Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Newsletter No. 8

In this issue

Editorial: Looking back at the past five years
Projects in manuscript studies
  * Books tell their story: cataloguing secondary notes in Islamic manuscripts in Gotha
  * The Byzantine translation of the Qur’ān from the eighth/ninth century CE
Conference reports
  * COMSt workshops
  * Conferences and workshops in manuscript studies
Miscellanea
  * The Coptic Version of the Acta Phileae
    Alessandro Bausi
  * Of Books & Men: Past cultural practices and methods of Islamic manuscript preservation in Iran and India. Part 2: Pest control and Indo-Iranian manuscripts
    Amélie Couvrat Desvergnes
  * Byzantine punctuation and orthography. Between normalisation and respect of the manuscripts. Introductory remarks
    Antonia Giannouli
  * Our common codicology (and some notes on the West)
    Peter J. Gumbert
  * Tracing the sources. A rare case of explicit scholarly practice in an Arabic manuscript tradition
    Lucia Raggetti
  * Modern palimpsests. The case of the counterfeit Kufic fragments
    Jan Just Witkam

Impressum
The Byzantine translation of the Qur’ān from the eighth/ninth century CE and its role in the polemic of Nicetas of Byzantium

The research project on a witness to one of the earliest translations of the Qur’ān, preserved in the Vat. gr. 681, is directed by Manolis Ulbricht within the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre 980 “Episteme in Motion. Transfer of Knowledge from the Ancient World to the Early Modern Period” at the Free University Berlin.

Byzantium was especially challenged by the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE. The Byzantine empire was not only externally threatened in its sovereignty by the Arab forces, it also strove to prove the superiority of their own Christian faith against Islam. 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 eighth century. While names such as John of Damascus (ca. 650–750), Theodor Abū Qurrah (ca. 740–820) and Theophanes the Confessor (ca. 760–818) are well known, a profound analysis of the work of Nicetas of Byzantium (ninth century) is still a desideratum.

Nicetas wrote two letters to a Muslim emir as well as his opus magnum, the “Refutation of the Qur’ān”, Ανατροπὴ τοῦ Κορανίου (see, e.g., Niketas von Byzanz, Schriften zum Islam, I., ed., tr. by Karl Förstel, Würzburg: Echter Verlag – Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 2000 [Corpus Islamo-Christianum, Series Graeca, 5]). The Anatropē dates back to the 860s CE and contains in its polemical main part a large number of verses quoted from a Greek translation of the Qur’ān. This Greek translation, now lost, had been made by an anonymous author in the ninth or possibly even the eighth century CE, that is very soon after the genesis of the Qur’ān as a written text. The Anatropē is thus one of the most important sources on Byzantine views on Islam, extensively quoted in later works until the eleventh century CE. It is preserved in a single manuscript, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 681.

The research project aims to present a synoptic Greek-Arabic edition of the Qur’ān fragments preserved in the Anatropē. These fragments are classified into four categories: literal quotation, free quotation, paraphrase, and allusion. A Greek-Arabic glossary will list all lexemes and their Greek translations while a concordance will put them into their context. This provides us with the possibility to double check this Byzantine translation against other Arabic-Greek translations leading to the overall question: Did this translation of the Qur’ān form part of a larger translation movement from Arabic into Greek? Furthermore, a commentary will analyse the Qur’ān fragments under philological, theological and historical-cultural perspectives and, finally, explore the use of the Qur’ān fragments by Nicetas in his Anatropē.

In general, the Greek translation is very accurate but, nevertheless, it displays subtle textual differences with the textus receptus of the Arabic Qur’ān. On closer examination, we find a number of modifications of the Qur’ānic text that are of great theological relevance so one can speak about a Christian hermeneutization of the Qur’ān.

For example, verses referring to Jesus Christ display the same feature: In different Suras, his name is connected to the term kalimah (‘word’) in his undetermined form. The Greek translation, by contrast, determines this expression by adding the definite article (ὁ λόγος), 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’ānic 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’ān itself (for more details see M. Ulbricht, "الترجمة الأولى للقرآن الكريم من القرن ٨ / ٩ م في سجال نيكيتاس البيزنطي (القرن ٩ م) مع الإسلام باسم تفسير القرآن Chronos – Révue d’histoire de l’Université de Balamand/Lebanon 25, 2012, 33–58)."
In addition to these theological aspects, the project also contains a philological dimension since the translation is given in the Greek of the Byzantine era (vs. the Classical Greek used by Nicetas). That makes the manuscript one of the rare testimonies of written Byzantine colloquial language while, at the same time, certain terms specific for the Byzantine liturgy are used in the translation. Another question is the understanding of the Qurʾān itself: By analysing the translation into Greek, we could get an idea of the comprehension of the Qurʾānic text in early times, and furthermore, of the literature the translator had at his disposal for understanding and translating the Qurʾān. This would help to give us a better understanding of the historical development of exegetical literature on the Qurʾān.

This project aims to analyse the polemical oeuvre of Nicetas of Byzantium (ninth century c.e.) in an interdisciplinary way, by placing philological work with Christian and Muslim theological texts in a heresiological context and taking into consideration palaeographical and codicological aspects. Contact: Manolis Ulbricht, manolis.ulbricht@fu-berlin.de.
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Newsletter edited by:
Alessandro Bausi
Evgenia Sokolinskaia

COMSt Steering Committee:
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Jost Gippert
Cataloguing:
Paola Buzi, Witold Witakowski
Conservation and Preservation:
Laura Parodi

COMSt Programme Coordinator:
Evgenia Sokolinskaia (eae@uni-hamburg.de)

ESF Liaison:
Marie-Laure Schneider (comst@esf.org)

Head office:
Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian Studies
Hamburg University
Alsterterrasse 1
20354 Hamburg, Germany
Tel. +49-40-42838-7777
Fax +49-40-42838-3330

Email: eae@uni-hamburg.de
Web: www1.uni-hamburg.de/COMST

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