From Tunis to Leiden across Renaissance Europe

The curious career of a maghribi Qur'an

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The Leiden Codex Or. 241 is an illuminated Qur'anic manuscript in maghribi script containing suras 33:31-37:44, with a lacuna from 36:80 to 37:22. It was probably written in the early 16th/17th century. The recto of its first written page contains a manuscript annotation, 'Sum Andreae Masij', by which it has long been known to have belonged to the Netherlandish scholar and diplomat Andreas Masius (1514-1573). But if one turns back a page, to the very first fly-leaf (read from right to left), and holds the codex upside-down, two more small annotations meet the eye: 'Sum Rescij professoris graeci' and 'Sum nunc Andreae Masij Rescij discipuli.' The owner in the first ex libris note can be no other than Rutger Rescius (Ressen), printer and professor of Greek (1518-1545) at the Collegium Trilingue in Louvain. Masius, who indeed studied Greek with Rescius there, respectfully noted his name beneath that of his teacher. But while Rescius opened the book at the right end, he held it upside down while marking his ownership, much like Scaliger does with an Arabic manuscript in the famous 1608 portrait, now kept in the Senaatskamer of the Academiegebouw. Perhaps to subtly note his own competence in Arabic, Masius noted his ownership a second time, now right-side up.

A journey through space and time

These brief annotations open up the history of this beautiful codex, which has quite a story to tell about the history of oriental scholarship in Early Modern Europe. Some twenty years ago, Alastair Hamilton discovered that several important Arabic and Hebrew manuscripts were long erroneously ascribed to the Scaliger bequest, and that they had actually belonged to Franciscus Raphelengius, printer to Leiden University, professor of Hebrew, and founding father of Arabic studies in the Netherlands. Hamilton's main source was the 1626 auction catalogue of books sold by Raphelengius' sons, some thirty years after their father's death. Among the manuscripts listed therein is one described as 'Ex Alcorano Fragmenta quaedam, seu integrae Azoarae, charactere African. in charta. Exemplar hoc fuit primo Rescij Professoris Graeci Lovan. inde And. Masij, &c.' Hamilton suspected this to be the current Or. 251, but that is on parchment, while the auction catalogue says 'in charta' (on paper) instead of 'in membrana' (on parchment). Or. 241, however, is on paper, and indeed belonged to both Rescius and Masius, while nothing about Or. 251 suggests such provenance. It can therefore safely be asserted that Or. 241, while included in the recent catalogue of Scaliger's library, All my books in Foreign Tongues (2009), did not in fact belong to Joseph Scaliger at all. And while it therefore must only have entered the library sometime after the 1626 auction, it most probably arrived in Leiden with Raphelengius in 1586 when he took over the Leiden office of the Plantin printing house, available there for Scaliger to consult.

The owner's entry by Andreas Masius on the verso of the first leaf. [UBL Or. 241].

The annotations "Sum Rescij professoris graeci" and "Sum nunc Andreae Masij Rescij discipuli." on the first fly leaf. [UBL Or. 241].
Rescius and Raphelengius: two of a kind

Rescius and Raphelengius resemble each other in interesting ways. Both studied in Paris before returning to their native Low Countries. Rescius was a corrector for Erasmus' friend and printer, Theodoricus Martinus (Dirk/Thierry Martens) in Louvain, in the very years when he produced the editio princeps of Thomas More's Utopia. Raphelengius went to work for Christopher Plantin in Antwerp and collaborated on the Antwerp Polyglot Bible, among others alongside Andreas Masius, from whom he most likely acquired this Qur'an. Eventually, Rescius and Raphelengius both became important printers as well as scholars in their own right.

Yet if we know how this Qur'an passed from Rescius through Masius to Raphelengius, a man famous for his love of Arabic, then how did it wind up in the hands of a Louvain Hellenist with no known interest in Arabic?

A Moroccan scholar has recently deciphered the calligraphic waqfyya of this manuscript, identifying its origin as Bizert, the ancient Phoenician port just north of Tunis. Among the earliest Arabic manuscripts acquired by Renaissance humanists were those looted by the troops led by Charles V during the sack of Tunis in 1535, and Rescius' Qur'an might very well have been among them. But how did it get to Rescius?

A possible path, while without direct evidence, merits consideration. Among Rescius' most devoted students was Nicolas Clenardus (Cleynaerts, 1493-1542), the Netherlandish humanist best known for his popular introductory grammars to Greek and Hebrew. Clenardus taught himself rudimentary Arabic from Agostino Giustiniani's polyglot Psalter published in Genoa in 1516 (the Leiden copy UBL ry68 c 2 belonged to Scaliger), and eventually decided to travel to Spain, and hence to Fez to study Arabic in earnest.

A centre for islamic studies

Rescius is among the addressees of Clenardus' letters. The correspondence does not mention the gift of a Qur'an, but it does show us Clenardus as a devoted pioneering Arabist. In Granada he acquired not only Arabic manuscripts, but also a Muslim slave taken in captivity from Tunis, recently identified by P. Sj. van Koningsveld, from contemporary Arabic sources, as the prominent Tunisian scholar Muhammad ibn Abi 'l-Fadl ibn Kharuf. Clenardus even tried to persuade 'Charufius meus' to come to Flanders to teach Arabic, mirroring the way his hero, Erasmus, had attracted to the Collegium Trilingue a converted Sephardi Jew, Matthias Adriani, to teach Hebrew.

Clenardus' dream of establishing a center for Islamic studies in the Netherlands took another fifty years to materialize, at Leiden rather than Louvain. But there, the Qur'an Or. 241, whether Clenardus' or not, served Raphelengius, Scaliger and their students as a most valuable source for their study of the Islamic world.