

Translatio, disputatio, and the first Latin Qur'an

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Published as “The First Latin Qur'an, Disputation, and the Second Person of a Translation”, *Tradurre le sacre verità. La traduzione dei testi religiosi / Translating Divine Truth. The Translation of Religious Texts*, ed. Stefano Arduini, (= *Koiné* 5-6). 1995-96, 173-183. This seems to be a pre-print version.

In 1142 Petrus Venerabilis, the abbot of Cluny, organized the first Latin translation of the Qur'an, along with explanatory documents. The text, the translators, and the mode of translation have been described by d'Alverny (1948) and Kritzeck (1964). What remains to be considered, however, is the way this translation should be inserted into the wider cultural transfer from Arabic to Latin in twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially with regard to the text's sacred status.

The wider context concerns one major kind of transfer from the Christian to the Islamic world: the twelfth-century Crusades, since the expressed aim of the translation was indeed to convert infidels to Christianity. But given this aim, why should the abbot of Cluny have had the Qur'an translated into Latin rather than the Bible into Arabic?

I hope to show that answers to this question can be derived from three kinds of practice transferred from the Arabic to the Latin world: the making of paper; the disputation as a mode of intercultural communication, and observation as a mode of producing scientific knowledge. These answers should then help us place the Latin Qur'an within a very wide transfer movement, questioning the very division between Islamic and Christian Europe and, as a sideshow, furnishing important keys for an understanding of the translative activity known as the School of Toledo.

The Story

The circumstances surrounding the translation bear repeating. Petrus Venerabilis (Peter the Venerable), abbot of Cluny, visited Spain in 1142. His motives were primarily economic. Since Cluny had been the main powerbroker behind the conquest of Muslim territory in Spain, it demanded a share of the profits. But Alfonso VII of Castile had not been paying the tributes promised by his grandfather, whose money had virtually paid for the Cluny basilica, at that time the largest in the world. Hence the visit, which was reasonably successfully in economic terms, given that the abbot of Cluny was promised a share of the profits from the Burgos baths (Kritzeck 1964: 12). It was no doubt well-laundered money.

Yet Petrus wanted more than gold from ex-Muslim lands. While in the north of Spain, “in the region of the Ebro”, he asked the translators Hermannus Dalmata and Robertus Ketenensis to translate the Qur’an and explanatory documents. He extended the translation team to include the Mozarab clerk Petrus Toletanus and his own notary Petrus, to make sure the text came out as acceptable Latin (all this information is from letters of 1143 to Bernard de Clairvaux, ed. Constable 1967: I 274-299, II 278-286). A native informant anonymously named “Mahumeth” was also employed, although the abbot seems to have mentioned this only some years later (d’Alverny 1948: 71, Kritzeck 1964: 229).

According to Kritzeck, the texts translated were attributed to single translators as follows: the *Fabulae Saracenorum* (Robertus), the *Liber generationis Mahumet* (Hermannus), the *Doctrina Mahumet* (Hermannus), the Qur’an (Robertus), the *Epistola Saraceni* and *Rescriptum Christiani* (Petrus Tholetanus and Petrus de Poitiers). To these were later added the *Liber contra sectam* written by Petrus Venerabilis, prefaced by a letter to Bernard de Clairvaux, and the *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum* compiled by Peter of Poitiers. We shall later consider the reasons for translating and producing so many documents. But for the moment, let us concentrate on the actual Qur’anic, translated by the Englishman Robertus Ketenensis.

Robertus and Hermannus were primarily translators of mathematics and astronomy. They seem to have been rather unwilling to tackle sacred texts, since Petrus notes that their services had to be won over through “many prayers and much expense”. In fact, a decidedly economic register pervades the entire context, including Robertus’s justification of his work on the Qur’an. He says he has brought the text “to the treasury of the Roman tongue” (“in linguae Romanae thesaurum attuli”) (Kritzeck 64), and his prefatory letter to the Qur’an, addressed to the abbot of Cluny, continues in a similar register: “Selecting nothing, altering nothing in the sense except for the sake of intelligibility, I have brought stones and wood so that your beautiful building may hereafter be raised up all joined together and imperishable (Kritzeck, 65) [...] I have not tried to cover so vile and unworthy a matter in gold.” (d’Alverny 1948: 85-86; Kritzeck 1964: 110). The translation was perhaps like the funds the Castilian kings had contributed so that the Cluny basilica could be built. The intermediaries passed on Islamic elements of value that the French could then set in place. Robertus accepted the abbot’s gold (which had come from Muslim Spain anyway), but he was not going to provide gold in return. Let the French then build their beautiful cathedral; it that was not the translator’s affair. Indeed, Robertus describes his work on the Qur’an as a digression from his real concerns with geometry and astrology. And although he was further rewarded with a position as archdeacon at Pamplona in 1143, he did not stay there long. He signed a translation in Segovia in 1145 and drew up astronomical tables for London in 1149. The translation of sacred texts was obviously not his ultimate goal.

All this might explain why, although handsomely paid, Robertus made a rather shoddy job of the Qur'anic text and the *Fabulae Sarcenorum*. The *isnad* to the latter was omitted (since the list of names would mean nothing in Latin), as were numerous passages that presented difficulties and the overall poetic structure. The remainder abounds in guesswork (d'Alverny 1948) and is perhaps fittingly called "paraphrase" (Daniel 1966: 6).

And yet this translation, the first and by no means the most exact, accrued a strong manuscript tradition that outlasted and overwhelmed some of the later, more careful versions. Read by scholars like Richard Fitzralph, Simon Simeon, Denys le Chartreux and Nicholas of Cuza, in 1543 it was printed in Basel or Zurich by Theodor Bibliander and abridged by Johann Albrecht Widmannstetter. In 1547 it was adapted into Italian for the printer Andrea Arrivabene, and this Italian text then became the source for Salomon Schweigger's German version of 1616, which was in turn the source for an anonymous Dutch version of 1641 (on all of which, see Bastiaensen, forthcoming). Whatever happened in the north of Spain in 1242 was to inform the European image of the Qur'an for some four centuries.

It is worth reflecting on the material support that made this possible.

Paper

Islamic culture and commerce brought many wonderful things to Europe, including gold (from African mines), pasta (Spanish pasta, not Italian, but still from China) and paper (also originally from China). The technique for making paper, known and kept secret in China from the second century, reached Samarkind in 751 (Chinese taken prisoner by the Mongols are supposed to have revealed the secret). Paper was then manufactured in Baghdad from 794 and in Damascus from the tenth century. Spanish Muslims are said to have manufactured paper in Játiva from the eleventh century and in Toledo in the twelfth century. Its use in Christian Spain became generalized in the thirteenth century, when tariffs for Muslim paper merchants trading in Christian territories (1221 in Barcelona, 1242 in Tamarit). The translators working in Toledo for Alfonso X after 1250 were in all probability writing on paper. Parallel to this Spanish connection, of course, the Crusades and Italian traders in the eastern Mediterranean also brought the technology to Europe. In 1250, when the Alphonsine translators began their work in Spain, a paper mill was established in Fabriano, Italy, which eventually came to supply the whole of Europe.

What does this have to do with the Qur'an translation? There is certainly nothing to suggest that Robertus Ketenensis was writing on paper in 1142. He was about a century too early. Yet paper would have profound effects on the translation culture that was to make his text influential.

When using paper instead of parchment or vellum, translators produce a cheaper product, able to reach a wider potential public. This need not always be the case. When Hunain ibn Ishaq produced medical translations for the caliph in ninth-century Baghdad, he was paid their weight in gold, so Hunain became a rich man by working on specially heavy paper (Makdisi 1990: 245). Robertus had no such deal, so he had every interest in producing a lighter translation by omitting text. More generally, however, paper made possible the practice of copying by pieces (*pecia*), vastly increasing the number of manuscripts available for distribution. This happened in the Islamic world from the ninth century.

In Spain, the thirteenth-century translation culture was similarly stimulated by the use of paper, although in a way that affected the translation process itself. Whereas the twelfth-century work had been based on oral collaboration between an Arab-speaker and a Latinist (Robertus probably worked with the Mozarab Marcus Tholetanus or the native informant Mahumeth), the thirteenth-century Alphonsine translators also formed teams engaged in the successive revision of manuscripts. Paper was cheaper, so substantial revising and editing could more easily become parts of the translation process. One result of this seems to have been the distribution of intermediary “working copy” manuscripts among nobles who could otherwise not afford the completed translations but probably had some kind of contact with the translators (such is the hypothesis put forward by R. Menéndez Pidal, reported in Gonzalo Menéndez Pidal, 1951: 371). The production of more polished translations thus went hand in hand with a distribution to a wider public.

This concerns the Qur’an translation in two ways.

First, although Robertus was ostensibly translating for the abbot of Cluny, who is indeed the second person named in the introductory discourse, his manuscript went to one of the major intellectual centers of France - the Cluny library - and thus easily survived through to the age of paper. The individual second person virtually became a pan-European readership.

Second, remembering Jerome’s criticisms of expensive parchment as an “unnecessary luxury”, the age of paper fitted in with the ideal of

- Robertus’s prefatory letter is addressed to Petrus.
- Petrus’s prologue to *the Liber contra sectam* is addressed to Bernard de Clairvaux.
- The *Liber contra sectam* is addressed to the “Arabs” (Arabibus Hysmahelis filii).

Disputations

The abbot had fairly clear reasons for ordering a Latin *Qur’an*:

No matter whether the Mahomedan error is called a shameful heresy or infamous paganism, we must act against it, we must write. But since our Latins [...] know no other language than that of their homeland, they can neither recognize the enormity of this error nor stop its advance.

(in Le Goff 1957: 20-21)

Scholastic method is often described as being based on disputation and debate.

Scholastic method and observation

Although generally considered peripheral with respect to the translation of scientific texts, Petrus Venerabilis's visit is of considerable importance for the relation between translators and the church. The project he set up is the first evidence we have of a translation team working in Spain on the one general task, in the one general region, and for visible money. His visit thus marks the beginning of our second stage, initiating the kind of centralized patronage that would be continued at Toledo.

When in Salamanca in 1142 the abbot met archbishop Raimundus of Toledo, who was also French, as had been his predecessor at Toledo. This family meeting quite possibly inspired the archbishop to sponsor a translation himself, since his personal interests had until then been money and power (González Palencia 1937). His patronage would be continued by his successors at Toledo. The abbot of Cluny had introduced an institutional structure that would remain of importance for as long as a century.

The enhanced distribution enabled by paper meant that a translation could be conceptualized as a weapon. The scene of the inter-religious disputation was then the intellectual battlefield on which such weapons (or their information) would be used. And science in fact provided Petrus's main argument for seeking a disputation: if Islam's scientific knowledge could be translated and debated, why shouldn't it religious texts?

Analysis of the translation strategies in these terms can be taken further. It can explain, for example, why the abbot's main translators were more interested in Arabic science than religion, and why the Castilian church, following direct contacts with the abbot, sponsored the scientific translations of what has been called the School of Toledo. At this peculiar juncture, the translation of science had its sacred uses.

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