

Royal Society reveals “Arabick Roots” of British Science

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The FINANCIAL – 5th July 2011: London’s Royal Society is launching an exhibition today about the enormous influence that “Arabick” scientific knowledge had on giants of British science like Edmond Halley (of “Halley’s Comet” fame), Robert Boyle and many others.

The Arabick Roots exhibition is open to the public from the 5th to 10th of July 2011, free of charge, as part of the Royal Society’s “Summer of Science” celebration.

Like many of their Renaissance contemporaries, both Halley and Boyle understood Arabic and translated many scientific works into Latin. This new exhibition displays rare books, scientific instruments and correspondence, showing how science and culture from the Muslim Civilisation influenced and early Fellows of the Royal Society, many of whom eagerly pursued works in Arabic and Persian as well as communicating with their intellectual contemporaries in the Muslim world.

The word “Arabick” refers to the many languages that use Arabic script, including Farsi (Persian), Kurdish, Urdu and Ottoman Turkish.

Exhibition Curator Dr Rim Turkmani said:

“This exhibition uncovers the never-before told story of the connections between the early Royal Society and contemporary and classical Arabic learning, and how they were used to solve some of the most pressing problems of the day.”

“This was a time when British society as a whole was largely ignorant of the cultural achievements of the Arabic world – yet we find that the early Royal Society’s group of ‘ingenious and curious gentlemen’ included three Fellows from the Arabic world. This forgotten history reveals a rich tradition of communication between two very different cultures, and shows that then – just like today – collaboration across linguistic and cultural boundaries can lead to great results.”

The research for Arabick Roots has been sponsored by the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation (FSTC) and the exhibition curator is FSTC Fellow Dr. Rim Turkmani.

Arabick Roots is open 9am - 5pm in the week of the Royal Society’s Summer Science Exhibition (5 - 10 July, 2011). From 11th July 2011 onwards guided tours are by appointment (call +44 20 7451 2597). Entrance is free. The exhibition runs until November 2011, after which it will transfer to Doha.

Smallpox Inoculation

The surprising history behind one of the most significant medical advances of all time will be revealed in Arabick Roots. Famously, vaccination against infectious diseases was pioneered by Edward Jenner in the last years of the eighteenth century. However, Arabick Roots shows how thinkers from the Arabic and Muslim world helped to pave the way for Jenner’s great breakthrough and other key advances in astronomy, medicine and other disciplines.

When London was devastated by a smallpox epidemic in the mid-eighteenth century, Fellows of the Royal Society turned to their counterparts in the Arabic world to help them understand this terrible disease. In letters seen publicly for the very first time in this exhibition, the Ambassador to Tripoli at the time, Cassem Algiada Aga, describes the practice of inoculation, which had been taking place for centuries in North Africa and the Middle East.

Aga’s letters provided valuable first-hand reassurance about the safety of inoculation at a time when there was serious public fear and mistrust of this life saving practice in Europe, and he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society, joining two existing Arab Fellows, Mohammed Ibn Haddu and Ben Ali Abgali.