Zwickau in Electoral Saxony was not a good place to be during the Thirty Years War. Throughout the hostilities the town’s inhabitants were repeatedly subjected to the miseries of chronic warfare. Worse still were the accompanying inflictions: hunger and repeated outbreaks of the plague. Zwickau’s Latin school was spared none of these miseries. As early as the summer of 1619 the town was forced to billet some three hundred Saxon soldiers, much to the burghers’ disadvantage. To this inconvenience were added recurring acts of lawlessness by the soldiers, who were finally brought under control when three of the Saxon recruits were hanged in the market place.¹ Zwickau’s wartime woes had just begun. The following year witnessed a severe crop failure,² with food shortage reaching a peak in 1623.³ In light of the growing menace of the Thirty Years War the Latin school decided in 1625 to suspend the Lent schoolcomedies, to be renewed only in 1671. The following year the town was afflicted by yet another in a series of bubonic outbreaks which claimed the lives of 375 victims. This occasioned an order from the Saxon Elector for weekly penitential sermons and Catechism exams for adults as well as school-children.⁴ One further wartime misery came in 1632 when the town was conquered and plundered by Wallenstein and its Latin school was temporarily used by the Imperial commissary of stores as his headquarters.⁵

² Ibid., p. 400.
³ Ibid., pp. 405–6.
⁴ Ibid., p. 409.
⁵ Ibid., p. 422.
During one bubonic outbreak Johann Zechendorff (1580–1662), headmaster of Zwickau's Latin school, decided to take action.\(^6\) God in his wrath was chastising the town with the scourge of war, hunger, and pestilence, he wrote in the introduction to a strange undated work extant only in manuscript. To assuage this divine displeasure he had decided temporarily to suspend the study of profane authors (Graeco-Roman literature) and instead to read and comment on the Seven Penitential Psalms.\(^7\) These he read with his pupils in the classroom as well as privately in no less than thirty translations and paraphrases.\(^8\) Since some of his pupils had begun learning Arabic, Zechendorff undertook the compilation of an Arabic paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms to acquaint them better with the Qur'an's vocabulary and phraseology. Muhammad, for Zechendorff the unquestionable author of the Qur'an, is dubbed the Arab Cicero (Cicero arabicus) – according to him a common epithet for the prophet among Muslims.\(^9\) This resulted in a curious work, which Zechendorff never got printed, with the equally curious title An Arabic paraphrase of the seven penitential psalms, i.e. in the style of and taken from the system of the Qur'an, which contains cxiii chapters,\(^10\) or rather from the Arab Cicero and in the Ismaelitic and regal Solomonic language: in pure and unadulterated speech set down rhythmically, with an interlinear Latin translation for the benefit of German students of Arabic, to allow them an easier access to the Qur'an.\(^11\) In a lengthy German introduction to the work Zechendorff argued that there was more eloquence (Reden v[nd] Wortt) and substance (Res oder Realia) in the Psalter than in the ‘monotonous droning’ of the ‘book of the deluded Muhammad’, which

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\(^6\) Possibly the bubonic outbreak of 1626 which occasioned the above-mentioned Electoral decree but one of the later outbreaks (e.g. 1633 or 1636) are also possible.

\(^7\) RSBZ, MS 18.4.29, fol. 224r-\(^r\). J. Zechendorff, Septem Psalmorum poenitentialium Para-Phrasis Arabica. The codex was written by Zechendorff from right to left but paginated by a later librarian from left to right, hence the reverse pagination.

\(^8\) Ibid., fols 224v–223v.

\(^9\) Muhammad, needless to say, was not, to the best of my knowledge, ever referred to in Arab sources as an ‘Arab Cicero’, nor am I acquainted with any other of Zechendorff’s European contemporaries using this (in itself charming) epithet.

\(^10\) This is a rare slip. As Zechendorff knew, the Qur’an has 114 chapters. In an undated letter to the Jena Orientalist Johann Ernst Gerhard the Elder (1621–1668) Zechendorff even offered an analysis of the short concluding sura. FBG, Chart. B. 451, fol. 132r.