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The Greek Qur’an: Scholarship and evaluations

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Abstract
The early Greek translation of the Qur’an has received little notice, not least due to the many claims that it was a faulty and inadequate attempt of rendering the Qur’an into Greek. This article argues that the faults are very few and minor, and that the early translation (from before 870 CE) should instead be read as a serious example of early Qur’anic interpretation as well as a documentation of early Greek readership of the Qur’an.

Keywords: Translation, Qur’an, Greek, Niketas Byzantios, polemics, interpretation

Introduction
Within the last few years, the early Greek translation of the Qur’an, or what has been transmitted of it, has finally received the attention that matches its importance. Through an edition and a presentation of the approximately 82 preserved fragments accompanied by commentaries and translations, the main outlines of this translation are now settled. We do not know who the translator(s) was, or where and when he worked, but we do know that in 870’s the translation was in the hands of Niketas Byzantios (Constantinople, late 9th century). Niketas quoted and paraphrased the translation in his polemical treatise, usually referred to as Refutatio. The complete translation was lost at some point, probably quite early, since writers who were active after Niketas do not display any first-hand knowledge of it. Later Byzantine polemicists, such as Euthymios Zigabenos (12th century), did not have access to the original translation but depended exclusively on Niketas’ quotations and paraphrases included in Refutatio. Consequently, also...
our current knowledge of the Greek Qur’an depends solely on Niketas Byzantios’ text.

On the basis of the preserved fragments, which represent perhaps one per cent of the whole Qur’an, we can infer some general characteristics of the translation: 1) it was a rigidly word-for-word translation (thus possibly originally an intra-linear translation); 2) it displays some quite extraordinary Greek phrases and words, including a surprising number of otherwise unattested words, partly of a vernacular character, or words only known from lingua franca; 3) in a few instances, the translation offers alternative interpretations of the Qur’an, some of them known from the Muslim tradition; and 4) the translation is highly consistent in its choice of words and transliterations, but the transmitted text also has its flaws (more on this below).

The Greek translation provides us with an excitingly early witness for the reading and understanding of the Qur’an, as well as a fascinating starting point for a scholarly discussion of the where, when, why, by whom, etc. The lack of answers to these questions (except the ante quem date of 870 CE) is, however, the main reason why the translation has not yet sparked off the historical, religious and philological discussions that we know from the Latin, and to some extent the Persian, translations. Until now, most scholarly work has concentrated on linguistic features, paying attention to the translation’s peculiar but readable Greek, as well as on the quality and adequacy of the translation. This may seem surprising, given the immense importance of the other issues, but academic discussions require at least some approximations of the origin and value of a translation, before broader implications can be debated.

In evaluating the translation, there has been an almost universal agreement on the low quality of the Greek rendering of the Qur’an, but in many cases this conclusion is based on questionable arguments. The assessment of the actual translation has often been mixed up with demonstrations of the misconceptions of Islam that Niketas offers his reader. This feature is then further connected to the many issues of mutual misrepresentations that take up so much space in the polemical literature. Thus, the translation has been viewed more as a product of polemical exchanges than as the result of an actual understanding of the Qur’anic text. There is, however, no reason for supposing that the translation was made for polemical reasons. I have suggested elsewhere that it was Greek-speaking Muslims who were responsible for the translation, and in my view this is indeed a possibility. The aim of this article is to give the translation a more just treatment than has been accorded to it earlier, and to emphasize that we do not really have

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reason to criticize the quality of the Greek translation. It should be noted that most (purported or real) faults in the translation have already been identified as copyist’s errors or as translations reflecting alternative interpretations – often recognized in the Muslim tradition. Further, some of the details that have been considered faulty are in fact results of conscious choices and based on an alternative approach to translation.

By going systematically through the words and passages that scholars have viewed as incorrectly translated into Greek, we will get a list of actually problematic passages. Often, a bad translation is the result of a translator’s insufficient language skills, but in the case of the Greek translation of the Qur’an, the text was rendered by a translator (or translators) who was skilled in both Arabic and Greek, acquainted with Muslim traditions, but who was not educated in the higher Constantinopolitan circles (his Greek is proof of that). His translation, therefore, deserves intense scholarly attention, not least for its interpretation of the Qur’an.

To understand the nature of the surviving fragments of the Greek translation, one important distinction must be made. Niketas Byzantios used the Greek translation of the Qur’an for writing his Refutatio, a treatise that is obviously polemical, and he took no care to get the actual Qur’anic message through. Therefore, when he paraphrased the Greek Qur’an, much of the content came out disfigured and wrong, but when he quoted it, he simply copied the text as it appeared. Therefore, his paraphrases are often an inaccurate rendering of the Greek text, whereas his quotations are reliable. Fortunately, the translation was a strict word-for-word translation, which makes it possible to see when Niketas was copying, and when he was paraphrasing: if the Greek words come in exactly the same order as in Arabic, Niketas was transmitting the Greek Qur’an he had at his disposal. Only such word-for-word renderings from Niketas’ text will here be considered as true fragments of the Greek translation.

Mai’s criticism
Mai is the first to argue that the Greek translation of the Qur’an was of low quality. Mai was the editor of the editio princeps of Niketas’ Refutatio, published in 1847, and in his prologue (taken from the reprinted version in the Patrologia Graeca), he acknowledges the Greek renderings of the Qur’an and suggests that Niketas either produced the translations himself or had access to an existing Greek version. Having been unable to find any such Greek translation, Mai states

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7 I have not had access to Mai’s edition, but his prologue appears in PG 105.665-670 together with a reproduction of his edition and commentary.

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that “it is certainly not to be doubted that the Greeks must have translated the Qur’an into Greek, not only once but several times” due to their proximity to the Muslim world “which they have even received into the interior parts (viscera) of the Empire.” After these interesting, but probably mistaken assumptions about Greek translations of the Qur’an and his vague allusions to the fall of Constantinople (what else could be the viscera of the Empire?), Mai adds that

it is therefore quite entertaining [festivum] to see how much Niketas’ Greek text of the Qur’an now and then differs from the Arabic that we commonly read; this must be due partly to the Greek translator’s lack of skill, partly to the polyvalent vocabulary of Arabic, partly finally to the great variety of editions of the Qur’an, after which he lists seven different editions. He then states that he will be cautious in commenting on these errors in translation. Nevertheless, in the commentary to his edition, Mai mentions a number of faulty renderings of the Qur’anic content identifying the errors by comparing the Greek text with the Latin translation by Maracci (1612-1700). Mai suggests corrections to some of the mistakes in the Greek text, but the remaining ones constitute the central body of what is often argued in later scholarly works to be examples of the Greek translator’s incompetence. Below, I shall go through Mai’s indications of mis-translations, pointing out how some of these may nevertheless be interpreted as sound translations of the text:

1. Mai has three footnotes (PG 105.708, 776, 784) on the Arabic al-ṣamad (Sura 112.2) being rendered as holosfyros or holosfairos. This much-debated word also offered difficulties to Greek interpreters but, as has long been acknowledged, the Greek holosphyros is quite faithful to a possible meaning of the Arabic word, a fact which is partly acknowledged by Mai.9

2. In a passage that reflects the meaning of Sura 2.25 ff., Mai (PG 105.712) considers the Greek word aischynetai a mistake. The word, however, appears in a

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8 For this and the following quotation of Mai, see his prologue in PG 105.667-8 (reproduction of A. Mai from 1847): In singulorum satanici libri capitum confutationibus, recitatur Graece Mohamedis textus, vel ipso Nicetae interprete. vel ex cjuusvis Graeci hominis translatione, quam neque in libris editis, neque in ipsis ut arbitror manuscriptis codicibus videre est. Certe Graecos Alcoranum non semel tantummodo, sed fortasse pluries, ad linguam suam transulisse, dubitari nequit; cum immanem sectam in prospectu, imo et in imperii visceribus receptam haberent, et cum ejus doctoribus necessario contendensent; id quod Graeca monumenta superstitionis disputations testantur. Nunc itaque festivum est videre, quantopere interdum Graecus Alcorani textus apud Nicetam ab Arabicbo, quem vulgo legimus, differat: quam rem, partim ex interpretis Graeci imperitia, partim ob polysemia Arabicae linguae vocabula, partim denique propter ipsius Alcorani editionum varietatem, contigisse credendum est. The translation is mine.

9 See the excellent discussion in Simelidis 2011.
passage where the Greek words do not follow the Arabic version word for word. The passage should thus be interpreted as a part of Niketas’ (often distorting) comments.

3. A very strange passage in the Greek Qur’an (translation of Sura 9.61), as quoted by Niketas, suggests that Jesus was the son of God, which is never stated in the Qur’an. Trapp has shown that the passage is corrupt: either Niketas or the copyist of his manuscript must have skipped a line in the Greek text. Trapp suggests a most convincing Greek wording for the missing line. Mai’s criticism (PG.105.749) is therefore unjustified.

4. Mai (PG 105.769) finds the Greek *dedomenē* ‘given’ insufficient in representing Arabic *al-maṣjūr* (Sura 52.6), and rightly so. The Arabic word means ‘swelling’, here of the sea, and the word used in Greek would be forms of the verb *oīdṓao* or *oīdēao*. It would be reasonable to suppose an original *oīdōmēnē* (or *oīdōumēnē*), being an admittedly unparalleled middle form of the Greek verb, which has been corrupted into the *δεδομένη* of the manuscript.

5. Mai (PG 105.772) is not satisfied with the Greek *aneu oneidismou* in the translation of Sura 68.3, since it does not quite correspond to the Latin he knows: *perennis* and *infinita*; but it corresponds well with the Qur’anic *ghayra mammūnin*.

6. The Greek *en ischyī* (ἐν ἰσχύϊ) ‘in strength’ definitely deviates from the most common understanding of the Arabic *fī kabadin* (Sura 90.4), which is normally translated ‘in travail.’ But this meaning is found in Muslim commentaries, as observed by Versteegh.

7. In one place, Mai states that the Greek *ek bdellēs* ‘from a leech’ (PG 105.708) is a bad translation of *min ‘alagin* (Sura 96.2). The passage is not a true quotation from the Greek Qur’an, since Niketas’ words do not follow the Arabic word order. Nevertheless, the meaning closely follows the Qur’an, for Glei finds support for interpreting ‘*alaq* as ‘leech’ in early Muslim tradition, and the same interpretation is found in the Latin translation of Ketton.

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10 Trapp 1981. The passage is also indicated by Khoury 1969: 120 n.16.
12 Glei 2012: 18.
8. In seven instances, Mai (PG 772ff.) comments on words that have not been translated, but are transliterated into Greek: ἀκκά (Sura 69.1), ἄλαχουθ (Sura 85.4), ἀλταρικόν (Sura 86.1), ὄγερ (Sura 89.1), καρέ (Sura 101.1-2), ἀλέξαρ (103.1), καύθαρον (Sura 108.1). In some cases, Mai simply states that these words do not reproduce the meaning found in his Latin translations; in other cases, he recognizes the words as transliterations. Also Versteegh and Glei criticize the translator’s use of transliterations (see below). However, most of these instances are easily explained. In suras 69, 85, 86, 101, 103, and 108, the Qur’anic text asks what the particular word means “What is …?”, and the translator therefore chose not to translate the word but, instead, reproduced the original Arabic word in the question. The transliteration in Sura 89, however, remains unsolved and is thus a possible mistake. In a recent article by Glei, another explanation for these transliterations is suggested, namely that the whole Arabic text could have been transliterated.13 This procedure would, however, be hard to account for, and since most transliterations – also the case of kautharon discussed by Glei – are explained above, one could argue that the idea should be abandoned.

9. The Greek rendering ἀγκάλας (as translation of the Arabic aqlāma, Sura 3.44) is faulty according to Mai, who offers two suggestions ἀστραγάλους and καλάμους (PG 105.725). But the status of the passage is unclear: the word order deviates from the Arabic. The passage may thus be a paraphrase, but a translation mistake cannot completely be ruled out, either.

10. The Greek title of Sura 7 ta gnorismata ‘the known things’ (al-‘Arāf commonly translated as ‘The Elevations’) is indicated as wrong by Mai (PG 105.740), but Versteegh has shown parallels in the Muslim tradition.14

11. The Greek ta lichmounta lichmon ‘those who winnow the winnowing-fan’ is a strange rendering of the opening of Sura 51, as pointed out by Mai (PG 105.769). But the passage is much debated even in the Muslim tradition, and perhaps the chosen translation could point to yet another early interpretation.

12. In a difficult passage, the Greek translation has Israel for the Arabic ‘Uzayr (or Ezra; Sura 9.31). Mai sees the translation as a deviation from the original (PG 105.74515). This is clearly a mistake, and appearing in a passage that is a word-

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for-word translation, we can only suggest that the translator or the copyist included a wrong name.

13. The Greek \textit{psōra} means ‘itch’, and not ‘moths’ as \textit{farāsh} in Sura 101.4 is commonly taken to mean. This itch is probably wrong.

Thus, items 12 and 13 (as well as possible mistakes in items 8, 9 and 11) offer some support for Mai’s claim that the translation was faulty, but given the difficulties that face any translator of the Qur’an, this is not much. Furthermore, the translator was obviously familiar with Muslim interpretative traditions, and this makes him a knowledgeable transmitter rather than a mere translator. Even though there is only little support for the negative assessment of the quality of the translation in Mai’s commentary, his views have been influential. I will now take a brief look at Versteegh and Glei, two other exponents of the theory of ‘bad translation.’ They are the only ones who have come up with new examples since Mai.\textsuperscript{16}

Views of Versteegh and Glei

In 1991, K. Versteegh published an article on the issue, entitled “Greek Translations of the Qur’ān in Christian Polemics (9th C. A.D.).” Unfortunately, Versteegh had not read the article by Trapp\textsuperscript{17} and therefore included erroneous information. Versteegh was still caught in the open question of the nature of the translation, speaking of “translations.” He was sure that Niketas did not master Arabic and therefore was dependent on a translation without having access to “feedback from Muslims, or from Arabophones … [which] would have brought into light the many inaccuracies in the translation.”\textsuperscript{18} However, Versteegh stated that it was “not really a bad translation at all,” but a “rather literal (one), perhaps in an intentional effort to increase the awkward character which the text must have had for Byzantine readers who were used to the text of the Biblical revelation.”\textsuperscript{19} Versteegh further concluded that “the Greek translation of the Qur’an did contribute towards a more intimate knowledge of Islam in the Western world.”\textsuperscript{20}

Still, Versteegh gives eight examples of inadequate Greek translations that according to him were due to insufficient knowledge of Arabic.\textsuperscript{21} Of these eight

\textsuperscript{16} The examples found in Güterbock 1912, Khoury 1969, and Förstel 2009 are all taken from Mai’s comments.
\textsuperscript{17} Trapp1981.
\textsuperscript{18} Versteegh 1991: 58.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 60
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. 67.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 60-61.
examples, two can be eliminated by Trapp’s observations (concerning Sura 2.23 and 3.144); three are due to Versteegh’s insufficient understanding of Greek;\(^{22}\) two cases are Niketas’ erroneous interpretations; in two cases, Versteegh himself offers an explanation (regarding Sura 5.68 and 17.17); and finally, in Sura 17.4 the Arabic marratayni ‘twice’ is translated into Greek deuteron ‘the second time’, which really looks like a mistake.

Furthermore, Versteegh gives four examples of transliterations, which he characterizes as inadequate translations\(^{23}\). All of them are taken from Mai, and are thus explained above. Further five mistakes due to inadequate exegetical knowledge are reduced to one, since Versteegh finds support for four of the translations in Muslim exegetical literature. In his final example, concerning as-ṣā’iqatu from Sura 4.153, Versteegh argues that the Greek translation to theion offers a lexical difference; yet, the Godhead is certainly meant in both the Arabic original and the Greek translation, consequently the mistake is a minor one at most. Versteegh also deems certain passages incomprehensible in Greek without referring to the Arabic original, but that could be claimed in many instances. Finally, the leech and the issue of holosphyros come up again, but these have already been accounted for above. Summing up, Versteegh’s criticism comes down to a single passage where ‘twice’ is translated as ‘the second time’. This could happen to any translator.

Finally, a quick glance at the recent contribution by Glei.\(^{24}\) In his article, Glei lists eight examples of incorrect translations, which, according to him, are significant examples of translation problems and misunderstandings. But example 1 is a transliteration, due to the Arabic word being regarded as a proper name (as explained by Glei himself on p. 15). Example 2 is a paraphrase, which can be seen from the lack of word-for-word correspondence with the Arabic text. Example 3 is the difficult holosphyros for the Arabic ṣamad. The difficulties in translating this word should not be blamed on the translator, and certainly not on one who intended to convey a possible meaning. Example 4 is another paraphrase on the leech, also explained above. Example 5 (where Glei refers to a wrong Arabic text by including the end of Sura 9.33 instead of the end of 9.32, in addition to correctly giving the first half of 9.33) might be a true mistake: in translating the Arabic masculine pronominal ending –hu, the translator gives the corresponding Greek masculine pronoun auton, instead of the feminine autēn, which would have

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\(^{22}\) The three cases are: (1) Sura 17.40, which could also be read as a question in Greek. (2) Sura 9.30, where the Greek των could be understood as the variant form of τίνων and therefore understood as a question, which would suit the passage. (3) Sura 2.23: the Greek translation can be understood correctly, though Niketas has not done so.

\(^{23}\) Versteegh 1991: 61-62 concerning all examples mentioned in this paragraph.

\(^{24}\) Glei 2012.
been the correct choice. This mistake has serious implications for the meaning, as noted by Glei, and unless an emendation to autēn is accepted, this is indeed a mistake. Example 6 is the complicated case of Israel for the Arabic ‘Uzayr, probably another mistake as indicated above. That Ahmad in Sura 61.6 is translated as Muhammad is in accordance with traditional Muslim interpretation, as noted by Glei in example 7, and therefore is not a mistake. In example 8, the translator has not made a mistake but has chosen a perfectly acceptable interpretation.

Conclusion
Based on the analysis above, we reach a maximum of eight mistakes (Mai 3-5, Versteegh adds 1-2 and Glei adds 1). This is not a very high number, given the difficulty of the Qur'anic text. Further, the Greek translation offers support for interpretation known also from the Muslim tradition, as well being a very early interpretation in its own right. Thus we have at our disposal a competent and interesting translation, which should be regarded as a valuable asset in the future discussions of the interpretative history of the Qur'an.

References