

# The first translation of the Quran (8th/9th century A. D.)



## its use in the anti-Islamic work of Nicetas of Byzantium (9th c.)

An analysis of the Greek Quran fragments  
and a commentary on Nicetas' "Refutation of the Quran" (Vat. gr. 681)

Abstract of the PhD project of  
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## 1. Summary

The PhD project aims to examine the first translation of the Quran ever, which was made in the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century A. D. into Greek, and to compare it with the Arabic text. This translation was used in a Byzantine polemic against Islam by Nicetas of Byzantium (9<sup>th</sup> c.), the so-called “Refutation of the Quran” (in the following referred to as “*Anatropē*”). The translation by an anonymous author, generally very accurate, contains some textually subtle, but theologically highly important differences in comparison with the Arabic text. It seems to be the result of a Christian hermeneutical reading of the Quranic text.

Further, the PhD project shall analyse the use of this translation in Nicetas’ “*Anatropē*”, which is its main source (Vat. gr. 681). In a final section, the “*Anatropē*” is to be contextualized with Nicetas’ other apologetic works against the Catholics and the Armenians; this in order to reach the conclusion whether he considered Islam a Christian heresy – as did other apologetic writers before him – or if Nicetas understood it as a new, independent religion.

The research project is related to Quranic studies and it characterizes one of the most important, however little known Byzantine polemicists. Nicetas is the first who makes extensive use of the Quran itself for his refutation of the Islamic faith.<sup>1</sup> His attempt had a vast influence on later Byzantine or even mediaeval European apologetic writing against Islam. He lived during the ‘Macedonian Renaissance’ in Constantinople in a period of military and intellectual thriving and a climate of intercultural exchange with the Muslim ‘Abbāsid caliphate. My research will help to throw light on the so-called ‘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 did not only pass through essential internal changes during the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, concerning economical, political and social aspects of Byzantine life, but it was also externally threatened in his 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 Quran) 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 8<sup>th</sup> century. The first of them was John of Damascus (ca. 650–750) who integrated a short treaty about “The Sect of the Ismaelites” into his Greek work *de haeresibus*.<sup>2</sup> Theodor Abū Qurrah (ca. 740–820) followed this tradition by editing Greek and Arabic *opuscula islamica*, 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 (died 879).

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<sup>1</sup> D. J. Sahas argues (*John of Damascus on Islam*, Leiden 1972, p. 138 D) – based on the passage «εἶργασαι τὴν γῆν ἣν ὁ θεὸς ἔδωκε σοι καὶ φιλοκάλησον αὐτήν· καὶ τόδε ποιήσον, καὶ τοιῶσδε» that already John of Damascus translated and cited the Quranic verse Q 2:223 literally. It surely represents a paraphrase of Q 2:223, however, to speak about a literal quotation is quite difficult, especially comparing this verse to the translation used by Nicetas.

<sup>2</sup> Among some other works whose authenticity is not absolutely sure.

However, it is Nicetas of Byzantium (9<sup>th</sup> century) who first treats the Muslim faith thoroughly by making use of the Quran itself. He edited two letters directed to a Muslim emir as well as his most important work, the “Refutation of the Quran”, which he wrote around 860 A. D. Nicetas has to be seen in the light of the reemerging Byzantine Empire in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. He was probably a monk and part of the clerical elite of the capital Constantinople since he was close to the Emperor’s court<sup>3</sup> and to the patriarch of Constantinople Photios (858–867 & 878–886)<sup>4</sup>. Photios, at that time, 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 marks therefore the beginning of the long process of drifting apart between the Western and Eastern Churches leading to the Great Schism of 1054. Photios also strove to gain influence on 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 Bagdad.

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

Biographical details about Nicetas are very rare and can only be reconstructed from his works although he is one of the most important polemicists and the most influential for the Byzantines’ and even mediaeval view on Islam until the Late Middle Ages. It is astonishing, therefore, that until now there is no complete analytical research on Nicetas’ writings. And likewise no studies have been written about possible interrelations between the first translation of the Quran, 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 PhD project opens a whole field of research about the translation or better transformation of the meanings of the Quranic text into the European languages and therefore also their religious conceptual frameworks. This would give us new insights into Western perceptions of Islam since the Middle Ages, which sometimes continues until our days, as global politics impressively showed in the last decade.

### 3. Nicetas’ “Refutation of the Quran” and the Quran fragments therein preserved

Nicetas’ work “Refutation of the Quran” (*Anatropē*) is preserved in one single Greek manuscript, nowadays in the Vatican library (Vat. gr. 681). It dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> 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 gets special importance because it preserves a respectable number of Quran verses taken from Suras from almost all of the Quran. Nicetas quotes them from a Greek translation by an anonymous author – which is now lost – in order to build on it his own

<sup>3</sup> As he was officially assigned to compose the response to the Armenians.

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nicetas’ titles as “φιλόσοφος” and “πατριάρχης καὶ διδάσκαλος” in his Quran refutation and his treaty against Catholics respectively.

argumentation against Islam. The *terminus ante quem* of the translation has to be the 9<sup>th</sup> or even the 8<sup>th</sup> century A. D. It is therefore extraordinary close to the supposed period when the oral revelation to the prophet Muḥammad was fixed as a written text, which happened in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century or maybe after that.<sup>7</sup>

This Greek translation displays subtle textual differences with the *textus receptus* of the Arabic Quran text, which is represented by the Quran 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 high theological relevance concerning the doctrinal differences between Islam and Christendom. There are mainly restricted to topics and personalities shared within Quran and the Bible, so that they probably may represent a Christian understanding of the Quranic text, as I have showed in my Master thesis. Nevertheless, as it is known, the Quranic text underwent a process of unification since the Caliphate of ‘Uṭmān ibn ‘Affān (died 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 Quran text may be recited. The differences in the Greek translation could theoretically go back to the use of another Quran reading as basis beside the *textus receptus*.

#### 4. The research project: goals & methods

My PhD project is based on my 325 pages Master 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). Now, the PhD project is aimed to present an analysis of Nicetas’ work in the framework of the greater context of Byzantine intellectual life: First, the translation is studied under historical, theological and social-cultural aspects. Second, the project shall further analyse its theological and polemical use in Nicetas’ “*Anatropē*”. Third, it attempts to contextualize the “*Anatropē*” with Nicetas’ other polemical writings against Catholics and Armenians in order to investigate the opening question: Does Nicetas consider Islam as 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 first goal of the PhD project is to examine the differences between the Greek and the Arabic texts of the Quran by first verifying if another reading beside the *textus receptus* – the reading of ‘Ḥafṣ ‘an ‘Āṣim’ – was used for the translation. After excluding another reading, the existing discrepancies are to be interpreted: From the typology of linguistic inconsistency between the Greek and the Arabic text I reach conclusions about the religious and cultural environment of the translator and about the character of the translation. This helps us to understand the kind of intercultural exchange between both the Christian Byzantine and the Arab Muslim worlds.

In a second step, light shall be thrown on how this translation was used by Nicetas: Which are the topics of the Quranic verses he chooses for his polemic? When and how does he quote them – the whole verse, just certain expressions, eliding phrases or words? What are the aspects he bases his argumentation against the Quran on? Where does a misunderstanding of the Quranic text go back to the translation, where to Nicetas itself? These questions are important in order to get a better image of the Byzantines’ understanding of Islam as Nicetas’ work influenced their apologetic writing until the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The Quran represents, according to Muslim conception, the ‘Word of God’ (*al-kalām*, ὁ λόγος [*logos*]), and is therefore the ‘Holy Book’ of Islam. Nicetas knows about this status in Islam. This leads, in the last step, to the central question: As what does Nicetas the newly appeared and rapidly grown movement consider – a new Christian heresy or a new independent religion? For

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

answering this, Nicetas' perception of his own religion – the 'right faith' (see above) – has to be examined by analysing the apologetic parts of his works and to compare them with his argumentation against the two 'heretic' Christian confessions, Catholics and Armenians: Is there a difference between the conception of heresy regarding the two Christian heresies and his treatment of Islam? If yes, where? What are his criteria for a new religion?

## 5. Perspectives

There is also an interesting philological dimension within this project since the translation is written in the vulgar Greek of the Byzantine era; the vocabulary shows a remarkable tendency towards Modern Greek and therefore makes the manuscript one of the rare testimonies of written Byzantine colloquial language. There is a tendency of using Roman-Byzantine juridical terms as well as vocabulary stemming from Aristotelian philosophy. The analysis of the first Quran translation may furthermore include, beside of theological aspects, grammatical phenomena, e. g. the translation into Greek of some certain Arabic expressions, like the *ḥāl* or the *'an al-maṣdariyyah*.

While the translator is most likely a Christian, the question of his mother tongue demands a deeper examination. This is directly related to the question of understanding the Quranic text itself, which requires consultation of lexicographical and exegetical literature even for native speakers. By analysing the translation into Greek, we could get an idea of the comprehension of the Quranic text itself, and further, of the literature the translator had at his disposal for understanding and translating the Quran. This helps to give us a better comprehension of the historical development of exegetical literature on the Holy Book of the Muslims.

The importance of my PhD project lies in the attempt of a widespread analysis of Nicetas' "*Anatropē*" and in the contextualization of his work within his whole heresiological oeuvre. This is – under a theological aspect – 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. Further, this provides us with new historical information about the changes in the Byzantine Empire during the 9<sup>th</sup> century and about the Orthodox Christians and, last, their relation with the Arab Muslims.