



# Greek Letters in the Arabic Culture

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## The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement as a Social and Historical Phenomenon

- From about the middle of the 8th century to the end of the 10th, almost all non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books were translated into Arabic.

## All these subjects passed through the hands of the translators

- Astrology and alchemy and the rest of the occult sciences.
- The subjects of the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and theory of music.
- The entire field of Aristotelian philosophy throughout its history: metaphysics, ethics, physics, zoology, botany, and especially logic - the *Organon*.
- All the health sciences: medicine, pharmacology, and veterinary science.
- Various other marginal genres of writings, such as Byzantine handbooks on military science (the *tactica*), popular collections of wisdom sayings, and even books on falconry.

# The Graeco-Arabic translation movement

- Began with the accession of the 'Abbāsids to power and took place primarily in Baghdad.
- Represents an astounding achievement.
- Lasted well over two centuries. It was no ephemeral phenomenon.
- It was supported by the entire elite of 'Abbāsīd society.
- It was subsidized by an enormous outlay of funds, both public and private.

# The background of the translation movement

- ▶ The historical, economic, and cultural significance of the Arab conquests.

Prominent cities in pre-Islamic times that maintained a tradition of some Greek learning

- ▶ Al-Ḥīra
- ▶ Ḥarrān (Carrhae)
- ▶ Marw

## The new multicultural society in Baghdad

- (a) Aramaic-speakers, Christians, and Jews
- (b) Persian-speakers
- (c) Arabs, partly sedentarized and Christian

## Pre-‘Abbāsīd translation activities

- The Syriac translations
- Translation from Greek into Arabic
- Sanskrit sources
- Persian translations



# Al-Manṣūr and the origins of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement

- ▶ The policy of al-Manṣūr (r. 754-75).
- ▶ His motives.
- ▶ The role played by the imperial ideology of the early 'Abbāsīd administration.

# Baghdad

- The round shape of the city.
- Opinions.
- Its symbolism.
  
- Al-Manṣūr's policy aimed at legitimizing his power.

# *Bayt al-ḥikma*

- the 'house of wisdom'
- founded by the 'Abbāsīd caliphs in Baghdad
- a royal archive
- its foundation

# Al-Mahdī

- Al-Mahdī (d. 785) commissioned the translation into Arabic of Aristotle's *Topics*.

# Al-Ma'mūn

- The conflict between al-Ma'mūn and his brother al-Amīn.
- *miḥna* (=inquisition)

## The needs of scientific research and theoretical knowledge

- ✓ Astrology and astronomy
- ✓ Mathematics
- ✓ Optics
- ✓ Medicine
- ✓ Philosophy

# Patrons, translators, translations

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- Four major groupings of sponsors or patrons of the translation movement:
  1. 'Abbāsid caliphs and their families
  2. courtiers
  3. officials of the state and military administration
  4. scholars and scientists

## The translators of Greek and Syriac texts

- A few of them were Syriac-speaking pagans, the Ṣābiʿan scholars of Ḥarrān.
- The vast majority were Aramaic (Syriac)-speaking Christians.



# Scientists and translators who knew Greek

- Al-‘Abbās ibn Sa‘īd al-Jawharī (d. after 843)
- Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq
- Qusṭā ibn Lūqā
- Thābit ibn Qurra
- Iṣḥāq ibn Ḥunayn

# Concluding remarks

- ▶ The Graeco-Arabic translation movement was as significant a manifestation and as original a creation of early 'Abbāsīd society.
- ▶ It was based on the Greek texts of the classical tradition.
- ▶ The Graeco-Arabic translation movement cannot be understood apart from the history of the early 'Abbāsīd empire, of which it was an integral element.

# Concluding remarks

- ▶ It produced an Arabic scientific literature with a technical vocabulary.
- ▶ Not only did it preserve for posterity, in Arabic translation, both lost Greek texts and more reliable manuscript traditions of those extant.
- ▶ It demonstrated for the first time in history that scientific and philosophical thought are international.