

Abstract of

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The Oldest Transmitted Translation of the Qur’ān
within the «Ἀνατροπή τοῦ Κορανίου» of Nicetas of Byzantium

Introduction – Text – Translation – Commentary

(1,261 pages, III volumes)

[Für die deutsche Fassung bitte hier klicken]

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1. Summary

The research 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, the project analyzes the use of the Greek translation in Nicetas’ *Anatropē*, which is its main and oldest source (Vat. gr. 681). I contextualize the *Anatropē* with Nicetas’ other apologetic works against the Catholics and Armenians in order to determine Nicetas’ image of Islam and to inquire toward his impact on later Byzantine and Western writers about Islam.

This project is related to Byzantine and Qur’anic studies as well as Christian and Muslim theology and Greek and Arabic philology. It characterizes one of the most important albeit little known Byzantine polemicists. Nicetas is one of the first to use 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 ‘Abbāsīd caliphate. My research will help to shed light on the ‘Macedonian Renaissance’, its intellectual life and external relations with the Arab neighbors.

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 so 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 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 reproachful – 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 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 quarreled 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 proselytize 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

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: للقرآن الكريم من القرن ٨ / ٩ م في سجال نيكيتاس البيزنطي (القرن ٩ م) مع الإسلام باسم تنفيذ القرآن [In Arabic: “La première traduction du Coran du 8ème/9ème siècle et son utilisation dans la polémique de Nicétas de Byzance (9ème 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.

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).

(*orthodoxia*), or, in Qur’anic terms, *aṣ-ṣirāt 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 scarce 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 (1142), from which Martin Luther (1483–1546) was inspired, and the later one made by Marcus of Toledo (1209/10). The research project opens a whole field of research about the translation or, better, the transformation of the meanings of the Qur’anic text into 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 of the last decades has amply shown.

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 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.⁷

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 Christiani-

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

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

⁷ I am bypassing in this context the significant scientific debate about this topic in both the western Islamic studies and the Muslim traditional view.

ty. They are mainly restricted to topics and personalities shared within the Qur’an and the Bible, so that they probably represent a Christian understanding of the Qur’anic text.⁸ Nevertheless, as is known, the Qur’anic text underwent a process of standardization starting with the Caliphate of ‘Utmān 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.

4. The Research Project: Goals & Methods

The present research project consists of 1,261 pages (III volumes) and provides a critical edition of the fragments of the Greek translation of the Qur’an preserved in the Vat. gr. 681 of Nicetas of Byzantium. The edition is structured as a Greek-Arabic synopsis (vol. II, chap. 6) with the respective German translations, i.e. in total four columns with *apparatus criticus*. The Qur’anic fragments were extracted from Nicetas’ polemic and the material was – in reference to Reinsch⁹ and in development Ulbricht¹⁰ – classified in four categories: literal quotation (Z), free quotation (S), para-phrase (P), hint (H).¹¹ I was able to identify many more Qur’anic fragments than were hitherto known (vol. III, chap. 10.4). The fragments of the Greek translation were compared with the Arabic text of the Qur’an (vol. I, chap. 7) and, thus, I was able to find out details about the original Arabic and Greek Qur’an texts as well as about the translator.

The edition is accompanied by an analytical commentary of Nicetas’ work (vol. I), which contains several levels: Nicetas’ polemic is, first, examined in the framework of the greater context of Byzantine intellectual life (chap. 2) and, then, the *Anatropē* is contextualized with Nicetas’ other apologetical-polemical writings against Catholics and Armenians (chap. 3). Furthermore, Nicetas’ argumentation in his *Anatropē* is analyzed as well as his methods of adaptation of his Greek translation for polemical theological purposes (chap. 4). After an excursus on the history of the Qur’an text (chap. 5), finally, the translation itself is extensively studied with respect to historical, theological and socio-cultural aspects (chap. 7). The analysis of the first Qur’an translation is completed by materials for further research (vol. III, chap. 10) – besides theological aspects – of grammatical phenomena, e.g. the translation of particular Arabic expressions into Greek, such as the *ḥāl* or the *‘an al-maṣdariyyah*. 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.

⁸ Cf. Manolis Ulbricht: “الترجمة الأولى للقرآن الكريم من القرن ٨ / ٩ م في سجل نيكيتاس البيزنطي (القرن ٩ م) مع الإسلام باسم تفنيد” [In Arabic: “La première traduction du Coran du 8ème/9ème siècle et son utilisation dans la polémique de Nicéas de Byzance (9ème 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.

⁹ D. R. Reinsch: „Stixis und Hören“, in: *Actes du VIe Colloque International de Paléographie Grecque* (Drama, 21–27 septembre 2003), vol. I, ed. B. Atsalos/ N. Tsironi, Athen 2008, p. 259–269.

¹⁰ M. Ulbricht, Ph.D. (2015, FU Berlin), Chapter 6.1.4 (p. 197–200, vol. II).

¹¹ These classifications reflect a ‘degree of proximity’ to the hypothetical Arabic textual basis of the Qur’an. They are essential to relativize the commentary whilst correctly contextualizing the analytical findings in a philological way.

The introduction elucidates the historical, and especially the heresological context of Nicetas of Byzantium: 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? 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 is hence examined as part of the Christian authors’ fighting ‘with the word’ against heresies.

The first goal of the 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 Ḥaḥṣ ‘an ‘Āṣim – was used for the translation. This analysis is important as Nicetas cites, as it seems, the oldest translation of the Qur’an and bases his argumentation against Islam on it. From the typology of linguistic inconsistencies between the Greek and the Arabic texts, I was able to 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 the Arab Muslim worlds. In order to find the original Qur’an reading, I recurred to Qur’anic commentaries¹² and compendia (*iḥtilāf al-maṣāḥif*)¹³.

The second goal of the 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 (chap. 1).¹⁴ I was able to show that the arguments of Nicetas’ polemic had a long afterlife not only in

¹² Like: Ibn Ḥālawayh (d. 980): *Kitāb al-ḥuḡḡa fī-l-qirā’āt as-sab’*. Abū ‘Ālī ibn Aḥmad al-Fārisī (d. 987): *Kitāb al-ḥuḡḡa fī-l-qirā’āt*. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad Abū Zur’a (d. 1013): *Kitāb ḥuḡḡat al-qirā’āt*.

¹³ Like for the not canonical readings: Abū Bakr Ibn Muḡāhid (d. 936), in the selection of Ibn Ġinnī (d. 1001/2) (ed. Bergsträsser 1933). Ibn Ḥālawayh (d. 980): *Muḥtaṣar fī ṣawāḏḏ al-Qur’an min kitāb al-badī’* (ed. Bergsträsser 1934, complemented by Jeffery 1938). Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838): *Faḏā’il al-Qur’an* (ed. Spitaler 1952). Ibn Abī Dawūd as-Siḡistānī (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, Bayḏāwī and ar-Rāzī. Standard works for the canonical readings: Abū Bakr Ibn Muḡāhid: *Kitāb as-sab’* (ed. Dayf, 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. Gätje), Wiesbaden: 1987, pp. 128–130.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Manolis Ulbricht, art. “Euthymios, the monk”, *Christian-Muslim-Relation*, vol. 3, Leiden (Brill), 2011, pp. 523–537, p. 535.

the Byzantine area but also in the Latin Middle Ages up to the Modern Period (chap. 8). Concerning the methodological point of view, I ordered the analysis of the Qur’anic fragments (chap. 7) 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 commentary on usage (chap. 4) is classified into different subjects like ‘Ethics’, ‘Christology’, ‘Violence’ etc. as it makes the reading easier and more material for the commentary might be, thus, considered.

The third goal is 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 final step, to the central question: How does Nicetas conceive of this newly and rapidly appearing 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 analyzing the apologetic parts of his works (the *Anatropē* and his two other letters), which in turn are to be compared with his argumentation against the two ‘heretic’ Christian confessions from Nicetas’ point of view: 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 has to 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?

5. Some Pre-Publication 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.

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. This is hardly consistent with the characteristics of an official and accredited work. For sure, the Greek translation was a complete and written one. I was able to present results on what might have been the original mother tongue of the translator and what Greek dialect he was probably familiar with. Moreover, the provided concordance (chap. 6) shows that there is a certain number of irregularities within the translation process which seem to go back to the use of another Arabic Qur’an reading as a basis besides the Qur’anic *textus receptus* of Ḥaḥḥafḥaf ‘an ‘Āḥḥim.

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 co-existed 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. Importance & Prospects of the Research Project

The research is directly related to the question of understanding the Qur’an itself, which requires consulting lexicographical and exegetical literature, even for native speakers. By analyzing the translation into Greek, we can 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 the research project lies in the attempt at a sweeping analysis of Nicetas’ *Anatropē* and in the contextualization 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.

The printed version of the edition (‘Edition Ma’) of the Qur’anic fragments (chap. 6) has been extended by an online version, which is completed and has been presented at [my defense \(14/07/2015\)](#) in a beta-version. Therefore, the different Qur’anic fragments of the ‘Edition Ma’ were encoded in TEI standard to get prepared for an electronic publication. The xml-files were transformed via xslt into the web-enabled format html. Further, the website itself was created by css.

The purpose of this additional digitized edition is to make it accessible to the specialist public in an adequate manner. The research vision behind that (chap. 9) is to create a database called *Corpus Coranicum Byzantinum* with which you can compare synoptically the *fragmenta coranica* found within

all different Byzantine polemics and to analyze carefully their arguments against Islam. The project intends to study the Qur’an as a medium of ‘revelation knowledge’ (“Offenbarungswissen”). It will do so on the basis of its material manifestations in Greco-Byzantine manuscripts and from the external Christian perspective.

The database will contain the entire Qur’anic material from the polemic by Nicetas of Byzantium (9th century) «Ἀνατροπή τοῦ Κορανίου»,¹⁵ the so-called *Coranus Graecus*, which is the oldest and most extensive textual witness of a Qur’an translation [*Nik*]; furthermore the isolated fragments from the *Abiuratio* (confirmed 13/14th century)¹⁶ [*Abiur.*] and the first Christian documentation of the Qur’an by John of Damascus (7/8th century) in *de haeresibus*, cap. 100 [*JohDam*]. In addition, the tradition of Euthymios Zigabenos (12th century)¹⁷ [*EuthZig*] as well as the scarce details of monk Euthymios (11/12th century) [*EuthMon*] and the tradition of Bartholomew of Edessa (12th century) [*BarthEd*] should be included.

The materials display the transfer of knowledge and its transformation in the Middle Ages using as a case study the Muslims’ holy book, the Qur’an. This project could be subject to a broader range of cooperation, for example Medievalists for the reception of Islam in the Latin Middle Ages and its picture in the West, Orientalists in order to explore the importance of the early Byzantine works on Islam for the development of Islamic theology, and Linguists by examining the very diffuse and different levels of language in which Greek works on Islam were written.

It is probable that a systematic study of Muslim-Christian relations, of its various stages and the connected process of knowledge transfer from Late Antiquity, mediated by Byzantium, up to the Latin Middle Ages and until the Early Modern Period, will result in the reevaluation of the origins of our ‘Western image of Islam’. Congruences of stereotypes and reasoning from Nicetan ideas in the 9th century up to the 20th century imply a much more decisive role of Byzantium as an actor of knowledge transfer in terms of *Episteme Islamica* than previously thought. It is imperative at this point to illuminate our current society through this knowledge and to raise awareness for the other – or speaking, [with Pope Benedict XVI](#), that is „die große Aufgabe der Universität“ (Regensburg, 12/09/2006).

¹⁵ Vat. gr. 681 (*codex unicus*).

¹⁶ Vind. theol. gr. 306, fol. 24v–27r; Pal. gr. 233, fol. 3r–6v; Brux. II 4836 (B), fol. 85r–90v.

¹⁷ Probably depending on Nicetas of Byzantium, but in a higher (!) language level.