

Seminar Series 2024-2025

Emotional Grammars
of Globalization

Mediterranean Emotions



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**‘Inebriated by a
Barbaric Language
I Need to Possess
Immediately’.
The Emotional
Tribulations of a
Grammarians Trying
to Learn Arabic**

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University of Florence

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ABSTRACT

Nicolas Clenardus (ca. 1493/4-1542) was a Flemish humanist educated in the philological principles of the Collegium Trilingue. His intellectual outlook was therefore that of major figures such as Erasmus and Vives. He was also a militant Catholic—in Louvain he studied under Jacobus Latomus, whom he always addressed in his correspondence as his dear praceptor. His commitment to the cause of Emperor Charles V's project of Universitas Christiana connected him with Hernando Colón's project for a universal library and also with similar millenarian projects that emerged from the humanists around Leo X and the pontiffs who succeeded him. The author of successful Greek, Latin, and Hebrew grammars, Clenardus also developed a strong desire to learn Arabic. He thus set off southwards from Louvain on a pilgrimage that would take him first to Spain and Portugal: in Granada he improved the skills in Arabic he had taught himself while still in Louvain, thanks now to Mohammad Kharruf al-Ansari al-Tunisi, a scholar who was at the time a captive under the Marquis de Mondéjar in the city of the Alhambra. He finally set off for Morocco in 1540, and settled in the Jewish quartier of Fez, where he stayed for about 15 months trying to obtain manuscripts and improve his knowledge of the language, hermeneutics, and doctrines of Islam. His pilgrimage can be traced in his correspondence (*Nicolai Clenardi Peregrinationum ac de Rebus Mochometricis Epistolae Elegantissimae*, published in 1550), which recounts the different stages of his travels to Morocco, up until his return to Granada in 1542, where he died. Clenardus' correspondence does not just give a detailed description of his pedagogical approach to language learning, it also constitutes a unique testimony of the way in which a humanist educated in the tradition of Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus approached what he described as a barbaric language by which he avowedly felt both captivated and inebriated. Clenardus conveyed his determination to learn Arabic by means of Freudian slips which betray a combination of guilt and keen eroticism. He referred to it as the horrid language of the Africans (*sermone Afrorum horridissimo*). In his Letter to Christians he acknowledged that he had been captivated by his love for a barbarian language (*captus ... amore barbarae linguae*) and added that he felt intoxicated with desire (*ebrium ferri cupiditate huius linguae*). He described Arabic as his own Helen of Troy, whom he needed to possess immediately (*celerius mea potirer Helena*). If on the one hand the language used by Clenardus to describe his desire to learn Arabic evinced a complex sense of guilt caused by his irrefrenable lust for the language of the infidels, on the other hand his ulterior motives proved to be utterly aggressive, since his ultimate aim was to weaponise his knowledge of Arabic in order to rhetorically slay Muslims with their own sword. In spite of the eventual failure of his attempts at publishing a grammar and dictionary of Arabic, and the creation of a library of Arabic texts, his testimony provides material for an untold episode in the general history of the complex and frequently paradoxical ways in which Christian Europe approached Arabic language and culture during the early decades of the sixteenth century.

THE SPEAKER

José María Pérez Fernández teaches early modern cultural history, translation studies, and comparative literature at the University of Granada in Spain. He conducts research in these disciplines both at home and abroad, as a visiting fellow at institutions that include the European University Institute, Villa I Tatti in Florence, as well as the universities of Padua, Florence, Oxford and Cambridge. Between 2019 and 2023 he led the Paper in Motion work group, which was in turn part of the People in Motion COST action, led by Prof. Giovanni Tarantino—with whom he has curated exhibitions at the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence and the Archivio di Stato in Prato. In 2023 he edited alongside Gaetano Sabatini a special issue of the *Journal of European Economic History* (*Paper and the Economy of Knowledge in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Finance, Semiotics and the Communication Revolution*). He is currently working on a monograph for OUP on the reception of Thucydides between Lorenzo Valla and Thomas Hobbes, and he is one of the editors of the forthcoming edition of Hernando Colón's *Libro de los Epítomes*, also for OUP.