Chapter 10

On the Middle Iranian Borrowings in Qur’ānic (and Pre-Islamic) Arabic

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1 Introduction

It has long been recognized that the holy book of the Muslims, the Qurʾān, was replete with religious concepts, imagery and allusions from outside the “pagan” Arabian heartland in which many non-Arabic forms and expressions had found their natural place. Many of the Muslim commentators on the Qurʾān had no hesitation to consider a foreign provenance for especially those cases where the strange morphology of the forms would not fit in any paradigm of Classical Arabic grammar. It is only following the influential works of the pre-eminent scholar, the Jewish convert Abū ‘Ubaidah (728–825 CE) from Basra and Imām al-Shāfi‘î (767–820 CE), the founder of one of the main Schools of the Fiqh, a fairly dominant view took hold that the holy Qurʾān was free of foreign elements. This view was based on Sūrah 41:44 primarily: *wa law ja‘alnāhu qurʾānāna‘jamīyyan la-qālū lawlā fuṣṣilat āyātu-hu a‘jamiyyun wa ‘arabiyyun qul hu wa lillaδīna āmanū hudan wa šafā’un* ‘And if We had made it a non-Arabic Qurʾān [i.e. a Qurʾān in ‘ajamiyya], they would have said, “Why are its verses not explained in detail [in our language]? Is it a foreign [recitation] and an Arab [messenger]?” Say, “It is, for those who believe, a guidance and cure.”’

The argument was, of course, that the only way the Arabs could have understood the Qurʾān, if it were in their native, Arabic tongue. Another argument against the presence of foreign elements in the Qurʾān was that, as the Qurʾān was the most perfect and final manifestation of divine revelations, God would have naturally chosen the most perfect of languages, i.e. Arabic, which would surely not be lacking vocabulary in expressing religious concepts. The reply to the argument that the Qurʾān contains forms that are incomprehensible to ordinary Arabic speakers, was simply that, because the Arabic language was so rich and vast, a mere mortal being would not be able to grasp its entirety.

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1 The English translation of all the quoted passages of the Qurʾān is from *Sahih International*, www.quran.com.
Even so, the evidence of the early philologists was so strong, that for the proponents of a “foreign free” Qur’ānic reading, the similarities between some of the Arabic forms and their foreign counterparts were just coincidental, or at least, Arabic happened to use those forms first in the Qur’ān, which is the position of al-Ṭabarī in his famous Tafsīr of the Qur’ān.

The more pragmatic argument was later suggested by the Egyptian scholar and Qur’ān exegete al-Suyūṭī (1445–1505 CE), viz. that indeed the Qur’ān was in plain Arabic, but the ancient Arabs merely assimilated words from other civilisations in such a way they have become part (“perfected”) of the Arabic language. Al-Suyūṭī also attempted to classify those originally non-Arabic elements of the Qur’ān in several groups, according to language, viz. borrowings from Ethiopic, Persian, Greek, Indian, right down to “Zanji” and Berber. Many of these assumptions were little more that guesses based on a certain resemblance in form or meaning.

It is only with better understanding and discoveries of those languages among the European scholars that we are now able to assign a foreign provenance on a firmer philological footing. A comprehensive overview of the modern researches on the foreign forms in Qur’ānic Arabic was published by Arthur Jeffery in 1938 (repr. 2007): The Foreign Vocabulary Of The Qurʾān. It is from this publication that I have collected my Qurʾānic forms of probable Iranian origin. Since Jeffery we now have at our disposal a panoply of relevant Middle Iranian texts, which have been edited and published together with auxiliary tools, such as dictionaries. I will therefore assess these forms from my background as an iranist. It must be emphasized though that the so-called “Iranian” source is mainly from Middle Persian (as attested in Pahlavi and Central Asian Manichean texts) and Parthian2 (chiefly preserved in Manichean texts).

Not only from Jeffery, but also Ciancaglini’s most recent publication on Iranian loanwords in Syriac (Ciancaglini 2008) will be extensively consulted too.3

I have assessed the forms according to 3 main criteria:

1. Qurʾānic forms that have come from Iranian, via a different language, most often from Aramaic.

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2 It must be added that even after the downfall of the Parthian-speaking Arsacids, Parthian was still extensively used in the Iranian realm under the successive, Persian oriented, Sassanian dynasty.

3 Prof. Harry Stroomer points out that Iranian forms may also have entered Arabic via Ethiopia, where Aramaic was used as a lingua franca as well (next to Classical Ethiopian).