

# Ramon Martí or: How to imitate the Qur'ān

Georg Leube

## Introduction: The tradition of Qur'ānic *i'jāz*

قُلْ لَئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ  
ظَهِيرًا. وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ فَأَبَىٰ أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورًا.

*Say: If all the humans and jinns were called together to come up with a semblance of this Qur'ān, they could not do it, even if they helped each other. For we have offered in this Qur'ān all kinds of examples to the people, but most of the people refuse anything but unbelief. (Sūrah 17, 88–89)<sup>1</sup>*

If translation is the process of appropriating a linguistic cosmos of signs and structures foreign to the original context of an argument, translatability as a touchstone of communicability emerges as a central category establishing a community of human thought. This categorical possibility of complete appropriation as a necessary prerequisite to translation into another language, as well as to imitation, paraphrasis or other modes of intertextuality, underlies much of the optimistic confidence in human reason pervading Classical and Modern Philosophy since the time of Platon.

A very consciously different perspective is found in classical Islamic thought, basing itself on grounds such as the two Qur'ānic verses translated above. If the all-permeating confidence in the translatability of human thought can be put succinctly in the form of *if a thought is human, it can be understood*, the Qur'ān is posited as the thought not of a human being, but of God. As the *Word of God* pertaining to a divine language of signs, the Qur'ān can by no means ever be completely appropriated by a mere human being restricted to her human knowledge of linguistic signs and structures.

This categorical otherness of the Qur'ān is manifest on a number of levels and usually described with the Arabic term of *i'jāz*, that is, *something that cannot be imitated*, rendering it

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations in this article are, where not otherwise mentioned, the author's. Toponyms and personal names appear in their Catalan form where applicable.

the prime miracle establishing the prophecy of Muḥammad.<sup>2</sup> On a first level, this *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān is articulated by means of the super-human stability of the Qur'ānic text. The idea that *if a thought is human, it can and will be changed* is endorsed most wholeheartedly and in pronounced opposition to the stability of the Qur'ānic text, which must in turn be attributed to its divine origin. As an example, I would like to refer to a German rendering of the Qur'ān distributed for free to the general public by Islamic groups in German shopping malls and busy streets during the last years.

The impossibility to appropriate the divine language of the Qur'ān underlying the idea of its *i'jāz* makes it impossible to present any rendering of the Qur'ān in the linguistic sphere of the German language as a literal translation. Accordingly, it is introduced on its cover as *The noble Qur'ān: Its approximate meaning in the German language*.<sup>3</sup> Such a renouncement of the concept of a *translation* of the Qur'ān is justified on the following grounds:

*It must be kept in mind that the Qur'ān exists only in Arabic, according to its revelation. Only in this language its whole clearness and force of words (Wortgewalt) can be recognized. A translation – in any language – can always merely offer a certain part of its meaning and is not seen as Qur'ān [sic] itself. This is one of the reasons, why every Muslim should learn the Arabic language as well as possible.*<sup>4</sup>

The disappointment which may result from this impossibility to have a real Qur'ān outside the language of signs and contexts of the original Qur'ānic Arabic is, however, amply compensated for by the divine stability of the text as described in the subsequent paragraph:

*Only in the Qur'ān has Allāh's message to the humans remained unaltered und will remain thus. All other scriptures of revelation (Offenbarungsschriften) were demonstrably altered.*<sup>5</sup>

The prominence which the idea of the divine stability of the Qur'ānic revelation is given in this succinct preface of two and a half pages introducing the revelation and collection of the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Samarqandī, 6, for the Qur'ān as Muḥammad's miracle, and Berger 2010, 134, for a short overview over the dogma of Qur'ānic *i'jāz*.

<sup>3</sup> *Der edle Qur'an: Die ungefähre Bedeutung in der deutschen Sprache*. The title is given somewhat differently on the title page as *Die ungefähre Bedeutung des Al Qur'an Al Karim in deutscher Sprache*. See Qur'ān, German rendering, cover and title page.

<sup>4</sup> Qur'ān, German rendering, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Qur'ān, German rendering, 7.

Qur'ān amply testifies to the significance of the dogma of the unalterability of Islamic revelation to this day. Indeed the presumed alterations and corruptions of Christian and Jewish scriptures and laws have furnished a pivotal argument of Islamic polemics in a most diverse array of contexts. The precise nature and genesis of the argument in its developed form of a full-grown church-history as a history of organised corruption is offered, for example, in the *Tathbūt* of the renowned scholar 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī (d. 1025). It has been amply discussed by Reynolds.<sup>6</sup> To this day it underlies the assiduous publication of apocryphal gospels by Islamic groups, supposedly serving as proof both of organised ecclesiastic suppression of authentic material and of the alterability of Christian scripture.<sup>7</sup>

This argument of Christian scripture and customs being corrupted by human hands rests on the proud assertion of the immutability and stability of the divine word of the Qur'ān. Islam is on this level characterized not so much by the content of its revelation, but rather by the stability with which this revelation was destined to remain. While this dogma of the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān proved to be a constant in interfaith polemics to this day, a challenge to its basic assumptions seems to have been largely overlooked in a most peculiar text copied around the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century quite blatantly claiming to form an additional Qur'ānic *sūrah*. It is to this text and its interpretation that we now turn.

[Insert picture of the manuscript here.]<sup>8</sup>

### Ramon Martí and his historical and intellectual background

The main feature allowing for a precise localisation of the text is the name of *Ramundu Martīn* in verse (11), additionally fixed against textual variation by means of the rhyming *saj'*-meter of the text, which has been identified with the well-known Catalan scholar Ramon Martí at least since the time of Schiaparelli.<sup>9</sup> A native of Subirats near Barcelona,<sup>10</sup> Ramon Martí entered the Dominican Order around 1235<sup>11</sup> and remained a member until his death around the year 1284.<sup>12</sup> Politically the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Aragón and Catalunya was shaped by the rule of king Jaume I who reigned at least nominally from 1213 to 1276. From 1229 onwards,

---

<sup>6</sup> Reynolds 2004, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> See as an example the Gospel of Barnabas, published in an English translation in Jiddah.

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Signora Migliore and Dottore Stacchetti of the Riccardiana Library in Florence for their kind permission to publish this scan of the manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xix.

<sup>10</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xix.

<sup>11</sup> Berthier 1936, 268.

<sup>12</sup> Garcías Palou 1981, 15.

he incorporated Palma de Mallorca and the Balearic Islands and 1245 Valencia in his realm.<sup>13</sup> This territorial expansion was flanked by a “crusade of thought, aiming to convert the heretic or unbeliever by force of reason”.<sup>14</sup> In keeping with its Latin name of *fratres praedicatores* or *Preaching Brothers*, the Dominican Order had been geared towards the conversion of Jews and Muslims at least since the year 1230, when its general Ramon de Penyafort had founded a school for studies in Hebrew and Arabic in Barcelona.<sup>15</sup> The application of this learning was described by the famous scholar and *homme de lettres* Ramon Llull as follows:

*This brother [most probably Ramon Martí himself] knew how to speak Hebrew and among others he frequently disputed with a certain Jew who was very well schooled in Hebrew and was a teacher in Barcelona.*<sup>16</sup>

In order to study Arabic, Ramon Martí together with a number of other students was sent in 1250 to the Dominican chapter in Tunis which had been established in 1230.<sup>17</sup> Apparently he had been to Tunis around 1269,<sup>18</sup> about ten years after the Dominican school there had been closed.<sup>19</sup> This is not the place to enter upon a detailed discussion of the available fragments of his biography; suffice it to note that as far as it can be determined he successfully mastered Classical Arabic language and learning. Based on an evaluation of Ramon Martí’s Latin writings about and against Islam, the extent of his knowledge can be shown to be rather astounding.

*Ramon Martí thus seems to have been the Occidental Christian who most extensively used the Qur’ān for apologetic means and certainly the only one who truly knew and used the Muslim ḥadīth.*<sup>20</sup>

In this article, I argue that Ramon Martí used his intimate knowledge of Islamic learning to dispute the dogma of the Qur’ānic *i’jāz*.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Bisson 1986, 64-67.

<sup>14</sup> Galmés de Fuentes 1999, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Dufourcq 1966, 141. In contrast Berthier 1936, 272 merely mentions a school in Murcia.

<sup>16</sup> Ramon Llull, quoted after Garcías Palou 1981, 143.

<sup>17</sup> Berthier 1936, 272.

<sup>18</sup> Schiaparelli 1871, xix, Dufourcq 1966, 109, and Friedlein 2004, 48. Apparently they refer to the *Llibre dels Fets*, II, 346, equalling chapter 490, where the same date is given.

<sup>19</sup> Hillgarth 1976, I, 165.

<sup>20</sup> Sidarus 1994, 147. See for a more extensive evaluation of Ramon Martí’s Arabic sources for his Latin works Cortabarría 1983, as well as more recently Burman 2007 b, 94, and Burman 2015.

## The text of the additional Qur'ānic *sūrah* by Ramon Martí

The text to be discussed here is written on some blank pages in the middle of one of the first Latino-Arabic dictionaries, the so-called *Vocabulista in Arabico*. It is written in a hand contemporary to the one from the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century which wrote the remainder of the *Vocabulista*<sup>21</sup> and is reproduced as part of the preface of Schiaparelli's edition of the latter.<sup>22</sup> The text in the manuscript is here presented according to the method of a diplomatic edition, rendering precisely the paleographic signs in the manuscript and abstaining from any emendations to normalize the sometimes unclassical Arabic:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الْعَفُورِ الرَّحِيمِ (1)

- أَعَارِضُ فُرْأَنَ مَنْ آخِرِ اسْمِهِ الدَّالُّ وَأَوَّلُهُ الْمِيمُ بِلِسَانٍ فَصِيحٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُبِينٍ (2) لَا يَمْنَعُنِي مِنْهُ سَيْفٌ وَلَا  
سَكِينٌ (3) إِذْ قَالَ لِي بِلِسَانِ الْإِلَهَامِ سَيِّدُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ (4) قُلِ الْمُعْجِزَةُ لَا شَرِيكَ فِيهَا لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ  
(5) وَ فِي الْفَصَاحَةِ يَشْتَرِكُ كَثِيرٌ كَثِيرِينَ (6) يَغْلِبُ فِيهَا أَحْيَانًا الطَّلِيحُ الصَّالِحُ وَالْكَافِرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ  
(7) فَلَيْسَتْ الْفَصَاحَةُ وَلَوْ فِي النَّهَائِيَةِ آيَةً وَلَا مُعْجِزَةً لِلَّهِ إِلَّا عِنْدَ الَّذِينَ أَوْطَاهُمُ عَشْوَةٌ مُعَلِّمٌ مَجْنُونٌ  
(8) حَتَّى قَالُوا عَنْهُ حَاتِمُ الْأَنْبَاءِ وَسَيِّدُ الْمُرْسَلِينَ (9) مَعَ أَنَّهُ بِإِقْرَارِهِ فِي سُورَةِ الْأَحْقَافِ لَمْ يَدْرِ قَطُّ  
[sic] مَا يُفْعَلُ بِهِ وَلَا يَتَّبَعُهُ أَجْمَعِينَ أَكْتَعِينَ (10) فَقُلْ يَا مَنْ اسْمُهُ رَمُنْدٌ وَلَقَبُهُ مَرْتِينُ (11) آه  
لِقَوْمٍ يَقْبَلُ الْبَاطِلَ وَالْخُرَافَاتِ وَالْتُرْهُاتِ كَأَنَّهَا الْيَقِينُ (12) وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي شَكٍّ مِمَّا أَهْمَنَا إِلَيْهِ عَبْدَنَا يَا  
مَعَاشِرَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ (13) فَاتُّوا بِحَلٍّ هَذِهِ الْحُجَّةِ وَبِمَثَلِ هَذِهِ السُّورَةِ وَادْعُوا لِذَلِكَ إِخْوَانَكُمْ مِنَ الْجِنِّ إِنْ  
كُنْتُمْ مُهْتَدِينَ (14) فَإِنْ لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا وَلَكِنْ تَقْدِرُوا فَقَدْ زَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ وَاسْتَقَامَ الْيَقِينُ (15) وَالْحَمْدُ  
وَالشُّكْرُ لِلَّهِ أَمِينَ أَمِينَ أَمِينَ [sic] (16)

زيادة من نسخة اخرى

<sup>21</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xv-xvi.

<sup>22</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xvi-xvii.

فَإِنْ لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا وَلَنْ تَقْدِرُوا فَاسْتَحْيُوا وَارْجِعُوا وَاقْتَدُوا بِنُورِ الْقُرْآنِ الْبَاهِرِ وَلَا تَكُنْ كَصَاحِبِ السَّفِينَةِ  
سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْنَا أَوْعظْنَا أَمْ لَمْ تَكُنْ مِنَ الْوَاعِظِينَ (17) وَاللَّهُ الرَّحِيمُ يَرْحَمُ عَبْدًا أَلْجَمَ بِهِدِهِ جَمَاعَةَ الْإِسْلَامِ  
وَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْمُلهِمِينَ (18) وَلِيُقُلِّلْ أَهْلَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِينَ أَمِينَ أَمِينَ أَمِينَ (19)

The text given here follows the edition by Schiaparelli who, however, interprets the text as a *polemica breve* or *short polemical dialogue* between a Muslim and a Christian and accordingly assigns portions of the the text to both speakers.<sup>23</sup> While the existence of dialogical fragments in this curious piece of Arabic *saj'* or *rhymed prose* cannot be completely ruled out, this article argues that the main polemical argument of the text lies not so much on the level of its content, but rather in its form imitating the shape of a Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Therefore I propose to structure the text by means of the internal pattern of its rhymes, as a Qur'ānic *sūrah* would be structured, and give the number of the resulting “verses” at the end of each rhyming portion.

*In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate (1)*

*I oppose the Qur'ān of him whose name ends with [the letter] dāl and begins with [the letter] mīm in language that is correct and clear Arabic (2). No sword and no knife shall hinder me (3). The Lord of the messengers speaks to me with the language of inspiration (4): There is no partner to the Lord of the worlds in miracles (5). As regards eloquence, however, many are partners to others (6) and thus sometimes the wicked overcomes the good and the unbeliever the believer in eloquence (7). But eloquence, even in its most refined form, is no sign and no miracle, by God!, but among those who are overcome in darkness by a mad teacher (8). So they call him Seal of the Prophets and Lord of the messengers (9), even though he confirmed himself in the sūrat al-aḥqāf that he did not know at all what was done with him or all of his followers (10). So say, you whose name is Ramundu and whose last name is Martīn (11): Woe over those who accept the false, superstitions and vanities as if they were true (12)! And if you are in doubt as to what we revealed to our servant, oh you multitudes of Muslims (13), then come and refute this proof with a sūrah like this, and call upon your brothers from*

<sup>23</sup> Vocabulista 1871, xv.

*among the spirits for help, if you are rightly guided (14)! And if you cannot, and surely you cannot, then the evil has been defeated and the right has overcome (15). And praise and thanks to God. Amen, amen, amen. (16)*

*Addition from another copy*

*And if you cannot, and surely you cannot, then repent, turn back and follow the shining light of the Qur'ān. Be not like the owner of the ship [who boasted]: We do not care whether you have warned us or not (17)! God the merciful has mercy with a servant who reins with this the community of Islam, praise be to God, the best of the inspirers (18). So let the people of heavens and earths say: Amen, amen, amen (19).*

### Interpretation of the text

In the following pages, I would like to embark on a short examination of some striking features of the text. Rather than strive for an exhaustive commentary of the numerous intertextual references contained therein, my aim is to show how the interpretation of this curious piece of Arabic *saj'* as an attempt to manifestly demonstrate the imitability of the Qur'ān enables its coherent reading on structural, formal and intertextual planes.

Following Schiaparelli's indication of a Muslim and a Christian speaker in his edition,<sup>24</sup> the structuring of the text as a polemical dispute has apparently not been questioned. Berthier even went so far as to argue for a joint Muslim-Christian authorship of the whole *Vocabulista* on the base of his conviction that the two "speakers" in the short text reproduced above had "expressed their religious convictions".<sup>25</sup> The relation of the text to the *glossarium* of the *Vocabulista* surrounding it is, however, highly problematic. While it is most probably safe to assume that the text alludes on some level to the historical person of Ramon Martí, its location in the middle of a dictionary does by no means signify its being part of it. It would probably be much likelier to interpret the text as a later addition scribbled onto some blank pages after the *Vocabulista* proper had been compiled, just as a paradigm of verbal conjugation according to a Maghribī dialect has been scribbled on one of the pages surrounding it.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xvi–xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Berthier 1936, 293.

<sup>26</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xv.

An interpretation of the text as an exemplary piece of work which was compiled with the aid of the *Vocabulista* or as a literary sample to be translated by students with the help of the *Vocabulista* is ruled out by the fact that almost half of its lexemes are not contained in the glossary with its focus on items of daily use and the spoken Arabic language of the Western Mediterranean. An additional complication to a supposed close relation between text and its enveloping glossary is offered by the claim of the last part of the text to be an addition “from another copy” (17), which would be difficult to explain in any other way than by supposing that the text was transferred from another context to its present setting. While it certainly cannot be ruled out that Ramon Martí and the curious text mentioning his name pertain to a similar milieu as the one in which the *Vocabulista* originated, the formal characteristics of this text distinguish it from the main part of the dictionary to such a degree as to justify its separate interpretation.

In order as to facilitate an understanding of the supposed dialogical shape of the text, I will now give a short paraphrasis of the two disputants’ respective arguments:

*(1-2) The Christian: In the name of God. I oppose the Qur’ān of Muḥammad in clear Arabic.*

*(3-7) The Muslim: Nothing hinders me, if the Lord inspires me to say that only He can perform miracles, while eloquence is a common human talent.*

*(8-10) C: Eloquence is not a miracle but among those who follow a crazy teacher [Muḥammad] even though he himself stated that he doesn’t know the first thing about what is happening.*

*(11-19) M: So, Ramon Martí, say woe upon those who accept the wrong! And if you Muslims doubt what we [God?] have inspired Our servant to say, come and imitate it. And call upon the help of your brothers the ghosts. If and because you cannot do this, the right has been shown and praise and thanks be to God.*

*Addition [according to Schiaparelli still voiced by the Muslim]: ... So turn back and follow the shining light of the Qur’ān, don’t shrug it off like the owner of the ship [Noah?]. And may God have mercy on his servant who reigns with this [text?] the community of Islam, so praise be to God.*



It is rather difficult to make sense of this as a historical or literary dialogue. While dialogical forms are indeed used in writings of Ramon Martí and his pupil Ramon Llull,<sup>27</sup> it is almost unthinkable to assign the longer portions of the text to the Muslim side, let alone let the Muslim have the last word and “win” in the context of an explicitly Christian dictionary superscribed with the words “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the one God” in Arabic.<sup>28</sup>

There are, however, a number of problems with the supposed dialogical form of the text from an internal perspective of the argument as well. While it is very difficult – if not impossible – to interpret the “arguments” of the “speakers” as in any way relating to each other, the “part” of the “Muslim” is very difficult to interpret coherently. While it may still be thinkable to suppose that a Muslim might speak of God inspiring him to praise His miracles (4-5), it is by no means clear why he should turn to “you multitudes of Muslims” (13) while disputing with a Christian monk. In similar fashion, the challenge to come up with “a similar *sūrah*” (14) and the assertion of the impossibility of such a task (15) are effectively rebutted by the form of the text itself which, as will be shown below, structurally and linguistically, as well as on an intertextual level closely follows Qur’ānic precedent. On the contrary, the hypothesis that the text’s main argument lies precisely in its form imitating the shape of the Qur’ān may also be found in the by all appearances deliberate choice of the word *mu’jiza*, attributed by Schiaparelli to the supposed Muslim voice of the dialogue in verse (5) and taken up by the Christian in verse (8), which as a synonym of the *terminus technicus* of *i’jāz* seems specifically chosen to lead the reader to connect this text to the Muslim dogma of the Qur’ānic *i’jāz* as signifying the impossibility to imitate the Qur’ān.

Returning to the supposed arguments of the two “speakers”, it is also very difficult to see how a Muslim should ask God for “a servant who reins with this the community of Islam” (18). If the “servant” should refer to Muḥammad, one would expect a verbal qualification more current in the context of Muḥammad than the peculiar *aljama*, translated here as *to rein*, which is not even attested in the Qur’ān. If, on the other hand, this *servant* should be none other than Ramon Martí himself, addressed by name a couple of verses earlier, the choice of a verbal qualifier unclaimed by notions of Islamicity to unambiguously designate Ramon Martí in opposition to Islamic authorities is, while in itself certainly justified, difficult to reconcile to a Muslim voice supposedly defending his religion. There are also, as far as I see, no

---

<sup>27</sup> See Friedlein 2004 and the references contained therein.

<sup>28</sup> Schiaparelli 1871, 3.

alternative dialogical structures possible which would present viable alternatives to the speakers proposed by Schiaparelli. Due to these difficulties which are created by the interpretation of the text as a polemical dispute between two separate speakers, I propose to read the text as non-dialogical.

The main difficulty in abandoning a dialogical reading of the text lies in the inherent necessity to move it out of the well-established field of interreligious debate and posit it as a literary piece *sui generis*, namely an additional Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Such a repositing of the text has been mentioned in passing by Fück who called it a “polemic imitation of a *sūrah* in Qur'ānic style” even though he did not to my knowledge develop the matter further.<sup>29</sup> Following his suggestion, I will in the following paragraphs briefly demonstrate how the text imitates Qur'ānic usage on structural, stylistic and intertextual levels.

On a structural level, the text follows Qur'ānic usage in its being composed in rhymed prose or *saj'*, enabling its structuring in verses in analogy to the Qur'ān, as proposed above. While *saj'* is more or less common in later Arabic *belles lettres*, the intertextual references contained in this text, which will be sketched below, firmly posit it in the context of Qur'ānic language and imitations thereof. While Islamic tradition is very careful to demonstrate most clearly the inadequacy of imitations of Qur'ānic *saj'* in early Islamic history<sup>30</sup> by extracting them from any framing even remotely “Qur'ānic”, the text discussed here is framed in common Qur'ānic usage with an invocation of God (1) paralleling the *basmala* at the beginning of Qur'ānic *sūrahs*.

On a stylistic level, the text also parallels Qur'ānic style. This is manifest on a general level in its full vocalisation, its mastery of Qur'ānic Arabic and its almost exclusive restriction to words also found in the Qur'ān. On a more specific level, parallels to Qur'ānic style can be found in its frequent use of interjections such as *qul*, “say”, (11) one of the most emblematic features of *sūrahs* such as the so-called *mu'awwidhatāni* concluding the Qur'ān (*sūrahs* 113 and 114) or the *sūrat al-ikhhlāṣ* (*sūrah* 112) preceding them. Equally typical of Qur'ānic parlance is the direct speech of God in the first person plural form (13), as well as the quotation of direct speech of third persons as *we do not care whether we have been warned or not* (17) and the direct address to the receiver or receivers of divine inspiration and warning (11, 13-15 and 17) in the form of the second person.

---

<sup>29</sup> Fück 1955, 16.

<sup>30</sup> See for example the *saj'* of “Pseudo-Prophets” like Ṭulayḥa in Ṭabarī II, 309 and 312, and of Musaylima in Ṭabarī II, 237.

The tightly-spun net of intertextual references inside the Qur'ān is well known. By virtue of being composed almost exclusively of Qur'ānic words, the text discussed here opens up manifold avenues of intertextual allusions to different parts of the Qur'ān. Rather than attempt an exhaustive survey, some particularly striking examples already noted by Schiaparelli should be sufficient to illustrate this point. The qualification of the Arabic of the text as *language that is clear and correct Arabic* (2) is an almost verbal quotation of *sūrah* xxvi, 195. The reference to Muḥammad's words that *he did not know at all what was done with him or all of his followers* (10) is an almost literal paraphrasis of *sūrah* xlvi, 9. The words *We do not care whether you have warned us or not* (17) are another nearly verbal quotation, this time of *sūrah* xxvi, 136.

In conclusion it seems clear that the text carefully imitates Qur'ānic modes on structural, stylistic and intertextual levels. Similar care is, however, taken to pointedly *break* the similarity to actual Qur'ānic *sūrahs* on each of these levels. If the structure purports to be most blatantly Qur'ānic, it is equally blatantly violating Qur'ānic usage by opening with *bi-smi llāhi l-ghafūri l-rahīm*, which is indeed attested in the Qur'ān,<sup>31</sup> but does not serve as the opening line of any Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Instead, *bi-smi llāhi l-rahmāni l-rahīmi* would be the usual opening line for all but one of the Qur'ānic *sūrahs*. The end of the *sūrah* as well disturbs Qur'ānic precedent: While the word *āmīn* (consistently as *amīn* in the context of this text) is indeed Qur'ānic,<sup>32</sup> its triple repetition as a concluding formula (16 and 19) is most certainly not and rather seems to echo Christian liturgical praxis. Similarly, the inclusion of so un-Arabic a word as the last name of its probable author, *Martīn*, in the *saj'* clearly disturbs the careful analogy to Qur'ānic language.

In a similar way the stylistical and intertextual connections of this text to the Qur'ān are most pointedly severed. While stylistically the anachronism of including the name of a historical character of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Western Mediterranean in Qur'ānic context (10) was certainly not lost upon any reader, the disjunctive allusion to Muḥammad as *him whose name ends with [the letter] dāl and begins with [the letter] mīm* (2) may indeed, as Schiaparelli suggested<sup>33</sup>, have served to save the mouth of a Christian from the sacrilege of uttering the name of the prophet of another religion. Additionally, however, it served to exaggerate the riddles surrounding the *muqaṭṭa'āt* or isolated letters at the beginning of some Qur'ānic

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. for example *sūrah* iii, 129.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. for example *sūrah* vii, 68.

<sup>33</sup> *Vocabulista* 1871, xvi.

*sūrahs*, introduced *plene* writings of letters which are not written *in plene* in the Qur'ān and by the plainness of their allusion to Muḥammad quite possibly ridiculed the manifold levels of meaning found in the Qur'ān by Muslims.

In the light of such almost certainly intentional disruptions of Qur'ānic usage, it may be worth considering whether the attribution of the Qur'ānic quotation of the unbelievers of *sūrah* xxvi, 136, in the form of *We do not care whether you have warned us or not* (17) to the *owner of the ship* (17) who, as Schiaparelli already noted, is to be identified as Noah mentioned in the same *sūrah* some verses earlier<sup>34</sup>, may not represent a deliberate garbelling of the two verses of this *sūrah* and *sūrah* xxix, 15, where the ship is called, as in the present text, *safīna*, instead of the *fulk* used in *sūrah* xxvi, 119. The supposition of a deliberate mixing up of intertextual references would extend very nicely the pattern found on the other levels. If one wishes to follow the interpretation proposed here, the text not only demonstrates the possibility of an imitation of Qur'ānic precedence and thereby disproves the dogma of its *i'jāz*, but also very consciously *breaks* the form of the supposedly so firmly fixed divine word.

The argument presented in the text, if read in this way, rests less on the level of its actual argumentation, than on the level of its form. A Muslim arguing for the truth of her religion based on the incommensurability of its Holy Scripture is here presented not only with a quite close imitation of the Qur'ān, but even with a wanton breaking of the form including abuse of Muḥammad as *a mad teacher* (8). On an even more fundamental level this breaking of the form of supposedly immutable divine speech is manifest in the laconic assertion that there is an alternative ending to this piece of rhymed prose, introduced as an “addition from another copy” (17): How could a pious Muslim react to alternative endings and widely differing manuscripts of the word of God?

### Muslim reactions to Ramon Martí's philological challenge

The interpretation of the curious Arabic text in *saj'* as a conscious and elaborate challenge posed to the Muslim dogma of *i'jāz* can be further corroborated from a number of reports of contemporary Christian and Islamic sources. The first report which may be connected to the more than slightly ambitious activities of Ramon Martí is found in the autobiographical *Llibre dels Fets* of King Jaume I of Aragó. Here it is recounted how Ramon Martí and his confrère Pere Cenne returned from Tunis in 1269 and tried to convince the king to embark upon a

---

<sup>34</sup> *Sūrah* xxvi, 119.

military expedition to North Africa.<sup>35</sup> After they were not successful with Jaume I, they went on to Montpellier to convince King Louis the Holy of France to go to Tunis, apparently suggesting the possibility of a conversion of the Ḥafṣid Caliph al-Mustanṣir himself.<sup>36</sup>

It would seem from this story that Ramon Martí was as honestly convinced of the validity of his refutation of *i'jāz* and other Islamic tenets as to envisage direct political and military action. That his confidence may have been a bit unfounded is indicated by the report of his pupil Ramon Llull who recounted how the Muslim “King”, quite possibly the same Ḥafṣid ruler of Tunis, had had Ramon Martí expelled from his realm after the latter had not been able to present cogent arguments in a dispute with a Muslim.<sup>37</sup>

While all of these examples are recounted in Christian sources and may accordingly to a certain degree represent a Christian view on the matter, an even more telling account of Muslim reactions to challenges to the dogma of the Qur'ānic *i'jāz* has by chance been preserved in the so-called *Mi'yār* among a collection of Maghribī *nawāzil* or *juridic opinions*.<sup>38</sup> Hidden between *three questions of a Jew*<sup>39</sup> and the opinion of a certain Sīdī Abū Yaḥyā al-Sharīf on an unclear passage in al-Zamakhsharī's famous commentary to the Qur'ān,<sup>40</sup> there stands the account of a *disputation between Ibn Rashīq and a monk*.<sup>41</sup> De la Granja has translated and discussed the text at some length and suggested to identify the monk in question with Ramon Martí.<sup>42</sup> In the following, I will turn to the more recent edition of the *Mi'yār*, which de la Granja was not yet able to use for his article, to show how in this case a challenge to the dogma of Qur'ānic *i'jāz* was remembered by a Muslim scholar.

*Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn b. Rashīq narrates in his Kitāb al-Rasā'il wa-l-wasā'il the following story: [After the town of Múrcia had fallen into Christian hands] a group of priests and monks came there to disrupt worship by their false arguments, to crane their necks after the sciences of the Muslims and to translate them into their language to criticize them, may God make their endeavor futile.*

---

<sup>35</sup> Llibre dels Fets, II, 346, or chapter 490.

<sup>36</sup> Dufourcq 1966, 109.

<sup>37</sup> Friedlein 2004, 223.

<sup>38</sup> I would like to thank Rainer Oßwald, Bayreuth University, for sending me a scan of the pertinent passages of the *Mi'yār*.

<sup>39</sup> *Mi'yār* XI, 154.

<sup>40</sup> *Mi'yār* XI, 158.

<sup>41</sup> *Mi'yār* XI, 155-158.

<sup>42</sup> De la Granja 1966, 60-62. See more recently also Vernet 2008, 175-176.

*They were also avid to start disputes with Muslims and lure the weak to their side: This is what they were paid for by their state*<sup>43</sup>.

*I was at that time a student at the hands of my father, may God have mercy on him, working in the chancellery. [...] At one time it became necessary for me to give oath for a Muslim against a Christian in a case which had been judged against him. [...] So we came with both of the parties to an assembly of these monks in a house with a church of which they were rather proud, and after we had performed our oaths, a priest among them beckoned me to him. He was from Marrakesh<sup>44</sup>, spoke correct Arabic and knew how to argue. [Impressed by the priest's knowledge of Arabic, the narrator agrees to a conversation.]<sup>45</sup>*

In the course of the ensuing discussion, the priest quotes the Qur'ānic phrase of *fa-in lam taf'alū wa-lan taf'alū* (sūrah ii, 24)<sup>46</sup> and argues for its relevance to the question of the Qur'ānic *i'jāz*. He also briefly refers to the idea that Arabic language deteriorated since the time of the Qur'ān as a possible reason why nobody was able to imitate the Islamic revelation,<sup>47</sup> before switching to the subject of a challenge posed in al-Ḥarīrī's famous poetry of the *Maqāmāt*, where two verses are given, which are also held to be impossible to imitate.<sup>48</sup> He accordingly quotes both verses from the 46<sup>th</sup> *Maqāmah*, recounts how nobody has so far been able to imitate them and challenges the narrator to find a matching third.<sup>49</sup>

Even beyond the citing of precisely one of the Qur'ānic verses alluded to in the text in rhymed prose presented above,<sup>50</sup> the connection between the incident retold by Ibn Rashīq the

---

<sup>43</sup> Mi'yār XI, 155.

<sup>44</sup> The *qasīs min marrākush* (vocalisation according to Yāqūt, Mu'jam al-Buldān *sub lemmata*) or *priest from Marrakesh* does pose somewhat of a problem which I do not really see an easy way around. In order to identify him with Ramon Martí one would have to think about either a spelling error, speculate about Ramon Martí having been to Marocco sometime or speak the respective dialect for another reason or simply assume the narrator garbled his information. Even if the priest should not be identified with Ramon Martí, it is rather unlikely that he was a native of Marrakesh as the Romanic-speaking Christian population of North Africa seems to have disappeared by the time of the Almohads: See, for example, Lewicki 1953.

<sup>45</sup> Mi'yār XI, 155-156.

<sup>46</sup> Mi'yār XI, 156.

<sup>47</sup> Mi'yār XI, 156.

<sup>48</sup> Mi'yār XI, 157.

<sup>49</sup> Mi'yār XI, 157.

<sup>50</sup> The Qur'ānic verse of *fa-in lam taf'alū wa-lan taf'alū* (sūrah ii, 2), which is quoted in Mi'yār XI, 156, is closely parallel to the *fa-in lam taqdirū wa-lan taqdirū* (15 and 17) of the text discussed above. There is another parallel between both texts on a lexical level in the fact that both use the unusual verb *aljama*, or *to rein*: See Mi'yār XI, 158, and (18).

elder<sup>51</sup> and the curious verses contained in the *Vocabulista* also extends to the precise level on which the dogma of the Qur'ānic *i'jāz* is challenged. While the piece in *saj'* discussed above aims to manifestly demonstrate the imitability of the Qur'ān and thereby prove its human nature, the challenge posed in the story of Ibn Rashīq the elder attempts to show how mere human minds may come up with verses impossible to imitate. As, however, in this instance the story is being told by a Muslim, it is hardly surprising to read how the smart boy recounting the story spontaneously came up with the requested verse fitting the challenge and proved thereby the imitability of any human poetry, even that of al-Ḥarīrī.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

As sketched at the beginning of this paper, imitation can be seen as a variant of translation appropriating a foreign system of signs for an argument derived from a different context. While translation in its day-to-day meaning is seen as the process of transmitting textual knowledge from one linguistic sphere to another, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Dominican scholar Ramon Martí can be seen as a border-crossing figure who was so familiar with the system of signs of contemporary Muslim religiosity that he was able to formulate an argument contesting the divinity of Islamic revelation in terms most internal to Arabic-Islamic learning. As shown in this article, the broad range of evidence surrounding the historical figure of Ramon Martí can be interpreted as the residue of a fundamental challenge to Islamic truth aimed at demonstrating the imitability of the Qur'ān.

As regards an evaluation of this challenge in its historical context, however, the audience of contemporary Muslims emerges as the crucial component deciding the success of Ramon Martí's philological endeavours. The reaction of this audience is characterized by a resilience possibly surprising in the light of the admitted philological excellence of Ramon Martí: As described above, the Muslim "king" of Ramon Llull's account had Ramon Martí expelled on grounds of insufficient arguments in wanton polemical debates and the elaborate cunning of challenging Muslim scholars to imitate al-Ḥarīrī is remembered by the proud Ibn Rashīq as nothing more than a curious incident most satisfactorily mastered. The text in *saj'* or rhyming prose meant to demonstrate once and for all the ability of human minds to imitate Qur'ānic style, quite possibly a literary masterpiece *sui generis*, was ultimately lost on some blank

---

<sup>51</sup> See de la Granja 1966, 49.

<sup>52</sup> Mi'yār XI, 158.

pages between the parts of a relatively obscure Latino-Arabic dictionary, showing once again the resilience of the pious wisdom of *wa-llāhu a 'lam*.

Georg Leube, Bayreuth University.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berger, L., 2010: Islamische Theologie, Wien.
- Berthier, A., 1936: Un Maître orientaliste du XIIIe siècle: Raymond Martin O. P.. *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* VI, 267-311.
- Bisson, T. N., 1986: *The Medieval Crown of Aragon*, Oxford.
- Burman, T. E., 2007 a: *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560*. Paperback edition 2009, Philadelphia.
- Burman, T. E., 2007 b: How an Italian Friar read his Arabic Qur'ān. *Dante Studies* 125, 93-109.
- Burman, T. E., 2015: Two Dominicans, a Lost Manuscript, and Medieval Christian Thought on Islam. In: R. Szpiech: *Medieval Exegesis an Religios Difference. Commentary, Conflict and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean: 71-86*. New York.
- Cortabarría, A., 1983: La connaissance des textes arabes chez Raymond Martin O. P. et sa position en face de l'Islam. *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 18, 279-300.
- Dawlatshāh Tadhkirah: *Tadhkirat ash-Shu'arā'*, Dawlatshāh Samarqandī, ed. E. Browne, Leiden 1901, repr. Tehran 2005.
- Dufourcq, C.-E., 1966: *L'Espagne Catalane et le Maghrib aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, Paris.
- Friedlein, R., 2004: *Der Dialog bei Ramon Llull*, Tübingen.
- Fück, J., 1955: *Die arabischen Studien in Europa*, Leipzig.
- Galmés de Fuentes, Á., 1999: *Ramon Llull y la tradición árabe*, Barcelona.
- Garcías Palou, S., 1981: *Ramon Llull y el Islam*, Palma de Mallorca.
- Gospel of Barnabas: Jiddah n.d.. Originally edited according to the preface by M. A. Rahim, Secretary General of the Quran Council of Pakistan in 1974 and reprinted by Abul Qasim Publishing House in Jiddah.
- De la Granja, F., 1966: Una polémica religiosa en Murcia en tiempos de Alfonso el Sabio. *Al-Andalus* 31, 47-72.
- Hillgarth, J. N., 1976: *The Spanish Kingdoms*, Oxford.
- Lewicki, T., 1953: Une langue romane oubliée de l'Afrique du Nord. *Rocznik orientalistyczny* 17, 415-480.
- Llibre dels Fets: Jaume I, ed. J. Bruguera, Barcelona 1991.
- Mi'yār: *Al-Mi'yār al-mu'rib wa-l-jāmi' al-mughrib*, Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Wansharīsī, ed. M. Ḥajjī, volume XI 1981, Rabat and Beirut.
- Qur'ān, German rendering: *Die ungefähre Bedeutung des Al Qur'ān Al Karīm in deutscher Sprache*. Tr. Abu-r-Ridā' Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rassoul, ed. Ibrahim Abou-Nagie. Köln / Cologne 2012.
- Reynolds, G. S., 2004: *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu*, Leiden.
- Sidarus, A., 1994: Le Livro da Corte Emperial entre l'apologétique lullienne et l'expansion catalane au XIVe siècle. In: H. Santiago-Otero: *Diálogo filosófico-religioso entre Cristianismo, Judaísmo e Islamismo durante la edad Media en la Península Iberia: 139-172*. Turnhout.
- Ṭabarī: *Ta'rikh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. M. al-Sayyid and Ṭ. Sālim, Cairo without year.



Vernet, J., 2008: El món científic de la Corona d'Aragó amb Jaume I. In: M.-Á. Roque: Ramon Llull i l'Islam: 171-195. Barcelona.

Vocabulista in Arabico 1871: Edited by C. Schiaparelli, Florence 1871.

al-Wāqidī, Muḥammad b. 'Umar (ascribed), 2008: Futūḥ al-Shām. Ed. 'Abd al-Khāliq Muḥammad 'Abd al-Khāliq, Cairo.

Pre-Proofs