioned in the declaration is the AA, whose 'meritorious exertions' should be imitated 'as closely as possible'. But the last item in the aims certainly originated in the SA.

William Hamilton, who had been responsible for this call, presented his address at the inauguration meeting of 24 April 1805, adding: 'I considered myself bound to explain, as well as I was able, the nature of the undertaking for which I am desirous of soliciting your support' (Minutes 24 April 1805). Thirteen out of 24 'original Institutors and Members' participated in the meeting. Hamilton opened with the unique characteristic of the target area, the 'sacredness' of the 'Land', arguing that the association's objectives derive from the importance of researches related to the 'biblical and historical knowledge of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, including the Jewish people', or

the fact we hope to establish relative to the history, the manners, and the country of the Jewish nation. Exclusive of the divine character of the Scriptures, they have handed down to a later posterity the earliest history of which we have any records, and they perpetuate the economical, domestic and political character of a people who inhabited one of the most interesting portions of the ancient world. (Minutes 24 April 1805)

His main conclusion, he added, after careful study of many of the relevant investigations, was that there is still a lot to be done and many questions to be solved in order 'to elucidate many of the most difficult passages of the Holy Scriptures'.

He presented a strongly deterministic approach to scriptural geography, as there is no other country in the world as Syria with its geographical features, where the character and nature of the inhabitants and its products 'so immediately depend on the peculiarities of topography soil and climate'. The study of the inner parts of Syria, mainly of Palestine, 'will furnish us with a clearer insight into the revolutions of earlier times', and will clarify some improbable facts concerning this country. This conceptualisation of scriptural geography has been summarised by Edwin Aiken as 'the Book of Nature could be used to help explain the Book of Scripture' (Aiken 2010, 19). Hamilton recommended that the first priority should be 'Jerusalem and its immediate Environs . . . , and the country contained between a line drawn from Jaffa on the Sea coast, through Jerusalem, to the point where the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea, and another from Gaza across the straits of the Desert to the southern extremity of that Sea' (Minutes 24 April 1805). The Minutes do not hint at the reason for the change of the name from 'Syrian Society' to 'Palestine Association', though it might have to do with this scriptural-geographical delineation. It was common in that period to either include Palestine as part of Syria in maps (which might explain the initial name) or to present each as an independent entity (e.g. Playfair 1814; Arrowsmith 1828). The religious interest favouring this small portion of Syria, Palestine, and possibly the belief that it would attract more members, may provide a more likely answer as to why the members felt a change in name was appropriate.

Hamilton stressed his belief, consistent with an advanced perception of the accepted 'culture of exploration' (see esp. Livingstone 1992; Driver 2001), and probably also as a result of his personal experience, that the aim of the traveller should be a thorough, deep knowledge of a limited area, and not a superficial acquaintance with a larger one. Accordingly, he also pointed out that the second area to be studied by the PA should be confined to Sidon (Saida) and the sources of the Jordan in the north, and Jerusalem and Jaffa in the south. A third area should be the desert between Palestine and Egypt (i.e. the Sinai). Only later, and only 'if our success in these researches should prove proportioned to the supposed importance of them' (Minutes 24 April 1805), explorers should be sent to Lebanon and Syria.

In order to avoid suspicion by the governing Turks (i.e. Ottomans) of political or intelligence motives, Hamilton stressed that the people sent by the Society aimed only at scientific studies, 'to serve [. . .] the mere promotion of Biblical and Historical knowledge'. He then proposed a strict selection of highly

qualified emissaries, to supply them with exact instructions and with a list of 'particular questions, suited to the Country they are to visit, as well as to their own personal dispositions' (Minutes 24 April 1805).

An important document of systematic 'directions as to the principal objects of Inquiry in the Holy Land and its vicinity' was issued at the meeting in May 1805 (Minutes May 1805). It includes 21 paragraphs, and discusses geographical characteristics, such as the forming 'of a more accurate map of the country than has hitherto appeared' (without the benefit of the Jacotin maps published in 1810 that were as yet unknown to them), agriculture, meteorology, and natural and botanical products and their possible use. Paragraphs deal also with the route of the Exodus, the proper transcription of place names, and the need to collect inscriptions and manuscripts. Further issues are population, weights and measures. This list bears an interesting similarity to the 'categories of data' issued for various surveys in India between 1800 and 1814 and directed at systematic observation (Edney 1997, 45–7).

According to the Minutes, the short-lived association actually functioned only for 3 years, from April 1805 to April 1808. There were five meetings in 1805, two of them 'general meetings', five in 1806, three in 1807 and three in 1808. Only one general meeting took place each year from 1806 to 1808. Nineteen members participated in the general meeting of 1807, only ten in 1808. As it did not have permanent quarters, Anthony Hamilton agreed to lend his house for the half-yearly planned general meetings. An analysis of the meetings held and those who attended leads to a clear picture of the decline and failure of the organisation to grow and prosper. Whatever the case, it seems that the early hopes, as mentioned in the founding documents, had been overly ambitious.

The PA emissaries

In its proposed mode of operation, the PA followed the system, developed by the AA and used commonly in explorative geography, of sending able, well-prepared emissaries (Hallett 1965, 167–76, 427–8). The organisation financed the emissary, as well as his family that stayed behind, for contracted periods. The PA looked for the appropriate people to be sent to the Holy Land. The choice of the first emissary and securing the success of his mission, were of crucial importance. Interesting and worthy reports would certainly attract more members and bring more money into the association's treasury, enabling it to send larger, stronger and better equipped delegations.

Unfortunately for the PA, this was not to be the case. The choice of emissaries proved to be unsuccessful, and did not provide the strong impetus needed. The association had, from its very beginning, to struggle with this failure which led to demoralisation.

sation and loss of interest. It is important to note that of the expenditures totalling £423 between 1805 and 1808, 78 per cent (£330) was paid as salaries and expenses for emissaries (Minutes 25 April 1808).

In the first discussion of a possible emissary at the meeting of 1 July 1805, about 2 months after the society's establishment, the candidacy of Samuel Inman (1776–1859), Fellow of St John's College, mathematician, and (later) writer on navigation, was presented. 'With no immediate intention of taking orders', wrote his biographer, 'Inman decided to pursue mission work in the East' (Laughton 2004; Minutes 1 July 1805). He was appointed on July 1805, and was authorised to take a draughtsman with him. Inman's first letter from Malta was dated 15 December 1806, when the winds of war had already been blowing in the East (Minutes 20 March 1807, 24 April 1807). He got no further. Subsequently, in a letter from Portsmouth to the Secretary, dated 1 August 1807, he declared 'that his present situation, as Superintendent of the Naval College at Portsmouth would prevent him being of any further use to The Society' (Minutes 25 April 1808).

The next proposal of a possible traveller was presented 9 months after Inman's appointment. Christopher Usko, Chaplain of the English Factory of the Levant Company at Smyrna (Izmir), proposed that the Society together with his employers should send another clergyman to replace him while he would explore Palestine, and after his return to his position in Smyrna, that replacement could continue in Syria from where he stopped. 'The deficiency of funds' is stated as the reason for the Society's negative answer (Minutes 8 April 1806). The Minutes record two letters concerning other possible emissaries, a certain J. Grant and Jm [sic] Bentley, but neither are mentioned again.

The Association did have another interesting candidate. At the last General Meeting, in April 1808, the President described the failure of Inman's mission. He then reported on a letter from 'Mr. Joseph Hammer, late Secretary of the Austrian Embassy at Constantinople', who offered his services (Minutes 25 April 1808). Undoubtedly, he was the best candidate for the mission. Joseph Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856), diplomat, poet, historian and pioneer of Austrian Orientalism, entered the Austrian diplomatic service in 1796, served in Constantinople from 1799 to 1807, visited Egypt in 1801, and participated in the English campaign against the French (Elgohary 1979; Dawson and Uphill 1995, 188–9). He was acquainted with all the Europeans who visited the Ottoman capital in those years, including Hamilton, who replied in a warm letter, telling him that the association 'unanimously resolved' to accept his offer. He was promised an annual salary of £150, and a letter of credit was sent to Smyrna. All this was to no avail, as Hammer returned to Vienna in 1807, where he led a successful career as translator and publisher of Oriental texts and author of numerous historical studies (Minutes 25 April 1808).

Contacts with British consul in the Levant

Smyrna-born John Barker (1771–1849), British Consul and Agent in Aleppo, served from 1797 in Istanbul and from 1799 in Aleppo as agent *ad interim* for the Levant Company and the East India Company (Barker 1876; Dawson and Uphill 1995, 30–1; Grant 2004), and in 1803 was appointed as full consul for the Levant Company (Barker 1876, II 321–3; Lipman 1989, 72–3). He gained fame for introducing vaccination to Syria. In a letter to Hamilton reported to the General Meeting of April 1806, Barker offered his assistance to an emissary ('traveller') who should be sent out by the association (Minutes 25 April 1806). In March 1807, expecting war between Britain and the Ottomans, Barker left Aleppo and found refuge with the Emir Bashir, the Druze prince in Lebanon, where he stayed until June 1809 (Barker 1876, I 99–117), transmitting information between Britain and India (Barker 1876, II 1, 200, 285). The language and contents of a letter, dated 1 May 1807 addressed to 'William Hamilton, Esq., &c. &c. &c., Foreign Office', describing his flight to the mountains, attest to a close acquaintance and friendship between Barker and Hamilton. Subsequent letters related to Barker's efforts to contact Inman in Malta (Barker 1876, I 105–8; PA Archive in the RGS, Letters, 1807–1817).

The Wahhabis in Arabia and Joseph Marpurg's Mission

What follows, based on contemporary letters in the PA archive, is an example of the extensive involvement of scientific societies in imperial intelligence data gathering, which had been an accepted part of their mission, as shown by recent researchers. Alexander John Ball (1756–1809), a distinguished naval officer commanding the *Alexander*, aided Nelson's dismasted flagship the *Vanguard* in 1798 and probably saved the Admiral's life. In that year he began his association with Malta, from 1803 being the island's civil commissioner and *de facto* governor (Frendo 2004). Barker approached Ball with a request to assist his secret courier, the Austrian Joseph Marpurg, who carried highly classified dispatches from India via Bussora (Basra, Iraq) and Aleppo to London. He asked Ball to urgently enable Marpurg, though a foreigner, to find a British ship and sail to London.

The French consuls in Aleppo and Baghdad had been ordered in 1803 to make contact with the Wahhabi tribes, as part of an intensive effort to expand French influence in the Ottoman Empire's southern provinces in any way possible, in line with Napoleon's persistent eastern ambitions. The Wahhabis, together with allied tribes of the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, presented a real challenge to Britain and to the East India Company (Kelly 1968, 99–135). William Barker, John's father, wrote in November 1808 from Malta, probably to Hamilton, a letter that

relates to this episode (Minutes 25 November 1808). Marpurg was the bearer of top-secret dispatches from India forwarded by John Barker, who proposed a mission to the Wahhabis in order to interfere with the French efforts. Alexander Ball arranged passage for Marpurg on HMS *Woolwich*, which sailed for England escorting a convoy, ordering its commander, Captain Francis Beaufort, later the legendary Hydrographer of the Navy, to transfer him to any faster ship (Courtney 2003, 138–9). A letter addressed to Hamilton was sent by Marpurg himself, while on board the *Woolwich*. He regrets the fact that he could not meet Inman, who had already left Malta to return to England, and he asks for money. On 28 March 1809, still on the *Woolwich*, he sent another letter, explaining the great danger posed by the Arabs and their French allies, and urged Hamilton to send him money. There is no record that Hamilton responded to any of these requests (Minutes 24 and 26 March 1808) and no mention of the services rendered by Marpurg to the PA (rather than to the Foreign Office) for which payment was requested.

Publication of Ulrich Jasper Seetzen's letter

The PA did, however, have to its credit one important publication, of a letter, dated Acre, 16th June, 1806, describing Seetzen's voyages along the Jordan Rift from the Baniyas to the Dead Sea and the areas bordering it to the east (Seetzen 1810). Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1811), a graduate of the University of Göttingen, travelled in the East, disguised as a Muslim physician, for 10 years at the beginning of the nineteenth century, preparing for his main plan to reach the inner parts of Africa from Egypt (Kruse 1854; Schienerl 2000; Goren 2003, 36–48). His letter, in part previously published in Germany (Seetzen 1808), reached Banks through 'Members of the National Institute at Paris', and he forwarded it to the PA, following a request of the PA to its members to 'communicate to them [...] whatever information they may possess concerning the present state of the regions' (Seetzen 1810, v).

Also remarkable in the PA publication of Seetzen's letter is the map the PA added of the region he had visited. Seetzen was the first to produce a map based on field observations of the entire Jordan Rift valley that was published in 1810 (von Zach 1810; Kruse 1854, 293–385; Schienerl 2000, 59–63; Goren 2003, 36–49), and therefore could not be appended to the letter. The PA, however, had in its possession another map of Palestine compiled four decades earlier by the French geographer and cartographer Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville in 1767 (Anville 1767; Godlewska 1999, 21–55).

1834: Dissolution of the PA

The PA was formally dissolved and incorporated into the newly established RGS in 1834, many years after

it ceased to be active (Mill 1930; Livingstone 1992, 155–76; Driver 2001, 21–67). It followed the AA, which had been the first to propose merging with the RGS and took place on 23 July 1831. The PA, as erroneously recorded in the official report on the history of the RGS, 'surrendered its identity in the same year' (Mill 1930, 44). Two main sources exist that describe the process of dissolution. The first is a two-page report in the *JRGS* of 1834, which presents the protocols of the four disbandment meetings held (Hamilton 1834, *JRGS* 28 January to 4 March, i–ii; see also PA, Draft of Resolution, 1834). The second is an undated letter, probably from 1876, signed by members of the General Committee of the PEF, to the President of the RGS requesting transfer to the PEF of the funds that the RGS inherited from the PA (No Author 1876).

'No meetings of the PA had been held since the 24th of April, 1805 . . . no steps had been taken to continue the researches in Palestine since the year 1809'; these statements formed the basis of Hamilton's formal dissolution process of the PA, which began at a general meeting of PA members held on 28 January 1834 on the premises of the newly founded RGS. The facts were straightforward: the Association had ceased to exist more than 20 years earlier (Hamilton 1834, 28 January). Judging by his comments, Hamilton, now 57 years old, did not precisely recall all the details. He reported erroneously that there had been no meetings since 24 April 1805, the inauguration date, though meetings were actually held until 1808. Since its foundation he had served in the Foreign Office. In 1822 he moved to Naples because of ill health, served there as Minister and Envoy Plenipotentiary, and retired in 1825. He was one of the founders of the RGS (president in the 1840s) and member of a long list of societies, organisations and institutions (Mill 1930, 9, 38–9; Livingstone 1992, 166–8; Driver 2001, 36–7; Anderson 2004). It was only natural that 'his' almost forgotten association would be absorbed into the new, active and prosperous RGS, which 'embraces in its views purposes of a similar nature to those for which the Palestine Association was instituted' (Hamilton 1834, 28 January).

There is no clue as to how many members participated in the 1834 disbandment meetings of the PA. Those present agreed that the PA no longer existed, and the only issue to resolve concerned the fate of the £135 9s 8d balance remaining in its treasury. As the RGS 'embraces in its views purposes of a similar nature to those which the Palestine Association was instituted', it was decided that this sum would be added to the general fund of the RGS, which would decide on its future use. The same should be the fate of all 'papers, books, &c.'. Subsequently, letters were sent to members who still lived in Britain, asking for their consent, and on 4 March 1834 the PA was formally dissolved and absorbed into the RGS (Hamilton 1834, 28 January to 4 March).

The last chapter in the history of the PA was written between 1876 and 1880. In 1876 the PEF had been involved in numerous projects, the Survey of Western Palestine being the biggest and most demanding. Consequently it faced a vital need to raise funds wherever possible. We are not informed as to who exactly initiated the idea, but the fact is that 11 of 13 members of the General Committee of the PEF, all of them Fellows of the RGS, signed a letter to the President of the RGS, requesting transfer of the PA's funds to the PEF. There is no evidence that this was done.

Summary: a chronicle of failure

The Syrian/Palestine Association came into being in early nineteenth century London, an incubator for targeted scientific organisations, established in the best explorative traditions, which integrated science and society with imperial economic and political interests. It was also the period when explorative geography, undertaken by trained experts employed by the scientific societies and associations, was understood as a comprehensive mission to study all possible interesting as well as useful topics and objects. The founders of the PA had an additional over-riding objective. They aspired to pave the way for another British scientific conquest, that of the field of scriptural geography and study of the Holy Land as a unique space. Notwithstanding their illustrious membership, they fell short.

The British Empire as yet had no foothold in this small country, although new religious trends and a burgeoning interest in the Holy Land in some sectors of the British population motivated action (Ariel and Kark 1996; Goren 2002). The timing appears to have been premature for a systematic field study of scriptural geography, with no organisational or institutional support in position on the ground. This would wait for about another 30 years to find its real beginning with the studies of the American biblical scholar Edward Robinson, and more active British political and religious involvement in Palestine marked by the opening of the first British consulate in Jerusalem in 1838, and the establishment of the British–Prussian Protestant Bishopric there in 1840. The PA was the forerunner of the impressive comprehensive research, exploration and mapping projects of Palestine undertaken by the PEF, established 60 years later, in 1865. In contrast with the highly successful RGS, where military personnel played a salient role among the leadership of the Society, the PA did not count military officers among its active leadership, thereby limiting its potential dual role in empire building. The topic of scriptural geography appeared to have been insufficiently attractive at the time to garner the long-term commitment and support required to assure success.

The failure of the PA is even more conspicuous when compared to the AA. The reasons for failure might lie in its founding persons. Although scholars such as Silberman have mentioned the wealth of the

founding members of the PA, it seems that neither their financial position nor social status provided the organisation with the means to prosper, succeed or even survive (Silberman 1982, 21). Their wealth was not expressed in their financial contributions to the association. From its establishment the PA suffered from insufficient funds, whereas the founders of the AA, also people of considerable wealth, understood that they should shoulder the task of sponsoring exploration. The AA was formally established on 9 June 1788 and moved quickly; 8 days later they had already successfully engaged two people, Simon Lucas, an 'Oriental' interpreter at the court of St James, and an American, John Ledyard, one of the most famous adventurer-explorers of the time. For a start, the AA members immediately advanced £430 of their own money (Hallett 1965, 203). In comparison, during 3 years of activity, the entire PA income generated from 52 members in 1805–6, 73 in 1806–7 and 68 in 1807–8, totalled £423 (Minutes 25 April 1808). It barely received contributions for its activities, apart from annual subscriptions.

There was also a difference in the period in which the two organisations were established and initially operated. Between 1802 and 1810, the years of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, there had also been a significant setback in the recruiting of the AA. Between 1799 and 1802 the AA gained 35 new members, in the next 4 years only 9, and from 1807 to 1810 only 4 (Hallett 1965, 357). The vagaries of war may have made such intellectual pursuits as meetings of a new and small scientific society seem trivial.

In contrast with the AA, the PA had also been unlucky with its first emissary, as well as with the timing of his travel. Inman's unfulfilled mission developed into a fruitless saga that lasted more than 2 years and consumed three-quarters of the finances of the society. The combination of inadequate funding, insufficient recruitment of members and lack of scientific success must have contributed to the low morale of the society, and to its de facto though not formal dismantling in 1808. Little productive work came from this society; its members showed little persistence and tended to avoid the meetings, the Secretary's reports were always apologetic, and he was never able to show any notable achievements.

However, other key organisations established in its wake, the RGS and in particular the PEF, which are both active to the present, were highly successful in this endeavour.

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RGSA The Royal Geographical Society Archives, London (today: RGS/IBG)

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