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John Tolan

Conclusion: Robert of Ketton's Translation and its Legacy

“Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete, que arabice Alchoran, id est, collectio preceptorum uocatur”, “The law of the false prophet Muhammad, which in Arabic is called the Qur’an, which means collection of precepts.” This is the title that the scribe of the earliest extant manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal MS 1162) gave to Robert of Ketton’s Latin translation of the Qur’an. The title crystallizes some of the principal ways in which European Christian intellectuals, from the twelfth century forward, understood the Qur’an and Islam. The Qur’an is first and foremost a *lex*, a word which in twelfth-century Latin means both *law* and *religion*. European jurists and theologians understood human history as being marked by a succession of legal configurations. From the time of Adam to that of Moses was the period before the law (*ante legem*), ruled by natural law. From the revelation of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai to the birth of Christ was the period under the law (*sub lege*). Finally, Christ came and initiated the period under grace (*sub gratia*), proclaiming “Think not that I am come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” (Mt 5:17). These three periods were associated with three types of law: natural law (*lex naturalis*), Mosaic law (*lex Moysis*, codified in the Old Testament), and Christian Law (*lex Christi*, grounded in the New Testament).¹ Confronted with another *lex*, that of Muhammad (or of “the Saracens”, as it is often called *lex Sarracenorum*), Medieval European intellectuals tried to understand how it might fit into this schema.

The Qur’an, according to this title, is the law of a false prophet. Whereas Moses received the Law from God on Mount Sinai and Christ, God’s word incarnate, fulfilled and transformed the law, Muhammad’s law by contrast is illegitimate. The de-legitimizing of the Muslim prophet plays a central role in Christian responses to Islam, as the various works that accompany Ketton’s Qur’an in the *corpus cluniacense* make clear. Whereas for Muslims the Qur’an is the word of God, for Ketton as for other Latin Christian authors it is merely a “collection of precepts” of a false prophet. Muhammad, for Ketton and for those who will read his translation, is the sole author of this *lex*, an illegitimate law based on feigned

¹ For a comparison of “law”, “religion” and other related concepts in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, see John Tolan, “Comparative Remarks: A History of Religious Laws,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religious Laws*, ed. Silvio Ferrari and Rossella Bottoni (London: Routledge, 2019), 83–91.

revelations. The choice of the term “collection” also emphasizes the human origins of this law, the hand of the false prophet who gathered diverse “precepts” into a single volume.

Robert of Ketton’s translation, as we have seen in these pages, represents the first comprehensive attempt by Latin Christians to understand and confront the Qur’an. Or rather, Robert’s translation is the most important part of the collective effort of the translators that Peter of Cluny hired to produce the *corpus cluniacense*. This is why Mercedes Garcia Arenal, Jan Loop, Roberto Tottoli and I decided to make this translation the starting point for our collective research project, “The European Qur’an”, which is studying the history of the Muslim holy book in European culture from the twelfth century to the early nineteenth.² Cándida Ferrero Hernández and I organized a conference on Ketton’s translation at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona in March, 2020. This book is the result of that rich and stimulating conference. For years, José Martínez Gázquez, Cándida Ferrero Hernández and their colleagues (many of whom contributed to this volume) have been conducting research on the translation and study of the Qur’an in Latin in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, through their joint research endeavor, “Islamolatina”.³ This book is also the first book in our new series, The European Qur’an, with De Gruyter. It allows us a first look at what we mean by “The European Qur’an”, the place of the Muslim holy book in European cultural history.

An important part of this tradition of the European Qur’an is the transmission and study of the Arabic text. Xavier Casassas’ study of the glosses of the Arabic Bellus Qur’an manuscript provides a fascinating example of the study of the Qur’an in 16th century Spain: we see how the readers who annotated the manuscript studied the Arabic text, attempted to understand it, and consulted Muslim exegesis (*tafsir*) to help them do so. Juan Pablo Arias’ study of the particularities of the Qur’an as preserved in the Maghreb and Al-Andalus underlines the attention we need to pay to the possible versions/variations in the Qur’anic texts that European Christians encountered; we cannot assume that they had access to a text equivalent to that of the 1924 Cairo edition.

Robert of Ketton’s translation is of course at the center of our preoccupations in this volume. Roberto Tottoli and Reinhold Gleis have published a book on “Marracci at work”, and some of the papers given here could be put under the

² Funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, grant agreement no. 810141, project EuQu: “The European Qur’an. Islamic Scripture in European Culture and Religion 1150–1850.” See <https://euqu.eu/>.

³ See <https://grupsderecerca.uab.cat/islamolatina/> (accessed 18 March 2021).

rubric “Ketton at work”.⁴ Olivier Hanne’s close comparative study of the translation methods and strategies of Robert and of Adelard of Bath show how each of these twelfth-century translators sought to comprehend the texts and to adopt their translation methods to the specificities of the texts and of the intended readership. Reinhold Gleis explores the problems of trying to produce a “literal” or “word-by-word” translation of the Qur’an in Latin and the choices that Robert of Ketton makes in trying to render the sometimes quite foreign concepts of the Qur’an into comprehensible Latin.

Ketton’s text cannot be understood without taking into account the manuscripts in which it was known, and in particular the rich and complex set of glosses. We await the coming edition of the translation by José Martínez Gázquez and Fernando González Muñoz. Oscar de la Cruz examines several examples of glosses showing hostile readings of the Qur’an, involving *res turpissima* (sodomy) and the use of *velamen* (veil): in these cases Qur’anic words are given specific Latin significations that facilitate their polemical use.

Inevitably, we often came back to Arsenal MS 1162, which Marie Thérèse d’Alverny had recognized as the source manuscript of the *corpus cluniacense*. Anthony Lappin’s careful study, notably focusing on Peter of Cluny’s letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, shows how the *corpus* is to be understood first as part of Peter’s rhetorical defense of Cluny against a formidable spiritual and institutional adversary. When it is no longer necessary to defend the Cluniacs against the Cistercians, the *corpus* falls into relative neglect (reflected in the state of the manuscript), only to be revived later. Fernando González’s meticulous study of the deleted and corrected passages in the Arsenal manuscript confirms that it was a working copy, original of collection, but not of any of the constitutive texts. Florence Ninitte’s work dovetails nicely with that of Lappin and González. Her close study of Vincent of Beauvais’ use of the Latin *Risālat al-Kindī* shows that Vincent had access to a more complete version than the one in the Arsenal manuscript (and the other manuscripts of the *corpus cluniacense*), which confirms that this pre-Arsenal version of *Risālat al-Kindī* circulated independently (and was sent by Peter of Cluny to Bernard of Clairvaux.)

While Ketton’s translation has been the focus of many of the articles in this volume, others have examined other medieval translations. Tom Burman looked at one early and previously overlooked text that transmitted Qur’anic citations to the Latin world: the *Epistola Leonis imperatoris ad Umar*, a ninth-century Latin

4 Reinhold Gleis and Roberto Tottoli, *Ludovico Marracci at Work: The Evolution of His Latin Translation of the Qur’an in the Light of His Newly Discovered Manuscripts: With an Edition and a Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Sura 18*, Corpus Islamo-Christianum. Series Arabica-Latina 1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016).

translation of the famous apocryphal correspondence between the Byzantine emperor and the second Caliph. Mark of Toledo's thirteenth-century translation of the Qur'an was less known than Robert's but clearly appreciated by some, notably Riccoldo da Monte di Croce because it is more closely follows the Arab text, as Davide Scotto demonstrates. Nadia Petrus' study of the manuscript traditions of Ketton and Mark highlights the very different contexts of the two translations: Mark's was a stand-alone text, making it more difficult for those who did not have access to other information about Islam, while Robert's, in the vast majority of manuscripts, was part of a corpus. Alexis Rivera brings the tools of translation studies to bear on the comparison of the translations of Robert, Mark and Egidio da Viterbo, showing how Robert presents an *overt* translation (one that acknowledges its nature as an interpretation) while Mark and Egidio are *covert* translations (translations posing as the equivalent of the original). Mouhamad Khaly Wélé's comparative study of the translations of Robert of Ketton and George Sale shows how each was dependent on *tafsir* and how Ketton chose those elements of Muslim exegesis which reinforced his polemical view of Islam (for example, that when Egyptian women saw the handsome young Joseph, they were so struck by his beauty that they menstruated). Sale, on the contrary, chooses those elements of Muslim tradition that confirm his Enlightenment view of Islam as a rational, pure form of monotheism.

Knowledge of Qur'an came also through other works in the *corpus cluniacense*, in particular the *Risālat al-Kindī*, in which passages from the Qur'an are presented with polemical arguments ready to be deployed against a hypothetical Muslim adversary – or, more probably, to reassure the Christian reader of the superiority of Christianity. The *Risālat al-Kindī*, is hence much easier to use for a compiler like Vincent of Beauvais than Ketton's Qur'an (and, as Florence Ninitte has shown, Vincent probably had a manuscript of the *Risāla* independent of the *corpus cluniacense*). Some chose not to use Robert's Qur'an, including his friend and colleague Hermann of Carinthia, in the *Liber de Doctrina Mahumeti* which comprised part of the *corpus*, as Ulisse Cecini has shown.

One of the major Latin authors to grapple with the Qur'an was Dominican Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, who read the Arabic text and was familiar with and Mark's translation. As Davide Scotto shows, Riccoldo approached the Qur'an through study of the Arab text alongside Latin texts and earlier anti-Qur'anic polemics. He tried to use the Qur'an to help understand Christian soteriological history. Why had God allowed the Saracens' successes? Why hadn't those who tried to oppose it (Francis of Assisi, Louis IX and others) succeeded? Despite his long residence in Baghdad, his knowledge of Arabic and of the Arabic Qur'an, Riccoldo was dependent on Mark's translation and on the material in the *corpus cluniacense*. Riccoldo's *Contra legem sarracenorum* became an extremely important source of information about the Qur'an and Islam for European readers, as

Cándida Ferrero's article makes clear: there were numerous Latin manuscripts, early printed editions: these included the *Improbatio Alcorani*, published by Antonio de la Peña in 1500 and in Bibliander's volume of 1543, in which Riccoldo's text is published alongside Ketton's translation and the other works of the *corpus cluniacense*. There were also vernacular translations of Riccoldo's anti-Qur'anic tract: an anonymous Castilian translation was published in Seville as *la Reprobación del Alcorán* (& in Toledo in 1502); Martin Luther published his own German translation of Riccoldo's polemic in 1542.

Robert of Ketton's Latin translation became a key tool for European intellectuals to understand and describe Islam. Many of them used Ketton's text and the glosses which accompanied it to reinforce a negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims. As Augustín Justicia Lara shows, Franciscan friar Symon Semeonis, in the *Itinerarium* describing his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1323, uses his reading of Robert's Qur'an to offer authoritative citations to describe the Muslim societies in which he travels (their religious practices, veiling of women, prohibition of alcohol). Robert's translation and the glosses permit him to understand, explain and denigrate the society he describes. Giacomo della Marca (1391–1476) used Ketton's translation as a tool for missionary activity in the Balkans, as José Martínez shows. Martínez provides a critical edition of Giacomo's *Extracta ex Alcorano ad confutationem Sarracenorum* (in appendix to his article) and shows how he worked Qur'anic material into his sermons.

The years from 1451 to 1461 saw a significant number of texts about Islam and the "Turkish menace" as, in reaction to the Ottoman siege and capture (in 1453) of Constantinople, European Christians debated the merits of crusade and mission; a number of these texts were written by ecclesiastics who had met at the Church councils of Basel (1432) and Ferrara/Florence (1437). Jacob Langeloh's chapter on John of Ragusa and the manuscripts brought to the council of Basel provides an introduction to a key event in the intellectual encounter between Islam and Latin Europe in the fifteenth century. One of those present at the Council of Basel was Jean Germain, bishop of Châlon sur Saône, the object of Irene Reginato's article. She looks at how this intellectual and proponent of crusade understood the Qur'an and deployed it in his polemics against Islam. Jean did not mention Robert's translation; it is not clear whether he had seen it or read it in Basel. He had an indirect access to the Qur'an, via the Latin translation of the *Risālat al-Kindī* and via Petrus Alfonsi twelfth-century *Dialogi contra Iudeos* (which was based largely on Arabic text of the *Risālat al-Kindī*). Jean Germain's additions and alterations, deliberate or not, show his Christian point of view: for example, he systematically portrays Muhammad as the author of the Qur'an.

Indeed, in these pages we have seen a number of examples of the old adage: *traductio nostrificatio est*. Translators and glossators and commentators tried to

make the Qur'an and Islam comprehensible to their Latin Christian audience, to incorporate the Qur'an into their own Christian world views. Antoni Biosca's close study of scribal errors in various polemical manuscripts shows how these scribes tend to replace the strange with the familiar. Kasia Starczewska shows how glosses concerning Dhul-Qarnayn ("the one of two horns" in sura 18) were incorporated into pre-existing ideas of the history of Alexander the Great and of Gog and Magog. Over and against the polemical impulse to refute or reject the Qur'anic narrative is the desire to understand it by incorporating it into the web of historical knowledge based on a mixture of Greek and Latin historiography and biblical narrative.

As Cándida Ferrero Hernández explains in her introduction to this volume, we chose to give an end-date of 1500 to the scope of this volume. We wished to stop before Bibliander's 1543 edition, when Robert's 400-year old translation is given a second life. Bibliander's volume, and the tremendous impact that it gave to Robert's translation for the following centuries, is worth a study of its own. What we have traced in these pages is only the beginning of the story of the European Qur'an, a subject that the "EuQu" team of scholars will be studying over the coming years. We are organizing conferences and workshops across Europe and beyond, our "European Qur'an" database will soon be online, and other volumes in our "European Qur'an" series with De Gruyter will be published in the coming years. Readers can keep up on the progress of our research via our website.⁵

⁵ <https://euqu.eu/> (accessed 18 March 2021).