

## In Memoriam



### THIERRY BIANQUIS (1935-2014)

**T**he French historian of early Islamic Syria and Fatimid Egypt, Thierry Bianquis, died on September 2, 2014 at the age of 79, leaving a permanent ache in the hearts of those who knew him.

Born in Lebanon on August 3, 1935 of French parents, one of four sons and two daughters, his formative years were spent in the warmth of a civilization he would forever be attached to. He earned his doctorate in history at the University of Lyon (1953–1960) and his teaching license in 1963 after a two-year stint in Algeria teaching at a military academy, and then in his early thirties he returned

to the Middle East—to begin with, on a year’s scholarship at the Centre Religieux d’Études Arabes (CREA) in Bikfaya in the Lebanese mountains, from where he went to the Institut Français d’Études Arabes (IFEAD) in Damascus as a resident (1968–1971), whence on to Cairo for four years (1971–1975) as a visiting scholar at the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale (IFAO), before returning to Damascus and IFEAD as its director for the years 1975 to 1981.

The rest of his academic life was spent at Université Lyon Lumière 2 where he completed his thèse d’État (which has since

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Photo: Thierry Bianquis at Fustat, Egypt, in 1973. (Photo courtesy of Anne-Marie Bianquis)

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Thierry Bianquis in the 1970s. (Photo courtesy of Anne-Marie Bianquis)

been replaced by the French Habilitation) with Claude Cahen (1981–1984) and began his university career, rising to the position of full professor in the History and Civilization of the Muslim World in 1991. It is there that the Editorial Board of the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* found him, when the French editor Gérard Lecomte died suddenly in April 1997. As my professional relationship with Thierry began at this time and in this context, I will limit my remarks to the years of his tenure as last editor of the French edition of the *EI*.

The Editorial Board met urgently in Berlin to decide on the succession to Lecomte and a list of three names was agreed upon. Thierry was not on the list, but he was recommended by the first to be asked, who was staunch in his refusal. Thierry's location outside the academic cauldron that was Paris was seen as an advantage and he was subsequently asked if he had any interest (the final decision would be made after pro forma consultation with the Executive Committee). A defining

characteristic immediately came into view: Thierry reached out to colleagues to ask advice. A second characteristic followed: an invitation to the editors to come to his country home where “je pourrais vous loger, vous abreuver, vous nourrir et vous faire visiter des églises romanes.” The editors needed little persuasion that Thierry would be a good fit; the appointment was made per July 1, 1997 and he took over at the start of the tenth volume, T–U.

Scholarly integrity and unfailing generosity were his hallmarks. Where the other editors edited more broadly, occasionally adding, often deleting, but trusting in the authorial choice made when the article was just an entry to be allocated, Thierry was precise and idealistic. Had Thierry had his way, which he did not, each article would have been subjected to a process of stringent peer-review, editing, and rewriting, over a period of many, many months. “Il faut adopter les doubles équipes, une équipe écrivant la notice, une autre relisant la notice et complétant

la bibliographie,” he wrote soon after beginning. Wedded to the lofty ideals of a pure scholarship but ensnared in the big business of corporate publishing, Thierry chafed under the contractual obligation to produce three fascicules per language edition per year, regardless of extenuating circumstances. “It is only for the big profits,” he said more than once.

The *EI* was a machine, and a conveyor belt of articles that needed to be edited, translated, and proofread awaited him, propelled by the incessant pressure from the publisher. Struggling with the encyclopedia ropes, which were in abundance and very tangled, Thierry worked his way through the undiminishing mountain of work that for most contributors and users played out behind the scenes. A good three-quarters of the encyclopedia was submitted in English and had to be translated for the French edition, which was in perpetual need of funds for that very task. However proud of and territorial about their edition the French were—Lévi-Provençal famously declared in 1949 that no French scholar would write for the *EI* if a French second edition was not continued—there was precious little money put forward to support it. In 2000 Thierry estimated that for the ten fascicules of 112 pages that were left to be completed, he had approximately 3,360 typescript pages (*feuilles*) to translate, requiring approximately FF 240,000, or FF 150,000 more than the pledges made (and not always kept), to pay for translating them. Thierry, and his predecessor, spent countless bruising hours in their search for money to pay for the encyclopedia articles to be translated into French, and more often than is widely known took the translations upon themselves, unpaid.

It can truthfully be said that Thierry never learned all the ropes, never closed the gap and brought the English and French editions back to simultaneous publication, and never saw any of his ideas for improvement realized. Yet he worked tirelessly, managing for a number of years two fulltime and taxing jobs; the one remaining after he retired from the university in September 2000 was arguably the most arduous. Hoping that he might have more success influencing the run-up to the third edition, he as tirelessly advocated for a more internationally inclusive approach to ensure its quality—“il faut avoir une commission puisée parmi des savants d’au moins quinze pays qui choisirait les entrées et déciderait à qui les confier, en même temps elle devrait choisir un autre chercheur, ou plus, d’une culture différent pour relire l’entrée, la corriger et la compléter.” A consummate scholar.

True to his word, Thierry and his wife Anne-Marie, a scholar of Syria in her own right, opened their beautiful old home in the French countryside for editorial

**“Earth, receive an honoured  
guest.”**

***W. H. Auden***

meetings—two of the three convened should perhaps be put in air quotes—and the editors and their spouses, along with two teenage children, unabashedly took advantage. He did indeed know every Romanesque abbey and church in the region and a van to charter everyone was easily rented. Sweet are the memories.

Thierry was in poor health during the latter half of his encyclopedia tenure;

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thankfully the *EI* did not send him to a very early grave, however exasperating, complex, rote, and nigh unmanageable the enterprise was. He delighted in his academic work, in his marriage, in his children, and in his grandchildren, and his

letters after the editors went their separate ways are reminders of the fount of love and affection that Thierry could call upon and dispense with ease. He is very sorely missed.

— Peri Bearman