



Medieval Texts for a Modern Audience

The Islamic Translation Series at BYU in Light of Two Early Antecedents

D. Morgan Davis

Since the publication of its first volume in 1997, the Islamic Translation Series at Brigham Young University has gained recognition as a significant academic endeavor. From a historical perspective, however, the series, which seeks to make available to a new audience texts from the medieval efflorescence of Islamic civilization, is hardly unprecedented. Indeed, when compared with past undertakings, it is quite modest. This essay traces the outlines of two earlier translation movements, one centered in Baghdad from the mid-eighth to the tenth centuries C.E., the other in Spain during the twelfth century. These movements resulted in the transference and augmentation of scientific and philosophical ideas across cultural and linguistic boundaries as civilizations in transition sought to harness the knowledge of their predecessors. As will be seen, both movements are, in a sense, intellectual ancestors of the scholarly enterprises being carried out today at Brigham Young University.

The Translation Movement at Baghdad

The Syriac (Christian Aramaic) tradition was an early source of translations from Greek into Arabic. During the centuries prior to the rise of Islam, there had been a movement among the Christian (mostly Nestorian and Jacobite) communities of Palestine to translate Greek Christian texts into their native Syriac. In the process of translation, Christian scholars became interested in classical Greek philosophy, which they saw as a discipline that would aid them in the interpretation of their own scriptures.¹ Accordingly, translations were made of these non-Christian texts as well.

After the initial Islamic conquests of the Middle East, non-Christian Greek material was translated again, this time from Syriac into Arabic (a relatively easy step because the two languages are cognate). These translations allowed Arabs, who were already becoming interested in the Hellenistic sciences, some of their first exposure to the texts. But this was only a foreshadow of what was to come as political developments within Islam intersected with cultural influences from still another quarter—the former empire of Persia.

In 750 C.E., conflict between rival factions under the first Islamic dynasty culminated in the so-called Abbasid revolution. The Abbasids established a new dynasty and founded a new capital at a small village called Baghdad on the banks of the Tigris River.² Anxious to establish their legitimacy, the rulers of the Abbasid empire embarked on a vigorous program of public works and palace building, channeling their wealth toward the development of the burgeoning city. At the same time, they improvised, then formalized, a system of imperial administration to maintain control of their vast domains.

The new administration was largely entrusted to elite families of Sassanian Persian background, whose culture the Abbasid elites much admired for its own imperial accomplishments and its achievements in astrology and other courtly sciences of the period. The Sassanian tradition was an ancient one with a well-established translation movement and ideology. During the previous century, the Sassanians had overseen the translation of a large body of texts from Greek and other ancient languages of science and culture into Pahlavi.³ With the decline of the Sassanian empire and the coming of the Arabic-speaking Muslims as the new wielders of power in the region, the Persian tradition of translation continued but was redirected to produce Arabic translations.⁴

As the Abbasid rivalry with the Christian Byzantine Empire to the north intensified and as Islamic theological debates created internal tension, the fruits of the translation program—in particular translations of the philosophical corpus of ancient Greece—became a means by which the Abbasid caliphs could enhance their own cultural and intellectual stature. The disciplines of demonstrative reasoning and of dialectical argumentation set forth by Aristotle, for example, were adopted by the caliph al-Ma'mun in order to lend legitimacy to the Abbasid claim that they, rather than the Byzantines, were the rightful heirs of the admired Hellenistic tradition. Al-Ma'mun hoped also to acquire intellectual credibility as he asserted his claim to supreme religious as well as political authority amid a climate of theological controversy and cultural rivalry.⁵

The translation effort also sparked and then, in turn, came to be fueled by the desire of Abbasid courtiers, functionaries, and men of learning to acquaint themselves with the ancient sciences. By commissioning and funding translations, they cultivated their own reputations as sophisticated sponsors of high culture and learning.⁶

Over time, the translation movement increased in sophistication. Initially there were few or no translators who had sufficient command of both Greek and Arabic to accomplish direct translations from one language into the other. Instead, Arabic translations were made from existing Syriac or Pahlavi editions of the Greek originals. Within a generation, however, there

were translators working in Baghdad who had a firm command of Greek, allowing them to translate directly into Arabic and revise those translations made from intermediary languages. A catalogue of titles was maintained, and those works of greatest interest to the growing scholarly community were translated first, while those of secondary importance were translated later.

This activity at Baghdad lasted for nearly two centuries and eventually produced a vast corpus of Greek philosophy and science in Arabic translation. As a natural consequence of this translation work, Muslim scholars began to work in the Hellenistic tradition, producing their own commentaries and original treatises with an Islamic hue that was variously subtle or overt. A number of these Islamic intellectuals achieved great renown. The scholarly output of such thinkers as al-Kindi (died ca. A.D. 870), al-Razi (865–ca. 935), al-Farabi (ca. 878–ca. 950), Ibn Sina (980–1037), al-Ghazali (1058–1111), and Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroës, 1126–1198)—to name only a leading few—is truly intimidating both in terms of sheer volume and in scope of subject matter and sophistication of thought. Their often controversial influence was felt not only among scholars in the Islamic milieu but also in Latin Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the first philosophical awakenings following the Carolingian period took place.

The Translation Movement in Spain

The Latin West in the twelfth century saw the emergence of a town economy with specialized trades and disciplines, one of which was teaching. The *magister*, or professional teacher, was a new position that contrasted and competed with the older tradition of monastic learning. From the few Aristotelian works that were available to them, these teachers gradually pieced together Aristotle's system of logic and learned that there were yet other Aristotelian treatises lost to them—treatises on forgotten sciences for which the magisters had only the names but which had at one time been organized and systematized into an encyclopedic whole. C. H. Lohr has described the steps by which these European scholars gained access to the wealth of knowledge contained in the ancient Greek texts:

As the masters learned the names of these new sciences, they were like a modern librarian who finds a lacuna of several volumes in one of his library's periodicals; they could not rest until they had found the means to fill the gap. Thus they turned to the translators. The additions which *these* interpreters of the classical tradition made to medieval knowledge was immense: in geometry Euclid, in astronomy Ptolemy, in medicine Hippocrates and Galen, and above all—for method, for system, for wholly new and undreamt-of sciences—the works of Aristotle, the Philosopher par excellence, together with his Arabic commentators.⁷

The translators of these works were, for the most part, members of the Arabicized Christian population of Spain, known as Mozarabs. Thoroughly conversant with Andalusian Muslim culture, including its Arabic language of administration, they were nevertheless Christians, maintaining their own communal identity within the larger Islamic context of their society. In addition, some peninsular Jews became involved as translators, since their knowledge of Hebrew allowed them relatively easy access to Arabic.

Toledo and Saragossa became the main centers of this translation effort, but translation also took place at Barcelona, Pamplona, Segovia, and León.⁸ The Arabic texts were translated into Latin, then the language of learning in the West, and many of the manuscripts of these translations are still preserved in the museums and libraries of Europe.

This translation movement on the western extreme of the Islamic world was no less influential than had been the Abbasid translation effort nearly four centuries earlier. It supplied an entire civilization with heretofore unknown models of critical thought and inquiry enriched by the intellectual accretions of the intervening millennium. Of particular importance were the Aristotelian and other philosophical and scientific works, as well as Aristotelian commentaries transmitted or written by the Arabic philosophers mentioned above. These translations had a direct and pronounced influence on the thought and writings of Western men of letters such as Thomas Aquinas (who did more than anyone else to reconcile the tensions between the traditional theological learning of the clerics and the “new” Aristotelian approach of the scholars). The translations also inspired the development of Aristotelianism at the nascent universities of Paris and Oxford. In short, the translation movement in Spain was a prelude to the great cultural and intellectual renaissance of the West.

During the past few centuries, the Aristotelian system of investigation and science has been gradually eclipsed by more recent concepts and approaches such as natural selection, theoretical physics, modern economics, and even modern logic. As “old” science has had less and less immediate bearing on the new, there has been a concomitant decline in the West’s appreciation of its own intellectual roots. The Latin translations of the Islamic philosophers have fallen into obscurity, and the Arabic texts upon which they are based, though still published in the Middle East, have remained effectively unexplored by most Western scholars because of linguistic barriers. As a consequence, some of the most fascinating chapters of the world’s intellectual history remain mostly unknown in the West, and a sense of cultural connection and even indebtedness to the East has remained undernourished and undeveloped.

The Islamic Translation Project at Brigham Young University

As a scholar of classical Greek and Islamic philosophy, Professor Daniel C. Peterson of Brigham Young University's Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages was concerned about the general lack of understanding regarding the role of Islamic civilization in the transmission and transformation of the Hellenistic scientific tradition. He believed that, if the linguistic barriers preventing Western scholars from having access to the primary texts from the medieval Islamic period could be overcome, the result might eventually be a more widespread acknowledgment of the historical and intellectual interconnections between the West and Islamic civilization. The classical Arabic texts were in the public domain. They could be published with modern English translations in a side-by-side format. Such an arrangement would facilitate the study of the original text by language students and would allow scholars in the field to make critical use of the translations. In 1992, Professor Peterson proposed his idea to university officials, who encouraged him to pursue the prospect further.

Shortly thereafter, Peterson became acquainted with a scholar in New York who shared his desire to see more classical Islamic works in translation. Professor Parviz Morewedge already had contacts with many of the major scholars in the field, some of whom had completed translations and were looking for someone to publish them. With the scholarly contacts provided by Morewedge and with encouragement and support from university officials, Peterson was able to secure financial commitments from private donors sufficient to officially launch the translation series. Peterson formally announced the creation of the Islamic Translation Series on October 23, 1992, during a scholarly convention on Islamic science and philosophy at Columbia University. Work on the new series began in earnest shortly thereafter.

While scholars finalized the first translations for submission to the series, efforts at BYU were immediately focused on preparing publishable copy of Arabic text. The problem of handling Arabic—a cursive script written from right to left—on conventional computers had only recently been solved by a local software company. A small team of part-time typists and proofreaders, hired from among the students of Arabic at BYU, began entering the texts into the computer. Working in shifts in Professor Peterson's office, they typed and then proofread the texts to provide clean, error-free copy for eventual publication with the translations. To ensure accuracy, some manuscripts were sent to Egypt for an additional review by an editor of Arabic.

In 1994 a regular office to house the project was obtained in BYU's Jesse Knight Humanities Building. In 1995 a full-time editorial position was created in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages to ensure

that the work of typing and editing was not undermined by the frequent turnover of part-time help. By 1996 the first volume in the series was almost ready for publication. That volume, al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, was translated by Michael E. Marmura, an emeritus member of the faculty of the University of Toronto and one of the foremost authorities in the West on Islamic philosophy. A cover design that would be used for the entire series was approved, and the remaining technical hurdles of publishing Arabic and English together in the same format were finally overcome. Elizabeth Watkins, then of BYU's Scholarly Publications, shepherded the book through the logistics of the publication and cataloguing process. After several frustrated attempts to reach agreements with national or international distributors, an arrangement was made with the University of Chicago Press to help advertise and distribute the books worldwide.

The Incoherence of the Philosophers appeared in autumn 1997 and was followed a year later by another work by al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, translated by David Buchman. In February 2000, *The Philosophy of Illumination* by the Persian philosopher Suhrawardi (translated by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai of Indiana University and UCLA respectively) was published using improved software and publication methods that allow digital integration and transfer to negative of both Arabic and English texts. A second edition of *Incoherence* was produced using the same technology. In 2001 a fourth volume appeared—Ibn Rushd's (Averroës's) *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, translated by Charles E. Butterworth of the University of Maryland.

The aim of the Islamic Translation Series is to publish "significant works in the Arabic and Persian philosophical tradition, making them accessible to scholars, students, and the general public."⁹ Determining which works from the almost limitless ocean of classical Islamic literature should be given priority, however, presents an interesting editorial challenge, a challenge that has so far been met with informed pragmatism. Consensus among scholars about the preeminence of certain writers and works, and submissions of already completed independent translations have as yet made it unnecessary to commission any translation. Among the titles currently in preparation are the monumental *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, key works by the greatest of the Islamic philosophers, Ibn Sina. Another translation in process is a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* by Ibn Rushd, who was known to Thomas Aquinas and his contemporaries as *the* commentator on Aristotle.

Early in 2001, the Islamic Translation Series became a part of BYU's newly created Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. The institute consolidated several of BYU's scholarly organizations and

projects into one organization. The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), the Dead Sea Scrolls searchable data base, and related undertakings that use technology to restore and conserve ancient texts are now part of the institute. The creation of the institute made possible a more efficient sharing of technical expertise and resources by researchers and editors.

As the reputation of the Islamic Translation Series has grown, so has scholarly interest in the project's publication capabilities, particularly in its capacity to handle "exotic" scripts in tandem with English translations. Manuscripts and offers of collaboration have been received from quarters slightly outside the original purview of the series. For example, medical treatises in Arabic by Moses Maimonides, the great rabbi of twelfth-century Egypt, have been offered for publication by a scholar in Germany, and scholars working on ancient texts of Arabic and Syriac Christianity have expressed an interest in the possibility of publishing through BYU. Such texts come from the same geographical and historical milieus as those in the Islamic Translation Series; the only significant difference is that they are not specifically Islamic in character or authorship. During the past two years, several scholars with expertise in these fields have joined BYU and the institute, making it possible to take on these and related texts and bringing about the creation of two allied texts projects: the Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy series and the Eastern Christian Texts series. The three series (which include the Islamic Translation Series) are now being developed jointly, and a robust program of publications is in process for each.¹⁰

Translations Old and New

At key points in history, human thought has benefited from periods of intensive translation during which the religious, philosophical, scientific, and literary traditions of one civilization have been rendered into the language of another. The sheer magnitude of these translation efforts seems almost surreal to us today. Yet whenever the motive has been sufficiently strong and constant, means have been found to carry on seemingly Herculean tasks of intellectual and cultural transference. The Islamic Translation Series, as well as other translation projects undertaken by the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, is making a significant contribution to the sharing of knowledge across linguistic and cultural boundaries. These projects may never reach the monumental proportions of the great movements centered in Baghdad and Spain. Nevertheless, over time, the projects at Brigham Young University, like the great translation efforts of the past, will produce positive intellectual, cultural, and spiritual benefits for the generations to come.

D. Morgan Davis is Assistant Executive Editor of the Islamic Translation Series. He has been involved with the project since 1993, when as an undergraduate in Near Eastern Studies at BYU he worked part-time as a typist of Arabic manuscripts. He holds an M.A. in history from the University of Texas at Austin and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Utah.

Books from the Islamic Translation Series can be purchased directly from the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at <http://farms.byu.edu> or 1-800-327-6715. Works currently available include Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura; Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. David Buchman; Averroës, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth; and Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, trans. John Walbridge and Hossein M. Ziai.

1. Juan Vernet, *La cultura hispanoárabe en Oriente y Occidente* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1978), 80–84.

2. Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., *A Concise History of the Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991), 69.

3. The ideological and historical underpinnings of the Zoroastrian translation ideology and its influence in the Abbasid context have been ably delineated by Dimitri Gutas, whose brilliant study *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* is now the single most important scholarly work for understanding the Abbasid translation movement. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 40–45.

4. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 54.

5. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 75–104. See also Majid Fakhry's rather different and, in my view, less convincing interpretation in his nevertheless invaluable *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 10–12.

6. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 121–36.

7. C. H. Lohr, "The Medieval Interpretation of Aristotle," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 84. See also R. N. Swanson, *The Twelfth Century Renaissance* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999), 103–15.

8. Josep Puig, "The Transmission and Reception of Arabic Philosophy in Christian Spain (until 1200)," in *The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe*, ed. Charles E. Butterworth and Blake Andrée Kessel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 11.

9. This statement is printed on the dust jackets of the books published in the Islamic Translation Series, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press).

10. See Erica Griggs, "Islamic Translation Series Expands," *Brigham Young Magazine* 54 (summer 2000): 16. The new scholars include Glen M. Cooper, who has a Ph.D. from Columbia University in classical Arabic with specialization in Graeco-Arabic translation and the history of medicine and astronomy; Kristian Heal, a doctoral candidate at the University of Birmingham, U.K., with specialized training in Syriac and oriental Christianity; and Carl Griffin, a Ph.D. student in early Christian studies at The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., specializing in Greek, Latin, and oriental patrology.