

1. Summary

This Ph.D. project aims to examine the very first translation of the Qur’an, which is a Greek translation from the 8/9th century CE, and to compare it with the original Arabic text. The translation by an anonymous author, while generally very accurate, contains some textually subtle, but theologically highly important differences with respect to the Arabic text. It seems to be the result of a Christian hermeneutical reading of the Qur’an.

This translation was used in a Byzantine polemic against Islam (the so-called “Refutation of the Qur’an” – referred to in the following as *Anatropē*) by Nicetas of Byzantium (9th century CE). Additionally, and beyond the comparison, I shall analyse the use of the Greek translation in Nicetas’ *Anatropē*, which is its main source (Vat. gr. 681). In a final section, I will contextualise the *Anatropē* with Nicetas’ other apologetic works against the Catholics and the Armenians. I do this in order to determine whether Nicetas considered Islam a Christian heresy – as did other apologetic writers before him – or if he understood it as a new, independent religion.

This project is related to Qur’anic studies and it characterises one of the most important, albeit little known Byzantine polemicists. Nicetas is one of the first who uses the Qur’an itself for the refutation of the Islamic faith. His attempt had a vast influence on later Byzantine and even mediaeval European apologetic writing against Islam. Nicetas lived during the ‘Macedonian Renaissance’ in Constantinople in a period of thriving military and intellectual activities and a climate of intercultural exchange with the Muslim ‘Abbāsid caliphate. My research will help to shed light on the ‘Macedonian Renaissance’, its intellectual life and external relations with the Arab neighbours.

2. The Mediaeval Context of the Research Project

Byzantium, as the most important Christian outpost of mediaeval Europe, was especially challenged by the presence of the Arabs close to its southern borders. The Byzantine Empire not only experienced essential internal changes from the 7th to the 9th centuries concerning economic, political and social aspects of Byzantine life, but it was also externally threatened in its sovereignty and even existence by the Muslim forces, which rapidly spread out towards the former Roman lands. The appearance of Islam and the obvious link between the Arab fighters and their new ‘religion’ (*dīn* in the Qur’an) challenged the Byzantines theologically: They had to prove the superiority of their own Christian faith as they considered themselves the ‘chosen people of God’, following and developing the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament.

As part of the reaction to the Muslim victories, we find a proliferation of apologetic and polemical writings against Islam written by Eastern Christian authors since the 8th century. The first of them was John of Damascus (ca. 650–750) who integrated a short treatise on “The Sect of the Ismaelites” into his Greek work *De haeresibus*.¹ Theodor Abū Qurrah (ca. 740–820) followed this tradition by editing Greek and Arabic *Opuscula islamica*, which are small treatises on different aspects of the Christian and Muslim faiths, mostly written in dialogue form. Theophanes Confessor’s (ca. 760–818) – sometimes blameful – reports about the Arabs in his *Chronographia* influenced later ages and even reached the Latin writings of Anastasius Bibliothecarius (d. 879).

However, it is Nicetas of Byzantium (9th century) who first treats the Muslim faith thoroughly by making use of the Qur’an itself. He edited two letters directed to a Muslim emir as well as his *opus magnum*, the “Refutation of the Qur’an”, which he wrote around 860 CE. Nicetas ought to be seen in the light of the re-emerging Byzantine Empire in the 9th century. He was probably a monk² and

¹ Among some other works whose authenticity is not absolutely sure.

² Inferring from some expressions in his works which apply the conviction of a monk, cf. Manolis Ulbricht: “الترجمة الأولى: “La première traduction du Coran du 8^{ème}/9^{ème} siècle et son utilisation dans la polémique de Nicétas de Byzance (9^{ème} siècle) avec le titre ‘Réfutation du Coran’”, Chronos – Revue d’histoire de l’Université de Balamand/Lebanon, n. 25, 2012, pp. 33–58, p. 37.

part of the clerical elite of the capital Constantinople since he was close to the Emperor’s court³ and to the patriarch of Constantinople, Photios (858–867 & 878–886).⁴ At that time, Photios tended to extend the influence of the Orthodox Church over the Empire’s borders: He quarrelled with the Latin Bishop of Rome about the right of primacy in Christendom. His activity therefore marks the beginning of the long process of the Western and Eastern Churches drifting apart, leading to the Great Schism of 1054. Photios also strove to gain influence in the new European territories by sending forth the monks Cyril and Method in order to proselytise the slaves. Their teacher, Leon the Mathematician (ca. 790–869), had stayed at the Caliphate’s court of al-Ma’mūn (reign 813–833) in Baghdad.

In this climate of ecclesiastical-political agitation and flourishing intellectual output (at the instigation of the Caesar Bardas, the Emperor founded the University in the Magnaura Palace in 863, with the aforementioned Leon as director), Nicetas lived and worked for the ‘right faith’ – ἡ ὀρθοδοξία (*orthodoxía*), or in the Qur’an *aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. He wrote treatises against inner-Christian ‘heresies’, like the Latin Catholics and the Armenian Orthodox, which show close affinity to Photios’ epistles.⁵ But he also defended his faith against the ‘external heresy’, Islam, by deconstructing the heart of the enemy’s religion: the holy Qur’an. For that, he used a tendentious Greek translation of the Qur’an and rejected the new religious movement by refuting the content of its holy book in a logical-dialectical way, which is another indication of Nicetas’ academic formation.⁶

Biographical details about Nicetas are very rare and can only be reconstructed from his works, even though he was one of the most important polemicists, wielding the greatest influence on the Byzantine and even mediaeval views on Islam until the Late Middle Ages. It is astonishing, therefore, that until now there has been no complete analytical research on Nicetas’ writings. And likewise, no studies have been written about possible interrelations between the first translation of the Qur’an, used by Nicetas, and later ones, like the one commissioned by Petrus Venerabilis (1092/94–1156), from which Martin Luther (1483–1546) was inspired. My Ph.D. project opens a whole field of research about the translation or, better, the transformation⁷ of the meanings of the Qur’anic text into the European languages and therefore also their religious conceptual frameworks. This information would give us new insights into Western perceptions of Islam since the Middle Ages, some of which have persisted even through today, as global politics has amply shown in the last decade.

3. Nicetas’ “Refutation of the Qur’an” and the Qur’an Fragments therein preserved

Nicetas’ work “Refutation of the Qur’an” (*Anatropē*) is preserved in one single Greek manuscript, held today in the Vatican library (Vat. gr. 681). It dates back to the 9th or the beginning of the 10th century and consists of an apologetic introduction, in which Nicetas explains the Orthodox faith, and the polemical main part, in which he refutes Islamic teachings. His polemic is especially important because it preserves a significant number of Qur’an verses taken from Suras (so-called chapters of the Qur’an), from almost all of the Qur’an. Nicetas quotes them from a Greek translation by an anonymous author – which is now lost – in order to build his own argumentation against Islam. The *terminus ante quem* of the translation has to be the 9th or possibly the 8th century CE. It is therefore extraordinarily close to the supposed period when the oral revelation to

³ As he was officially assigned to compose the response to the Armenians.

⁴ Cf. the title of his letter against the Armenians (PG 105, 587–588).

⁵ Cf. Photios’ ep. 2, the so-called *Enzyklika* of 867.

⁶ Cf. Nicetas’ titles as “φιλόσοφος” and “πατρικίος καὶ διδάσκαλος” in his Qur’an refutation and his treaty against Catholics respectively.

⁷ See my presentation in Damascus [Translation as transformation: The first translation of the Qur’an into Greek \(8/9th century A. D.\)](#) at the *Institut français du Proche-Orient* (14/03/2011).

the prophet Muḥammad was fixed as a written text, which occurred in the latter half of the 7th century or potentially some time after that.⁸

This Greek translation displays subtle textual differences with the *textus receptus* of the Arabic Qur’an, which is represented by the Qur’an reading according to the widespread tradition of Ḥafṣ ‘an ‘Āṣim’. These discrepancies seem, at first, to be irrelevant; however, on closer examination, they are of great theological relevance concerning the doctrinal differences between Islam and Christianity. They are mainly restricted to topics and personalities shared within the Qur’an and the Bible, so that they probably may represent a Christian understanding of the Qur’anic text, as I have demonstrated in my Master’s thesis (“Magisterarbeit”, FU Berlin, 2010, 325 p.) and in the [Journal Chronos \(2012\)](#).⁹ Nevertheless, as it is known, the Qur’anic text underwent a process of unification starting with the Caliphate of ‘Uṭmān ibn ‘Affān (d. 656). As a result, there are at least seven canonical readings, which were imposed in 934 by the Muslim scholar Ibn Muğāhid (ca. 859–936), according to which the Qur’an text may be recited. The differences in the Greek translation could theoretically go back to the use of another Qur’an reading as a basis besides the *textus receptus*.

4. The Research Project: Goals & Methods

My Ph.D. project is based on my 325-page Master’s thesis, in which I provided the edition of the fragments and a Greek-Arabic synopsis (vol. 1) as well as a glossary and a concordance of the terms used by this Greek translation (vol. 2). The Ph.D. project now aims to present an analysis of Nicetas’ work in the framework of the greater context of Byzantine intellectual life. First, I will study the translation with respect to historical, theological and socio-cultural aspects. Second, I shall further analyse its theological and polemical use in Nicetas’ *Anatropē*. Third, I seek to contextualise the *Anatropē* with Nicetas’ other polemical writings against Catholics and Armenians in order to investigate the opening question: Does Nicetas consider Islam to be a Christian heresy – as John of Damascus and Theodor Abū Qurrah before him did – or does he understand it as a new, independent religion?

The introduction shall elucidate the historical context of Nicetas of Byzantium: What were the political, military, ecclesiastical and intellectual circumstances in which Nicetas lived? What is his importance for the intellectual life of Byzantium? Furthermore, how far does Nicetas follow the same heresological tradition as Irenaeus of Lyon (d. 202), Euseb of Caesarea (d. 340), Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403), and John of Damascus (d. 750)? And where does Nicetas differ from other authors writing against Islam, such as John of Damascus, Theodor Abū Qurrah (d. 820) and Theophanes Confessor (d. 818)? Nicetas shall hence be examined in my research as part of the Christian authors fighting ‘with the word’ against heresies.

The first goal of the Ph.D. project is to examine the differences between the Greek and the Arabic texts of the Qur’an by first verifying if another reading besides the *textus receptus* – the reading of Ḥafṣ ‘an ‘Āṣim’ – was used for the translation. After I have excluded other readings, I will go about interpreting the discrepancies. This analysis is important as Nicetas cites one of the oldest translations of the Qur’an (potentially the oldest) and bases his argumentation against Islam on it. From the typology of linguistic inconsistencies between the Greek and the Arabic texts, I can draw conclusions about the religious and cultural environment of the translator and about the character of the translation, answering the following questions: What can we say about the understanding of the Qur’an within the translation? Does it differ from the mainstream conception of the Qur’an? How and in which points specifically does the different conception appear? Furthermore, what can we say about the translator’s religious and cultural background? The answers to these questions will help us to understand the kind of intercultural exchange between both the Christian Byzantine and

⁸ I am bypassing in this context the significant scientific debate about this topic in both the western Islamic studies and the Muslim traditional view.

⁹ See above, note 2.

the Arab Muslim worlds. I am mainly working based on philological comparison. In order to find the original Qur’an reading, I can recur to Qur’anic commentaries¹⁰ and compendia (*iḥtilāf al-maṣāḥif*)¹¹.

The second goal of my research is to give insight into how Nicetas used this translation: What are the topics of the Qur’anic verses he chooses for his polemic? When and how does Nicetas quote them? Does he quote the whole verse, just certain expressions, or does he elide phrases or words? What are the aspects on which Nicetas bases his argumentation against the Qur’an? Where does a misunderstanding of the Qur’anic text go back to the translation and where to Nicetas himself? These questions are important in order to establish a more accurate image of the Byzantines’ understanding of Islam as Nicetas’ work influenced their apologetic writing until the 11th century.¹²

Concerning the methodological point of view, I will order the analysis of the Qur’anic fragments as they appear within the *Anatropē* as this order is mostly the same as in the Qur’an itself. Furthermore, it will be easier to make use of this part of the research, e.g. for comparing the Greek translation with other translations. The second part, the commentary of the use, shall be classified into different subjects like ‘Ethics’, ‘Christology’, ‘Violence’, etc. Not only will this make reading easier, but I will also be able to consider more material for the commentary.

The third part will be an examination of Nicetas’ conception of Islam: The Qur’an represents, according to Muslim understanding, the ‘Word of God’ (*kalimah/kalām*, λόγος [*lógos*]), and is therefore the ‘Holy Book’ of Islam. Nicetas knows about this status of the Qur’an in Islam. This leads, in the last step, to the central question: What does Nicetas consider the newly appeared and rapidly grown movement – a new Christian heresy or a new, independent religion? And how does he compare the Qur’an with the Bible? What do we learn about his conception of the Bible as a Holy Book? In order to answer this, Nicetas’ perception of his own religion – the ‘right faith’ (see above) – has to be examined by analysing the apologetic parts of his works (the *Anatropē* and his two other letters), which in turn will be compared with his argumentation against the two ‘heretic’ Christian confessions: Catholics and Armenians. Nicetas uses argumentation similar to Photios in his ep. 2, the Encyclica of 867, and thus, the relation between these two Byzantine authors shall be elucidated: Is there a difference between the conception of heresy regarding the two Christian heresies and Nicetas’ treatment of Islam? If yes, where? What are Nicetas’ criteria for a new religion?

The last part of the project shall put Nicetas into his heresological context: What can we say about Nicetas’ knowledge of Islam if we compare it to that of John of Damascus and Theodor Abū Qurrah? Where are the differences? Is Nicetas part of the mainstream, or does he introduce new aspects into the discussion about Islam in Byzantium?

5. Some up-to-date Conclusions

This chapter is taken from my publication in Arabic in [Chronos – Revue d’histoire de l’Université de Balamand/Lebanon](#), n. 25, 2012, pp. 33–58 about the Qur’an fragments.

¹⁰ Like: Ibn Ḥālawayh (d. 980): *Kitāb al-ḥuǧǧā fī-l-qirā’āt as-sab’*. Abū ‘Ālī ibn Aḥmad al-Fārisī (d. 987): *Kitāb al-ḥuǧǧā fī-l-qirā’āt*. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad Abū Zur’a (d. 1013): *Kitāb ḥuǧǧat al-qirā’āt*.

¹¹ Like for the not canonical readings: Abū Bakr Ibn Muǧāhid (d. 936), in the selection of Ibn Ğinnī (d. 1001/2) (ed. Bergsträsser 1933). Ibn Ḥālawayh (d. 980): *Muḥtaṣar fī ṣawāḥid al-Qur’ān min kitāb al-badī’* (ed. Bergsträsser 1934, complemented by Jeffery 1938). Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838): *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān* (ed. Spitaler 1952). Ibn Abī Dawūd as-Siǧistānī (d. 926/28): *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (ed. Jeffery 1937), in the last edition, there are also the information of the commentaries of aṭ-Ṭabarī, Zamaḥṣarī, Bayḍāwī and ar-Rāzī. Standard works for the canonical readings: Abū Bakr Ibn Muǧāhid: *Kitāb as-sab’* (ed. Ḍayf, 1972), and see also O. Hamdan: *Studien zur Kanonisierung des Korantextes* [Diskurse der Arabistik X], Wiesbaden 2006; A. Neuwirth: „Koran“, in: *Grundrisse der arabischen Philologie*, vol. II: Literaturwissenschaft (ed. H. Gärtje), Wiesbaden: 1987, pp. 128–130.

¹² Cf., e. g., Manolis Ulbricht, art. “Euthymios, the monk”, *Christian-Muslim-Relation*, vol. 3, Leiden (Brill), 2011, pp. 523–537, p. 535.

The detailed comparison of the Greek text with the Arabic Qur’an shows that it is an accurate and mostly literal translation. However, it seems not to be an official work since its language level is close to the spoken Byzantine Greek. Moreover, the concordance, which my Master’s thesis provides, shows that there is a certain number of irregularities within the translation process. This is hardly consistent with the characteristics of an official and accredited work.

The translator obviously possesses deep knowledge of the Christian Orthodox liturgy as he uses various technical terms from the Greek liturgical books in his work. For example, he depicts the Arabic word ‘Qur’an’ in Greek as «ἀνάγνωσμα» (‘reading’) with a clear reference to the Gospel readings in Christian liturgy, or he translates the word ‘Sura’ as «ὠδή» (‘ode’), which is an expression for a certain form of liturgical hymn. These observations led me to the conclusion that the anonymous translator is most likely a Christian, maybe a monk, but at the same time acquainted with a profound knowledge of Islamic rites and prayer practices.

This knowledge can only have been acquired by cohabitation with Muslims. So, I assume that the translator is likely a Christian from the Middle East, since, on the one hand, both religions have coexisted here since the time of the Islamic conquest, and, on the other hand, we know about a long tradition of bi-lateral religious debates. Maybe the translator was part of this cultural-religious exchange and therefore followed the tradition of John of Damascus and Theodor Abū Qurrah.

It is remarkable that discrepancies between both versions, the Greek and the Arabic, particularly appear in expressions related to doctrinal questions in Islam and Christianity. For example, I stated that a certain kind of differences in verses referring to Jesus Christ appears with certain regularity: In different Suras, his name is connected to the term *kalimah* (‘word’), in Greek «ὁ λόγος» (*lógos*), but in the Arabic text the word appears without the article. The Greek translation, by contrast, determines this expression by adding the definite article, calling him e.g. «ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ» (‘the Word of God’), while the Arabic text gives ‘a word of God’. This radically changes the sense of the Qur’anic text because it thereby situates the Christian teachings about Jesus Christ as the ‘Word of God’ and thus as the ‘only begotten Son of God’, which is strictly refused by Islam and in the Qur’an itself.

6. Perspectives

There is also an interesting philological dimension within this project since the translation is written in the vulgar Greek of the Byzantine era, which makes the manuscript one of the rare testimonies of written Byzantine colloquial language. There is a remarkable tendency towards a certain type of vocabulary used within the translation as well, which requires further examination. The analysis of the first Qur’an translation may furthermore include – besides theological aspects – grammatical phenomena, e.g. the translation of some certain Arabic expressions into Greek, like the *ḥāl* or the *’an al-maṣdariyyah*.

While the translator is most likely a Christian, the question of his mother tongue demands closer examination. This is directly related to the question of understanding the Qur’an itself, which requires consulting lexicographical and exegetical literature, even for native speakers. By analysing the translation into Greek, we could get an idea of the comprehension of the Qur’anic text itself in early times, and furthermore, of the literature the translator had at his disposal for understanding and translating the Qur’an. This would help to give us a better understanding of the historical development of exegetical literature on the Qur’an.

The importance of my Ph.D. project lies in the attempt at a sweeping analysis of Nicetas’ *Anatropē* and in the contextualisation of his work within his heresiological oeuvre. This is – as regards theology – a contribution to the history of heresies in the Eastern Churches at the beginning of the schism between the European Middle Ages and the Eastern Byzantine world. Additionally, this provides us with new historical information about the changes in the Byzantine Empire during the 9th century and about the Orthodox Christians and, lastly, the relationship between them and the Arab Muslims.