

Shaping the “Divine Man”
*Holiness, Charisma and Leadership
in the Graeco-Roman World*

Edited by
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and David Hernández de la Fuente



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Translation and Interpretation in the Arabic Reception of Platonism¹

JOHANNES NIEHOFF-PANAGIOTIDIS

The field of the “Graeco-Arabica” is a well-defined Academic subject: It treats the translations of Greek literature into Arabic, beginning with the Umayyad Era and reaching its peak during the eight and tenth centuries at the ‘Abbāsīd court. This “translation movement” is a continuation of the translations achieved during the Early Byzantine period in the Near East: The Greek classics were translated into Coptic, Armenian, Syriac etc. first, and then into Arabic. A splendid example for this is the Syriac Papyrus with Galen’s treatise *on simple drugs* later translated into Arabic by Hunayn ibn Ishāq (Nr. 53 Bergsträsser, with remarks on the complicated translation history).² Only during the ‘Abbāsīd Era though direct translations from Arabic to Greek were undertaken.³

There can be discerned a continuity of these two periods since

- The groups who performed these translations are the same: The Christians of the Near East who had by historical reasons a strong knowledge of Greek, but had developed their own literary languages since the third century CE: the Copts, the Aramaeans (with Syriac as their language), the Georgians, the Armenians, the Persians are to be mentioned here. Of these groups, the Aramaeans, represented as the Syriac Christians (divided by doctrinal strife into three groups at least) are the most important. These groups after the seventh century found themselves all under the sway of Islam and adopted Arabic as their spoken and literary idioms. This process lasted for centuries, from group to group and from region to region.

1 To EPJ يارمن

I am aware that every translation is a recodification. What is meant here in the title is that a translation *sensu proprio* has as its goal equivalence between the original semantics and the meaning in the target language. Interpretation tries to adapt the sense to the intended meaning for a later society. – I want to express my warmest gratitude to Rüdiger Arnzen (Bochum) for a critical reading; and to my research assistant Vassili Thanassis who helped in many difficulties.

2 Afif-Bhayro–Kessel *et alii* 2018.

3 McCollum 2015.



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- It was the Aramaeans (*Suryānī*) who translated the bulk of Classical literature, and their translations were to get further translated into Arabic. So, often we have two Arabic translations: one from Syriac, one directly from Greek, like in the case of *de caelo* or the *Metaphysics*⁴. The Syriac Christians did so *before* and *after* Islam (not so the Armenians).

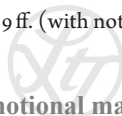
Also, very active in translating Greek literature were the Armenians but this field remains by far less studied and expects a thorough assessment.

Before proceeding, four points deserve our attention:

- The Jews, though they had a good knowledge of Classical literature since Imperial times (Philo of Alexandria), did not display a significant role in this process of transformation of knowledge into the Middle Ages. This is surely to be connected with the Rabbinic movement of Early Byzantine times: Greek as a first-rate sign of Jewish identity disappears and gets restricted to the Byzantine Empire proper.
- The first text translated from Greek into Coptic, Syriac etc. was the Bible, beginning with the third century. Pioneers were again the Aramaeans (and the Copts), beginning with the Coptic bible and the early Peshitta. The full systematic and temporal range from the Bible through patristic literature, and ending in philosophy is but displayed by the Aramaeans and the Armenians: So, as A. Becker has elucidated the following sequence (only for Syriac): Bible (3. Century CE) – Patristic literature (4./5. centuries) – Classical literature (6. Century; Sergios from ReshʿAyna/Raʿs al-ʿAyn).⁵ On the Gnostic translations of Plato into Coptic v. infr.
- The Oriental Christians who found their identity in confrontation with the Islamic “Leitkultur” after the eighth century translated Ecclesiastical literature and Byzantine theological/canonistic literature during the whole period after the seventh century, and this until Modern times. This is the topic of G. Grafts monumental *Geschichte der christlich-arabischen Literatur* (1944–1953). The “translation movement” in contrast, reached its peak during the ninth and tenth centuries CE, mostly in Baghdād and financed by Muslim patrons, close to the court (e. g. by al – Kindī, d. 873). The best introduction to the Islamic translation movement is Gutas (1998) who underestimates though the roots of this movement in Byzantine times. The first strand, the continuous translations from Greek into Arabic (“Christian Arabic”), is not considered in this paper: They are typical for the Christian Orientals als “middle men minorities” between Byzantium and Islam.
- What we call today “Classical literature”, was but rarely if at all translated: Attic tragedy e. g. is missing, also (almost) Homer. The Oriental Christians / their Muslim readers/patrons performed a selection, every group having its own one: The

4 Endress 1966; Bertolacci 2006.

5 A. Becker 2006, 4 (with notes 20 f.); 9 ff. (with notes); 127 ff.



Copts e. g. have a notorious aversion to every literature which is neither Christian (with one notable exception, v. *infr.*) nor popular (different versions of the Alexander novel). The factors for this reception/*vs.* denial are differently to assess. Most conspicuously, Platon, the centre of this paper is among the prominently missing authors, as can be best seen by his absence in the chain “Greek – Syriac – Arabic”. On a probable exception to this v. *infr.*

As the structure of this *champ littéraire* (in the sense of Bourdieu [1992/1998]) is concerned, both on the level of texts and of the social grounding for the “translation movement” (Gutas), Classical Philology used but recently to ignore the Syriac (etc ...) versions for the *constitutio textus*, one famous exception being the edition of Plotinus’ *Enneads* by Henry–Schwyzer. They give at least an English version where the direct translations from Greek into Arabic are distinguished from the additions typographically. But even the new standard edition of the *Politeia* by Slings commits a serious mistake in the preface.⁶ The number of Orientalists (R. Walzer, F. Rosenthal, P. Kraus) working in this field is small, but counts famous names among them. That Christian Oriental Studies deal mostly with Patristic and Biblical research is understandable, but most striking is the absence of Byzantine Studies in this research.

This can easily be explained, because the study of Classical literature is still viewed as a direct communication between e. g. Aristotle and its Medieval reception (e. g. Ibn Sīnā), while the Byzantine manuscripts are still seen as a mere transmitter for this. Byzantine philosophy in its own right is still an underdeveloped subject.

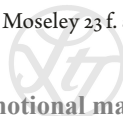
But as can be seen from the above sketch, this approach is simply wrong: The Aramaeans etc. passed from the Byzantine State to the Islamic, and the *princeps translatorum* Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (died 873) travelled to the Byzantine Empire in search of Greek (i. e. Byzantine manuscripts). There is though no direct way from Alexandria to Baghdad but by Constantinople.

Important is the fact that most of our Greek (i. e. Byzantine) manuscripts were written *after* the Syriac and even their Arabic translations were executed (e. g. this is true for Ptolemaios).

This holds also for Plotinus: The oldest manuscript of the *Enneads*: D, from the twelfth century (*praefatio* vol. I, Henry Schwyzer, XXII), contains only a small part of the *Enneads*. It does not fit into one of the existing families, so of now use for Henry–Schwyzer. But it is about three hundred years younger than the Arabic version of Plotinus.

By the same token, the textual variants these translations display are independent from the Byzantine branches of tradition, while it is still unknown which tradition(s) these translations represent (v. *infra*). In any case, some of these translations were

6 On the new edition of *politeia* by Slings, Moseley 23 f. and n. 32.



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