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# An Anti-Islamic Marginal Comment in the Apocalypse of “Codex Reuchlin” (GA 2814) and its Tradition

The interpretation of the number of the beast in Apoc. 13:18 is a long-standing interpretive crux, reaching back at least to Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 5.30.1–3), who identifies the beast whose names requires decoding as an antichrist. Irenaeus assumes that the graphemes that comprise the name of this future eschatological antagonist will add to six hundred and sixty-six, offering options like τειταν, λατεινος, and ευανθας.<sup>1</sup> His method of decoding becomes fixed in the tradition, even though interpreters offer a range of possible names that extend beyond his initial suggestions.

A marginal note on Apoc. 13:18 in GA 2814 (49r) inserted by a hand from the early fifteenth century also follows Irenaeus’ interpretive strategy.<sup>2</sup> But instead of offering a hypothetical name, the note identifies a specific historical person via coded wordplay as concomitant with Revelation’s beast: the prophet Muhammad, through the deployment of the term μαχκε (“Mecca”).

The goal of this short study is to examine this tradition and contextualise it in the light of Revelation’s Greek manuscripts and interpretive traditions in Byzantine Greek commentaries produced after the year 1453. The apparently idiosyncratic note in 2814 is a small part of a substantial tradition that casts Revelation’s eschatological antagonists as counterparts to the contemporary political and religious antagonists of Greek Orthodoxy in the late and post-Byzantine periods.

## 1 The Comment

The marginal comment appears in centre of the right margin of 49r (Fig. 1) and is partially cut off by the end of the page, which appears to have been trimmed after the production of the note.

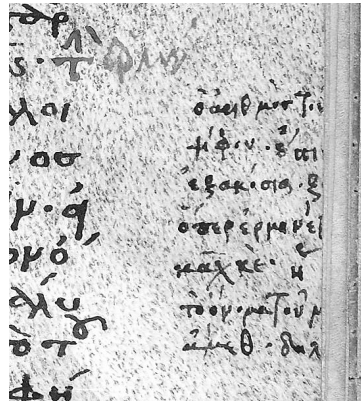


Fig. 1: Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek Cod I.1.4.1 [GA 2814], 49r

ὁ ἀριθμὸς το[υ  
ψίφου<sup>3</sup> ἔστι[ν  
ἑξακόσια ξ[ς  
ὄπερ ἔρμενε[ια  
μαχκε̅ . ἥ[γουν]  
τὸ ὄνομα του μ[ω-  
αμεθ . δηλ[οι]<sup>4</sup>

The number of the calculation is six hundred and sixty-six, which is interpreted as Machke, that is to say, the name of Muhammad. Revealed...

Although the value of the graphemes of the name μωαμεθ add to 895,<sup>5</sup> the numerical value of the graphemes in the sobriquet offered here, Machke, correspond directly to the number of the beast, which is presented in a combined ordinal and abbreviated form (ἑξακόσια = 600; ξ[ς = 66).<sup>6</sup> There appears to be two possible interpretations of the word Machke, which does not appear in any Greek lexicon that I have referenced. The first approach is to take the word as an abbreviation, a combination the μ of Muhammad with a form of the word μαχάω (“to wish to fight”) or μάχη (“battle” or “combat”), perceived characteristics of

<sup>1</sup> Other ancient commentators offer a range of alternative options. See Allen 2020 for a fuller examination. On the deployment of numbers and number abbreviations in Greek manuscripts, see Cole 2017.  
<sup>2</sup> On the date of this hand, see Karrer’s contribution (p. 53–61) in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> Regularised as ψήφου.

<sup>4</sup> See also the article of E. Gerke (p. 189) in this volume.

<sup>5</sup>  $\mu = 40 + \omega = 800 + \alpha = 1 + \mu = 40 + \varepsilon = 5 + \theta = 9 = 895$ .

<sup>6</sup>  $\mu = 40 + \alpha = 1 + \chi = 600 + \kappa = 20 + \varepsilon = 5 = 666$ .

Muhammad and Islamic political entities. This position is supported by the presence of an overline above the word, possibly signalling an abbreviation. Another option is to take the word as a misspelling of Mecca, often spelled Μακεχ in Greek. I prefer the latter interpretation, but both readings are possible.<sup>7</sup>

Taken in isolation, this comment is idiosyncratic, embedding an anonymous contrived anti-Islamic polemic within the textual history of the book of Revelation, a work composed many centuries before the rise of Islam and the even more distant rise of the Ottoman empire.<sup>8</sup> The note's identification of Muhammad stands against the consensus decisions of modern scholarship that the beast refers to Nero Caesar and the Nero redivivus myth by way of Greek-Hebrew paronomasia.<sup>9</sup> Where does this marginal comment fit in the larger trajectory of the interpretation of Apoc. 13:18 in particular? There are two further contexts that provide potential answers to this question, the first of which is Revelation's extant Greek manuscripts.

## 2 The Greek Manuscripts of Revelation

As I have noted in greater detail in another context,<sup>10</sup> forty-nine of Revelation's 300 accessible Greek manuscripts preserve marginal comments attached to Apoc. 13:18. These appear in three definable streams. The first strand is relatively restricted and is defined by notes that directly connect the interpretation of the beast to Irenaeus' interpretation in *Adv. Haer.* 5.30.1–3 (GA 1859 2027). The second strand has the most witnesses and is organised around excerpts of material from Revelation's late-antique Greek commentaries, usually focused on Andrew of Caesarea. Within this stream of marginal comment, three substrata exist: (1) a group of manuscripts that excerpt the prose of the Andrew Commentary;<sup>11</sup> (2) a smaller group that extracts the names of the Andrew commentary and adds some other names like αρνουμε (αρνου με “deny me”)

and Πειφαν (cf. the name of a foreign God in Am. 5:26);<sup>12</sup> and (3) a manuscript group that simply extracts the names from the Andrew (and sometimes Oecumenius) commentary, presenting them in the form of an enumerative list.<sup>13</sup>

The third major stream, and the one that is most relevant for contextualising the marginal note in 2814, consists of six manuscripts that preserve explicit anti-Islamic statements, usually revolving around the identity of the beast as Muhammad or Ottoman rulers.<sup>14</sup> While other isolated notes (GA 051) or other possible or illegible notations on Apoc. 13:18 exist in the manuscript tradition (GA 522 919 1617 1746 2031 2669), the anti-Islamic strand represents the immediate context of understanding the comment in 2814.

The six manuscripts of this tradition address the issue in a variety of ways. First, GA 1775 (Athos, Panteleimonos, 110), the most recent copy of Revelation in the *Kurzgefasste Liste* copied in 1847, preserves a number of possible calculations: Intervening between the text and commentary on fol. 135v is a series of identifications for the beast complete with mathematical explanations using Arabic script. In addition to the Irenaeus λαιτεινος (30+1+300+5+10+50+70+200), the calculations also include a form of Muhammed (μοαμετις = 40+70+1+40+5+300+10+200), “Ottoman” (οθωμανος, which adds to 1240: but cf. the transcription „otmanes“ in 2072 below), and μετζιτδ (40+5+300+7+10+300+4), a Greek transliteration of the contemporary Ottoman sultan Abdulmejid I (ruled 1839–1861; Αμπντουλ Μετζιτ in Greek transliteration). These options go beyond the conjectures of the other major strands and raise the exegetical bar by identifying particular rulers. The anti-Islamic stream often focuses on Muhammad, but branches out to other perceived personified and metonymic locations of external political or cultural pressure associated with Islam.

A second example is GA 1778 (Thessaloniki, Vlatadon, 35, fifteenth century), a double commentary that preserves material both of Oecumenius and Andrew.<sup>15</sup> In the upper right margin of the commentary section, attributed to Andrew in a marginal note on the preceding folio (αν<sup>δρ</sup> περι του ονοματου του αντιχριστου; “Andrew: Regarding the Name of the Antichrist”), the following comment appears (fol. 98r; Fig. 2).

<sup>7</sup> See also Martin Karrer's take on this note in §6.3 (p. 56–60).

<sup>8</sup> Other anti-Islamic notes occur on 41r (Apoc. 12:3); 46r (Apoc. 13:1); 47v (Apoc. 13:11); 51v (Apoc. 14:9); 65r (Apoc. 17:10); 73v (Apoc. 19:15); 75r (Apoc. 19:20); and 77r (Apoc. 20:4).

<sup>9</sup> See Aune 1998, 769–773 and Blumell/Wayment 2016, 119–135, among many others.

<sup>10</sup> Allen 2020.

<sup>11</sup> GA 35 325 632 757 824 1072 1075 1248 1503 1551 1597 1637 1732 1740 1745 1771 1864 2041 2059.

<sup>12</sup> GA 2073 2114 2254 2259 2323 2431 2554.

<sup>13</sup> GA 452 468 699 1685 1768 1854 1865 2024 2079 2201 2723 2821.

<sup>14</sup> GA 1775 1778 2072 2075 2077 2814.

<sup>15</sup> Schmid 1956, 64–66.

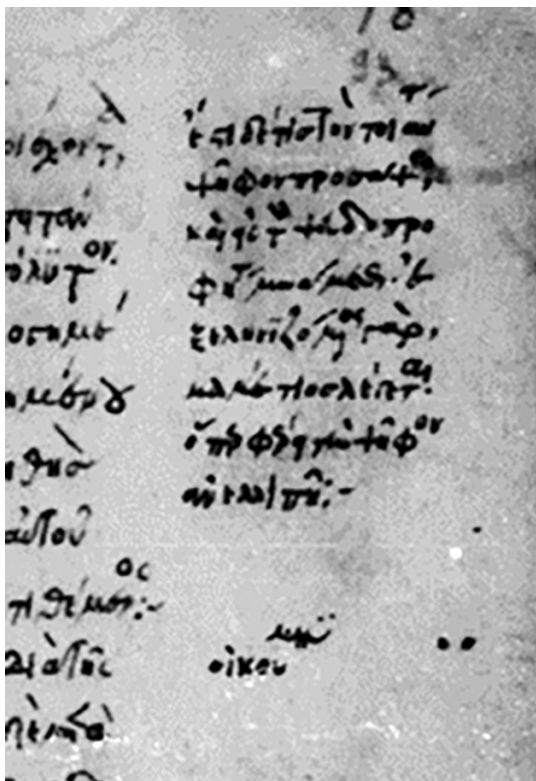


Fig. 2: Thessaloniki, Vlatadon, 35 [GA 1778], 98r

εστι δε τις την τοιαυτην  
ψηφον προσαψας  
και εις τον ψευδοπρο-  
φητην μωαμεθ . ε-  
ξεληνιζομενος γαρ  
μαμετιος λεγεται.  
οπερ φερει την ψηφον  
ανελλιπη:-

For it refers to the calculation of  
someone who also attached it to  
the false prophet Muhammad.  
For in Greek he is called  
Mametios. The calculation  
lacks nothing.

Again, the identification of Muhammad as an anti-christ feeds the anti-Islamic sentiment in this group of manuscripts. Interestingly, the note asserts that μωαμεθ is also called μαμετιος in Greek, drawing again upon the form of the name whose graphemes, not coincidentally, add to 666.

The final examples of this strand, excluding GA 2814, come from Athonite monasteries. GA 2072 (Athos, Dochiariu, 81, copied in 1789), the lone surviving manuscript of the commentary of Theodoret of Jannina (see below), preserves multiple layers of later textual and marginal interventions. It follows 1778 insofar as both manuscripts do the math of the decoding for readers. In the lower margin, five names appear, two of which derive ultimately from Irenaeus (βενεδικτος and λατεινος), along with μωαμετις (“Muhammad”). But two names

also appear: σμμανες (70+300+40+1+50+5+200) and ολ οσμανες, two different Greek transliterations of Arabic names for “Ottomans” and “the Ottomans” respectively. This identification is connected to the decoding of μετζιδ in GA 1775, but more general insofar as these options fail to point out a particular Ottoman ruler. The entire empire is interpreted here as the personification of an eschatological antagonist.

Another example is GA 2075 (Athos, Iviron, 370, fourteenth century), a commentary manuscript that contains additional layers of marginal comments by later hands, including a note on Apoc. 13:18 (71v). One or two graphemes in each line are cut off by the binding. The name μωαμετις again takes precedent, even omitting the proper Greek version μωαμεθ. Like GA 2814, this note also calls the decoding a calculation, even though it appeals not to μαχκε, but to μωαμετις.

GA 2075 fol. 71v

του ονο- ματος του θηριου vacat μωαμετις με]τρισε τα ψιφια και ...]ευρης	The name of the beast: Muhammad. Measure the calculation and...
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The final example comes from GA 2077 (Athos, Iveron 644; copied in 1685), a copy of the late Byzantine commentary of Maximus the Peloponnesian.<sup>16</sup> This manuscript carries a reading offering the name μωαμετις that urges the reader to do the math: μωαμετις μετρισε τα ψιφια (“Muhammad: do the calculation,” fol. 366). In this example, μωαμετις is specially emphasised by ornamental penwork frames. The front cover pastedown of this manuscript also preserves the word μωαμετις, signalling the importance of this identification in the context of the manuscript’s production. The traditions preserved in GA 2075 2077 2814 are closely related within the anti-Islamic strand.

Although GA 2814 connects the number of the beast to Muhammad through the new word μαχκε, an exegetical strategy unique amongst this group of manuscripts, the marginal note on 49r is deeply embedded in the broader discourse located in the margins of some manuscripts produced from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This

<sup>16</sup> The Maximus commentary is a sort of Greek vernacular translation of Andrew, closely following that tradition. See Kilpatrick 1959, 1–2; Argyriou 1982, 127–157.



relationship also demonstrates that the note in 2814 from the fifteenth century is the oldest example of the tradition. A more comprehensive study of this material in 2814 and its origins is required, but is beyond the scope of this short note.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, 2814 partakes in a tradition of decoding the number of the beast that is an ingrained part of a substantial section of Revelation's textual and material history. The perdurance of this tradition demonstrates that the boundary between textual history, commentary, and reception are innately blurred. More specifically, the reading in 2814 is part of a small sub-set of manuscripts that preserve exegetical traditions influenced by the perceived eschatological politics of the eastern Mediterranean before and following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the rise of the Ottoman empire, and on-going conflict between eastern and western churches. This sense of tension led scribes and interpreters to reimagine Revelation's number of the beast in light of the founder of the religion of the Ottomans (Muhammad), the Ottomans as a group (e.g. GA 2072), or specific Ottoman rulers (e.g. GA 1775). Interpretation is always contextual and the note in GA 2814 and the others in this stream of tradition are no exception. But these notes are also contextualised by the late and post-Byzantine Greek commentaries on the book of Revelation, a collection of interpretive traditions that sometimes overlap with the content of the notes that appear in these manuscripts.

### 3 Late and Post-Byzantine Greek Commentaries and the Number of the Beast

In addition to its three late-antique Greek commentaries produced by Oecumenius, Andrew of Caesarea, and Arethas of Caesarea, Revelation is also the object of interpretation in eleven neo-Greek commentaries or interpretive tracts. These works have been summarised in Asterios Argyriou's *Les exégèses grecques de l'Apocalypse à l'époque turque (1453–1821)*, but many of them still lack editions of any kind. Biblical scholars have not yet dared to deeply engage these works because their linguistic register differs from Koine and earlier forms of Byzantine Greek and because they are too far removed from the composition of the Apocalypse to seem immediately relevant

<sup>17</sup> See Karrer's contribution in this volume (p. 53–56) that undertakes such a study.

to understanding its text or history.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, these works represent underappreciated reservoirs of reception history that have influenced the material that appears in some of Revelation's later Greek manuscripts.

Although not all of these later commentaries partake in anti-Islamic exegesis, like Maximus the Peloponnesian whose commentary closely follows the interpretive trajectory of the Andrew commentary, many do. While not a direct witness to the anti-Islamic interpretation of Apoc. 13:18, Zacharias Gerganos' (d. ca. 1631) work entitled *Interpretation of the Apocalypse of John* (εξεγησις εις την του ιωαννου Αποκαλυψιν)<sup>19</sup> includes both anti-Islamic and anti-papal polemics in its interpretation of Revelation.<sup>20</sup> Gerganos decodes the name of the beast in 13:18 as λατεινος ("Latin"), an option that goes back as far as Irenaeus, but he makes clear that this name has a concrete reference: the church in Rome. Furthermore, although he does not factor into his pointed interpretation of Apoc. 13:18, Gerganos incorporates Muhammad in his interpretation of Apoc. 20:10, where he identifies the dragon as the devil, the beast as the pope, and the false prophet as Muhammad, all of whom are cast into the lake of fire and tormented eternally.<sup>21</sup> The sentiments in Gerganos' work correspond to the terse note in the margin of GA 2814.

A more direct example of an anti-Islamic interpretation of Apoc. 13:18 is preserved in the work "Against Muhammad and the Latins" (Βιβλίον κατὰ Μωάμεθ και Λατίνων in Athens, Bib. Nat. 444) by Anastasios Gordios (b. 1654), a popular seventeenth century work preserved in some thirty-seven manuscripts.<sup>22</sup> In addition to a lengthy polemic against the Latin church and the papacy, Gordios focuses his exegetical attention on the book of Daniel (esp. 2:31–45 and 7:1–7) and multiple texts in the book of Revelation, including 12:13–13:18, where he identifies the two beasts as Muhammad and the pope, both

<sup>18</sup> Parker 2008, 239 mentions some of these works.

<sup>19</sup> This work is preserved only in Codex Laudanus Graecus 77 (Oxford, Bodleian) and edited in Argyriou 1991. See also Argyriou 1982, 158–218.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Gerganos studied Wittenberg in the 1620s and was deeply influenced by Protestantism. See Argyriou 1982, 158–159; Kermeli 2017, 753. Many of these post-Byzantine commentators in Revelation spent significant time in the west, either in Germany (e.g. Theodoret of Jannina in Leipzig) or Italy (e.g. Anastasios Gordios) – traditions of Revelation's interpretation in both east and west in this period are not hermetically sealed from one another.

<sup>21</sup> See Argyriou 1982, 204; Argyriou 1991, 270–271.

<sup>22</sup> See Argyriou 1982, 305–354; Argyriou 1969a, 58–87; and his unpublished PhD thesis that is an edition and commentary on this work (Argyriou 1969b). Athos, Panteleimonos 639 asserts that the work was composed in 1703.

of whom function as metonymies for world empires. The ends of their respective reigns will ultimately signal *la fin du monde*. Other eschatological texts like Ioh. 5:43, Matth. 24:15, and Dan. 7:8 are also interpreted in light of Muhammad, supporting his interpretation of Revelation.<sup>23</sup> When it comes to Apoc. 13:18 in particular, it is not surprising that Gordios decodes the value of the graphemes in the word λατεινος to argue that the name of the beast refers to the papacy, noting that he takes the name λατεινος from Arethas.<sup>24</sup> But he also uses the number 666 to identify Muhammad, drawing not upon traditions of decoding, but upon traditions of Muhammad’s biography. Muhammad was supposedly born in the year 600 and lived 66 years: “En ce qui me concerne, j’ai pu apprendre en lisant certains chroniqueurs que Mahomet est né en 600 ap. J.-Ch. et que sa vie terrestre dura 66 ans, ce qui donne 666 ans. C’est justement ce que signifient les lettres du sceau.”<sup>25</sup> Even though other traditions perceived Muhammad in the number of the beast through the decoding of the numerical value of words like μοαμετις, Gordios appealed to an innovative mode of reasoning. The result is the same, but a new strategy has been introduced into the tradition. Although Gordios’ reasoning does not correspond directly to traditions embedded in Revelation’s manuscripts, it demonstrates the exegetical dexterity of this interpretation and its perdurance in the post-Byzantine world.

A final example of a post-Byzantine interpretation of Apoc. 13:18 that revolves around identifications of the name of the beast as both Muhammad and the papacy is located in a work of Theodoret of Jannina (ca. 1740–1823) entitled “Exegesis of the Book of Revelation.”<sup>26</sup> The only extant manuscript of this work is preserved in Athos, Dochiariu 81, which also appears in the *Kurzgefasste Liste* (GA 2072, see above). Theodoret is also the only post-Byzantine commentator to publish a print edition of his work in his lifetime.<sup>27</sup> Theodoret understands the book of Revelation as delineating the progressive periods of the history of the church: Apoc. 1:1–20:10 covers the eight periods from the incarnation to the end of the twentieth century, while Apoc. 20:11–22:21 provides a meta-historical overview. His perception that the beast in Apoc. 13:18 represents both Muhammad and the papacy is undergirded by his choice of names whose graphemes add to 666: Muham-

mad (μοαμετις), Ottomans (οτμανες), the Ottomans (ολ οσμανες), Latin (λατεινος), and Benedict (βενεδικτος).<sup>28</sup> In this Dochiariu manuscript, the numerical value of the graphemes are even added up in Arabic script. The polyvalent possibilities of the interpretation of Apoc. 13:18 are on direct display in this tradition where names are selected for their numerical value and ability to correspond to the commentator’s contextualised interpretation.

## 4 Summary

The marginal note in GA 2814 that identifies Muhammad as the name of the beast is part of a complex and rich tradition of anti-Islamic, and to a lesser degree anti-papal, Greek Orthodox eschatological interpretation. These traditions turn on the perceived political and religious pressures experienced by Orthodox communities and interpreters, stimuli that encouraged eschatological thinking by drawing upon past modes of interpretations to understand a key passage in the Apocalypse. Multiple manuscripts, both in and beyond the *Liste*, and different late commentary traditions bear witness to this surprisingly pervasive strand of Revelation’s reception history. In this light, the comment in 2814 is not idiosyncratic, but a witness to a larger stream of post-Byzantine Greek Orthodox interpretation.

Moreover, delving into these traditions illustrates the complex vectors of information and intellectual culture in Renaissance humanism and early modern thought in Europe and beyond.<sup>29</sup> Although these anti-Islamic interpretations derive from Greek Orthodox commentators, many of them were influenced by continental European thought: Zacharias Gerganos studied in Wittenberg, Anastasios Gordios travelled through Italy, and Theodoret of Jannina spent time in Leipzig. The intellectual context of these commentators, whose perspectives manifest themselves in the margins of some of Revelation’s Greek manuscripts, does not know the artificial boundaries that divide modern scholarship. The line between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Anastasios Gordios is very thin, and the comment in GA 2814 is a physical instantiation of where these traditions cross paths, here in the person of Reuchlin. Biblical studies, especially the study of the reception

<sup>23</sup> Argyriou 1982, 317.

<sup>24</sup> Another underappreciated dimension of these late commentaries is that they represent concrete instances in the reception of obscure late-antique traditions like Arethas. On Arethas see Sigismund 2017; German translation in von Blumenthal 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Translation from Argyriou 1982, 332.

<sup>26</sup> See Argyriou 1982, 443–586.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous 1800.

<sup>28</sup> This same combination names also appears in Theodoret’s *Combined Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (Ερμηνεία κατά συμφωνίαν αλληλενδετόν της Παλαιας και Νεας Γραφής). See also the parallel in GA 1775 at Apoc. 13:18.

<sup>29</sup> See also Podskalsky 1988, who traces the theological and intellectual currents between east and west in the post-Byzantine period.

of the Bible, must take into account the breadth of this field of reference, exploring and gumshoeing to find new examples of scriptural reception that illuminate the complexity of different intellectual cultures and contexts of interpretation. Scriptural interpretation is never an individual effort, but the product of a community of scholars, thinkers, families, friends, enemies, and acquaintances. Small notes like the one in GA 2814 have the possibility to open new worlds of knowledge and discovery, offering new information that challenges the critical consensus that can at times define our own frames of reference.

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