

# History of the Translation of the Meanings of the Qur'an in Germany up to the Year 2000 A Bibliographic Survey

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## Abstract

The following study consists of three sections, namely an introduction including a brief description of earlier bibliographical sources, secondly a description of the various full translations of the meanings of the Glorious Qur'an into German from 16th to 20th century, and lastly a complete bibliography of all translations, full or partial, that have been published in the same period, with some explanatory notes where appropriate.

It is understood that dealing with this subject in a language other than German cannot do justice to the matter and may also give rise to misunderstandings. However to undertake such an effort in spite of its risks is better than making no attempt. Errors and mistakes can be pointed out and corrected, whereas keeping silent on this subject will not provide any information about it at all.

## I. Introduction

The subject of the history of the translation of the meanings of the Qur'an in Germany has not previously been dealt with comprehensively apart from some earlier bibliographical surveys. These usually concerned literature on Islam and the Arabs in general and occasionally included some sections on the Qur'an and its translations. Those noteworthy are the following:

- Schnurrer, Christianus Fridericus de: *Bibliotheca Arabica*, Halae ad Salam, 1811, pp. 421-445. (In Latin)
- Chauvin, Victor: *Bibliographie des ouvrages des Arabes ou relatifs aux Arabes*,

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present study. Still they serve well as an initial introduction to the subject.

However these sources available on the history of the translation of the Qur'an in Germany have hardly, or not at all, taken into account the conditions, under which such translations need to be seen. Only Pfanmüller provides some background for earlier periods, but does not apply this to his own time.

No doubt efforts in translating the meanings of the Qur'an and their results are closely interrelated with their respective historical backgrounds as well as socio-cultural environments. They are determined, to a great extent, by the socio-cultural environments in which they emerged, and some of them do in turn influence the socio-cultural environment in which they are read and studied.

At times, the prefaces and introductions to some of these translations give indications concerning these interactions and developments, and one may therefore discover the following periods and trends in the history of the translation of the Qur'an in Germany:

- 1) classical anti-Islamic,
- 2) age of Enlightenment,
- 3) orientalism and Romanticism,
- 4) colonial and political up to World War I,
- 5) pro-Islamic and *da'wa* to Non-Muslims,
- 6) modern anti-Islamic.

### **First European publications of the Qur'an in Arabic**

Arabic editions of the Qur'an were published in Europe as early as the 16th century. The first one seems to be *Alcoranus Arabice* printed by Paganino de Paganini from Brixen, in Venice 1530. It is said that this edition had to be burnt immediately after its appearance upon instructions from the Pope.<sup>1</sup> However few copies seem to have escaped this fate and at least one copy has lately been discovered in the Franciscan Library of San Michele in Isola, Venice.<sup>2</sup>

In Germany the Arabic text of the Qur'an was first printed under the title *Al-coranus, Lex Islamitica Mubamedis, Filii Abdallae Pseudo-prophetae, ad optimorum Codicum fidem edita ex Museo Abrahami Hinckelmanni* in

<sup>1</sup> Pfanmüller, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Bobzin, Hartmut: *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation*, Stuttgart 1995, pp. 182-184.



objectives in mind. As may be seen from the so-called “Dialogues” by John of Damascus between a “Christian” and a “Muslim” - usually called the “Saracens” or even the “Barbarians” - the prime objective was to describe Christianity as, at least, intellectually and religiously superior to Islam in view of the factual inferiority of Christianity at that period in history in the sphere of political power. Just as one ought not to disregard the “collective memory” of Muslims concerning the crusades, although many centuries have passed since the Christian occident launched its “holy war” against “the infidels”, it would be equally unwise to overlook the traumatic experience of the earlier Christians and the church in particular, caused by the fact that they lost the largest part of their territory and in particular their territory of origin to the Muslims. It is from this that the roots of the anti-Muslim attitude originated, which is still in full force even today. From the point of view of the church at that time, Islam was seen as one of the various heretical teachings that endangered the influence and power of the established church. Now it is a fact that none of the so-called heretical sects has endangered the church to the extent as Islam did at the time. Hence Islam, its Messenger and its Book were perceived to be the most dangerous challengers and needed to be opposed by all means. All that Islam stood for was subsequently described as bad and evil. At times deliberately and at times, perhaps due to misunderstandings, all sorts of wrong descriptions of Islam, its Messenger and its Scripture were made to circulate in order to paint a picture as dark and grim as possible.

In this process as far as the Qur’an is concerned, one selected from it as far as one’s knowledge permitted whatever was thought to render support to one’s own ideas of Islam, and if what was found in the Qur’an was not sufficient one made up whatever was needed. Already the Byzantine Christian theologian John of Damascus applied this method and spread the story about an alleged “*Surah* of the camel of God”, which according to him, was part of the Qur’an and contained the story of “a camel sent by God, which drank up all the river and could not pass between two mountains, because the space was too narrow. This camel was killed by the people. However it had an offspring, and this young animal ascended to heaven.” All this including the question from which of the rivers of paradise this camel was drinking, if it was in fact in paradise, was meant to show what he perceived as the irrational nature of the Qur’an,<sup>1</sup> while in

<sup>1</sup> Ducellier, Alain: *Le miroir de l’Islam*, 1971, pp. 136-137.



This was the first ever printed translation of the Qur'an in Europe. At this time on the one hand the Spanish Reconquista had been achieved, and the Muslims had been expelled from Spain, although not all traces had been erased. On the other hand, the Christian occident, and in particular its German speaking region, found itself once again under threat from the Muslims, this time since the fall of Constantinople in 1453, through the Ottomans or "Turks". This development was perceived as extremely dangerous and gave cause to special concern about Islam, its Messenger and its Scripture. At the same time, Europe, and Germany in particular, was faced with hitherto unknown inter-Christian tensions, leading to the separation of the Protestants from the Roman church, and this, together with the Muslim threat from outside, resulted in a strange climate, in which at times opposition to Islam seemed to coincide with opposition to Rome and the Pope. This is reflected in the fact that during this period, the word "Alchoran" was used by many authors to refer to any disliked, scandalous and heretic book, and does not actually mean the Qur'an of Islam.

The 16th century is the turning point in the history of the translation of the Qur'an in Germany as it marks the beginning of translation of the Qur'an into German.

## Translations of the Qur'an into German

### First translations of selections from the Qur'an into German

#### *16th Century*

**Rickel**, Dionysius von: Alchoran. Das ist des Mahometischen Gesatzbuchs und Türckischen Aberglaubens ynnhalt und ablänung, Hans Schott, Straßburg 1540.

Dionysius of Rickel from today's Belgian province of Limburg, also known as Dionysius Carthusianus, is author of an anti-Islamic book entitled *Contra Alchoranum & sectam Machometicam libri quinque* written around 1454 and printed in Cologne 1533. In this book he quotes, based on the Latin translation of Robertus Ketenensis, a number of passages from the Qur'an in order to refute them. Seven years later, i.e. in 1540, an abridged version was published in German.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the earliest publication containing



















































































































