

# Hermann the Dalmatian's Purported Role in the Translation of the Quran into Latin

Tatjana Paić-Vukić

The Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Zagreb, Croatia

## ABSTRACT

*This paper, part of a forthcoming reassessment of certain claims about Hermann the Dalmatian (c. 1105/1110-after 26 February 1154), an illustrious scholar, philosopher and translator of scientific and religious works from Arabic to Latin, addresses Hermann's purported co-authorship of the first Latin translation of the Quran. Examination of the literature has revealed that this widely accepted claim, which has been uncritically disseminated via Croatian scholarly literature and the popular media, appears to be based on misreadings of the sources and conjectures.*

**Key words:** Hermann the Dalmatian, Quran, Latin translation, Robert of Ketton, conjectures

## Introduction

Hermann the Dalmatian (Hermannus Dalmata, c. 1105/1110-after 26 February 1154) was an astronomer, astrologer, mathematician and philosopher, best known as one of the pioneers in the transmission of knowledge from Islamic civilization to the medieval Christian West. He translated Arabic works by great Muslim scientists into Latin, as well as works by Greek and Hellenistic authors that had only survived in Arabic translations.<sup>1</sup>

Hermann was born in the central part of the Istrian peninsula. One of his pen names, Dalmata, refers to the former Roman province of Dalmatia, which encompassed Istria. He is also known as Hermann of Carinthia (because Istria once belonged to the March of Carinthia of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation), Sclavus (the Slav), and Secundus, a designation he chose to distinguish himself from another author, Hermannus Contractus (the Cripple).

The scant biographical data on Hermann are mostly derived from letters and introductions to texts he translated or wrote and a few references to him by his contemporaries, while the lacunae are occasionally filled on the basis of conjecture by analogy. According to the Croatian historian Franjo Šanjek, Hermann most probably attended a Benedictine monastery school in his homeland and proceeded to study at cathedral schools in Chartres and Paris under the guidance of Thierry of Chartres. There he met an Englishman, Robert of Ketton, who became his

inseparable friend and companion in the quest for knowledge.<sup>2</sup> “These schools had already been influenced by Arabic sciences, especially by the knowledge of positional [place-value] notation and the astrolabe. This was probably what prompted Hermann and Robert to travel toward the very sources of Arabic sciences.”<sup>3</sup>

Šanjek writes that in 1135, Hermann and Robert embarked on a journey to the Northern Mediterranean and the Middle East, where they studied the Arabic language.<sup>4</sup> After several years, their route led them to Northern Spain, by the Ebro River, where they participated in the great endeavor of transmitting the knowledge preserved in the libraries of Arabic manuscripts seized during the *Reconquista*. Hermann and Robert translated texts directly from Arabic into Latin, unlike most of their contemporaries, who translated from Arabic to a Romance language and then to Latin, or to Latin and then read the translation aloud to a Latin expert, who would improve the clarity and style.<sup>5</sup> Some authors associate the two friends with the famous Toledo School of Translators.<sup>6</sup> However, as Charles Burnett argues, they formed a distinct group in Northern Spain and Southern France, together with Hugo of Santalla and Hermann's student, Rudolph of Bruges.<sup>7</sup> According to J. Martínez Gázquez and A. Gray, the group worked in Tarazona or Tudela.<sup>8</sup>

The translations attributed to Hermann include Euclid's *Elements*, Theodosius' *De sphaeris*; al-Khwārizmī's *Zīj* (astronomical tables), Ptolemy's *Planisphere*, Sahl ibn Bishr's text on astrology *Fatidica* and Abū Ma'shar's *Mai-*

*us introductorium in astronomiam*. These titles indicate that Hermann's main interests lay in mathematics, astronomy and other natural sciences. It was only at the request of the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, that he and his friend Robert undertook the task of translating and compiling religious texts on Islam. Hermann compiled *De generatione Mahumet* and *Doctrina Mahumet*, while Robert was engaged in the translation of the Quran. Among his original works and compilations are an astrological-cosmological treatise, *De essentiis*, an astrological compilation, *De indagazione cordis*, and a collection of texts on weather forecasting entitled *Liber imbrium*.<sup>9,10,11</sup> Some scholars also credit Hermann with the co-authorship of the first Latin translation of the Quran, an issue to be addressed in this paper.

## Reading into the Sources

Robert and Hermann were persuaded and generously compensated by the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, to translate the Quran and various texts about Islam and the history of the Muslim peoples.<sup>12</sup> The Latin Quran was published in Basel in 1543 and 1550 by Theodore Buchmann, known as Bibliander, with only Robert of Ketton listed as the translator.<sup>13</sup> However, some authors, including Albert Faber, Sheila Low-Beer and Ferdinand Wüstenfeld,<sup>14</sup> may have been prompted to attribute co-authorship of the Quran translation to Hermann because of a reference by Peter the Venerable to the knowledgeable scholars to whom he had entrusted the task of translating texts on Islam:

“Using pleas and money, I persuaded them to translate the history and the doctrine of that unfortunate man and his law which is called the Koran from Arabic into Latin. And to ensure that the translation would be entirely accurate and no errors would hinder our complete understanding, I included a Saracen among the Christian translators. Here are the names of the Christians: Robert of Ketton, Hermann the Dalmatian, Peter of Toledo; the Saracen was called Mohammad.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the names of four persons are mentioned by Peter the Venerable, it does not follow that all four of them translated the Quran, as there were other texts on the agenda. However, as V. Kursar notes, Croatian authors tend to ascribe greater or lesser co-authorship to Hermann with Robert.<sup>16</sup> In 1983 and 1988, Šanjek wrote that the letter by Peter the Venerable confirmed that Hermann was one of the translators of the Quran,<sup>17,18</sup> adding that the work on the translation was led by Robert.<sup>19</sup> In a subsequent paper published in 1990, he writes: “The editors of *Patrologia latina*, Vol. 189, insist on the joint work of the two key protagonists, Robert of Ketton and Hermann the Dalmatian. However, it seems that in the translation of the Quran the share of our scholar does not exceed the limits of an expert advisor, a fact to which some other elements point.”<sup>20,21</sup> Unfortunately, these “elements” are not identified. However, even in Šanjek's paper where doubts regarding Hermann's co-authorship are raised, there are some sentences uncritically repeat-

ed from earlier texts by the same author, such as one stating that Peter the Venerable entrusted Hermann with the translation of the Quran.<sup>22</sup> In any case, Šanjek published an article about Hermann in 2017 that neither identifies him as a co-translator of the Quran nor as a collaborator on this translation.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, as early as 1990, Šanjek had recanted his previous assertion that Hermann was a co-author of the Latin translation of the Quran. However, F. Zenko published the following ambiguous account in the same edition of *De essentiis* in which Šanjek's text appeared.<sup>24</sup> Herein I quote verbatim from the English edition of Zenko's article, also published in 1990.

“They were received by Peter the Venerable (Venerabilis) and were prevailed upon to translate, with an abundant financial compensation, some Islamic religious texts, including Kur'an itself. From this Islamic religious group, Hermann translated the texts entitled *De generatione Machumet et nutritura eius* and *Doctrina Machumet, quae apud Saracenos magnae auctoritas est* [emphasis T. P.-V.]. As one of the contributions of the people of this country to the process of creation of the universal European spirit out of heterogeneous elements, we should point out the fact that the Ragusean Ivan Stojković (1443), during a diplomatic mission, found in Constantinople a manuscript of Hermann's translation of Kur'an [emphasis T. P.-V.], had it copied, and it was on the basis of this copy that Bibliander was to publish it in Baselin 1543, together with Hermann's translations of the mentioned Islamic texts.”<sup>25</sup>

In the above text, there is no reference to any source indicating that Ivan Stojković attributed the translation of the Quran to Hermann. Furthermore, Zenko claims that “the main interest of Hermann and his friend is revealed in Robert's dedication of his translation of al-Kindi's *Indicia* to Hermann, as well as in Robert's letter to Peter the Venerable, which he sent together with the translation of Kur'an in which he says that this work had taken them away from their main task [emphasis T. P.-V.]”.<sup>26</sup> This assertion is supported by a reference to Robert's words, as quoted by Burnett. However, Burnett actually quoted Robert as follows: “[Your wisdom] has compelled me meanwhile to lay aside my main study of astronomy and astrology.”<sup>27</sup> Burnett is faithful to the Latin original: “que me compulit (...) studium meum [emphasis T. P.-V.]”<sup>28</sup> while in Zenko's paraphrase, the first-person singular pronouns are rendered as third-person plural, the use of the plural form erroneously implying that Robert could have been referring to the translation of the Quran as a product of his and Hermann's joint efforts. Such claims have been perpetuated in Croatian scholarly works, and later repeated in the popular media.<sup>29,30,31,32,33</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented no new biographical data about Hermann but, rather, called attention to specific widely disseminated assertions that do not appear to

be source-based. I have also pointed out mutually contradictory claims in the Croatian edition of *De essentiis*, in which Šanjek cautiously approaches the issue of the authorship of the Quran translation in the first volume, while in the second volume Zenko asserts that Hermann translated the Quran together with Robert. Speculations and conjectures aimed at bridging the lacunae in our knowledge due to a dearth of sources are, indeed, legitimate methods in historiography, as long as speculation is clearly identified as such.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Hermann's biography, conjectures have sometimes been presented as facts

and further disseminated via Croatian scholarly literature and the popular media, thereby crediting "our scholar" as a co-author, or even the sole author, of the first Latin translation of the Quran in the collective memory of Croatian intellectuals and the general public.

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T. Paić-Vukić

The Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Strossmayerov trg 2, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
e-mail: [tpaic@hazu.hr](mailto:tpaic@hazu.hr)

## DVOJBENA ULOGA HERMANA DALMATINCA U PREVOĐENJU KUR'ANA NA LATINSKI

### SAŽETAK

Ovaj je rad dio još neobjavljene studije o pojedinim dvojbena tvrdnjama o životu Hermana Dalmatinca (oko 1105/1110-poslije 26. 2. 1154.), glasovitog znanstvenika, filozofa i prevodioca znanstvenih i vjerskih djela s arapskoga na latinski. Autorica se u njemu bavi pitanjem Hermanova doprinosa prvom latinskom prijevodu Kur'ana. Ispitivanje literature o Hermanovu životu i djelu pokazalo je da su tvrdnje nekih autora da je on preveo Kur'an, sam ili s Robertom od Kettona, plod učitavanja u izvore ili pak njihove proizvoljne interpretacije. Takva se nagađanja dalje pronose kao neupitne činjenice kroz hrvatsku znanstvenu literaturu i popularne članke.