

Translating in ninth century Cordoba

Notes on the *urjūzah* of Ḥafṣ ibn Albar al-Qūṭī to his Arabic
poetic version of *Sifr al-ḡubūr**

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Abstract

Ḥafṣ ibn Albar al-Qūṭī's verse translation of the *Book of Psalms* contains a prologue and an interesting introduction, an *urjūzah* in which the translator explained the method of translation he used. Our aim in this article is to comment some techniques and strategies adopted by the translator to realize the goal of this *urjūzah*. This is preceded by a section in which we offer a series of considerations on the socio-linguistic situation of Cordoba in the ninth century and the relationship between Arabisation and translation.

Key Words

Ḥafṣ ibn Albar al-Qūṭī, Psalms, Arabic, Translation method, Poetry.



Prolegomena: Between Arabisation and translation

In the ninth century, the situation in Cordoba met the right conditions for the Christian community to reach a high point in the process of translation from Latin into Arabic, as happened in the previous century in the *Oriens christianus* (Griffith, 1985; Rubenson, 1996).

The traditional vision of the ninth century Cordoba is not only portrayed as a society socially and religiously opposed between non acculturated Christians

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and Muslims, but also in the heart of the Christian community among Christians who supported the process of Arabisation against those who were against this process. One of the texts that has contributed most to this vision is the final fragment of Paul Alvar's *Indiculus luminosus* (§ 35 *in fine*: lines 53-62), whose literal reading has resulted in a partial view of the situation to which the famous Cordovan author refers.

Alvar's fragment runs as follows (Gil, 1974: 314-15):

Heu pro dolor, legem suam nesciunt Xpiani et linguam propriam non aduertunt Latini, ita ut omni Xpi collegio uix inueniatur unus in milleno hominum numero qui salutaris fratri possit ratjonauiliter dirigere litteras, et repperitur absque numero multiplices turbas qui erudite Caldaicas uerborum explicet pompas, ita ut metrice eruditjori ab ipsis gentibus carmine et sublimiori pulcritudine finales clausulas unius littere coartatjone decorent, et iuxta quod lingue ipsius requirit idioma, que omnes uocales apices commata claudit et cola, ritbmice, immo ut ipsis competit, metrice uniuersi alfabeti littere per uarias dictjones plurimas uariantes uno sine constringuntur uel simili apice.

“Oh sorrow! Christians do not know their own law and Latins do not understand their own language, in such a way that hardly in the entire Christian community is one of a thousand men that can address correctly a letter in Latin to a brother, but there are countless multitudes that are able to explain the verbal bombast of the Arabs, to the point that they are more erudite in metrics than those same people, and with more sublime beauty they adorn the final clauses with the shortening of a letter, and in accordance with what the very expression of the Arabic language demands, which closes all the accented vowels with a rhythmic or even metric cut, which suits all the letters of the alphabet through various expressions, and many variants are reduced to the same or similar end”.

Alvar's fragment has been repeatedly used as a sample of the complex relationship within the heart of the Christian community in Cordoba during the ninth century, which mimetically became a model for the situation of the Christians in al-Andalus. This model, in a simplified way, shows the Christian communities of al-Andalus in two groups: the group that resisted the process of Arabisation – refusing to collaborate and confronting the Andalusí State – and the supporters of the Arabisation process who collaborated with the Muslim authorities, with the aim of finding a room in the social scale.

However, in our opinion Alvar's fragment says more than what has usually been interpreted, and in a certain way contradicts that interpretation. Alvar complained about the dangerous ignorance of the Latin language that

Christians had (González Muñoz, 1996: 14-17), this is certainly true. But this sorrow (*Heu pro dolor*) not only was due to the ignorance of Latin, which the Christians had replaced – in his words – with an excellent knowledge of the (classical) Arabic language, nor to their skills in the art of versifying (*numero multiplices turbas qui erudite Caldaicas uerborum explicet pompas...*). Instead, what Alvar and his co-religionists feared was that Arabisation led Christians to participate in a process of acculturation which would open the door to the assimilation of a series of Islamic ideas and practices opposed to Christian orthodoxy, as occurred to some Christian groups in al-Andalus during the eighth and ninth centuries (Epalza, 1992: 55-72).

The Christian community of Cordoba, and of al-Andalus in general, was neither a self-isolated community nor isolated by the Islamic authority, although its people were legally defined by their legal status (*dhimmah*), and consequently subjected to the limits established by the Islamic authorities (Aillet, 2010: 33-39). The aim of Alvar, and of the Andalusí Christians as well, was to maintain their identity as a community (Tieszen, 2013) at the heart of a complex environment that stimulated at all times the linguistic and cultural interaction among its people.

The facilitation of this social interaction, as well as the process of assimilation of Christians to Islam, is proved in the influence that Islamic law had on *dhimmīs*. As occurred with the Muslim communities that lived under Christian power in the new conquered areas, Christian conversions to Islam sometimes occurred as a way of escape to a situation of social and religious marginality that ended in servile condition, as slaves or servants (Lapiedra, 2006: 108-109). Under this situation of legal control, Christians looked for a sign of their own identity, establishing lines of necessary control against a certain kind of acculturation that could be harmful for their community identity (Echevarría, 2009: 37-52).

But Alvar tells us one more thing that, despite being so obvious, has not received the attention it deserves. From the fragment one deduces that Alvar not only knew the grammatical rules of classical Arabic, but he also exhibited a good knowledge of the rules of the Arabic prosody, which indicates that Alvar was in fact an Arabized Christian (González Muñoz, 1996: 11-14; Monferrer-Sala & Cecini, 2014: 201-210).

The number of Arabised Christians, as in the Near East (Griffith, 2016: 29-51; Yarbrough, 2016: 173-216), had to be considerable (Millet-Gérard, 1982: 53-62), to the point that some families reached important positions in the

administration of the Umayyad state (Makkī & Corriente, 2001: 63, 170, 273; López, 1999: 169-184; Meouak, 1999: 220-227).

But, on the other hand, the real Arabisation process was not totally restrictive. Thus, Christians continued to use their mother tongue, without having any negative effect on their reputation or their social aspirations in the administration of the Islamic State (Ribera, 1914: ns. 1, 19). The language of the native population, generically called *al-‘ajamiyyah* (lit. “non-Arab; stranger”), was applied to Latin in the Andalusī context (Hitchcock, 2008: 36; Burman, 1994: 174-175; Monferrer-Sala, forthcoming), but also to a variety of peninsular romance registers (Corriente, 1997: 345; Zwartjes, 1997: 14-18; cf. Corriente, 1988: 132b; Corriente–Vicente–Pereira, 2015: 222, and 2017: 848). The same situation occurred in the Near East, where Christians, along with Arabic, continued to use their mother tongues: Syriac, Greek or Coptic, *inter alia*.

The Arabisation experienced by Christians was not considered negative by any sector of the Christian population, rather it was the result of a sensitivity expressed in a very different way, with which they reacted to a whole series of situations that they must face. By adopting the Arabic language, they were integrated into the new Andalusī society. But not only were they integrated as part of the Andalusī society, they also participated in its culture, which allowed them to create a valuable literary legacy in Arabic thanks to the expertise of bilingual Latin-Arab authors and translators (Van Koningsveld, 1994: 203-224), thus creating a kind of linguistic hybridism (Eddé–Micheau–Picard, 1997: 125).

The urjūzah: a note handbook for verse translation?

An example of the aforementioned linguistic hybridism is the use of the Arabic prosody (*‘arūd*) by Ḥafṣ ibn Albar al-Qūṭī (Monferrer-Sala 2010: 281-284) in his verse translation of the *Book of Psalms* (Urvoy, 1994: V-XIII; Van Koningsveld, 2016: 46-50; Graf, 1944-53: I, 124). The translation, commissioned by the Cordovan bishop Valens (*bi-idhn kbayr usquf li-l-bi‘ab Balans*, cf. Van Koningsveld, 2016: 190, 206; Urvoy, 1994: 19) was completed in the year 889 if the data is correct (Martin, 2017: 125-152; Van Koningsveld, 1994: 206-212; Monferrer-Sala, 2016: 7-8), and was rendered from a Latin version made by Jerome: “I have translated what Jerome interpreted” (*tarjamtu mā fassarabu Yarūnim*, cf. Van Koningsveld, 2016: 187, 202; Urvoy, 1994: 17), i.e. the

Psalterium ex hebraico (Ayuso Marazuela, 1960), although with influences and contaminations from other texts (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 51-61).

The translation is preceded by a prologue, with an original piece of great relevance for the present purpose: An introduction of 143 verses, in which the author says that he was commissioned to render a new version in verse of the *Book of Psalms*, because the prose translation circulating among the Arabised Christians was full of errors (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 182-209). But, in addition to this, the fact that Bishop Valens commissioned this translation of the *Book of Psalms* at the end of the ninth century is very important, since this contradicts the opinion of those scholars who describe the Cordovan Church clashing with the process of Arabisation shared by a portion of the urban Andalusi Christians.

But why did Ḥafṣ choose this poetic meter? (cf. Urvoy, 1994: X-XIII) Obviously for musical reasons, as it is made clear when he describes the *rajaḥ mashṭūr* as “a meter pleasant for singing, called among the Latins iambic” (*wabuwa ‘arūd fī l-ghinā’ mu’anniq ‘inda al-a‘ajim yusammā yanbaqu*, Van Koningsveld, 2016: 186, 200; Urvoy 1994: 16). But also, the choice of the *rajaḥ* meter was due to its similarity with the Latin meter (Norberg, 2004: 63-67), through which he intended to find the original Hebrew meter (Urvoy 1994: X). The use of the prosodic simile between both the Arabic and Latin meters, which helps to explain the poetic benefits of the chosen meter, is very illuminating in this context of the Arabisation, because Ḥafṣ affirms that he made his choice based on a Latin reference. Also, with this comparison Ḥafṣ established a conceptual equivalence between the two cultures in order to claim that the Latin language and its culture were superior to the Arabic language by conditioning Arabic to Latin.

Furthermore, Ḥafṣ’ vision of the language also included an ethnic-cultural feature, as he declares when describing the value of the psalms as an object of prayer (Urvoy 1994: 3):

(...) والرومانيون إنما آمنوا وصلّوا إلى ربهم باللغة التي يعرفونها من كان روميًا فبالرومية ومن كان سريانيًا فبالسريانية ومن كان عجميًا فباللاتينية لكيما يقرء كلّ لسان بإيمان الله

“(...) They only believe and pray to their Lord in the language they know: the Greeks in Greek, the Syriacs in Syriac and the Latin in Latin, in order that each language expresses faith in God”.

The musical benefits of the meter *rajaẓ mashṭūr* are highly emphasized by Ḥafṣ in such a way that when referring to the meter of the Hebrew original text (Eerdmans, 1947: 6-14; Schökel, 1987: 26-37) he also used this denomination (Urvoy 1994: 4):

(...) وينشدون الزبور بالعروض المشطور بالرجز العبراني

“And they recited the Psalter in the meter with internal rhyme, in Hebrew *rajaẓ*”

As we have just noted above, the Arabic meter was chosen by its similarity with the iambic meter. With this similarity through Latin Ḥafṣ pursued to reach the original Hebrew, which reflects an elaborate, melodic and regular meter (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 184, 197; Urvoy, 1994: 15):

وهنّ طراً في اللسان الأعجمي	في أصلها على عروض محكم
وزن غناء مؤتقٍ موزون	يفهمه ذو الفهم باللحون
كأنه في العربيّ الرجز	إلا قليلاً فيه ومعه يفترز
تهليل مزمار له الحان	بها يعني وله أوزان

And they are all in Latin,	in their original, in a well-defined meter—
A pleasing regular measure,	understood by the expert in melodies,
Resembling the <i>rajaẓ</i> in Arabic	except for slight differences,
Psalmody involves certain melodies	and certain measures in singing.

Another essential feature that Ḥafṣ sought was to reproduce the melodic rhythm of the Latin verse in order to approach the Hebrew original composed by the psalmist as much as possible. Obviously, the aim of Ḥafṣ was to get a translation suitable for the liturgical use, a requirement that would not meet the prose version circulating in those days among the Arabised Christian communities in al-Andalus (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 184, 197-198; Urvoy, 1994: 15):

فصار من ترجمه منشورة	أفسد منه النظم والتفسير
حتى إستحال مذهب	الكلام وزال عنه روتق النظام

He who previously translated it in prose

Spoiled its poetry and interpretation,
So that the style of the speech became absurd
And the charm of versified arrangement left it.

Although Ḥafṣ pointed out that in his poetic version he translated “word for word, / not interpreting it or by changing it, / without addition or subtraction, / except according to the need of the (Arabic) language” (*al-ḥarf bi-ḥarf mithlabu / lā muta’awmalan wa-la bi-badlibi / bi-lā ziyādah wa-lā nuqṣān / illā bi-qadar ḥājat al-lisān*, cf. Van Koningsveld, 2016: 187, 202; Urvoy, 1994: 17), however he criticized the prose translation that circulated prior to his, and expressed his rejection of the literal translation, specifying that the technique *ad pedem litterae* (*lafẓhan bi-lafẓhin*) is only the result of inexperienced (*ghayr mu’jabi*) and ignorant hands in grammatical rules (*jahd sharā’iṭ al-lisān*), which produces a semantically unintelligible translation (*lā yufham*), as a consequence of its nonsense (*lam yakun yafhamu mā fī l-tarjamah*), and syntactically incoherent (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 185, 198; Urvoy, 1994: 15):

لفظاً بلفظٍ فعلٍ غيرٍ مُعجَبٍ	إذ رام أن يُخرجه في العربي
بجهله شرائط اللسان	من أنه قد صَيَّع المعاني
في اللفظِ حتى أفسد التفسيرَ	فالتزم التقديمَ وتأخيرَ
إذ لم يكن مراده يترجمُ	فصارَ ما ترجمه لا يُفهمُ
من إستحالة المعاني المحكمه	ولم يكن يفهم ما في الترجمة
ليس له سرْدٌ ولا نظام	فشاع مما ترجم الكلام
ولا له معنىً به يُحتاج	ولا سيما ولا ديباج

Since he wished to produce it in Arabic
Word for word, an action not worthy of admiration.
Namely that he ruined the meanings
Through his ignorance of the laws of the language.
He strictly kept to the order of the words
With the result that he spoiled the interpretation.
What he translated was not understood
From the absurdity of the meanings.
The wording spread abroad in his translation
Has neither consecutiveness nor order.

Neither characteristic nor luster of style
Not even the indispensable meaning.

As a consequence of this criticism, the strategy adopted by Ḥafṣ is very clear: A poetic text cannot be rendered into prose, and even less literally. A poetic text must be translated, by force, in verse (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 185, 199, 201; Urvoy, 1994: 16):

وجاء للقائل أن يقولَ ليس يكون مثله تهليلاً
فلم أجد أقرب للتزيين من رده في الكلم الموزون

One could almost say
That the like of it is not praise at all
I have found nothing more to its adorning
Than to render it in poetic form.

وذا دليل أتع لو لم يكن في أصله ممتزناً لم يترن
نعم وبعضه كما يترجم من غير أن يُعنى به المترجم

I found what I have translated versified
In it and in anything else is impossible.
This is a proof that if it were not
versified in the original, it would not have been versified.

Ḥafṣ went into detail about the adopted procedure, explaining the most relevant data derived from the aim of the translator for getting a clear text, devoid of obscurities (*min ṣḥābirin wa-min kbāfī mubhamī*). Ḥafṣ also justified the chosen meter (*‘arūd al-rajaṣ al-mashḥūr*), giving an accurate description of its feet (cf. verses 42-46). Of linguistic interest is the information offered by Ḥafṣ relating the adapted Andalusī system of the *‘arūd*, which did it not attend the stress-syllabic theory, since long syllables must be substituted by stress (Corriente, 1980: 76).

Here is the text (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 185-186, 199-200; Urvoy, 1994: 16):

أربع نقرات إذ حسين كن اثنتي عشرة إذ حصَلن
وهن أيضا هكذا في الأعجمي توجد في وزن المذاق المُحْكَم

...
وحركانته على اللسان في الوزن من سواه ليس يمكنُ

It has three complete feet
In Arabic, and each foot possesses
Four syllables when counted,
Amounting to twelve in all.

...
And its motions upon the tongue
In the measure of both languages are the same

Ḥafṣ further explains why he decided to use that meter, saying that it “allows clear explanation and interpretation” (*al-wāḍiḥ al-tabẓīn wa-l-tafsīr*). He describes its measure (*waẓn*) and its melody (*nagħm*) as prosodic features that make it similar to some Latin meters (*yaqrabu min ba‘ḍ a‘arāḍ al-‘ajam*). The choice of the meter *rajaẓ* allowed in certain verses that the translator leaved practically the same version that Jerome (*Yarūnum*) did. However, there were also particularly difficult verses to translate, as Ḥafṣ wrote (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 186, 201; Urvoy, 1994: 16):

نعم وبعضه كما يترجم من غير أن يُعنى ب المترجم
...
وبعضه مُمتنع عسيرُ يُجَار فيه الوهم والتفسير

Yes, and some of it was left as it has been translated
Without the special care of the translator

...
Some of it is difficult and intractable
Perplexing both the imagination and interpretation.

The untranslatable are also subject to which our translator devoted some considerations of sociolinguistic interest, as when he stated that “It is sometimes permissible in the Latin language / to transpose what is not susceptible of transposition, / contrary to what the Arabs say / and their method of expressing what they mean” (*fa-qad yajūzu fī l-lisān al-‘jamī taqdīm mā laysa badhī’ taqaddumī / ‘alā kbilāf ma taqūlu al-‘arab / wa-mā bibi ‘amma turīdu tu’rifu*, cf. Van Koningsveld, 2016: 188, 203; Urvoy, 1994: 17). Therefore,

although we do not always have correspondences between the source language and the target language, Ḥafṣ simply translated “every word / in its place, taking the utmost care in the translation” (*kull kalimah / makānahā muḥarriẓan fi l-tarjamah*, cf. Van Koningsveld, 2016: 188, 203; Urvoy, 1994: 18).

Ḥafṣ also pointed out that some poetic licenses like *īṭā'*, *sinād* and *iqwā'* (Urvoy, 1994: XII) have not been taken into consideration, a strategy of scarce importance for the final result of his translation according to him. However, since he admitted to be an ignorant on (sacred) sciences (*idh kullubum ya'lamu mā lā a'lamu / wa-fi l-'ulūm mā jahaltu yaḥbamu*, cf. Van Koningsveld, 2016: 191, 207; Urvoy, 1994: 20) he gave importance to check his translation with learned scholars in sacred sciences, who would specify the meaning of concepts and expressions in the text, while illuminating his translation with commentaries (Monferrer-Sala, 2000: 303-319) on the Holy Scriptures (Van Koningsveld, 2016: 190, 205-206; Urvoy, 1994: 18-19):

وكلّ موثوق به في ديننا	شاوړت فيه كلّ حبر عندنا
مقابلاً لما كتبت معهم	محصلاً لما علمت عندهم
وفي العلوم الدلتقى [منائر]	قوم هم في دينهم أختيار

I have consulted about it every learned man among us
 And welcomed every effort for it,
 Collecting what I learned in their company,
 Comparing what I wrote down with them—
 People who are best in their religion
 And a bright light in the sacred sciences.

This information has a double interest: on the one hand, the reference to a kind of revision or query of doubts about the translation by learned scholars, as we have just mentioned, perhaps led to the consultation of *commentaria* to the *Book of Psalms*; but on the other hand, the sentence *idh kullubum ya'lamu mā lā a'lamu* (“Since all of them (the good and learned scholars) know what I do not know”) implies that the translation task of Ḥafṣ – which was not limited to this book – had more than one detractor. Accordingly, the aim of this introductory *urjūzah*, in which Ḥafṣ described its method of translation in detail, would also have as one of its purposes to justify the techniques and strategies adopted in the translation in order to mitigate as far as possible the criticisms that other translators and theologians could make on his work.

The *urjūzah*, in our opinion, was not conceived as a mere note handbook. Rather it represented a sort of justification in two directions: on the one hand, it was a vindication of his poetic rendition, which replaced the existing prose translation; but, moreover, the *urjūzah* was a justification against those scholars, Christians and Jews – including the author or the supporters of the prose translation – who were reluctant towards this new poetic version.

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