

Barcelona Symposium on Comparative Semitics  
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Opening Session: the International Group for Comparative Semitics

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Academic Authorities

Dear friends and colleagues

It was with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation that I approached the idea of addressing all of you in order to propose the celebration of this meeting and at the same time the founding of an International Group or Association which would bring together scholars in Comparative Semitics from all over the world. My anxiety subsided as your positive answers began to arrive. The responses reiterated the interest in the project and offered unconditional support.

Let me quote some of your replies:

- "I think it is important to discuss in depth Comparative Semitics, and I thank you for taking the initiative to organize the scholarly meeting" (Prof. Goldenberg)
- "Thank you for your message and for inviting me to participate in your proposed association of comparative Semitics. In my opinion such an association would be welcome. Indeed, several years ago I wrote to a group of scholars here in the US about forming an informal group that would meet every year or two to discuss issues in comparative Semitics ...; however, although there was interest in such a group, it did not come into existence, because I had too many other commitments at the time. Although scholars can and do give papers on comparative Semitic topics at the American Oriental Society meeting, and specially at NACAL (the North American Conference of Afro-Asiatic Linguistics), which meets at the same time as the AOS, a separate gathering of Semitists would, as I said, probably be welcome" (Prof. Huehnergard).
- "A mí me parece muy buena la idea; el único problema que veo es que poquísima gente hace estas cosas ahora ... Bien lo sabes, casi todos los simposios que pretenden ser de semitística comparada al final se convierten en reuniones de gente que tiene alguna relación con alguna lengua semítica y luego se habla de un montón de problemas de lingüística histórica o comparada, filología, religión, pero nada de gramática histórica o comparada, ni de etimología" (Prof. Kogan).

- "Ich begrüße Ihren Vorschlag sehr und möchte gerne an der Gruppe 'Komparative Semitistik' teilnehmen. Meiner Ansicht nach gibt es zu wenige Foren für diese Disziplin. Sie ist unterrepräsentiert und fristet besonders hier in Deutschland ein 'karges Leben'" (Prof. Tropper).

I would have never dared to pursue this idea without your support. Let me then ask you to consider this idealistic and purely scientific enterprise your own. Its future depends entirely on the paternal responsibility that we feel towards the creature we have begotten. It must be a team venture if it is to succeed.

The need for the creation of an International Association to further the comparative studies in Semitics was apparent to everybody. This field of studies arouses great interest among Semitists and well-publicized, important projects are underway in France and in Russia, for instance. But it remains a minority area, without a specific presence of its own. Since the creation of the highly respected GLECS, the public presentation of comparative Semitic studies has found a place in associations and meetings of Afro-Asiatic or Chamito-Semitic studies, and less frequently in gatherings on General Linguistics, Semitics or Assyriology. The associations of Afro-Asiatic or Chamito-Semitic studies, which have very active and productive representatives in Italy, Germany and the States, tend to be more interested either in inter-family (phylon) comparison or in the linguistic phenomena of individual languages. The other institutions encourage as a rule either an excessively general linguistic approach or give preference to literary, historical or even archaeological items within a clear-cut delimited division of Semitics/Assyriology as opposed to West/South Semitic languages and the other way round. Inside these powerful ambits and settings, studies in Comparative Semitics often become diluted.

We should stress that our field of research is strictly limited to comparative Semitics, even if inevitably we are interested in phylon and even distant comparison. Several specialists in the closest linguistic areas (Sumerian, Egyptian, Berber) have joined the main group of Semitists in order to broaden our perspective. And it is conceivable that in the future some other members who are specialists in Chadic and Cushitic languages will also join. But in any case, Comparative Semitics will always be the target of our research. We certainly do not intend to interfere with the above mentioned associations and meetings, especially of Afro-Asiatic studies.

Our Association will be organized as a working group with specific and systematically programmed subjects to be discussed at the regular meetings and with specific common projects that will be carried out as part of our research activity. Our aim is not to promote gatherings of amateurs, free-lancers or the general public with a casual interest in Comparative Semitics: there are enough meetings and congresses in the international 'orientalistic' ambit, in the broad sense of the word. What we intend to do is to bring together a group of people already working in this field who will be able to benefit from our common experience and from the studies in Semitic Comparison carried out by each of the members.

For this first Meeting we propose an overview of the main, most pressing problems facing Comparative Semitics, a kind of general and comprehensive 'tableau' on which to single out the most specific and urgent points of discussion for forthcoming meetings. This meeting aims to be a first and common 'prise de contact', in order to contrast the different methods and ways of approaching these main issues of our research field. Obviously, these approaches are likely to differ substantially, and consequently the mutual contrasting will be very fruitful and enriching.

In this way the Association aims to contribute to further research in this field, in which, as is commonly recognised and lamented, not as much has been achieved as in Indo-European studies. So it will be possible to continue the tradition of the enthusiasm and the marvellous and even somewhat innocent work of the lexicographers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in their comparative multilingual Semitic dictionaries. In fact it was the Semitists who opened up the way in this field of

comparativism in linguistic research, but at the crucial moment they abandoned their work and turned their attention towards literary, historical and even individual grammatical aspects of Semitic philology. It is up to us today to regain the lost ground. A point in our favour is that the circumstances today are much more favourable: the study of large corpora of various Semitic literatures and the field work on modern Semitic-speaking societies has broadened and enriched our perspective enormously. Comparativism can now yield fruits and produce results that were unthinkable a century ago.

Let me end these words of welcome with an expression of my warmest thanks to all of you who come from so highly reputed international centres of tradition in Semitic studies and who have accorded us, members of the Department of Semitics and of the Institute for the Ancient Near East at the University of Barcelona, in a certain way newcomers to this research field, your support and your precious time. You have helped to make our University a pioneer in a highly respected and significant research field in the Humanities. You have placed your trust in us and we will do everything in our power not to disappoint you. My sincere thanks to you all.