WA-'BA'DA ZAMÂN QALIL YAQŪMU FĪ-'ARAB INSĀN: APOLITICAL AS PROPAGANDISTIC TOOL AGAINST ISLAM

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Under the concept ‘polemical’ different samples of the Oriental Christian literary production are regarded, each of them being in turn suitable for further sub-classification according to their typology [1]. Thus, a wide range of types can be displayed starting from the apologetic literature till the apocalyptic, which were produced in the ample context of ‘Abladis era.
The problem of the Christian conversion to the Muslim faith [2], stimulated by economic causes affecting the abd al-djjumur [3], seems to be the background agent that provokes the first treats of apolitical nature — in Syria as well as in Arabic — in order to set a controversial clash with the Muslims [4]. The oldest apologetic treatises produced by Syrian Christians in response to Islam [5] — if we are to believe Reinink’s suggestion [6] — should not be considered the product of an argument or polemic, but rather a way to communicate in turn addressed to members of their respective communities to warn them about the impending dangers of apostasy, and were produced as a response to the increase of the Christian condition which had occurred ever since the late 7th when the Islam first appeared.
The Christian apologetic which has come down to us in Syriac language is a brief report of a conversation between the Jacobite patriarch John I (d. 648) and a Muslim officer called ‘Amur ibn Basri. Clearly referring to the Qur’an, we can mention his Kišāb al-ma‘īl il-walijdhun (“The Book of Questions and Answers”), which shows the same controversial topics among Christians and Muslims and also his “Apology in Favor of the Doctrine of the Trinity” [8].
In addition to all this, the apology by Hunayn b. Isḥaq (d. 873) [23], plus another by Qustā ibn Lūṭ (d. 912) [14], deserves a mention and no less that by ‘Abd al-Malšūd b. Isḥaq ibn Hārīm in the form of a response addressed to ‘Abd Allāh b. Ismā‘īl b. Hājīm, whose text still awaits a relevant critical edition [24], is both a definitive translation and moral behaviour and an attack, in turn, to the Muslim doctrine [25].
The Christian apologetic production in Arabic and in Syriac is another of a comparable importance in the context of the early theological typology — when the Muslims seem to have had a role to play [26], as pointed out by Col [27]. It has set the standards and defined the topics to be later dealt with by Christian Arab polemists of subsequent centuries.
For them the dialectic style of writing was the most important importation, which may well be called “Christian Arabic Theology” — although it comes up vigorously during the first century of the ‘Abbasid period — emerges some time later than the earliest apologetic treatises, during the Umayyad period and most probably in a Palestinian Melqute context, since these last people were the first to make use of Arabic as a lingua franca, as can be noticed in the evaluative picture of the apologetic literature drawn by Sanīrī Khālīl Samīr [28]. He distinguishes there four stages which he denominates, in turn: (i) “biblical and homiletic approach” (from mid-8th to mid-9th c.); (ii) “mixed approach biblical-philosophical” (from mid-9th to mid-10th c.) which adds to the previous the philosophical approach; (iii) “early 10th to mid-11th c.” and lastly (iv) “humanistic-spiritual approach” (from mid-11th to mid-13th c.) which takes on the same presentation of the first stage, which includes the treatises by ‘Abd ibn Rā‘īthān al-Qurraḥ, alongside with the apologetic section of Sanā‘a ‘Ismā‘īl ‘Abd al-Malšūd, produced by Stephen of Ramla in 877 in the works of various kings and in a way, there appears the transition second, where the biblical-homiletic tradition of the initial period combines with the logico-philosophical method that ‘Abd ibn Rā‘īthān’s treatises put forward, section devoted to the “Trinity” in ‘Abd al-Malšūd ibn-Kindī, ‘Amur ibn Basri, Īlāhī ibn-Ṭabarānī [30].
The evolution undergone in the second stage becomes more elaborated in the third one: a) ‘Abd and his school establishes the method and the philosophical approach, where the biblical references are scarce. In this stage the process of acculturation that began to be felt at the beginning of the 10th c. gradually gathering strength among Christian authors [31]. The fourth stage, in turn, is a kind of return to the second: through a more clearly expressed philosophical method they resort to the biblical and patristic sources, as is the case of the Qur’an and Islamic, in order to explicate the Christian beliefs. The more and more polished literary style would undergo a process of omanization, in turns of display of texts which were written in Arabic, while in Egypt in turn no Arabic literature can be identified until the middle of the 10th c. [44].
Lastly, polemical, homiletic and pastoral character lie at the heart of the very origins of the apologetic production in Arabic — they represent the first literary steps towards the transmission of the Gospels and the translation into Arabic lie at the very heart of the various types of arguments and controversies against the Muslims — in addition to the homiletic literature. Leaving aside the problem of the alleged first translation of the Bible into the Arabic language, the oldest Arabic manuscript (9th c.) containing passages from the New Testament is to be found in the famous Coptic Syriac [33], with the register number Sinait. Ar. 151/130 [34].
It has a total of 269 sheets over parchments of 25×15 cm, and an handwritten text of St. Paul’s letters, as well as the Catholic Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles a codex written with “transitional” cursive, perhaps a translation of Coptic to and from kufic [35]. It therefore represents, as suggested above, the oldest New Testament manuscript which has been handed down. In his reading methods one can read that some Birg al-Sirr [36] employed it in the Syriac in the city of Damascus during the month of ramā단 in the year 253/867, i.e. thirty years before the first Arabic translation of the Gospels made by Stephen de Ramla in the year 264/877 [37]. In addition to this specimen we also have, among other preserved early samples, the fragments of For, Ar. 13 found in the "Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana", from the laura of Mīr Sāhī near Jerusalem, of which currently only St. Paul’s letters and several fragments of the Gospels remain. Actually, the versions of the Psalms, the Acts of the Apostles and the remainder of the four Gospels as well as the epistles have been lost [38].
All this reflects the determinate function developed by the Palestinian monasteries in the bringing about of the manuscripts, generation by generation in laure like those of Mīr Khātifīn or the one on Mīr Sāḥī and St. Catherine, are the ones which triggered the first steps of the Christian literature in Arabic, becoming, because employed in monastic practice, the one the texts was written, the use was not limited to the end of the Umayyad period: the former at least by the Palestinian Melkite community until it was eventually replaced by Arabic. Whereas in Syria and Iraq the language used by the Christian communities was Syriac in liturgy as well as in written documents, in Egypt, Coptic, in Palestine, in turn, the language of the Church was Greek, except in cases where the native Palestinians made use of a dialect of Arabic.
In fact the Church maintained the basic ritual and the readings of the texts in Greek till the users of this language vanished, replaced the Coptic in the 9th c., the early 8th c., and more fully so since the 9th c. [42]. One must not forget the relevant aspects of bilingualism, trilingualism and even quadrilingualism of some characters, a common case in monasteries like those of Mīr Sāḥī and Mīr Khātifīn [43], as exemplified by the prolific Thābit ibn Qurra. The Syriac speaking regions, nevertheless, must wait until the 9th c. for the first display of texts which were written in Arabic, while in Egypt in turn no Arabic literature can be identified until the middle of the 11th c. [44].
But polemical, homiletic and pastoral character lie at the heart of the very origins of the apologetic production in Arabic — they represent the first literary steps towards the transmission of the Gospels and the translation into Arabic lie at the very heart of the various types of arguments and controversies against the Muslims — in addition to the homiletic literature. Leaving aside

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formation of the ample, varied and diverse genre of "polemic" [46]. Such tradition conceived of the new religion as a "divine punishment" that Christianity must overcome and overcome with the passing of time and God's help.

From the turn of the last century the term "apocalyptic" (apokalupteis) was coined by those who thought it came from St. John's Gospel [57], and in 1875 there was a label to identify the wide and varied corpus of literature both Jewish and Jewish-Christian [48]. In Glasson's suggestion such term is insufficient to describe the literary instances implied [49]. In the case of the Camargue's concept of "eschatology" ten years before, in which the idea of apocalyptic was also included [50]. At any rate, in spite of Glasson's radical position towards the conceptual "definition", there arises a more constructive proposal of offering a "description" of such a complex phenomenon, as the claim of Camargue's: "contra definitionem pro descriptione [51]."

One of the factors that characterises this type of literature, taking it as one of the religious-political constituent, recently acknowledged by Cook [52] and referred to by Abel [53], is the historical, which plays a prominent role, deemed mostly typical of the Muslim apocalyptic instances [54]. The Christianity living on either side of the river Euphrates before the arrival of Arab Muslim numer-

N O T E S

1. For a general introduction to this type of literature, see J.P. Monferrer-Salas, "La labor polemista de los cristianos orientales y su contexto histórico," in El arte espantoso del Cristianismo Oriental (Murcia, 2000), pp. 61-119.


3. About the tributes which the Christian population had to pay to D. C. Demmet, Conversion and the Poll Tax in Early Islam (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979).


7. For a discussion about this text, see ibid., pp. 171-186.

8. See ibid., pp. 171-186.


10. See ibid., pp. 171-186.

11. See ibid., pp. 171-186.


The problem of authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry has a long tradition in the history of classical Arabic literature studies. The approaches to the problem were developed as early as the Middle Ages, and the modern research has started in the middle of the 19th c. Medieval philologists did not manage to solve this problem: their criteria of selection of authentic pre-Islamic poems turned out to be too vague and subjective. Little more successful were the attempts of modern researchers. As a result there is no unanimous opinion about the authenticity of early Arabic poetry and thus contradictory ideas about the most important works of pre-Islamic classics are expressed.

Let us give one characteristic example. It is known that

of special popularity in the East since the 8th c. and in the scholars of Europe since the 18th c. have been the so-called mu'allaqat ('suspended', 'beautified', 'selected') a form of collection of seven (in other editions of nine and ten) large works of the same kind [1].

But a competent French researcher R. Blachère shares neither the delight of the medieval philologists about this collection, nor the praise of European critics under their influence. His attitude towards mu'allaqat the researcher justifies by the fact that they, in his opinion, are not reliable enough examples of archaic poetry. Thus, in a mu'allaqa by 'Amr b. Khulthu'm the elegiac prologue must have been added to give the whole the form of a "canal" qasida poem. The harmony of the parts of the mu'allaqa must have suffered sufficiently in the period of verbal existence of this poem. Mu'allaqa by al-Harith b. Hilifara, according to R. Blachère, is a work by an imitator inclined to rare terms. 'Antar's mu'allaqa reveals a mystifier: its length itself is suspicious as well as the connection of non-related themes. In Itris al-Qayyay's and Tair's mu'allaqa a skillful imitator gets too carried away with the rare terms and bombastisms. Besides, in the latter's mu'allaqa the description of sailing along Tigers and Iuphrates or the Persian Gulf must be considered an obvious interpolation of Iranian origin [2].

Blachère's quoted opinion can not be called too harsh. The harshest conclusions about this problem belong to an

Englishman D.S. Margoliouth and an Egyptian Tāhā Husayn. The latter, for example wrote:

"The majority of what we call jāhiliyya literature has nothing to do with jāhiliyya and is forged after the appearance of Islam; this literature is Muslim, it reflects the life of Muslims, its inclinations and interests more than the life in the epoch of jāhiliyya" [3].

Tāhā Husayn claims that

"the poetry ascribed to Itris al-Qayyay or al-A'qājah or other jāhiliyya poets cannot have been written by them neither from the linguistic, nor from the artistic point of view; this poetry cannot have been written and spread before the appearance of Qur’ān" [4].

D.S. Margoliouth stated that the Arabs did not have poetry at all before the appearance of Islam and thus considered the earliest examples of Arabic poetry later forgeries [5]. Most contemporary researchers do not agree with D.S. Margoliouth or Tāhā Husayn. At the same time, it is hard to find a specialist in medieval Arabic literature who would deny the existence of a sufficient number of late forgeries among the preserved works of early Arabic poetry. We can refer to the trustworthy opinion of I. Iu. Krachkovskii:

"Hardly any research today doubts that part of the works of the so-called pre-Islamic poetry is false. But it is far from admitting that all pre-Islamic poetry is a late falsification, and hardly any researcher would agree with such an extreme idea" (bolded by Krachkovskii — A. K.)[6].

From Krachkovskii's words we should conclude that the study of pre-Islamic poetry should be preceded by the processes of distinguishing authentic early Arabic works. Many speak about the complexity of this process, for example an Arabic scholar S. Khāliṣ: