Chapter 8

Raphelengius and the Yellow Cow (Q 2:69): Early Translations of Hebrew ָּדֶּם into Arabic ָּסֲרַף

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The year Thomas Erpenius was installed in the chair of Arabic at Leiden, another major event in the annals of Arabic studies took place just a few streets away from the university building. Sixteen years after the death of Franciscus Raphelengius, two of his sons, Frans and Joost, finally published their father’s Lexicon Arabico-Latinum, the first Arabic-Latin dictionary ever to be printed.1 All considered, the dictionary was no small achievement. Raphelengius, who was appointed professor of Hebrew in 1586, never came to master Arabic very well, and the sources that were available in Leiden at the time were few and in many ways inadequate for the task he had set before himself. The great oriental dictionaries had not yet found their way to Europe, and like J.J. Scaliger, W. Bedwell, and others who made similar efforts around this time, Raphelengius had to make do with what he could scrounge up. First and foremost, he based himself on the Mozarabic Latin-Arabic glossary now at the Leiden university library (MS Leiden Or. 231), which he quotes more than two thousand times in the published dictionary,2 and he also made frequent use of Pedro de Alcalá’s Spanish-Andalusian Arabic dictionary printed in 1505.3 The benefit he could draw from these sources was nevertheless limited in face of the richness of the Arabic lexicon, and he was therefore compelled to also take recourse to

1 A. Hamilton (‘“Nam tirones sumus”: Franciscus Raphelengius’ Lexicon Arabico-Latinum (Leiden 1613)’, in M. De Schepper and F. De Nave (eds), Ex officina Plantiniana: Studia in memoriam Christophori Plantini (ca. 1520–1589), Antwerp 1989, 557–589) offers a detailed account of the background to the publication of this dictionary, from which I in this section of my paper have benefited in more specifics than is practical to indicate in individual footnotes.

2 Raphelengius believed the glossary was from the eighth century. P.S. van Koningsveld (The Latin-Arabic Glossary of the Leiden University Library: A Contribution to the Study of Mozarabic Manuscripts and Literature, Leiden 1976, 65) dates it to the late twelfth century.

3 From time to time he also consulted the never-published dictionary Scaliger was compiling in parallel with him at Leiden (MS Leiden Or. 212), which however, builds on largely the same sources as his own.
various texts that were available both in Arabic and Latin (and in some cases also Hebrew or Greek). The two most important of these were the Qurʾān and Saʿadyah Gaon’s (d. 942) translation of the Torah, which had been printed in the Constantinople polyglot (1546). The others were of considerably less importance, though mention should be made of the Genoa polyglot Psalter printed in 1516, the Arabic gospels printed at the Medici press in Rome 1591, and in particular the Arabic text of Avicenna’s Canon (al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb) printed there in 1593. The dictionary thus grew into a virtual depository of information of such different varieties of Arabic as the language of the Qurʾān, the Classical Arabic of Ibn Sīna and Saʿadyah Gaon, and the Andalusian Arabic of Pedro de Alcalá. More consistently documented, it could even have become a historical dictionary of sorts, particularly if Raphelengius’ intention to include quotations illustrating the usage of the words had been carried through in the published edition. The project of producing a dictionary with these characteristics nevertheless proved overwhelming, and though Raphelengius had begun his work on it already in the early 1570s, he had not brought it to an end when he died almost thirty years later. Scaliger does not seem to have been very keen on taking over were he had left off, and the dictionary, like Scaliger’s own, was therefore probably on the verge of passing into oblivion when Frans and Joost decided to make it one of the last texts to be printed with their father’s Arabic type.

When Erpenius in 1612 returned to Leiden from a long journey which had brought him to England and France, where he had studied Arabic, and then to Venice, where he had studied Turkish and collected oriental manuscripts, the dictionary was already in the press. Time was running out, but Frans and Joost, aware that their father’s dictionary in reality was not quite ready for publication, wanted to have him look it over for them before it was put out. The soon-to-be professor of Arabic was well equipped for the task. Unlike Raphelengius, he had a good command of the language, and among the manuscripts he had brought back to Leiden was a copy of al-Qarāḥisārī’s Arabic-Turkish dictionary al-ˁAxtarī (1545), which he now could use to correct Raphelengius’ text together with two other Arabic-Turkish lexicographical sources.4 The work took Erpenius several months; when he finished, he had produced a body of improvements—or ‘observations’, as he called them—which were printed in an appendix to the dictionary running to almost seventy pages.

4 Erpenius’ copy of al-ˁAxtarī is now at Cambridge (MS Gg 6.41). Besides it he also used a copy of Mirqāṭ al-luġa (Leiden MS Or. 237), the author of which is unknown, and a short, likewise anonymous, Arabic-Turkish wordlist (Cambridge MS Gg 6.39).