

Latin Translations of the *Qur'an*

Early translations of the *Qur'an* into Latin largely served practical purposes. There was a noted desire among Western Europeans to understand Islam on its own terms; simple hearsay could not, and would not, formulate a solid basis of refutation in any true intellectual sense. The western experience in the Levant after the First Crusade made it inescapably clear that the Muslim East was wonderfully capable and clever in intellectual endeavors. This forced Christian polemics to reconnoiter and reformulate their opposition to Islam. The result was a plethora of Latin translations of the *Qur'an* and several other important works of Islamic religious literature which gave the Christian West a more detailed knowledge of a people and faith which had, until the twelfth century, remained distant and alien.

The first Latin translation of the *Qur'an* were made in the early twelfth century. It is likely that the experience of the Crusades garnered for Christians a more ardent interest in Islam per se, and thus instigated the research which the early twelfth century would produce. From Toledo in about 1143, Peter the Venerable (c. 1092-1156) gained access to the *Qur'an*, along with an Arabic Christian apology by 'Abd al-Masih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, and a slew of Islamic traditions (*Fabulae Saracenorum*), and a collection of "sentences" by 'Abdillah ibn-Salam that summarized important points of Islamic doctrine and philosophy. Peter intended his theological thesis, *Summa Totius Haeresis Saracenorum*, written within a year of his Toledan travel, for Bernard of Clairvaux. This is likely because of the Cistercian's reputation across Europe, but for reasons left unsaid, Bernard did nothing with the summary of Islamic doctrine and thought. Given his attempt to encourage its study by the great Saint Bernard, he most certainly wanted the audience to be wide. If it perhaps would not be studied in depth by the masses, it would all the same be known by the majority of those who heard Saint Bernard's preaching. Clearly, the

clergy and educated laymen were his primary audience, but his attempt to get a great preacher to learn it betrays the desire for a broader base of knowledge in society. Peter's *Summa* certainly contained polemics; James Kritzeck specified most of the irate language was a product of the influence of al-Kindi on his Cluniac counterpart. This aside, the majority of Peter's interaction with Islam was aptly intellectual. He highlighted similarities as well as differences and developed his arguments on succinct philosophical lines.

The ability of Peter the venerable to encounter Islamic theology on a level far deeper than nearly all of his predecessors was largely due to the efforts of Robert of Ketton (fl. 1141-1157). Robert's edition of the *Qur'an*, [*the Lex Mahumet*](#), was produced at the behest of Peter the Venerable, despite some trepidation on the part of the former. Robert had traveled to Toledo to study Arab sciences, especially mathematics and astronomy. His Latin translation of the *Qur'an* was notable, even beyond the point of it being the first of its kind, for the fact that it relied on Muslim commentary for its understanding of the text. Given the difficulty of the wording, even for native Arabic speakers, there must be some pool of commentary to consult for anything like a consistent view of the meaning therein. However, his interpolation bore noticeable injections of Christian theological vocabulary and concepts. While this improperly altered some of the content, it did not mar the entire work, as such interjections reveal an interaction with the text deeper than mere switching of words. His translations were as loyal to the commentaries and original wording as he could manage within his own mental framework. Such use of commentaries was a wide-spread practice in Spain and Sicily. Several Muslim scholars of Biblical literature, most notably 'Ali ibn Rabban (810-865) and al-Maqdisi (fl. 966), consulted Jewish and Christian commentaries to understand their query. What is more, when Robert translated it, he gave the text a Ciceronian Latin style so that it might have some clout as a text in

the European intellectual milieu. While succeeding generations would make further translations, none would supersede the quality of Robert's in regard of the use of Muslim thought to explicate their own theology. His would also frequently provide the basis of later translations, even into the modern era.

The next notable step was taken by Mark of Toledo (fl. 1193-1216), who composed the *Liber alkorani* in the early Thirteenth Century. His translation was more precise than Robert's, using the Arabic syntax as often as possible. This allowed the Arabic and Latin to be read alongside one another with remarkable clarity, making possible for the first time a more faithful philological study of the original. While Robert of Ketton had made an exceptional translation, its use of properly Latin rhetorical form made it an exceptional *Latin* document, intended for a Latin-reading Christian audience. Mark of Toledo paved the way for the more philologically focused studies of proceeding centuries.

Later sixteenth century editions of the *Qur'an* attempted to set original Arabic script beside the Latin translations. It was common practice among the humanist scholars of the time to interact with ancient scriptures in all three biblical languages: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. To facilitate this, many critical editions of the Bible set all three translations next to one another on the same page. It is in this tradition that Egidio da Viterbo (c. 1518) created a multi-lingual *Qur'an*. This remarkable project allowed for a more philologically-focused study of the Quranic text and paved the way for more precise translations. ---JR Morrel

[See Also: \(Joe, I will add this part later in the process. I will list other relevant articles in the encyclopedia here.](#)

[Further Reading:](#)

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James Kritzeck. *Peter the Venerable on Islam*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964.