

Languages of Islam During the Renaissance

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Abstract

There has been a recent renewal in the history of the knowledge of the languages of Islam during the Renaissance. Numerous accounts attest to both a lasting interest during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and to new approaches that blossomed in the Iberian Peninsula and Italy, leading to broader European interest beginning in the sixteenth century. This history is nevertheless marked by discontinuities, such as the fact that the bilingual Latin translations of the Koran from the years 1450-1525 had very little lasting influence. The study of the remaining bilingual manuscripts, neglected until then, has allowed the gradual illumination of the context surrounding the periodic reactivation and knowledge transfer of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian to a “Latin” setting between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. This context depended on complex factors, such as merchant networks, links between Jewish and Christian communities, the continuation of the medieval perspective of controversy, and new forms of intellectual and philological curiosity, among others.

Article

Our knowledge of the learning logic used for the “languages of Islam” during the Renaissance has been renewed in recent years. The traditional vision of the knowledge of Arabic, Persian, or Turkish in a Christian European setting is the following: the intense exchange during the Crusades and the great medieval translations of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were followed by a kind of low-water mark during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For various reasons, there was renewed interest in Arabic after 1450, along with a better understanding of the issues involved in understanding Persian and Turkish, which were occasionally translated before 1500 (the almost entirely lost translation of the Koran by Cardinal Juan de Segovia produced in the 1450s with the help of a Mudéjar informant from Seville, references to attempts to learn Arabic in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s circle, etc.). After 1500, the diffusion of new forms of philological and religious curiosity, along with intensified exchange, brought about a gradual development of the knowledge of Arabic in a European setting, notably in scholarly circles often primarily interested in Hebrew and Aramaic. This nevertheless did not lead to the structuring of an independent field of study until the seventeenth century. The publication in 1543 of Robert de Ketton’s twelfth-century Latin translation of the Koran—by the German Theodor Bibliander—could symbolize the resistance to this rise in the study of the languages of Islam in Europe; indeed, it was this old version produced in Cluniac circles in 1143 that still served, four centuries later, as the basis for the first complete translated edition of the Koran. Knowledge of Turkish and Persian remained confined to narrow circles until the seventeenth century, even though there were attempts to establish schools of interpretation for Turkish in Venice during the early modern period.

The last thirty years have renewed this oversimplified vision. Firstly, previously studied manuscripts have been examined anew, such as the *Codex Cumanicus*, which was composed at the very beginning of the fourteenth century, in all likelihood at Kaffa in Crimea. The first part of this manual of Persian and Kipchak Turkish (the Turkish spoken by the Cuman tribes and their successors in the area) was intended for Genovese merchants, and the second part for missionaries working in the

circle of influence of the Mongol khanate of the Golden Horde, which was centered around the steppes of southern Russia and was undergoing Islamization at the time. Secondly, hitherto neglected elements were unearthed, such as accounts by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century merchants, diplomats, or friars—who were often (but not always) Italian—and even partially bilingual manuscripts, signaling a desire to preserve the knowledge acquired in the Orient (particularly in Syria or Egypt), or in parts of Europe with residual Arab-speaking populations (the Iberian peninsula, or Sicily, where the Jews developed an Arabic dialect until 1492). Assessments of the knowledge of the languages of Islam in Latin Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were modified as a result. A certain number of artefacts show, in particular, that the study of Arabic, which was maintained (along with study of Persian and Turkish) for commercial reasons in certain Italian circles (Tuscan or Genoese merchants...), sometimes led to a high-level conceptualization of this language before 1450. For example, the Siennese Beltramo Mignanelli (1370-1455) left behind a preliminary description of the language and a bilingual anthology of the psalter, while bilingual Arabic-Latin manuscripts connected to the activity of the converted Sicilian Jew Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, also known by the name Flavius Mithridate, reveal a genuine phenomenon of Arabomania in certain Italian courts of the 1470s. In addition, Guglielmo, who was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Arabic professor, thus directed the publication of a bilingual Arabic-Latin anthology consisting of different sections (treatise on magic, extracts from the Koran, etc.) for the Duke of Urbino during the years 1479-1482; we also possess almost the entirety of an Arabic Koran, in Hebraic characters and with Latin annotations, that he probably used as pedagogical material for his humanist students. Finally, some Italian doctors, such as Girolamo Ramusio and Andrea Alpago, traveled to Syria at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century and remained in Islamic lands for a long time, with the aim of learning Arabic in order to improve translations of Avicenna.

The ongoing study of these accounts has contributed to a renewed vision of humanist "Arabic cultures" of the first Renaissance, which until recently were considered to be practically nonexistent. It connects them to the wave of European translations of the Koran that marked the years 1450-1525: a lost translation by Juan de Segovia, whose logic was reconstructed thanks to the recent discovery of certain fragments and a better analysis of the surviving introduction, in which he explains his goals and method; fragmentary translations by Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada, which have survived but remain understudied; a translation during the years 1510-1525 under the direction of the Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo, with the help of converted informants such as Juan Gabriel of Teruel and Leo Africanus, which was recently the subject of a substantial analytical and editorial effort. These works differed from medieval Koranic translations in that they notably presented a bilingual text, thereby attesting to a new approach towards Islamic culture and the Arabic language. This novelty should nevertheless not be exaggerated, as the renewal of objectives appears limited, with most of these undertakings serving a desire for polemics rooted in the old logic of the Cluniac controversies and the material already gathered in the Iberian peninsula at the time of the Reconquista. Traces of syncretic reflection—present from the 1480s in the circle of Pico della Mirandola—were in the minority, even though they are not negligible. Nevertheless, the new presentation of translations including the Arabic text was sometimes strikingly sophisticated (Egidio da Viterbo's version with four columns, including the Arabic text in both Arabic and transliterated characters; Juan de Segovia's version with three entries in Arabic, Castilian, and Latin, among others); they appear, however, to have been rather dependent on the philological reorientation that spread through Europe during the fifteenth century with the triumph of the humanist movement. It therefore appears possible to speak of a change in the system of learning for these languages (and first of all for Arabic, at least for the late fifteenth century), but it is more difficult to maintain that the efforts of the years 1450-1520 provided the basis for the birth of a genuine "linguistic orientalism" that hit its stride in seventeenth-century Europe. In fact, very little from the major fifteenth-century attempts at translation seems to have passed to the sixteenth century. The low *cumulativity* of this knowledge can moreover be observed over the *longue durée*: for instance, specific knowledge that was relatively well diffused in certain circles during the

fourteenth century (Italian merchants' knowledge of Persian, or the knowledge of Kipchak Turkic on the part of missionaries from the "Tartaria Aquilonaris") was weakened during the fifteenth century due to geopolitical changes connected to the end of the *Pax Mongolica* (middle of the fourteenth century). The history of the learning of the languages of Islam over the long term of the Renaissance was thus marked by discontinuities. The combined study of manuscripts, networks of linguistic intermediaries, and contexts of reception will gradually enable a better reconstruction of the logic of these dynamics.

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