

An Introduction and Analysis of Old Translation of Holy QUR'AN at WALTERS ART MUSEUM MANUSCRIPT

Ali Nazari¹, Muhammad Shokri²

- 1- Prof. in Arabic language and literature, Luristan University, Iran.
alinazary2002@gmail.com
- 2- PhD student in Arabic language and literature, Luristan University, Iran.
shokri1360@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper introduces one of the old translated manuscripts of *Holy Qur'an* which is held in an American museum. Apparently, it was created toward the end of 9th century but the translation goes back to centuries earlier. Remarkable for its word-for-word translation inserted between Arabic verses, this manuscript offers a great number of Old Persian words and is informed by linguistic spirit of 5th and 6th centuries. Before attending to the actual text, first some notes on visual and artistic features are presented. Finally, the significance of such manuscripts and old renditions of *Holy Qur'an* is explored while a considerable number of archaic words are listed.

Keywords: Manuscript, Holy Qur'an, Old Translation of Holy Qur'an, Walters Art Museum, Orthography, Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī.

1) Introduction

The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, United States holds a *Holy Qur'an* manuscript under the number W.563 in manuscript section of the museum. The valuable and beautiful book, written in 9th up until 15th century, offers many advantages each of which deserves study and inquiry. The feature that distinguishes this manuscript most is the precious marginalia which revolves around the different readings (Qira'at) known as *Sab'a readings (Qira'a Sab'a)*. Another unique feature has to do with page layout and illuminated that have made the book very special. But more importantly for our purposes is the very old translation from Arabic into Persian (Farsi) that is a word-for-word rendition put right beneath the corresponding Qur'anic word(s). According to available evidence, the rendition took place most probably in 5th or (at most) 6th, a fact making this Qur'anic translation a precious treasure of Persian language and literature due to its word choice which is both accurate and archaic and at times from Dari Persian dialect. As such, this book needs to be saved from obscurity. In what follows, an exposition of the manuscript will be followed by some notes on its Persian translation.

2) Qur'anic manuscript at Walters Art Museum: A brief description

2-1) Age

According to the brief description available in the museum, this Qur'an was written as far as 9th century AH (15th century CE) in northern India. One indication for this dating is the royal seal of Sultan Bayezid II (886-918 ah/ 1481- 1512 CE) on page 8a (fig. 1). In addition, page 3a bears another seal and dedication note attributed to Sultan Osman II (432 – 436 AH/1027- 1031 CE) that is intentionally scraped away.

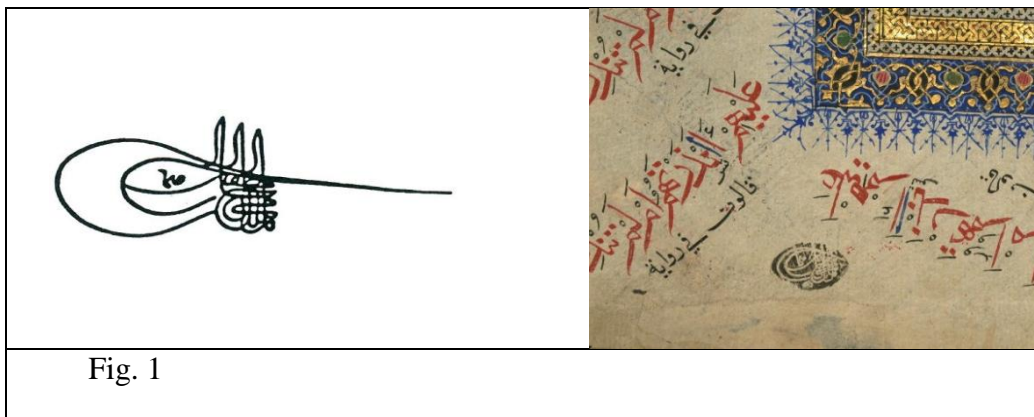


Fig. 1

2-2) Visual Features

This Qur'an is in Teymurid format (31*40 cm; approximately a folio size) written on thin paper sheets with a brown leather cover and a flap inside which verses 77-80 from *Al-Waqi'a* (the 56th surah) are inscribed in gold.

The manuscript contains all of Qur'anic verses in 1102 pages (551 sheets). The main pages (texts of surahs) feature 9 lines of black hand-written verse in a 19/5*26 cm layout. In between lines are interpolated the Persian translation (word-for-word) written in slanted red hand-written font with a small quill.

2-3) Marginalia on the different Readings

The most salient feature of the Qur'anic manuscript at Walters Art Museum is its precious and detailed marginalia on the contemporaneous disputed readings. The method adopted in this manuscript includes using different colors for the disputed words or phrases (or even pronunciation marks or cues) which are written in slanted or vertical lines in the margins. These marginalia are completed by confirmatory commentaries and explanations written in smaller black letters.

2-4) Madd (elongated vowel) and Edgahm (merged consonants or vowels)

One interesting section in this manuscript is the preface (Walters Art Museum manuscript: 3a) enveloped inside a decorative *Shamsa* (circular medallion signifying sun). This preface is a one-page commentary on *Tajweed* (the rules governing pronunciation during recitation of the Qur'an) and is, interestingly and unlike other expository sections, written in Persian or, more precisely, a mixture of Persian and Arabic. Unfortunately, this section has been eroded but it still can be read.

3) Translation of the Holy Qur'an manuscript in Walters Art Museum

3-1) Significance of the translation

The most valuable feature of this manuscript for our purposes is the word-for-word translation that is written in a different color and smaller font size than the verses and positioned in spaced slanted letters beneath each Arabic word. This is a complete rendition of Qur'an and has remained intact through ages with minor damage except for some sections in and inside the illuminated lines and the cases where the translator has, intentionally or otherwise, skipped some sentences. Thus, the manuscript is very important in that it is a treasure trove of archaic words, phonetic and linguistic features, old grammar and orthographic styles and can be used as a reference in correcting and comparing translation manuscripts of that historical period.

2-3) Translator of the Holy Qur'an manuscript at Walters Art Museum

As we will find later, the actual translation took place much earlier than writing. Although the Arabic marginalia are still disputed, it is possible to say that the bulk of the translation was copied from an earlier draft for some reasons: first, the language and archaic terminology of the translation belongs to a time not later than 6th century AH (see below for further details). Second, unlike the marginalia, the translation bears some errors which have to do with erroneous readings and understanding of the scribe who combined several copies to write the text of translation.

On the other hand, there are some indications that the scribe himself is the translator. A case in point is verse No. 120 in *Sūrat an-Nisā* where the word ‘maa’ is rendered as a conjunction and then crossed out and rendered as a negative function word:

(And Satan would encourage them only by deception)

Another but much more recurrent instance has to do with structure of ‘*Kaana* + progressive verb’:

(whatever they were weaving)

This complete rendition of *Holy Qur’an* has no mention of the translator. Perhaps, it was not customary to mention the translators’ names back then and scribes would ignore it since these were not singular works but copies and modifications of an official translation commonly known as *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. We believe that the translation at hand is a combination of several translations or an edition of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* now lost and that it is very similar to *Ayasofya* copy. This point needs exploration and comparison of these translations and demands a different study.

3-3) Translation Features

Like other translations from Middle Ages, translating of the religious scripture is a literal word-for-word rendition which follows the original language syntax. Instead of conveying the meaning, translator tries to insert the best possible equivalents for Qur’anic words, leaving the reader to draw his own perception. This translation is characterized by an Arabic word and its Persian equivalent (sometimes two equivalents or equivalents for morphemes) written distinctly beneath it. this adherence to literal equivalents sometimes undergo changes; that is, a single word is translated differently in context of different verses into its Persian equivalent or put on a par with an Arabic word popular among Persian readers. For example, the verb ‘Yat-Tabe-O’ is mostly translated as *Obey* and sometimes as *Follow*. The translator adds some interpretations of his own that will be explored below. Now, a rather unsatisfactory point is described:

3-3-1) *Inaccuracy*: there are instances where the translated units do not cohere and are arranged in semantically meaningless order: base form of the verb instead of verb, verb instead of adjective, adjective instead of verb. There are also some translated verbs that are erroneous in terms of inflection and/or tense. These inaccuracies could be accounted for by unwanted mistakes on part of the scribe only if they were few. However, some factors demand other explanations for these inaccuracies: they are too frequent to regard them as scribing errors. Further, other sections of the translation show very accurate performance and display perfection and excellence, perhaps an indication that this book was created as a gift to a notable figure or to sultan himself.

Another explanation has to do with contemporaneous books that bear the same level of errors (see Daberi, 1381: 141-145). In this case, the scribes only copied and quoted without trying to correct the errors.

The third explanation that exempts the scribes from these inaccuracies is that some errors are too blatant to be written by a Persian scribe: he knew Persian only partially. Such gross errors include:

- *washed* instead of *seated* for 'فَعُوداً' (Surat *Āl 'Imrān*: 191)
- *Intelligence* instead of *Merry* for 'هَنِيئاً' (Sūrat *an-Nisā*)
- *They will depart* instead of *Thou will depart*;
- *Returned* instead of *Avoided* for 'كَفَفْتُ' (Surat *al-Mā'ida*: 110)
- *Remember ... in a true way* instead of *Abandon ... in a true way* (Sūrat *Ṭā-Hā*: 97)
- *Indecipherable* instead of *Avoid seeing* for (Sūrat *Ṭā-Hā*: 96)

Therefore, it seems unlikely that such gross errors would be committed by scribes given that these were not uncommon in that period. As such, other explanations are required.

3-3-2) linguistic and syntactic features

a) Linguistic features

Walters Art Museum manuscript offers an incoherent translation in terms of linguistic and writing style. This confused assemblage is characteristic of the early period of Dari Persian which is roughly from early 4th century AH up until early 7th century AH (see Khanlari, 1374: 1/359-369). In addition, the features of the eastern dialects of Iran dominate old translations including Walters Art Museum manuscript. Some of the syntactic and morphological features that associate this manuscript with early Dari Persian rather than with next periods (7th and 8th centuries) are as follow:

- The verb 'Nemoodan' is used to convey its actual sense which is 'demonstrate, reveal', a sense associated with early period of Dari Persian (ibid: 1/345).
- The verbal prefix 'beh' (an emphatic device as defined by Mohammad-Taqi Bahar) is commonly added to negative verbs: '*Behgoftam, Behshetaphtam* (for a'jalto), and ...'
- Both 'Mee' and 'Hamee' are used as prefix to progressive verbs (see Khanlari, 1374: 2/222)
- The syllable 'Mar' in '*mar ... raa*' is an indicator of the object commonly used in Khorasan and users of Dari Persian (Bahar, 1381: 1/419). This syllable is widely used in the Walters Art Museum manuscript. Two such uses: *Kneel in front of Adam* and *The messengers notified him*.
- The prepositions 'Andar' and 'Dar' are present in this manuscript, a point that confirms our speculation about the age of translation.

- Pronouncing ‘d’ as ‘z’ as in ‘Pedar’ written as ‘Pezar’; probably because of the special local dialect. Other examples are: ‘pezaran,’ ‘mazar,’ ‘mazaran,’ ‘barazar,’ ‘barazaran’ (everywhere in the text) ‘khazayera,’ (78b) ‘baz raaheest’ (78a).
- Pronouncing ‘z’ as ‘d’ as in: Kaghad (117b), ‘napadirand’ and ‘az had godaran degaan’¹ (cf Khanlari, 1374: 2/ 74-75).
- Dual pronunciations for single words, as in: ‘Nar Dah Baan/Nar Dah Vaan’² (474b) ‘anbaaz/hanbaaz,’³ (244b) ‘anbaazan/hanbaazan,’⁴ (248a) ‘Neh veshteh’ ‘Neh beshteh.’⁵
- Omitting the nasal-dental consonant /n/ as in: ‘Neh goon saar/neh goosaar,’ ‘Shabaan rooz/ Shabaarooz,’ (see: Khanlari, 1374:2/86)
- Omitting the middle consonant between the final ‘aa’ and plural affix ‘aan’ (Khanlari, 1374:2/87-88) as in: *Tar saan* instead of *Tar Saayan* (it appears in the second form, too (16b))
- Omitting the initial *Hamza* with *Fatheh* sound /æ/ as in: ‘Aaz Eeshaan/ Azishaan,’⁶ ‘Anaar/Naar’⁷.
- Merging two Ts as in: *Sakhtar* instead of *Sakht taar*⁸ or *Raastar* instead of *Raast taar*⁹ (32a).
- Merging D and T into T as in: *Bataar* instead of *bad taar*¹⁰ as in translation of ‘هم شرّ البريّة’

b) Syntactical features

- Conditional appendix ‘= ī’ which is added to the end of verb in both dependent and independent sentences (Khanlari, 1374: 2/321).
Example: They said that you’ll be expelled if we dispatch our angel (118a).
Also, negative conditionals: If you do not honor them.
- Preference appendix ‘= ī’ is a passive form exclusive to Dari Persian in early period of this language (see Khanlari, 1374: 2/332 and next pages).
Example: Only if I offered my faith earlier (Surat *al Fajr*).
- The eulogistic ‘a=ī’ as in ‘Indeed you are impeccable’

¹ Trespassers

² Ladder

³ Comrade

⁴ Comrades

⁵ Written

⁶ From them

⁷ Fire

⁸ Harder

⁹ More correct

¹⁰ Worse

- Questions with function words ‘Hal= هل’ and ‘hamza with /a/ = اَ’ are translated in following ways:
 - a) Using ‘ayy = اى’ instead of ‘aaya = آيا’ as in: Ask if there is any God but
 - b) Using ‘hamza with /a/ = اَ’ instead of ‘آيا’ as in: Didn’t you behold those with the gift of books?
 - c) Using ‘any = هيج’ instead of ‘آيا’ as in: Any way opens for your cargo?
 - d) Other translations: ‘Inform me’; ‘Weren’t you informed/aware ...’
- Translations for ‘Bal = بل’: 1- ‘But rather this is the holy writ of Qur’an’; 2- ‘Said no to destroy your strength’ (283b).
- Indirect imperatives as in: ‘فَلْيَعْبُدُوا = then instruct them to pray’ (547a)
- The Arabic future prefixes ‘س / سوف’ is often rendered by adding the adverbial phrases ‘soon’ and ‘soon it’ll be that’ as in: ‘It’ll be soon that we enter them’
- Comparatives: ‘Greater indeed’/ ‘He is more articulate than I can say’
- Present tense: ‘Dripping small drizzle’ (117b)
- The adverbial emphatic object: ‘Allow in true sense’/ ‘He is bestowed with greatness in knowledge and character’
- Plural adjective: occasionally, the translation follows Arabic grammar in forming plural adjectives as in: ‘The pioneers’ / ‘I swear on swift-footed coursers’
- Female gender inflection in nouns and adjectives: some phrases include plural nouns followed by singular adjectives: ‘Of pious women’, ‘Of treacherous women’.

3-3-4) lexical features

The words and terms from Old Persian are the main distinction of books like Qur’anic manuscript at Walters Art Museum from the perspective of translation studies. These words were in use prior to the rule the Mongols and mainly in eastern Iran and most of which have undergone phonetic/semantic alterations or have been abandoned. Majority of these lexical units are also found in other old translations and interpretations of Qur’an, the basis (other than writing style and translation type) on which the presumption that Walters Art Museum Qur’an belongs to 5th and 6th centuries ah.

Words like ‘Diiv, Firishta, Pari), (Doojakh), and Rastaa Kheez’ are used throughout which mean, ‘Satan, Angels, Jinni, Purgatory, Judgment Day,’ respectively. It is known that these word have been used in these senses from the earliest translations of Qur’an and the word ‘Sheytan’ (Satan) replaced the word ‘Diiv’ only after 6th century AH (Azarnoosh, 1375: 41).

Similar words are 'Geravideh' meaning 'believer,' 'Na Geravideh' meaning 'infidel,' 'Shataa lang' meaning 'Kaab: ankle bone' and 'Paras taar' for 'Ama' (governess, housemaid). Other such words are listed below:

Al Masjid = (mosque) Masjid, Mazgit (252a)/Zaani va Zaaniiyeh = adulterer and adulteress (Surah *Noor*)/ Namaaregh = cushions/ Al sodos = one sixth/ Aslehoo = reform (251b)/ Muslimoon = the followers/Jahanam = hell/ Ho Ban, Jinaah, Al asam = offense, wrong/Va Anban va qazbaa/ and grape and (530b)/ al ghirdah = monkey /aleem = painful/shirk – partner/ hafa dah – grandchild/saeghaan = the water dispenser/ tagha = lost/ shafi = the supplicator/ al izza = magnanimity/ mahromoon = the grieving/ al sagh = home's sky (533a) (see *Borhan E Ghateh* = sky)/ keed = deception/al ommie'in = the illiterate/laa tahzan = without cure/ emaikoon (Sūrat an-Noor 32), and fetyatikoom (Sūrat an-Nisā) = nurses/azwajan = mates (246b)/jiobehonna = their adorned breasts/kawaaeb atraba = the miads with young breasts (528a)/hamiyyat ol jaheliya = the rage of ignorance/naghazat = tears apart (248b)/al nateehat = hanging from horn/mahd = bed/mohasinat = the virtues of the conduct/manna = appreciated/zarrabi = tapestries/mo takefaat = towns/aj jinna = the stillborn/al salvi = sandy route/adas = worship/qantaar = cow hide/lazeb = algae/takhsir = aggression and destruction/batra = in a hurry/ jabbar = incubus/taeifah = gathering.

Such words also include words derived from the infinitive forms which are no longer in use or archaic:

Anbazidan (commit blasphemy, take partner), andar kardan (enter), andar yaftan (understand), baaz kardan (pick), bashidan, bar shodan, barabari kardan, bar baftan (slander, defame), bar rasidan (1027), basaeedan, biyoseedan (wait, abide/crave, be encouraged), parhizidan, dastoori dadan, setohidan, segalidan, ziandan, faraz amadan, faraz kardan (close, shut), fosoos/afsoos kardan (jeer at, mock; see Bahar, 1381: 1/438), nebeshtan, hazineh kardan.

There are also words exclusively used in this translation (or its particular dialect) and which are not mentioned in other texts: bar mozhanand/ Kazeh Mibashand (188b)/ Baad paa/ rood konandeh.

4) Comparative study of translated words

Other facts are revealed by dating the age of the manuscript: given the fact that the contemporaneous translations were not independent and that they were all copies of an 'official translation,' they can be compared and corrected. As mentioned before, Walters Art Museum manuscript contains sections where sufficient accuracy was not applied and translation suffers from incoherence. Some erroneous examples were mentioned but there are other errors which are the result of careless copying and reading and which can be identified in comparison with other texts especially the translation of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. Some examples are presented below:

In page 247b we read: ‘The clothes that protects you in war’ according to *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, it seems that ‘Joob should be replaced by ‘Harb.

In page 510b we read ‘You fight yourselves and they fight themselves’. In the marginalia to translation of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* we read ‘flattery’ which is more sensible (*Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1365: 7/1914).

In page 538a we read ‘Created and creator’ which is most probably an error made during copying and should be replaced with ‘Mate and spouse’ according to translation of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* (*Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1365: 7/1914).

In page 246a we read ‘And insert it from behind’. In the marginalia to translation of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* we read ‘And fasten it with vine wood’ which is more sensible (*Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 1365: 4/873).

Such examples are not few. The correction, however, is hardly one-way: other texts based on translation of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* can be corrected according to Qur’anic manuscript at Walters Art Museum, too. For example:

The translator of *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* adds a question mark after

و الْمَطْلَقَاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ

‘Three items would be given to divorced wives {...}’

(verse No. 228 of Surat *al Baghara*)

and explains in the footnotes that: ‘Cleanliness. (Pa) deserting daily prayers. (sow) the translation and the word in question were not identified’. It is easy to find that the word in question is actually ‘حيض’ by comparing the text against Walters Art Museum manuscript which reads ‘The divorced women have to wait until after three periods’.

5) Conclusion

Dating back to late 9th century ah, the translated Walters Art Museum manuscript offers a precious and unique copy which allows for study and exploration from a variety of points: disputed readings, miniature and illuminated artwork, and reconstruction of the texts. This manuscript contains Qur’an in its entirety along with a word-for-word translation written between the lines. The study of the translation, linguistic and writing style, and the old Persian words let us find that the translation precedes the publication by centuries (5th or 6th ah). The results also include the fact that the manuscript can be used to correct other old translations and interpretations.

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Holy Qur'an

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