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How is a text and its story created? The example of the Koran

Abstract

In the article a new interpretation of Quranic sūra 85,1-8 al-Burūǧ the zodiac circle is proposed. The introduction the position of (Classical) Arabic within the framework of Semitic languages and scripts is rapidly described, followed by summary remarks on the particular nature of Quranic studies and their actual state. Then the "neuralgic" points in the traditional understanding and interpretation of the first 8 verses of the sūra are pointed out:

qutila - does it mean "they were killed, they perished" or is it on the contrary a curse "may they be killed, may they perish"?

Uḫdūd - is it a proper name referring to the town of Naǧrān and to the persecution of Christians there in the 6th century?

naqama - does the verb only have the normal sense in Arabic "he revenged", or has the semantic field of an analogous (Syro-)Aramaic verb been transferred to it?

Summing up the new interpretations proposed one may recognise in this short passage the furious outbreak of a frustrated preacher against his adversaries. At the same time a fine example of religious rhetoric is to be seen, which is based on the use of words and other elements of a foreign but prestigious sacred language.

Keywords

Coranic studies, Exegesis and interpretation of the Coran, Sūra 85,1-8, textual and historical criticism, linguistic and other influence of (Syro-)Aramaic in the Coran, foreign and loan words in the Coran.

Summary

The article proposes a new interpretation of *sūra* 89,1-8 of the Qur'an *al-Burūǧ* the zodiac circle. The introduction offers a brief overview of the position of (classical) Arabic within the framework of Semitic languages and scripts, followed by summary remarks on the particularity and current state of Qur'anic studies. This is followed by various

neuralgic' points of interpretation of the first 8 verses of the sūra are indicated and discussed:

qutila - literally "they were killed" is this an observation or a curse?

Uḫdūd - is this a proper noun referring to the city of Nağrān and the 6th century persecution of Christians?

naqama - "he took revenge" - does it only have the meaning of a simple Arabic verb, or does the context call for the influence of the semantic field of a synonymous (Syro)Aramaic verb?

The synopsis of the new interpretations makes it possible to classify this little Koranic passage as the furious outburst of a frustrated preacher against his adversaries. It is also a fine example of religious preaching style, drawing heavily on the vocabulary of a sacred and highly reputed foreign language.

Keywords

Qur'anic studies, Qur'anic exegesis, Sūra 85,1-8, textual and historical criticism of the Qur'an, linguistic and culturo-religious influence of Syriac (Aramaic) in the Qur'an, foreign or borrowed words in the Qur'an.

Nonum prematur in annum (Horace, Ars poetica 388) - Preliminary remarks

The following essay is a revised version of my inaugural lecture, given on 15 November 2007 at the Collège de France, as part of the 2007-2008 European Chair (Qur'anic Studies). A DVD containing the complete film of the inaugural lecture, an interview by the author with Professor Michel Tardieu, a presentation by Professor Henry Laurens, and a booklet accompanying the boxed set, has been released under the title Un philologue lit le Coran ("Les leçons inaugurales du Collège de France", Paris: Collège de France - Cned - Doriane Films, 2008). The printed version of the lesson, which was announced at one point by Éditions Fayard, was never published. As a general rule, the inaugural lessons are published in book form, with the video recordings, in DVD form, appearing only for certain lessons. This just goes to show that the paper version still retains its legitimacy. Thanks to the friendship, tireless dedication and advice of Françoise

Quinsat †, the text of the original lesson had been corrected and improved for oral presentation, despite difficult time constraints. I

I would like to thank him from the bottom of my heart, as I continue to mourn his untimely death in December 2008. Later, a former attentive listener, Guillaume Dye, who is now a colleague for whom I have great esteem, took the trouble to adapt the text to the requirements of printed form. In doing so, the

I am also grateful for the intensive and fruitful scientific exchange between the two of us. My gratitude also goes to the intensive and fruitful scientific exchange between us.

However, I have deliberately maintained a form of oral expression, close to that of an essay. This means dispensing with the usual numerous footnotes, which include documents and bibliographical references. The latter are easy to find in the many recent works devoted to Koranic studies. Considering the publications that have appeared since 2007, I believe that the arguments put forward in this work, in a form that is intended to be fluid and readable, as well as the conclusions presented in it, have retained all their relevance in the current scientific debate. They are intended not only for the restricted circle of specialists in Islamology and Qur'anic studies, b u t also for a wider public interested in questions relating to Islam in general and the Qur'an in particular - questions which are often, today, painfully topical.

Introduction - Semitic studies and Arabic language

Koranic studies are an integral part of Semitic studies, understood in a broad sense. The Semitic family of languages occupies an eminent place in the history of humanity if we consider the quantity and importance of the written documentation produced in the course of its development.

Taken together, the written documents in the various Semitic languages span more than 4,500 years (from the first part of the third millennium BC to the present day) and from China and Central Asia in the east to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in the west. Of course, this notion of space no longer has much meaning today where, after a preparatory phase of printed media, texts circulate almost without constraint of time or space. We could say, as a dazzled observer, that they circulate in immaterial form and freely in human space - if it weren't for this reservation, neither too pessimistic nor catastrophist, of the man of paper and history that I am, who can only emphasise the complexity of the technical infrastructure on which the circulation and above all access to this infinite amount of immaterial information rests. This infrastructure is indeed material, fragile, vulnerable even, but the historian, without pretending to be a prophet, aware of the constant reproaches that have already been levelled at his Cassandra-like airs, nevertheless points to the major dangers threatening the infrastructure in question.

Continuity, then, in terms of written documentation, which was aided by exuberant creativity in the field of writing s y s t e m s - cuneiform,

linear syllabics - including the Byblos alphabet, which has yet to be deciphered. Then there is the Semitic alphabet, with its many offshoots, including Arabic, and, among them, the Western branch, Greek and Latin, which is a bit of a mongrel. But let's be honest: when applied to non-Semitic languages, and as is often the case with bastards, this branch is remarkably strong, hence its enormous success.

However, we cannot speak here of a total continuity of languages, because there are dead languages in the Semitic domain. Dead, in the sense that there has been a break in the use, transmission and knowledge of these languages, such as Accadian, for example, which is known to us only thanks to the tireless efforts of researchers and scholars who have brought it out of oblivion since the first half of the 19th century. Then there is the extraordinary case of Aramaic, with all its variants, which has both an extremely ancient written tradition and a transmission in written form that is uninterrupted throughout history, with texts dating from the end of the second millennium BC to the present day. This written language clearly follows, in stages and not without breaks, the developments of a spoken language.

Historical linguistics and Semitic languages

Historical linguistics, which was formed in the spirit of comparative Indo-Germanic studies, or Indo-European studies as French-speaking linguists prefer to call them, thus has valuable material at its disposal for the internal reconstruction of the development of Aramaic. It also has the material to tackle the external reconstruction by making comparisons between Semitic languages from a diachronic perspective. This is the case, for example, for the Ethiopic branch of the Semitic languages, but with less chronological depth and far fewer texts than for Aramaic.

Leaving aside the very special case of Hebrew, let us say that these two branches of Semitic (Aramaic and Ethiopic) have succeeded in "breaking out of the circle", to use a metaphor that we will take up again when studying the Koranic corpus. Both have a sacred language, unchanging and cultivated in circles of clerics and scholars who have managed to put it in a crystal sarcophagus, so that it can be seen in all its beauty and splendour. But the existence of a sacred language has not prevented the continuous creation of a written language that is practised and felt by the speakers who use it to be close to their spoken language.

The situation just described seems normal to us modern Westerners, but it is not always the rule in the Semitic field. Thus, the Semites, a term I use here in the sense of the

peoples and cultures who express themselves in Semitic languages, have an exaggerated propensity to emphasise the ideas of continuity and identity, at least in the field of culture and religion. Continuity and imitation, certainly recognised as creative, but without any change of substance or structure or development. These are the principles that lead to visible and obvious results: we are dealing with languages that are cultivated, venerated, even sacred, but petrified, mummified to resemble the reality and activity that produce them. Let us say it now: the classical Arabic language, *al-'arabiyya al-fuṣḥā*, and its first corpus of texts, the Koran, from which it claims to derive and which it holds up as a pure, perfect and unchanging linguistic model, and which itself is seen as a sublime, incomparable and inimitable or matchless achievement, this is indeed an extreme case of a sacred Semitic language. And a curious observer, whether sympathetic or cold or indifferent, to mention only the two best cases, can very well see the consequences in the situation of today's Arab states and societies; all one has to do is refer to the latest United Nations reports on the development of human resources in the Arab world.

In the vast field of Semitic studies, apart from classical Arabic of course, I have long practised Ethiopic, the pre-Islamic South Arabian languages and the epigraphic texts of the north of the Arabian Peninsula, including the neighbouring regions, and I feel I owe the public an explanation of my return to Arabic in general and to Koranic studies in particular.

There are two causes for this: one endogenous, the other exogenous. Let us put the endogenous one, which is the most plausible and decisive, in the foreground. The study of pre-Islamic Arabic epigraphic documentation once led me to examine the oldest fragments and manuscripts of the Koran, specifically those accessible in facsimile editions or in public libraries. Coming from an inscription about a pre-Islamic Arab king, I naturally did not change my approach when I turned to a verse from the Koran. What does it mean? Well, first of all, in a moment of grace or damnation, I forgot everything that Muslim tradition brings to this ancient document: the diacritical points, the vowels, the punctuation; in short, I approached the reading of the text from its bare and ambiguous consonant skeleton, as if it were an ancient inscription. You can't cheat your own memory very easily, and you quickly fall back on what you remember and what you know: so, once well established, the mental mechanism of the DIY and independent epigraphist produced doubts - I wouldn't say results yet.

In addition to these first tentative steps, there is the exogenous cause of the extraordinary and stimulating development of Koranic studies over the last two decades, to which French scholars have made a major contribution.

Koranic studies

First of all, we need to take a quick look at the state and development of Islamic studies in the West. Born out of theological studies, particularly biblical studies, they emancipated themselves at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century and became an independent discipline, especially in the field of Qur'anic studies, paying a heavy price that is still being felt today: they integrated a certain number of Islamic dogmas and accepted and have accepted as historical various assertions that belong rather to the 'sacred (or holy) history' of Muslim tradition. As if brave Christians, having sacrificed the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, on the altar of historical knowledge, using the knife of historical-critical study to do so, had lost heart and left all the official dogma intact around the Koran. [the paragraph was duplicated, I have deleted the second occurrence].

One of the most surprising facts about Islamic studies is the absence of a historical-critical edition of the Koran. However, such an undertaking began in the first half of the nineteenth century, in conjunction with critical studies of biblical texts and ancient literature in general. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the second edition of Nöldeke's *History of the Qur'an* highlighted the progress made and attempted to summarise the rather uneven results in this field. Two major projects that were intended to complete the task (Arthur Jeffery and the variant readings contained in classical Muslim works and Gotthelf Bergsträsser with his project to collect and collate all the material variants present in tens of thousands of Qur'anic fragments from the first centuries) never saw the light of day. The twentieth century left us with the canonical Cairo edition (the Azhar edition, first published in the 1920s), which is in fact used as the basis for scientific work on the Koran. It is almost as if biblical studies were based on Jerome's Vulgate or the Vetus Latina as the fundamental text. Yet the last two decades of the twentieth century have brought to light new epigraphic data, from pre-Islamic times to the early days of Islam (for example, the Arabic graffiti of the Negev). Coherent and plausible readings of such texts can only come from a rigorous method: thinking about context and parallels, making comparisons with other Semitic languages and with similar texts attested there.

If someone, inhabited by such an "epigraphic" mindset, turns again to the earliest manuscripts of Qur'anic texts, he cannot but question the accuracy of the canonical readings. The epigraphist will naturally be tempted to read these *ḥijāzī* or kufic manuscripts with a similar critical method in order to arrive at a coherent and plausible reading. But in seeking such readings he will inevitably begin to feel a certain

unease. The canonical readings and their variants, as attested for example in the literature of the *qirā'āt*, do not in reality represent rivalry between competing versions of an oral tradition, but rather the work of epigraphists on a given *rasm* - perhaps without all the scientific baggage of modern times, but with more fantasy and intuition.

Having reached this point, the practitioner of a positive, secular science might give in to temptation and embark on an intellectual experiment. Starting with problematic words or passages, he might do his utmost to examine the text as if he were deciphering and interpreting ancient Arabic inscriptions. If his interpretations came to reveal recurring regularities, he would be entitled to formulate a hypothesis about the orthographic rules, grammar and semantics of the Koranic language. And if the end result was nothing more than 'art for art's sake', he might, ironically and paradoxically, be able to justify his work, even on a religious and theological level: if we believe that this text, the Koran, is the eternal divine word, then even this new and unexpected interpretation for the minds, reason and knowledge of men must have been willed by Him (God) as being legitimate and possible - end of concession to theology.

In any case, the digressions of the epigraphists are the cornerstones on which a historical-critical edition of the Qur'an can be built - let us hope that it will see the light of day in the twenty-first century. It will have to be based on the oldest manuscripts, and report and comment on all the attested, plausible and conjectural readings.

So what is or could be textual criticism of the Koran?

Textual criticism and the Koran

In the first place, it could direct research towards the study of the oldest fragments of the Koranic text and the oldest manuscripts of the Koran. This task was undertaken by Bergsträsser's project in the twenties of the last century and was accompanied by Jeffery's research, with a somewhat different orientation.

Bergsträsser's project came to an end during the Second World War - his successor, Spitaler, did not take much care of this legacy. Films of the Qur'an manuscripts in important collections such as those in Cairo and Istanbul ended up at Berlin's Freie Universität (Seminar für Arabistik), where they await an uncertain fate after their survival had been denied for decades.

There are in fact two projects that are advancing our knowledge of ancient Koranic versions: on the one hand, research into the Sana'a fragments, discovered some thirty years ago in the Great Mosque of Sana'a - the Sana'a Fragments - and, on the other, research into the Sana'a Fragments, discovered some thirty years ago in the Great Mosque.

a team of Tunisian scientists has recently taken over the task of studying and editing these texts (apparently with permission to publish a facsimile edition of the most important pieces - around six thousand); and the facsimile edition of the ancient Korans undertaken by François Déroche and Sergio Noja Noseda. To date, three volumes of two manuscripts from the Bibliothèque Nationale and the British Library have been published: however, the manuscripts have not yet been edited in their entirety, and none of them presents the complete text of the Koran.

However, what is already becoming clear at this first stage is very simple: all these manuscripts will tell us a great deal about the history of the development of orthography (*matres lectionis*, representation of the *hamza*) and the 'voyellisation' of the text. Apart from Islamic tradition, we will be able to trace the history of the canonical version as it developed. Certainly, one of the possible results will be a critical edition of the "ʿuṯmanian vulgate", if I may be allowed to use this very pragmatic terminology for the sake of brevity.

But what we will not have, and this is essential to stress, are insights into the plausible and possible variants of the Qur'an in the course of its development. To put it plainly: the variants of the *Rasm* - without diacritical marks or other additional signs - are few and far between; our texts, transmitted in a deficient writing system, have from the very beginning had a well-defined form; some exceptions are the titles of the suras, their succession and the basmala. The critical edition will therefore reveal very little to us about the history of the written text; just as the variants and readings in the canonical literature (*qirāʾāt*, etc.) - see Jeffery's authoritative, if outdated, edition - offer very little enlightenment.

More importantly, the hundreds of readings clearly reveal themselves to be the conjectures of philologists. Sometimes naïve, sometimes sly, they are nonetheless conjectures, coming from people with nothing more than the *rasm of* the Koran, some knowledge of Arabic in its various forms - jahiliyya poetry, spoken ancient Arabic... - and notions about the historical and religious traditions of the Near East in the broadest sense.

On the other hand, we still lack the reflection of an oral tradition of the Koranic text. Transposition of diacritical points, alternative vocalisation, different words obtained by adding *matres lectionis* and *hamza*: all this is mere philological material. This point becomes immediately clear when we move on to the variants in the transmission of the ḥadīṯs: not only does the ḥadīṯ have a very different vocabulary and lexicon, but its variants very often demonstrate that it has its origins in an oral tradition: different ways of saying (synonyms), word order, complete sentences formulated differently, and so on. This deserves to be said today, especially as we do not have - it bears repeating - a critical edition of any of the six canonical collections.

For al-Buḫārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, for example, we have at our disposal two quasi-canonical editions, that of Boulaq and the Ottomans, from which all other printed editions derive: what we lack is a collection and a census of the oldest manuscripts, accompanied by a critical analysis of what they can tell us.

To put it briefly: the secular and positive science of Islam and its fundamental sources must always seek "ihre Entlassung aus ihrer selbstverschuldeten Vorwissenschaftlichkeit" - I am using here a variant of a famous quotation from Kant - to emancipate itself from the pre-scientific level for which it is responsible. A glance at the neighbouring disciplines of classical, biblical or romance studies would make what I'm saying clearer.

Just as Rudi Paret discarded all available translations of the Qur'an when he decided to produce his own translation - which, incidentally, was totally illegible - so a researcher in the field of positive, secular criticism of the text must discard Muslim tradition when embarking on such an undertaking. He must consider the Qur'anic *rasm* as if it were a pre-Islamic Arabic inscription or a graffito, and approach it as he would other texts. So textual criticism of the Koran means in its real and specific sense: questioning the *rasm* of the Koranic text and looking for possible alternative readings. This will not lead to millions of readings - according to one remark "In the same way, inscriptions and graffiti do not give rise to legions of meanings. On the other hand, the sequential coherence we are trying to achieve will naturally reduce the number of possible interpretations. Certainly, in the case of the Koran, basic postulates must be introduced, and their validity will be proven - statistically - by the fact that the same set of starting postulates leads to a satisfactory result. The sum of the results obtained in this way can then be described as a reasonable hypothesis about the text in question. Nothing more can be obtained from research of this kind - but it is already a significant result that the scientific community will be able to accept: a result that remains verifiable and that can be called into question if new material or a new method emerges.

So to achieve the objective of scientific work, which is to discover what can be known about a subject, the hypothesis will demonstrate what the text contains - admittedly one thousand five hundred years after its origin - in accordance with human reason and reasoning. This may or may not coincide with the tradition of a religion on the same subject. But religious beliefs and dogmas, which are based precisely on these texts, are an entirely different problem and are not my subject today. To put it in the words of Maxime Rodinson: respect for a religion and its believers must not detract from scientific research.

The example of Sura 85: Al-Burūǧ "The Circle of the Zodiac".

The title of this lesson needs to be justified and commented on. First of all - perhaps to the bitter disappointment of the audience - we shall confine ourselves to a brief and limited example. Even with great ambition, it is not possible to deal with the whole of the Koran in the space of three-quarters of an hour, even if perspectives concerning the text as a whole and its characteristics will inevitably be opened up, especially towards the end of my talk. It is well known and accepted, however, that the Koran is a short book compared with other sacred texts that form the basis of a world religion. It can easily be printed on one hundred and fifty pages, or two hundred if you prefer a little luxuriant space for the comfort of the eye. The text has one hundred and fourteen chapters, roughly ordered by length, and six thousand two hundred and twenty-five verses according to one tradition, the others varying by about fifty verses. Readers interested in numbers, perhaps in words and letters, or even in the arithmetical and mathematical miracles of the text, can easily get an idea of what modern science has to offer in terms of intimate conjunction with deep faith by surfing the Internet using key words (the results of the search "mathematical miracles of the Koran" are edifying). On the other hand, it should be emphasised straight away that the Koran is a highly heterogeneous and composite text, offering an astonishing variety of literary genres, levels of style, tones of expression and registers of vocabulary. This is not extraordinary if we accept the divine origin of the work, and it becomes even less so if we assume that it is a human creation.

The title of the lesson is: How is a text and its history made? - As my old intellectual mentor reproached me when I received the invitation: "You will never free yourself from the dryness of philology". Indeed, the phrase has as much charm as the title of an instruction manual or technical directive! To make it more attractive, and out of reverence for the intellectual world of the country whose guest I am this evening, I could have written: Deconstruction and reconstruction of a text and its history. What matters, though, is that over the next few minutes I succeed in opening up the window of a workshop for the public and the audience - the workshop where an intellectual tinkerer takes in hand, so to speak, a beautiful piece composed of words, not without first having seen and appreciated the spirit and - according to his degree of sensitivity - the beauty of the current construction, from the dual point of view of its form and its content. He takes it in his hands, looks for the hinges and joints, examines the carved and glued parts, breaks them down and then, starting from there, tries to make another whole again. Where does this idea come from? What plan and what rules does he follow? He will try to explain this with examples.

The *sūrat al-Burūǧ* in today's reality

It is the text of Sura 85 as it is in its current acoustic and visual reality. It is this image of the text that is broadcast millions of times in printed copies of the Koran and on the Internet. In this respect, we should remember that the Muslim doctors were fiercely opposed to the use of printed c h a r a c t e r s for the sacred book when the first attempts were made in the East to publish printed editions. This was because the word of God can only be realised in this world by an individual human act, in other words in a manuscript produced by a calligrapher. The same should have been true of recitation. But here too, in the end, as with printing, technology and its practical advantages prevailed. And the missionary's desire for efficient propagation does not stand in the way of the use of loudspeakers - alas for me as a member of the International Association Against Noise Pollution in the *Pipedown* World*!* - nor to the use of magnetic tapes and electronic files that broadcast the divine word. So it is ubiquitous and can be heard every second, in every place, w h a t e v e r the sura or verse, for those who want it (provided they have access to the global net) as well as for those who don't!

This is how a totally uniform audiovisual image is propagated for billions of believers, but also for others, and it is like the ultimate realisation of the dogma of the direct and unchanging word of God. It is a solemn, ritual celebration of the text - and it's worth noting, and this is not without its piquancy! that Qur'anic psalmody bears many traces of the influence of Western, Jewish and Christian sacred music - an achievement which, however, in its near-perfect uniformity and elevated solemnity, divorced from everyday life, is as far removed as possible and in a very perceptible way from the historical reality in **w h i c h** the texts of the Qur'anic corpus, heterogeneous and composite, originated, having in the context of the time t h e i r own function and character.

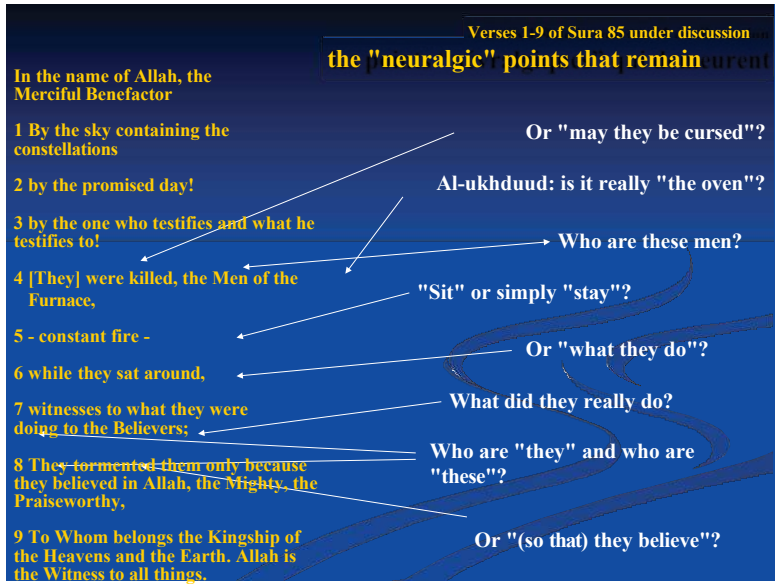
The Koran itself repeatedly invites us to observe, contemplate, reflect and meditate. Well, paradoxically, recitation conveys virtually no content. Often, in addition to its linguistic difficulty, the text is hardly comprehensible objectively and its recitation arouses and evokes feelings above all, which leaves the way clear for manipulators.

And i t is here that the historian begins to make history, it is here that he sees his task going back to this word of the past, that he seeks to make himself heard and, insofar as it is possible for human reason, which is relative and limited, to make himself understood. Without entering into a theoretical discussion of the hermeneutics that underlie this undertaking, an undertaking that advances in the light of these theories with an ideal goal that may even be illusory, but is nonetheless imperative for the secular, intellectual and inquisitive mind, let us open the door to a new era in hermeneutics.

door to the historian's studio. No more celebrations and solemnities. Instead, there will be precise, detailed questions, hypotheses, answers and proposals, and above all, adversarial discussion.

The translation of Q 85 and its interpretation problems

Translation of *the sūrat al-Burūǧ* and its key points



Let's look at the interpretations proposed by Muslim exegetes and various Western scholars. And let's do this on the basis of the French translation. For practical reasons, firstly, because there could be people in the audience who don't know Arabic. And secondly, for methodological reasons. A well-thought-out translation, whether literal or aimed at transposing into the target language all the meaning and spirit of the original text, creates a critical distance from the original and its thinking that often helps to spot inaccuracies or imprecisions. At least that's my personal experience, born of working on multilingual versions of my own work. And it's no coincidence that the best Germanists are not Germans, but French, and vice versa. The same phenomenon can be observed in the Muslim world: the eminent exegetes and commentators - like the best grammarians of the Arabic language (in the classical age) - are not all Arabs, and many of them are Persians and Turks. The Arabic-speaking reader believes too quickly that he understands a text as difficult as the Koran,

yet he should be warned: his mother tongue, spoken Arabic, is not identical to written Arabic, and this written and standardised Arabic is not identical to the language of the Koran either. A reader whose mother tongue is not Arabic is more inclined to respect the difficult, the obscure, the incomprehensible, and the enigmatic passages - truly enigmatic in substance - are less elusive.

Composition of Q 85 and writing of the Koran

The first fact that stands out is that not only is the Koranic corpus as a whole made up of very different and multiform parts - and you have to believe me when I say that you only see one part, one chapter, among the 114 that make up the book - but the suras, or chapters, are themselves composite and complex. This determines the changes in rhyme and rhythm in the verses: language and style vary as do the subjects dealt with. So the question arises: are there rules and principles that dictate composition? Is it possible to discern the character, the group and the intentions behind the work of writing that brought it to fruition? With a touch of irony, we could say yes and propose for Sura 85 the principle of composing a good military march in three parts: fast (1-10), slow (11-12), fast (13-21). But it is true that this does not correspond to the spirit of ancient Arabic and Semitic poetry and introduces a strophic principle that has been proposed several times in Qur'anic studies, which is highly debatable and discussed, and which I cannot go into now. The other question is just as thorny: is there an author or authors for the basic primary pieces of which the suras are composed? And are they identical to the writers and "arrangers" of the suras as second-degree entities? This question can only be answered by studying the principles and structures in detail, piece by piece, at the primary level, in comparison with the structure and main ideas that emerge from the analysis of the suras as a whole. And there is a third level, a tertiary entity, which is undoubtedly more obvious and accessible to analysis: the composition of the actual book as a whole and the principle that prevails within it. The one hundred and fourteen suras are ordered according to length, with few exceptions. The first of them, the Fātiḥa, whose name I am translating for the moment as "the opening", making it clear all the same that there are quite diverse attempts at interpreting and translating this title, is a short prayer, ranked in the first position, and it is certainly not by chance that the Muslim tradition itself knows a discussion as to whether this piece (in the mouth of God, without an introductory formula, "dis" or
"say", like the Lord's Prayer to which the text of the Fātiḥa is often likened).
is truly an integral part of the Qur'an. Some other exceptions in the order of classification can be explained as blocks of compilations prior to the final compilation of the book or as simple errors.

in the calculations. This mechanical principle, together with the very absence of titles for the suras concerned, points to a group of editors and sponsors with their own principles or intentions. Indeed, it is the political authority, not just the Caliph, but rather governors who are players in political conflicts and who are responsible for compiling one and only one sacred book. It is obviously in the practical and pragmatic spirit of the politician, I would even say the bureaucratic spirit, that the book is produced. Can we conclude that the content, spirit and religious motivation had little to do with it? Another hypothesis to be proven in the historical context explored would be that it was haste that was at the root of this composition: we were in a hurry to produce this book.

So all this complex diversity is totally hidden by the uniformity of the way the text is performed, namely ritual recitation, which in many ways obscures the original content and form of the pieces to be recited. It is indeed the ritual, the celebration, that creates the monolithic unity of the text, in language as in psalmody - in short, an overall atmosphere around the book.

Three levels of composition, then: behind the third, the composition of the book as a whole, we can guess a political will and intention, decided and carried out by bureaucratic means. As for the second level, that of the chapters or suras, it is more difficult to talk about it, not least because detailed studies are still lacking. But in an experimental way, I propose the hypothesis of a group of erudite editors who work on pre-existing material with which they are familiar. They have the spirit of applied archivists, not necessarily a theological spirit, but that of commentators who seek to bring secondary order to this collection of disparate units constituting the primary level. The results of this operation include compositions governed by formal and literary principles, but also compilations of a theoretical nature that follow the outline of a theological treatise (we shall see an example of this) or a didactic discourse.

Then there is the first level: there are short pieces, long since canonically recognised as political, and long homiletic and parenetic speeches, discernible by their rhetorical cohesion. There are also recurring doctrinal themes. The genres include oracular proclamations, hymns (the strophic principle was alluded to earlier), legislative texts and polemical speeches. Behind these, as authors, we can distinguish the visionary and the missionary, the preacher and the orator, but also the teacher and the political and religious leader. The latter could well be the extraordinary figure, as he is traditionally seen, Muhammad - although we don't have to attribute the whole thing to him.

My long digression was perhaps a little theoretical, but I hope it was not boring. My intention was above all to explain to the uninitiated listener who is reading the Koran for the first time, either through

of a translation, either in the original language, his feeling of being totally lost, of not finding the thread of the discourse or the thought of the book, who even doubts that it is a book, according to our understanding imbued with rationality, i.e. a composed book. And this also explains the existence of many keys to reading the Koran, such as: what does the Koran say about such and such a subject? Basically, these are thematic concordances for all those who want to use the text as a spiritual guide in their lives, when they do not want to confine themselves to the learned and competent authorities on the subject. Finally, let us always remember, with regard to the Koran, that it was a hand and a mind far removed from a spiritual and religious undertaking that gave this book its final and immediately visible form, I would say almost brutally.

The "nerve centres" of translation and interpreting

The resulting differences in interpretation and translation can be summed up in three points:

1 - Who are the people in the "pit"?

2 - Is the verb *qutila* - let's leave the reading in the passive for the moment - to be taken in the sense of the past tense "they were killed", i.e. "annihilated", or in the sense of a curse "may they be killed or annihilated"? Arabic grammar allows for both possibilities.

3 - Does the verb *naqama* really mean "to be angry"? Is it constructed with the preposition *min*, "against someone", and is there a reason for this anger in a sentence with a subordinate containing the verb in the subjunctive *'an yu'min*ū, "because these believed"?

There are other minor points that will be addressed in the course of dealing with these three main issues. All the questions raised - and I apologise at this point for their character and nature, which are similar if not identical to the *quisquilia philologica* - will lead, in the course of their treatment, to a deconstruction of the text, which will hopefully be followed by a construction. I deliberately avoid the term reconstruction. So I leave aside the discussion of verse 3: by the one who testifies and what is testified to, a *figura etymologica* that is clear and frequent in the Koran ("per merismum"), which simply means: by the complete, absolute testimony.

As you have already noticed, the Koran, and this is one of the typical features of its style, rarely tells stories - the story of Joseph is one of the most striking exceptions - but it abounds in allusions to stories and facts that it presumes to be known to its audience. He therefore refers mainly to previous writings and books, of which he presupposes at least superficial knowledge. And as this is not enough to satisfy the good intentions of the missionary and propagandist, he constantly refers to these writings and their teachings on religious matters: the oneness of God, His Creation and above all the Last Judgement.

At the moment, there is a fashion in Koranic studies: there is a lot of talk about the extraordinary self-referentiality of the Koran in relation to other sacred texts; several hundred times the text refers to the Koran, the Book, the Revelation that came down, and so on. I have very little faith in this. We still need to study the thorny and extremely delicate question of whether the text refers to itself when it refers to the Koran. But that could be the subject of another conference.

So if the text does not tell the story, it has to be told, or even invented. And this is precisely what Muslim exegesis has done and is doing, right down to its most modern ramifications, and this is also what scientific - in the sense of 'non-religious' - Koranic studies in the West, but not only there, have done and continue to do. I will present this metahistory of the text and its deconstruction in a somewhat mixed way, jumping from Muslim tradition to the results of scientific research. This relative disorder is deliberate and merely reflects the interaction and influence, sometimes even reciprocal, of the two spheres.

The *aṣḥāb al-U/uḫdūd* "people of the pit", a first attempt at interpretation

Let's start: 'The people of Uḫdūd', in the spirit of Arabic ṣāḥib pl. aṣḥāb which does indicate a relationship and an intimate link, either of possession, destination, or, as seems to be the case here 'the people whose history and what they did to *Uḫdūd* are well known'. *Uḫdūd* taken as a proper noun, and the curious reader or listener will not fail to find Al-Uḫdūd on the modern map of Saudi Arabia (archaeological site near the town of Najran). The Internet, if he asks, will give him a multitude of details and information. So the problem could already be solved here, and to do so we would only need to talk briefly about the Christian martyrs of Najran and explain the fact that the Koran alludes to this story which took place a hundred years before the mission of Mohammed and the revelation of the Koran. But then comes a destructive detail, expected and warmly welcomed by the passionate historian. We know the ancient names of the oasis of Najran, which is also an ancient name: Rgmt in South Arabian inscriptions, Ra'ma in Hebrew, Ragma in Greek. The identification by Arab authors, Qur'anic exegetes and geographers, of *Uḫdūd* with Najran, or part of the oasis, is therefore a circular conclusion: because we know that the Qur'an refers to the persecutors of the Christians of Najran as "people of *Uḫdūd*", well, we say that *Uḫdūd* is another name for Najran. Incidentally, I must confess to not knowing when or by whom the name *Uḫdūd* was actually applied to the locality of Najran. This could have already happened during the Middle Ages - Najran had Christian bishops and therefore a Christian community, at least until the time of the first Zaydi imams in the eleventh century - or it could have been more recent. The proper name plays a key role in the solution

textual problems of all kinds and almost everywhere in the field of sacred texts and their exegesis. Let us add the present example to the long list of failed solutions.

Second try: if we must dispense with this proper noun, let us give a suitable meaning to the word Uḫdūd in the relevant context. *Uḫdūd* pl. *ʼaḫādīd* means "the pit, the ditch". And with that comes the long story of the Himyarite king Ḏū Nuwas (we never say he was Jewish) who set about persecuting the believers (we never say Christians) of Najran. When he entered the town, he had two pits dug in the area and had fires lit in them. Once the flames were ablaze, he gave the believers the choice of abjuring their faith or being thrown into the fire. This is how the story is told in most Muslim commentaries on the Koran, even the most recent ones.

Western historical science accepts this willingly and too quickly. In commentaries and translations, it is added, expanded and clarified that the Ḏū Nuwas of Arab-Muslim tradition is indeed the Jewish king called Masrūq in the *Acts of the Martyrs of Najran* circulating in Greek, Syriac, Ethiopian and Arabic. But there is no mention of ditches filled with fire. Instead, the persecutor put the martyrs to the sword, even though he naturally burnt churches. These facts, as well as the two Ethiopian invasions to the aid of their co-religionists in Yemen (between the years 517 and 525, the exact chronology of which has been the subject of a great deal of research), support the historicity of this account. However, there are not only Christian sources and traditions, but also primary documents: South Arabian inscriptions and fragments of Ethiopian inscriptions. However, the joy and satisfaction of being able, on the one hand, to confirm and, on the other, to remarkably clarify the Muslim tradition makes Western researchers forget some fundamental facts. It was indeed a Jewish king, a fierce champion of monotheism, who persecuted and martyred Christians because they did not renounce their monotheistic but trinitarian Christian faith. Some Muslim commentators, not the majority, who knew the true nature of the Najran persecutions understood this well and present another story authenticated by various "sayings" (*ḥadīṯ*) of Muhammad, which in turn have every chance of having been invented late in life: it is the story of an unnamed tyrant, in an unspecified place, who has two parallel ditches dug, fills them with fire and has believers who do not renounce their faith in one God thrown into them. The fundamental problem of a monotheistic tyrant (possibly Jewish) persecuting monotheists is not raised. Moreover, it would be a rather rare case if the Koran decided to take sides sympathetically with Christians in distress.

But the problem remains: does *Uḫdūd* mean "ditch"? The explanations and passages often referred to, which are taken from

especially pre-Islamic Arabic poetry - which is also often of dubious authenticity! - are long, too long to go into now. But to put it briefly: the root ḤDD and its noun derivatives *(ḥadd*, "joy", etc.) refer to the marks left by a stream of water, the whip on the skin, the plough or the wheels of a cart in the earth (remember the parallel pits?). The precise form Uḫdūd is very poorly attested, I mean before the Koran. It was really "burning the holy martyrs slowly" then, to put it in Voltaire's words, if such little trenches were used as a place and instrument of martyrdom.

Q 85, verse 4: Observation or curse?

Let's leave the matter in abeyance for the moment and move on to the second question, the solution to which, as we shall see, may also be decisive for the first. Does the verb *qutila* express the past, an accomplished fact, or rather a very negative wish - a curse? This problem brings us back, and I hope it won't be an endless magnifying glass, to the very beginning of the sura: the oaths or, to put it better, the affirmations. Ah, the oaths in the Koran! They gave rise to a whole exegetical literature and even created the type of verse where God swears by Himself. This is the logical and inevitable outcome of the dogma that says that the words of the Koran are the direct divine word. It also means that God speaks, and speaks of Himself, in the first person singular, the first person plural and the third person singular. If there are no introductory formulas such as *qul* "dis" (or formulas of the same kind), inviting the messenger to transmit his message, we must interpret the text as it stands as divine speech, or resort to *taqdīr*, i.e. presuppose such a formula, even if it does not appear in the text. This changes the whole perspective and communicative situation in which the various textual genres of the Koranic corpus must be situated: orations, polemics, historical accounts. It makes a big difference whether we interpret the text as an unbridled attack of anger by a desperate preacher directed at his opponents, or as a word coming directly from God. So the Koran, at least in its canonical interpretation, is "ein verrücktes Buch", in the primitive sense of the German word *verrückt*, "displaced, off-centre". Let's come back to oaths: in the Koran we swear by natural phenomena - day and night, plants, the sky and the stars, but also by rather abstract things, participles in the feminine plural, attributed to vague and unknown things, and, in the case of Sura 85, active and passive participles from the same root - left to the listener's imagination. This is the legacy of the Arab poet, rhetorician and diviner. Basically, the content matters little, it's the sound of the bell being waved by the hands of the speaker who, with big words, often enigmatic and not very comprehensible, wants to

attract the attention of his audience before beginning his real speech. The style of the Koran has well integrated this rhetorical heritage, sometimes as it is and other times by slipping religious concepts into the ringing effect. While there are few rules for the distribution of "big words", there is a grammatical rule for what follows.

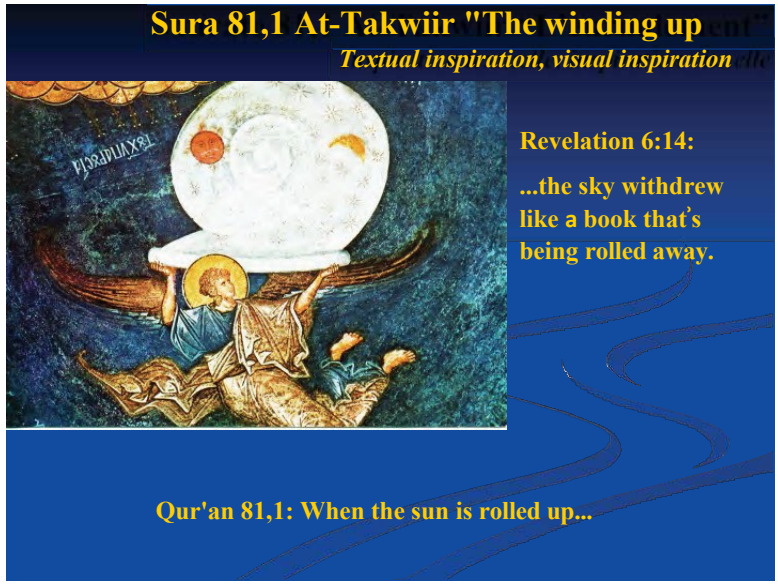
But, before I say it, I apply the rule of *adab* myself, classical Arabic literature in good taste, and I don't want to bore my audience by treating my subject in too linear and rigid a way. So I'm going to digress for a moment once again to talk about the zodiac circle.

The castle in the sky, the zodiac circle

As-samāʾ ḏāt al-burūǧ: starting from modern Arabic, we have no problem interpreting this syntagm as "the sky with its twelve stellar mansions"; we sometimes find, in late-antique Jewish and Christian representations and writings, the idea of stellar "gems" or "stones", in connection with the type of iconography we will discuss below. *Ḥalqat al-burūǧ* being the modern Arabic technical term. This is not the case in the classical commentaries, which give a multitude of meanings; but, in the end, it is the word of God, and it is observed that, even among the noises of the agitated bell, a particular meaning must be found. The "castles of the heavens", the sun and the moon, the stars in general and finally the classical mansions too are suggested. For learned philologists, in fact, the technical Arabic term is obscure. A Persian etymology for burūǧ is unconvincing. The word *burǧ* pl. *bur*ūǧ, already a borrowed word in itself, does indeed mean "tower, palace, castle", but why does it also mean "castle"?

mansions? Neighbouring languages have no such metaphor. Another exception for this evening: as a philologist, I am an iconoclast, by nature and by education, and all the more so because I have to live, and live with pain and daily vexations, with the exaggerated visual and acoustic pollution of our age that I have already mentioned, which does not improve my situation! However, I now propose a visual source for the expression 'sky with towers' in the sense of 'sky with zodiacal mansions'. The sky with the zodiacal circle was a frequent and recurring motif on the mosaics of the synagogues and churches of Late Antiquity, especially in the synagogues. Here is an image of such a mosaic in the synagogue of Bet Alfa (north of Nablus).

What is the function of this image? It represents a kind of popular Midrash, accessible to the uneducated, but also to the educated of course, relating to divine creation. Looking at it with the curious eyes of an Arab of the time, trying to find a word in his language to describe what he sees, it is not at all far-fetched to suggest: "a sky with (a circle of) tower(s) around it". Let us leave aside for the moment the question of whether this is an innovation in the language of the Koran. The idea of using such visual, iconographic sources to shed light on textual phenomena in the Koran could be fruitful in other cases too. I cite the example of Sura 81:1, At-Takwīr "the winding up" - "when the sun will be wound up". There is no doubt a textual source, Revelation 6:14: "the sky withdrew like a book being rolled up". But the idea and the formula in the Koran become much more obvious when you look at a Byzantine mosaic illustrating this verse from Revelation.



Unfortunately, I can't show an image of the area at the time - the view I'm showing is of the church of Chora, 14th century, in Constantinople, sorry! Istanbul - but since we're on the subject of etymology, perhaps it's the same word - and the idea of the sun, moon and stars winding around each other is made visible, in the sense of the Arabic word, by the mosaic. A closer look at this image would no doubt have saved some eminent translators of the Koran - I am thinking of the German Paret and the French Blachère - from absurdities such as "obscuration" for the title of the sura, on the one hand, and interpretative speculations such as "if the sun were wrapped in darkness (in the manner of a turban)", on the other.

The call that serves as a doorbell, according to my usual image now, remains, even emptied of its concrete meaning, grammatically an oath, but it is trivialised into a pure formula of affirmation: Arabic spoken language always abounds in formulas of this kind. Thus, as Arabic grammarians say, an oath is necessarily followed by an 'answer', the formulation of a desired or predicted thing or event, but not by a statement of fact. This formally prevents *qutila* from being taken in the sense of "they have been annihilated, damned". It is therefore a curse. We can leave aside the attempt by some commentators to find an "answer" to the oath later in the text, in verse 12, for example. Here too, it is not a wish, but an apodictic observation. Let us listen to the decisive argument of a Muslim authority on the subject: "it's too ugly!", namely the separation of the oath and the "response" to the oath by an interval of several sentences. And let's add: too ugly even for a grammatical construction of 'help'. Let us remember that the intended meaning of this passage is a strong curse. This excludes a priori the other findings of exegetes, whether Muslim or not, or Western. Initially attempted as a proposition by scholars, the hypothesis became an established fact, expressed as follows in a well-known French translation of the Koran: "The reminiscence of the Book of Daniel 3:20 is therefore indisputable here" (Blachère, 644-645, no. 4). And, according to this reminiscence, it should be noted, the *tertium comparationis* would be the living, blazing fire in the furnace, on the one hand, and in hell, on the other. In a way, therefore, it is logical to say that '*uḫdūd* does not mean "the small pit, with wheel marks, which is only used for a small fire for the martyrs", but rather it simply means "the fire, the furnace", described in such vivid terms in the Book of Daniel. Muslim tradition presents a similar version in which the reminiscence of the Book of Daniel is presented as an alternative to the story of Ḏū Nuwas already mentioned, and it is therefore to them that the primacy of this find belongs.

It is of course permissible to slander people of the past who are certainly already in hell although this does not increase the pain of their torment. Thus, the Shiites regularly do this with the Umayyad caliph Yazīd Ibn

Muʿāwiyya. But this does not reach the dramatic intensity of the situation rendered by the statement in verse 7 saying "what they do with the believers", nor the level of anger of the speaker against his adversaries whom he curses. All the defenders of the interpretation that this is a historical allusion have sensed this and come up with convoluted explanations: even though Mohammed is alluding to events in the past, he is so distressed by what he and his community are enduring in the present that he transfers the strength of the emotions felt to his account of the past. Yes, *qutila* and the passage that follows are indeed a historical allusion, but the implicit content and meaning (*taqdīran* in Arabic) implied by the text must be made explicit and the idea of the necessary curse of Muhammad's adversaries added. We must therefore read and understand: "Annihilate the Meccans and the unbelievers of the tribe of Quraysh, as the people of the pit were annihilated!"

Why all these detours and why avoid the simplest, most linear solution at all costs?

The obvious reason for this is the simple fact that there is no plausible explanation for the word *uḫdūd*. On the part of Western scholars, we can no doubt assume a little professional vanity, which pushes one to display one's historical knowledge based on the meagre Qur'anic allusions and commentaries of Muslim tradition. On the part of Muslim commentators, the problem lies in the genre they lend to the statement, this violent curse emanating directly from the mouth of God, who must also carry it out. This is why the passive form of the verb is used. The formula also has an active version, which is often used: *qātala-ka/hu Llāh* "may God curse you", which is less vehement than the previous version and shows weariness rather than anger. At a pinch, we could also add an alif - one more alongside the hundreds already added to the holy book by Umayyad governors in Iraq - and read: *qātala* (implied Allāh) *aṣḥāb al-'uḫdūd* "may God curse the people of the pit!"; this would be a parallel to oaths where God swears by Himself.

Once it has been established that this is a curse, most probably in a form of wording similar to the present text - a curse addressed to Muhammad's direct adversaries - the mind is freer to devote itself to seeking out the meanings covered by the word *'uḫdūd* among the terms in use for such formulae. Throughout the history of the various religions of the Near East, religious writings are not lacking in curses addressed to adversaries and the impious, unbelievers. Thus, retaining the meaning of 'pit', we find in the writings of the Essenes of Qumran 'the people of the pit', in a situation that is both delicate and piquant: these are impious people who, perhaps, succumb to the snares of women and for that reason are doomed to the hellish pit, benê or aneshê hash-shaḥath. The word *'uḫdūd* would then be a

literal translation from Hebrew, perhaps not directly, but after passing through Aramaic. Is this plausible?

Reflections on a preacher's style and use of language

Let us pose the problem in a general way: where do we situate the religious literary genre (Arabic?) within the body of religious literature of the Near East? It is neither prophetic language and discourse as we know them in the Old Testament, nor the narrative and epic style of a history b o o k .

The Koran rarely contains passages in which the visionary, drunk with inspiration, transmits a direct message that imposes itself by its own authority, that does not quote, but establishes immediate and primary truths. The language and style of the Koran can be likened to the religious literature, particularly apocalyptic - Jewish and Christian - so much in vogue from t h e sixth century AD onwards, as well as the religious hymns that were part of the Christian - and Jewish - liturgy at that time. They are, one might say, secondary discourses, in the sense that they constantly refer to earlier writings, synthesising and interpreting them anew with the aim o f supporting and proving the justness of one community's cause to the detriment of all the o t h e r s , particularly in the very striking apocalyptic descriptions. This is the favourite instrument for "turning" the hearts and minds of listeners, at once an instrument of threat and discipline, of promise and edification, and also an instrument of propaganda and instruction. From the point of view of a well-defined genre of religious literature, borrowings, either in the form of entire passages, or in the form of motifs and images, but also o f isolated lexical units (vocables, words), would be the rule rather than the exception. From this point of view, it's not surprising to come across an Arabic word that is a copy of a foreign expression. The Arabic of the time was a language in the process of establishing itself as a written language and we can assume, given the current state of our sources and knowledge, that this development took place at the same time as the creation or formation of the Koranic text. The fact remains, however, that *'uḫdūd* does not really convey the idea of a great and deep pit: indeed, would we not have expected *ḫandaq* instead*?* Reflections on the religious literary genre of the text and on the presumed authors of such literature may produce an argument that seems to me to allow us to conceive of another solution. Orators and preachers of the kind mentioned above like to adorn their language, either in writing or orally, w i t h learned words, prestigious words, better still by resorting to a foreign language of prestige. This is how Christian preachers in the West insert Latin words or expressions into their speeches, only to translate or paraphrase them for an audience - unfortunately impressed - that does not immediately understand them.

I apologise for using an example that

is also a caricature of German literature, Friedrich Schiller, in the Wallenstein Lager (Wallenstein Camp), 8 Auftritt, more precisely the sermon of the Capuchin monk:

> Fragten ihn: *Quid faciemus nos*?
> Wie machen wir's, daß wir kommen in Abrahams Schoß?
> *Et ait illis*, und er sagt:
> *Neminem concutiatis*,
> Wenn ihr niemanden schindet und plackt;
> *Neque calumniam faciatis*,
> Niemand verlästert, auf niemand lügt.
> *Contenti estote*, euch begnügt,
> *Stipendiis vestris*, mit eurer Löhnung
> Und verflucht jede böse Angewöhnung.

French version:

> ...To ask: *quid faciemus nos*? How do we
> get to Abraham's bosom? *Et ait illis*, and
> he replied:
> *Neminem concutiatis*,
> Don't hurt anyone;
> *Neque calumniam faciatis*,
> Do not slander falsely. *Contenti*
> *estote*, be content, *Stipendiis*
> *vestris*, with your pay And reject
> bad habits.

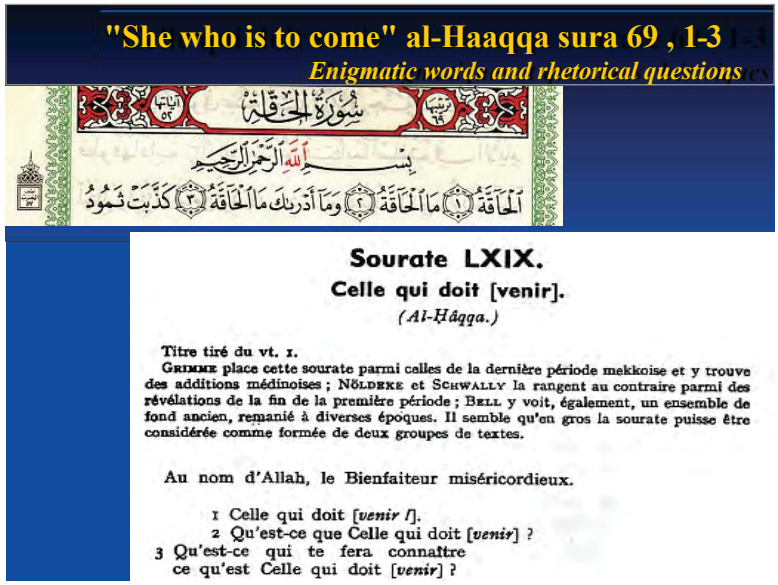
Well, despite the chronological and geographical distance between the two extracts, and despite the difference in the cultures and religions to which these two extracts relate, we find the same trick, the same rhetorical effect. More: this seems to me to be de rigueur for an 'orator in rebus divinis doctus peritusque', an orator who claims to be cultured in the subject. The Koran is not lacking in such examples, although not all of them are identified. Let's look again, from this point of view, at verses 4 and 5:

> 4 - They] were killed, the Men of the Furnace,
> 5 - constant fire -

Note that the French translation already offers my interpretation, without the author even realising it, or even drawing any consequences for his translation. In fact, "- feu sans cesse alimenté -", between two hyphens, is nothing more than the translation or paraphrase of the word *uḫdūd*.

The gloss is in apposition - in Arabic, *al-badal*, literally, 'the exchange', a particularly happy term that confirms my interpretation.

Allow me to digress for a moment, but it is "ad rem", directly to the point. Not only does the Koran use the rhetorical device in question, but on many occasions it does so explicitly. This applies precisely to passages and suras close to the Zodiac sura. We would be right, moreover, to call it, at least alternatively, *sūrat al-'uḫdūd*.



"She who is to come! Who is the One who is to come? What will make known what the One who is to come is?".

The word in question - used here in a function similar to that of the "bell", intended to attract the attention of the recipient of the message, as we have already seen with oaths - *al-ḥāqqa*, is simply a feminine (active) participle which gives very ambiguous meanings in Arabic. We could understand:
"the hour", the last hour, (that) which is to come. The two typical formulas that indicate (both) the riddle and its solution are brought together within the text itself: mā l-ḥāqqa "what does this mean?", or mā adrā-ka
"how can you know, what is it?". The same is true in Sura 101, Al-Qāriʿa. Take Sura 104, 4-5 again:

The enigmatic word *ḥuṭama* - perhaps simply a Qur'anic invention - is explained, in answer to a question posed in the previous verse, as "Allah's fire kindled". Similarly, enigmatic words like *siǧǧīn* [Q 83, 7] and *ʻilliyūn* [Q 83, 19] - all presumably good candidates for a Hebrew or Aramaic etymology - are defined

as a *kitāb marqūm* 'a sealed book' [Q 83, 9 and 20]. But the same principle - foreign or enigmatic word and explanation in Arabic terms - also applies to cases where the question of a rhetorical effect designed to impress the audience is not central. Or better still: the interplay between the two languages is used to create rhetorical devices (we shall see the cases of hendiadys), on the one hand, and, on the other, it is also used at the same time to create a religious terminology in Arabic based on translations which are sometimes experimental and have no posterity, but which are sometimes very successful and enduring.

Words with meanings assigned by religious ideology/authority; examples of "new language" in the Koran

For example, there is a case of hendiadys - an Arabic word accompanied by a synonymous word in Aramaic - in verse 48 of Sura 5 *Al-Mā'ida* "The Served Table", a sura that is dear to me. At this particular moment, I am not referring to the table served itself, which I also appreciate, of course - the sura and its title being dear to me because the word *mā'ida*, about which I have published a study, is a (particularly) complicated and interesting lexical borrowing that unfortunately cannot be dealt with here, even in the form of a digression. Virtually everyone has had a vague sense of the structure of the passage, but no one has admitted its true nature. And consequently it has not been correctly interpreted.

So we read (in a rather "naive" translation): (v. 48) "We have sent down to you the writing (the book) with truth", *muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yaday-hi min al-kitāb wa muhayminan 'alayhi* "confirming the writing that is found

and confirming it". I had already had occasion to allude to the presumed self-referentiality of the Koran - here's a fine example - but I don't want, and not just for lack of time, to open up yet another hell (theological, or for theologians?), so I'm concentrating on the *figura etymologica*. The word *muṣaddiq* is (so) simply the near-synonymous Arabic translation of the Aramaic, Syriac more precisely, *muhaymin* "to confirm, authenticate", but also "to lend trust, faith". This is not acceptable to Muslim orthodoxy. I'll leave you to contemplate this phrase more fully and quietly after the lecture and suggest another occurrence of this word in the Koran in Sura 59, *Al-Ḥašr* "The Gathering", verse 23. Like the previous one, it opens with one of the oldest forms of the Muslim *šahāda* (the 'profession of faith') with a literal parallel (to put it in a 'politically correct' way) to the Pseudo-Clementines: 'no deity but Him! - the King, the Most Holy, the Peace, the Salvation (?)". Then follow several other epithets, in Arabic, *al-mu'min al-muhaymin*, then "the powerful, the violent, the superb". So it is indeed one of Allâh's qualities that is expressed by *al-mu'min al-muhaymin;* like the following epithets, it is repeated and redundant. For the reader already experienced in interpreting these pairs of words, it is clear that *mu'min* is merely an alternative translation for the Aramaic loan *muhaymin*, which is also morphologically very close to Arabic: *afʿala* in Arabic corresponds to *haf'el* in Aramaic. Given the meaning of the verbs, a participle referring to God must here rather take the passive form (instead of the active form), which manifests itself in a simple change of vowel, both in Arabic and in Aramaic - a vowel usually not written in these two writing systems. The result is clear and intelligible (as follows):

Allāh al-mu'man al-muhayman "God in whom absolute trust has been placed".

The orthodox interpretation of this expression retains the active participle, although it has great difficulty in explaining how mu'min, a common term in the sense of "believer, faithful", can well refer to one of the qualities of Allāh. In reality, it is more judicious to simply transfer the meaning of the word *muhaymin*, which we believe we can legitimately read differently in the rasm, in accordance w i t h the context, and understand: what prevails, what is imperative. With this happy discovery, we turn again to sura 5, verse 48, and translate - leaving aside certain other details -: "confirming the book that existed before you (your mission) and making it prevail over this one". However, the root in question does not have such a meaning in the texts of the known Semitic languages. It is true, according to an eminent Scottish Semitic scholar and expert in biblical studies, who died recently, t h a t a word does not have (in the target language) its etymological meaning, but only the meaning conferred on it by the system

of which it has become a part and the context in which it appears. In written Arabic, *haymana* - which is derived from the root we are talking about - means (well) "hegemony". Thus, we speak of the *haymanat aṭ-ṭāġūt al-imrīkī* "hegemony of the American oppressor (Satan)". For a Semitiser, the term *haymana* appears as a possible alternative or competitor to the word *īmān* "faith" - a noun still derived from the same root, but according to the rules of Arabic. So we have two series: Arabic *mu'min, mu'man, īmān* which correspond to the Aramaic loan *muhaymin, muhayman, haymanūt*.

The linguistic history of the creation of a new vocabulary, required by a new religion and a new culture, is a rare and fascinating field of study. It is also fascinating to see how certain linguistic, cultural and religious spheres react to the challenge of translating sacred books and creating a new written language at the same time. This is certainly the case for Aramaic with Hebrew, for some Syriac with Greek, for Ethiopian with Greek but also with Aramaic, and for Arabic with Aramaic, certainly with Hebrew, but there are many other languages and factors that also play a role in such processes, particularly in the case of Arabic.

With the Koranic documents and their canonical interpretation at our disposal, we can explain this etymological anomaly within the framework of the Semitic languages, and we have the elements to (re)construct a history which itself perhaps, from time to time, prevails over etymological constructions. The result is certainly a little depressing, but not surprising for the historian: we are in the presence of a case of
This is the "novlangue" of a language decreed by the religious authorities, but also by the political authorities. The terminology of the Koran, the meaning of words and certain sensitive passages, is defined according to fundamental dogmas. In the case of *haymana*, for example, the decreed granting of a particular (specific) meaning has been extraordinarily successful, to the point where the term has entered the common usage of written Arabic.

Having established that the affixed segment "well-fed fire that does not go out" is the synonym or paraphrase of the word *uḫdūd*, we have to start looking for a possible etymon. Or resign yourself! It wouldn't be the first time for a Koranic word. In Sura 104, *Al-Humaza* "The Slanderer", verse 4-5, it says: "Let him beware! He will certainly be thrown into the Hotama. And what will teach you what the *ḥuṭama* is? It is the fire of Allah kindled!" Attempts at explanation do not lead to acceptable results, and the note by the French translator Blachère says it well: one could believe in a free creation, something that is not impossible - as the word *zaqqūm* probably demonstrates - but a solution that would amount to saying of an enigmatic word that it is a proper name.

Moreover, there is something tragic about the notes of this French translator Blachère, some of whom you have already seen. Armed with his enormous knowledge of languages, he comes very close to an 'Aramaic' solution to various problems. But he does not dare to take the plunge, or perhaps the charm of classical Arabic holds him so tightly that he cannot conceive of a working hypothesis, or a coherent and plausible theory, that would explain the many phenomena we have just been talking about?

Interpretation of uḫdūd - second test

We are not resigned and have the courage to abandon "the pit" to look elsewhere. The nominal form *uf`ūl(a)* is rare in Arabic. It can be found in foreign words, and right here. You can already guess, with words derived from, or passed through, Aramaic! Here are a few examples: *unbūb*, "pipe", *usṭūl*, "fleet", *usṭūra*, "legend, story". The alif prostheticum is often already found in Aramaic, especially in Mesopotamian Aramaic (known as Mandean), but it may also be an internal phenomenon of Arabic. The search for an etymon derived from a root √ḪDD - Aramaic knows no ḫ - offers no results. But what obliges us to leave the diacritical points as they appear in the canonical reading of the text? They are not inscribed in the text of the oldest manuscripts of the Qur'an, although they are known very early in the first century of Islam. There is a refusal, and for a long time, to provide the sacred text with the necessary signs, to remove its ambiguities, as if a certain ambivalence were part of its mysterious character, and precisely to leave the field open to different readings and interpretations. This is not only out of respect for the sacredness of the text, but also to avoid, in a pragmatic way, too many discussions about it. Let's try the root √GDD which would give ugdūd. It will prove promising in its derivations and meanings, although for the result that will now be proposed we will have had to take into account a parallel root √GDY - the exchange between the roots *tertiae infirmae* and *mediae geminatae* as variants with the same meaning is however well attested and known. The common meaning seems to be "to rise, to go up", which perhaps evolves into "to grow" (German *heranwachsen*), with the two extreme states of age: "to be young" or "to be old". A specific meaning is "to rise", referring to smoke, but above all to a well-fed flame. I confess that I do not at present have any attestation of this precise form, but it can be posited as possibly *gdoḏā*, perhaps already agdoḏā, of which the Qur'anic Arabic *uǧdūd* would be a direct reflection. Would he have taken it directly from an Aramaic source, or did the term already exist in one of the many Arabic dialects? We will probably never know for sure. And the meaning of this word would be: "the flaming, blazing flame".

The Arabic verb qaʿada "to sit" is grammaticalized and simply means "stay"

The persecutors of the believers could sit comfortably around the pit and the fire and at the same time enjoy the torments of their victims. But this is hardly plausible for people who would be the object of a curse promising them, in the future, hellfire. The verb *qaʿada* "to sit" is therefore no longer to be taken in its concrete sense. It is grammaticalised, like many other verbs, and indicates nothing more than a certain duration of time or a time during which an action takes place or a state endures. The phenomenon is common and well known in many languages, including our own. The cursed then remain - simply, but irrevocably, in hellfire - the choice of preposition not being free, but governed by the verb. In this case, the Arabic verb qaʿada requires the preposition *ʿalā*, literally 'upon' (as does the Aramaic verb *iṯeb*, which is otherwise analogous to the Arabic form in meaning and function). The formula is analogous to the very frequent Qur'anic phrase that designates the duration of the stay in hell or paradise: *ḫālidīna fīhā* "they will stay there eternally". And they will be well forced to account for what they are now doing and inflicting on believers, which naturally justifies a condemnation to hell. There is absolutely no need, then, to force the use of the present tense - *yafʿalūna* - to produce an expression that would be in the past tense.

Try to draw the scene described in Q 85, verses 4-9, the communicative situation

We are nearing the end of this philological tour de force in the study of this brief passage from the Koran. I will not be able to deal with a greater quantity of text and, consequently, I will not be able to examine the sura in its entirety, although it is very brief. I must conclude with a few necessarily summary remarks on the third question that has been raised, namely the interpretation of verse 8 and in particular that of the verb *naqama*, literally "to take revenge".

Let's first clarify the tangle of facts and actions and draw a chronological framework according to the interpretation that has been proposed so far. Let's remember: as long as it was an allusion to the past, to a known story, the phrase in verse 7, "what they are doing now", posed a problem. Verse 8, on the other hand, was a reference to the past: "They were only angry with them" - and here the French translation exaggerates the interpretation by saying: "Ils ne les tormentèrent (sous-entendu: les croyants) - because they believed in Allah." This is, for the second subordinate phrase, a forced interpretation or simply a mistranslation. The Arabic text reads:
"in order that they may believe in God, in order that they may believe in God".
Let's set the chronological scene according to the situation reconstructed so far: the speaker

curses some of his opponents, sends them to the devil and even to hell altogether - saying (to a wider audience and addressing his opponents indirectly, in the third person): "May they go to hell where they will remain with their guilty consciences and as damned witnesses of what they are now doing with believers (including perhaps with himself?)!" This is followed by a sentence which refers to something that happened in the past: "And they did nothing to them but believe in God! Now there is an imperative question here: who is acting, who is being acted upon, and what kind of action is it? It is inconceivable to think that the adversaries mentioned could have taken action against believers with the sole aim of making them believe in God! In the canonical interpretation, which lapses into incoherence when it comes to the use of verb tenses and modes, this was the reason for the torments. The verb in question naqama min 'an, "to take revenge on someone because of", is well attested in the Koran and in pre-Islamic poetry, but the reason is always given in the present or past indicative of the verb. Moreover, the interpretation "to get angry, to disapprove", as intended by the commentators, seems to be another of these rules of language decreed to form the norm. The solution may lie in changing the actors in the action, the poor believers: why are their merciless adversaries inflicting these torments on them at present? The poor have done nothing else (action X) to them (the unbelievers) other than believe in God! And what precisely does a conscientious believer do, and even more so a messenger, a zealous missionary? They invite others, perhaps exaggerating a little, they ask them to believe in God! The situation is somewhat paradoxical: analysis of the discourse, its historical circumstances and above all its morphological, syntactic and semantic structure has taught us what the word in question most probably means, but how can we arrive at this meaning without applying the radical and ideological measures in the formation of the Koranic lexicon and its canonical interpretation already described with the example of *haymana?*

The solution I'm proposing, and I'm warning you now, is still a long way off. more tentative and hypothetical than that which sought to solve the problem of the pit. But it works by highlighting a mechanism so fundamental to the influence of one language on another in the process of transference - who is still talking about translation pure and simple - that I wouldn't want to fail to sketch it out quickly. At least, in the end, I owe it to my audience to finish explaining the passage I started.

We're looking for a verb that changes meaning depending on the context. This is followed by a subordinate sentence in the indicative tense, which must mean "to take revenge on someone because of". Then there is a subordinate sentence introduced by a conjunction which must mean "to ask". For a Semitic scholar, versed in etymology and automatically thinking of the primitive and common meaning of roots and their derivatives (roots that are so divergent in the light of contexts

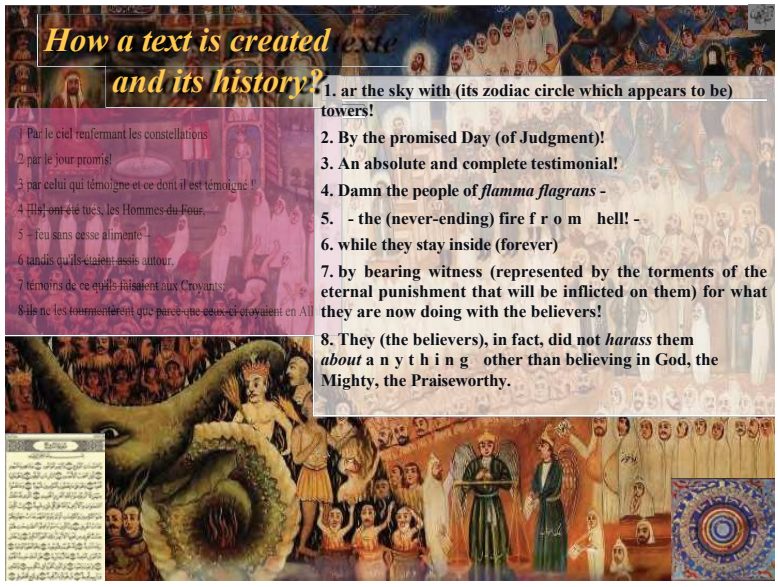
In a given language, and very variable through a comparison between the various Semitic languages), this does not require one to force one's well-trained idiosyncratic fantasy to excess. To take revenge is to want and demand a specific thing (revenge) in an extreme way. Incidentally, French, like other European languages, has similar semantic developments of the verb 'to want'. However, and here etymology meets bitter linguistic reality, the Arabic verb *naqama* is not attested with this meaning. One possible solution would be to speak of regional and/or dialectal usage. Classical Arabic dictionaries bear witness to the extreme richness and variety of these ancient dialects, and they offer only a limited choice. But the Koranic corpus is also the result of influences and interactions not only between religions and cultures, but primarily between several languages. For the moment, I am not talking about an enlightening effect resulting from translations, although there are clues in the text of the Koran itself that point in that direction. That will be the subject of another lecture, or rather a series of lectures. Let's come straight to our point. The words of a language not only have one meaning, but they often simply have a multitude of meanings and are therefore ambiguous or vary according to context. Translating a word from one language to another involves choosing a precise meaning and trying to find it in the semantic field of a word in the language into which we are translating. The semantic field of these two words (in the source language and in the target language), if the translator has done a good job or if he or she has been lucky, corresponds for this single meaning, but may, in general, be different for the rest of the semantic field. A typical translation error consists of using the same word, once it has fortunately been found, in other cases and other contexts. And then the result is no longer intelligible in the language of translation (target language) or gives a completely different and inappropriate meaning; cf. e.g. Syriac *šubḥā* as an equivalent of Greek *doxa*. So the translation has failed. But not always and not completely. In cases where the translation, like that of a sacred text for example, creates the model for a new literary language, such false or, better, innovative translations create paradigms and rules. Finally, the decisive question is: in a language that is known to have influenced the Arabic of the Koran, is there a verb that would fulfil the necessary conditions, i.e. cover, depending on the context, the semantic field of "to want, to ask" and that of "to take revenge"?

I quote the French equivalents from a simple language dictionary Syriac: *tbaʿ*, "to follow; to harass, to urge; to exhort; to ask, to ask again; to demand an account; to take revenge; to punish for".

And I'll stop here! It is decidedly too early, and represents too much work within Qur'anic studies, understood as historical-critical studies, to try to draw conclusions from these analyses for the genesis of the Qur'anic texts and to draw a real and plausible picture of their history. I

ends with an infinitely more modest result: a new translation of a third of a fairly short sura, sura 85:1-8:

1. By the sky with (its zodiac circle which seems to form) towers!
2. By the promised day (of judgement)!
3. An absolute and complete testimonial!
4. Damn the people of *flamma flagrans* -
5. - the (never-ending) fire f r o m hell! -
6. (W h i l e) they stay inside (forever)
7. bearing a / (bearing a) testimony (represented by the torments of eternal punishment that will be prepared for them / and) that accounts f o r what they are doing now with believers!
8. These (the believers), in reality, asked them nothing other than to believe in God, the Mighty, the Worthy of Praise / (to be Praised).



Summary of the study of the Sūrat al-Burūǧ (85) and particularly its first verses

First of all, let us look at the definition of the genre of the text and its role and, to put it in the jargon received from biblical studies, let us try to give it a "Sitz im Leben". We are in the presence of a sermon, or more precisely the beginning of a sermon that gives the main subjects to be developed. It is even possible to get a glimpse of the preacher's state of mind: indeed, the eight verses we have just analysed in detail represent an angry attack on part of his presumed audience who, not only reject the message and the invitation

religion and its precepts, but also ridicules or torments those who believe in it and convert. All this is presented as a curse in a pounding rhythm.

In the current composition of the sura, a calmer and more contained passage follows, recalling the condemnation to hell for unbelievers, on the one hand, and the reward of paradise for believers in God, on the other. These two long verses unfold in a slow, quiet, hymn-like rhythm that is most familiar from other long suras in the Qur'an.

This is followed by a restless *staccato* that presents God as the omnipotent one who will destroy, just as he had destroyed the unbelievers and evildoers throughout history, some of whom are quickly named and alluded to.

The end consists of an emphatic affirmation - which stands out a little because of the different rhythm, and even the lack of rhythm in the passage itself - that this is a *Koran* - a preaching, a lectionary? - preserved forever on an eternal tablet.

It should be noted from now on, and kept in mind for future examinations of the Qur'anic passages, that if we speak of the composition of the chapters or passages of this book, there are two levels to be distinguished. Level 1: the actual composition and formatting of the suras. Level 2: the composition of passages or pieces that can be defined on the basis of linguistic and literary criteria as being pieces by the author(s) that have been (strictly speaking) "composed". It should be noted that these two levels rarely coincide in the Koran. Therefore, the composition of the present suras is most probably due to later compilers and editors who exercised their own criteria and principles. To a certain extent, we can deduce from the example of Sura 85 a unity of rhythm. The subjects, at the very least, are related and, given the genre of the sermon, which allows a wide variety of themes to be addressed provided they are linked by a religious interest, a certain unity can be admitted. The change of rhythm is certainly a rhetorical principle that is often used. But the skill and intelligence of this presumed committee of potential editors do not necessarily guarantee, for this sura, an original and initially desired unity. On the contrary, they may well cover up and hide original gaps between parts of the final text that were composed and reconstructed a f t e r w a r d s .

As for the nature and composition of the written material available to the collectors of the Qur'an, in order to gain a better understanding of it we should meticulously scrutinise Muslim tradition and its information on the various copies of the Qur'an existing before the establishment of the canonical book known as the *ʿuṯmanian version*. Suffice it to recall the fact that even fragments of text, singular verses notated on small pieces of parchment, on shoulder blades, etc., have been sought. I will limit myself here to quoting the theory of

Richard Bell, who starts from the idea that these small pieces of text were written on the front and back of index cards or other preservation material. So if the piece was written as it was, as he suggests, the verso normally continued the recto, the whole forming a continuous text. There are two other cases to distinguish: very brief pieces, perhaps even isolated verses, were written on both the recto and verso, which may lead (fortuitously) to a sequence of passages that are not necessarily linked together. What's more, if by chance these fragments were to form part of a manuscript, an object made up of longer, continuous pages than the aforementioned media, then the transcription of the front and, subsequently, the back, could have resulted in fragments of disconnected texts being brought together. The actual composition of the suras in the Koran provides examples of this. All these facts taken together constitute a strong argument against the existence of a reliable and uninterrupted oral transmission of the Qur'anic text before it was finally written down. And I stress the expression "before it was written down". Because it is only and precisely the reality and existence of a definitive and canonical text that opens up the possibility of an oral and precise transmission of the text: this text is learnt and transmitted from the written word. Admittedly, the system of defective writing, as regards punctuation and vocalisation, still leaves a relatively large space for interpretation, and it is precisely this space for interpretation of the written text that is reflected in discussions about readings of the Qur'an (*qirāʾāt*). This is therefore a reflection of a secondary, I would even say academic, oral tradition. It should be pointed out that modern studies, on the composition of the Meccan suras in particular, merely study and judge the competence of the writers of the so-called Meccan suras, but in reality say very little, or sometimes nothing, about the author's intentions or those of the authors of the original texts.

The original composition is reflected in the units of discourse, one of which we have just analysed. We'll come back to this when we talk about linguistic and stylistic particularities. We must now insist on a common fact shared by the different textual units. These are not developed, well-constructed texts that form a complete sermon. Rather, we have the impression of being in the presence of a summary written down and specially formulated to ensure that the beginning of the sermon is of good quality and sufficiently impressive for the audience, while not forgetting to mention the subjects that are going to be dealt with - in a way, we are dealing with the preacher's aide-memoire to which he can have recourse if necessary. In other words, the written word gives only a small part of the historical reality: we must necessarily imagine a longer sermon developing the allusions and concepts contained in the introduction, a sermon that is lost forever because it was not transmitted through the written word. Without neglecting the undeniable differences in style and content between the short surahs of the Meccan period and the long surahs of the

Medina, we could hypothesise that some of these differences are due to a growing habit over time of putting the religious message in writing, thus leaving less room for improvisation in the moment.

But let's move on to linguistic and literary analysis:

> To convey his new and unheard-of religious message, the preacher used traditional rhetorical means familiar to his audience: the oaths of the pagan Arab rhetors and soothsayers, although he was already gradually introducing images and elements of the (new) religious message.

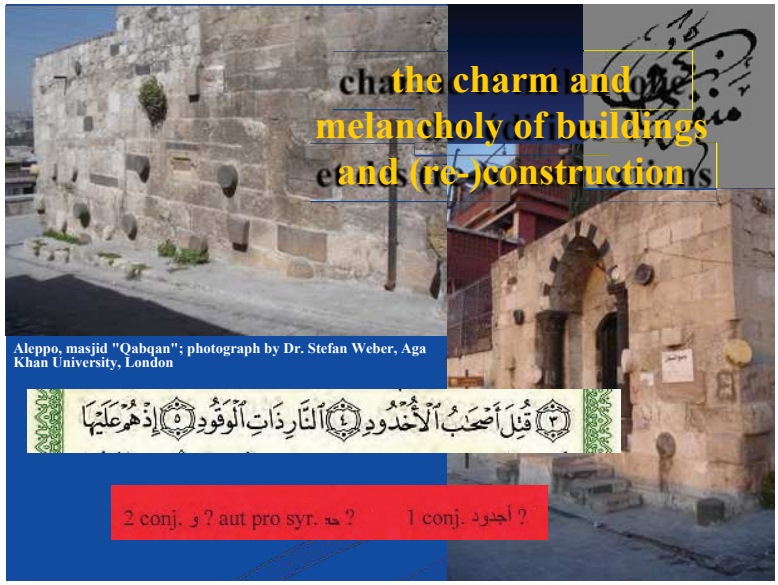
He embellished his speech with foreign words taken from one of the prestigious languages of the time. This is partly to make an impression on his audience, but also to introduce new concepts into the language of his preaching - Arabic, which was in the process of becoming a written language. Sometimes the foreign term is followed by an explanation, which is a paraphrase in Arabic or else a new term, a neologism (*uǧdūd = an-nār ḏāt al-waqūd*). But the influence of the foreign language goes further. It exerts its influence on the semantic field of common, well-known Arabic words and loads them with new meanings (example: *naqama*). And with that the peculiarities of this little passage are not yet exhausted: we might also add the use of the conjunction *i*ḏ, corresponding to the Syriac *ka*ḏ, as an introduction to a sentence indicating the simultaneity of states or actions (Arabic *ḥāl*), alongside the conjunction *waw* of usual Arabic, used in the following proposition.

Finally, there is the question of the identity of the author of this text. Leaving aside the question of which historical figure he was, let's ask ourselves whether we can answer the question in a meaningful way: was he an Aramean, a missionary, who used Arabic? Is he an Aramean, a missionary, who uses Arabic, an Arabic that he has learnt more or less perfectly, as the vernacular of the place where he is carrying out his mission and that of the people he wants to convert? Or is it a native speaker of Arabic who has been strongly influenced - either through the study of religious writings in Aramaic, or through contact with religious figures who are scholars of the language - and is seeking to transmit, for the first time, new ideas and concepts in his mother tongue? In either case, we are dealing with highly complex translation processes.

Final thoughts and perspective. Let's use another image

The Koran could be compared to a building, for example a mosque, constructed with elements from other, older buildings: ancient temples with their columns and capitals, Christian churches with their naves and vaults. In the walls, you can see the columns, the

capitals, carved stones that have been reused, often even shaped, to fulfil their new function. Walled doors and a narrow, acute-angled plan, for example, also bear witness to an older building oriented in a different geographical direction.



Contemplators can choose to devote themselves entirely to t h e harmony and beauty of the building as it is today. He or she can consider it as a perfect synchrony, taking into account the function and usefulness of its current elements, in short, exposing the project and the idea of the last masters of the work. The observer who contemplates can just as easily concentrate on the building's constituent parts: and thus discover the origin and age of the various elements, try to determine where they were made, p e r h a p s place them in their former architectural context, and finally find out what they were used for at the different periods under consideration.

In the long run, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive, even if, from time to time, it is necessary to concentrate efforts on one important aspect in particular in order to obtain significant results. Admittedly, the work involved often exceeds the capacity of a single person, a researcher, to deal with both approaches at the same time. However, the two methods are always complementary, and each needs the other to achieve its aims, to advance research in its own field.

As a reward for their varied studies, once they are well informed, the contemplators will finally be able to consider the building in the manner of a holograph: looking synchronously at the structure and beauty of the edifice from different angles.

This will allow him to see the elements that have been brought in from elsewhere and to conjure up images of the original buildings. It remains to be seen whether he will ever, for a moment, be granted the grace to conceive of the building, complex and composite though it is, as being made of a single block, as being a creation of genius, or even a divine revelation.

This will of course depend on other factors: the personality of the observer, his rational knowledge, his belief in absolute and perfect beauty, and perhaps even more, his faith in an ultimate and complete truth.