FROM AL-BIṬRĪQ TO ḤUNAYN: MELKITE AND NESTORIAN TRANSLATORS IN EARLY ʿABBĀSID BAGHDAD

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Abstract

The present study examines the social history of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement from the perspective of the Christian communities that participated in it. Special attention is given to Melkite and Nestorian translators active in ʿAbbāsid Baghdad – from the late eighth-century Melkite translator al-Biṭrīq to the famous ninth-century Nestorian translator Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq – and to the complex interactions between Melkites and Nestorians, which involved both competition and scholarly collaboration.

Key Words

Graeco-Arabic translation movement; ʿAbbāsids; Melkites; Nestorians (Church of the East); al-Biṭrīq; the circle of al-Kindī; Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq.

By the time of the Muslim conquests of the Middle East in the seventh century CE, Middle Eastern Christianity had split into three factions:

(1) Chalcedonians, who accepted the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and its « two natures in Christ » (dyophysite) formula and maintained liturgical communion with the imperial Church of Byzantium;

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1 An earlier version of this study was presented at the online workshop « The Translation of Arabic Scientific Texts into Greek between the Ninth and the Fifteenth Centuries » (26 February 2021), organized by Johannes Pahlitzsch (Mainz), Joe Glynias (Princeton), and Zachary Chitwood (Mainz). I am deeply grateful to Professor Pahlitzsch for his thought-provoking response to, and comments on, my paper and to Joe Glynias and the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions.
(2) Anti-Chalcedonians, who rejected the Council of Chalcedon and adhered to the « one nature in Christ » (monophysite or miaphysite)2 formula – they were called « Jacobites » in Syria (after the sixth-century Syrian bishop Jacob Baradaeus) and « Copts » (literally: « Egyptians ») in Egypt, though the term « Jacobites » was often applied generically to both groups;3

(3) The Church of the East, the main Christian group in the territories of the Persian Sasanian Empire – its followers were often called « Nestorians » (because in the wake of the Council of Ephesus in 431 they sided with the archbishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, who was condemned and deposed by that council).4

In the seventh century yet another schism rocked the Chalcedonian faction:

(1.1) After the Council of Constantinople (680–681), those Middle Eastern Chalcedonians who accepted the council’s « two wills in Christ » (dyothelete) formula came to be known as « Melkites » (royalists), because they remained in communion with the imperial Byzantine Church;

2 In modern terminology, a distinction is often drawn between « monophysitism » (the belief that Christ has one divine nature – this view is characteristic of Eutyches and was rejected not only by the Council of Chalcedon but also, eventually, by the anti-Chalcedonian faction) and « miaphysitism » (the belief that Christ has one nature, which is both divine and human). « Miaphysitism » is, of course, a neologism: in Greek, compounds with the meaning « one » or « single » are always formed with the prefix μονο-, not μια-; for opposing views on the admissibility of the term « miaphysitism », see PHILIPPE LUISIER, « Il miafisismo, un termine discutibile della storiografia recente: problemi teologici ed ecumenici », Cristianesimo nella Storia, 35/1 (2014), p. 297–307; SEBASTIAN P. BROCK, « Miaphysite, not Monophysite! », Cristianesimo nella Storia, 37/1 (2016), p. 45–54 (and other articles in the same volume).


(1.2) Those Middle Eastern Chalcedonians who favoured the « one will in Christ » (monothelete) formula and, as a result, broke communion with the imperial Byzantine Church came to be known as « Maronites » (after their spiritual centre, the monastery of Mar Maron in Syria). Members of these four factions – the Melkites, the Maronites, the Jacobites (including the Copts), and the Nestorians – were interacting with Muslim administrations: first, the Umayyad government in Damascus, then – in the wake of the ‘Abbāsid revolution – with the ‘Abbāsid court in the newly founded capital Baghdad, and subsequently with Sunnī and Shī‘a dynasties that controlled various territories in the Middle East: the Fāṭimids, the Ḥamdānids, the Būyids, the Selğūqs, the Ayyūbids, the Mamlūks, and eventually the Ottomans.

This intra-Christian sectarian diversity was a key factor affecting both Christian intellectual life and Christian communities’ relations with their Muslim overlords. It is therefore a legitimate – though rarely asked – question whether this factor played a role in the history of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. I believe that it did. In the present contribution, I shall offer some preliminary observations on this topic by focusing on Melkite and Nestorian translators in ‘Abbāsid Baghdad and their competition and cooperation.

I. Introduction

Dimitri Gutas’s ground-breaking monograph Greek Thought, Arabic Culture (1998) has demonstrated that the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, which spanned two centuries and a half (c. 750–c. 1000) and revolutionized the intellectual life in the Middle East, was not the result merely of the caliphs’ zeal for Greek learning or of Christian intellectuals’ altruistic desire to make such learning accessible to Muslim patrons. Instead, the translation movement was the effect of an intricate network of social and cultural factors that ranged from the ‘Abbāsids’ dependence on Iranian, still to a large extent Zoroastrian, elites to interreligious polemic. Gutas has masterfully reconstructed the climate within the Muslim society that both made the Graeco-Arabic translation movement possible and enabled it to have a lasting effect.

6 Dimitri Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsid Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries), Routledge, London 1998; see also Dimitri Gutas, « The Rebirth of Philosophy and the Translations into Arabic », in Ulrich Rudolph, Rotraud Hansberger, Peter...
A complementary network of factors must have been at play among the Middle Eastern Christian communities that participated in the translation activity. Just as the Muslim patrons – and Muslim society generally – had an interest in promoting the translation movement, so the Christian translators – and Middle Eastern Christian society generally – must have had reasons to collaborate. It is true that the remuneration offered for philosophical and scientific translations (at least those of the highest academic calibre) was remarkably high and provided a strong incentive to Christian intellectuals to participate in the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. At the same time, these Christian translators did not only seek to meet economic demand. They must have regarded themselves as partners in a joint enterprise, which both intertwined societies – the Muslim (still a minority in the Middle East) and the Christian (still the majority) – supported for their own reasons. For such a « symbiotic » relationship between the Muslim elites and the Christian intellectuals to have been forged, not only select individuals on both sides but the two intertwined societies must have had their vested interests. It is therefore imperative to investigate how the Christian communities in general and the ecclesiastical authorities in particular viewed the translation movement and what motivated them to encourage their members to participate in it.


of the Arabicization of the bureaucracy under the Umayyads. In this climate of intense interreligious competition, philosophical, medical, and scientific knowledge became a valuable commodity that was exploited by those with access to it. In fact, as Saliba notes, it was owing to this climate of competition that Middle Eastern Christians reached back to the scientific books of the Greeks that their predecessors knew existed but had less incentive to peruse.⁹

Saliba’s observation leads us to consider the rivalry between the various Christian communities of the Middle East. Though all these communities conflicted with each other, by far the most significant cultural divide separated the « Westerners », i.e., the Christians of the former Byzantine provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (who were Melkites, Maronites, and Jacobites, including Copts), on the one hand, and the « Easterners », i.e., the Christians of the former Sasanian Empire (Nestorians / the Church of the East), on the other.

Until the ’Abbāsid revolution, the « Easterners » seem to have remained on the losing side of this competition. As a result of the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, the Church of the East lost the privileged status that it had enjoyed under the Sasanians. Its doctrinal archenemies, the Jacobites gained ground by expanding their ecclesiastical hierarchy to the East (the « maphriana of Tikrīt ») and establishing monasteries in northern Iraq.¹⁰ The Melkites, too, held on to power, insofar as it was the Melkite elites in Damascus – notably, the family of John of Damascus – that continued to control the state apparatus under the Umayyads.¹¹ Similarly to the

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¹⁰ GEORGE A. KIRAZ, « Maphrian Catholicos », in SEBASTIAN P. BROCK et al. (eds.), Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage, Gorgias, Piscataway, NJ 2011, p. 264–265. Nestorian authors frequently complained that after the Sasanian regime collapsed, Muslim authorities abandoned the Sasanian discrimination policies between different Christian denominations. This allowed the rival Jacobite community to flourish. See MICHAEL G. MORONY, Iraq after the Muslim Conquest, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1984, p. 346: « one of the things Yōḥannan bar Penkayē [the friend and contemporary of the catholicos Ḥnānīšō` I (r. 686–693)] complained most bitterly about was the way the new rulers allowed both Nestorians and ‘heretics’ (Monophysites) to survive the conquest. He particularly deplored the demoralizing consequences of undiscriminating toleration in the reign of Muʿāwiya, when ‘there was no difference between pagan and Christian; the faithful was not distinct from a Jew’ ».

Jacobites, the Melkites took advantage of the changed political situation and expanded their hierarchy eastward, establishing the «catholicosate of Romagryis». This catholicosate was initially located in the former Sasanian city of Wēh-Andiok-Ḥosrow («Ḥosrow’s Better Antioch») in the vicinity of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, commonly known in Persian as Rūmāğān and in Arabic as al-Rūmiyya. When in 762 the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Mansūr (r. 754–775) transferred the population of Rūmāğān / al-Rūmiyya all the way to Šāš (near modern Tashkent), Šāš became the new location of the catholicosate of Romagryris, while a second Melkite catholicosate was eventually established in Baghdad.12

The Melkite Church’s expansion to Iraq necessitated forging relationships with Abdāsid elites, while its members’ linguistic prowess, especially their facility with Greek, provided them with a ready means of doing so. Before long, Melkite scholars became indispensable as translators of Greek philosophical and scientific literature who – unlike other Christians at the time – could work directly from the Greek original. This is why we find Melkite scholars at the forefront of translation activity, especially in the early stages of the translation movement (c. 770s–c. 830s), after which they gave the central place – though never surrendered the stage completely – to the Nestorians. This is the period on which we shall focus below.

II. Melkite Translators

What was the role of the Melkites in the Graeco-Arabic translation movement? This is a question that has not been systematically addressed because the standard narrative of the Graeco–Arabic translation movement privileges the role of Nestorian translators (Ḥunayn and his school); this, in turn, has to do with the fact that Nestorian Christians were the dominant Christian group in Baghdad and that most primary sources – notably Ḥunayn’s famous Risāla – focus on Nestorian translation activities. Based on the lists of translators provided by Ibn al−Nadīm and Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, Gérard Troupeau estimated that Nestorians constituted c. 62% of all the known translators (38 out of 61), while Melkites constituted only 18% (11 out of 61).

Traditions between the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia » (forthcoming in an edited volume on Syriac and Iranianate Christianity, edited by Chiara Barbatti and Vittorio Berti, to be published with the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften in Vienna – I am grateful to Adrian Pirtea for sharing this article with me prior to publication).


14 Gérard Troupeau, « Le rôle des syriaques dans la transmission et l’exploitation du patrimoine philosophique et scientifique grec », Arabica, 38/1 (1991), p. 1–10, at p. 4–5: « Du fait que 25 traducteurs sont communs aux deux listes [i.e., the lists of translators provided by Ibn al−Nadīm and Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa], que 11 sont propres à Ibn al−Nadīm et que 14 sont propres à Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, c’est un total de 61 traducteurs que nous fournissent les deux listes. Ces 61 traducteurs se répartissent de la manière suivante: 48 sont des syriaques (38 nestoriens, 9 jacobites et 1 maronite); 11 sont des byzantins melkites; 1 est sabéen et 1 est persan. Les traducteurs syriaques représentent donc 78% des traducteurs, et ce sont les nestoriens qui se taillent la part du lion avec 62%. Cette statistique vient
However, it is important to point out that only translators with identifiably Greek names were tallied as Melkites; translators with Arabic names whose confessional affiliation is left unspecified in the sources were catalogued as Nestorians by default; clearly, this procedure is unfavourable to Melkites (and others), as they too could bear Arabic names in the period under discussion. This casts a shadow of doubt over Troupeau's confessional breakdown of the translators; moreover, Troupeau's figures may be skewed for yet another reason: the primary sources from which they derive seem to be better informed about Nestorian translators than about translators from rival Christian groups. Based on these considerations, it is possible that the Melkites’ share in the Graeco-Arabic translation movement – especially in its early stages – is underestimated. More pertinently for our purposes, we need a clear explanation of how Melkite translators fit into the general narrative of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. This is a significant scholarly lacuna that ought to be addressed.

The earliest Melkite translator known by name is a certain al-_BLEND (literally: « the Patrikios », though the Arabic term biṭrīq was often used generically for Byzantine dignitaries). Al-Blend’s son Yūḥannā, or Yaḥyā, ibn al-Blend – the sources refer to him as a mawlā, « client, freedman, or loyal associate », of the caliph al-Ma’mun – was likewise active as a translator, as we shall discuss below.


15 For a useful survey, which, however, does not include all the Melkite translators and, on the other hand, includes some translators who were clearly not Melkites, see Joseph Nasrallah with Rachid Haddad, Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l’église melchite du Vᵉ au XXᵉ siècle, 5 vol. in 8 parts, Peeters, Louvain 1979–2017, vol. II.2, p. 74–91; see also Fiey, « Rûm », p. 414–417.


17 On the term mawlā in this period, see Daniel Pipes, « Mawlas: Freed Slaves and Converts in Early Islam », in Robert Hoyland (ed.), Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society, Routledge, London–New York 2017, p. 277–322. Yūḥannā, or Yahyā, ibn al-Blend would seem to fall within the category of mawlā amīr al-muʾminin, which, according to Pipes (p. 298 [153]–301 [156]), does not necessarily imply conversion to Islam.

18 Douglas M. Dunlop, « The Translations of al-Blend and Yahyā (Yūḥannā) b. al-Blend », Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 91/3–4 (1959), p. 140–150; Nasrallah, Histoire, vol. II.2, p. 81–86. On Yūḥannā (or Yahyā) ibn al-Blend, see Françoise Micheau, « Yahyā (or Yūḥannā) b. al-Blend », Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition [= EI²], vol. XI, p. 246 (the translator is called « probably a Mālikī », instead of Melkite). Micheau provides a complete list of translations attributed to him; she also indicates that he was part of the team that went to Byzantine territory in search of manuscripts. Gerhard Endress suggests that he belonged to the circle of al-Kindī – see Gerhard Endress, « The Circle of al-Kindī: Early Arabic Translations from the Greek and the Rise of Islamic Philosophy », in Gerhard Endress, Remke Kruk (eds.), The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism: Studies on the Transmission of Greek
of Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Bīṭrīq worked under the auspices of the caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775), who commissioned him to translate « some of [or: some material from] the ancient books » (aṣyāʾ min al-kutub al-qadīma).19 Ibn al-Nadīm also claims that al-Bīṭrīq translated Ptolemy’s Tetrabiblos for the Persian astrologer ʿUmar ibn al-Farraj al-Ṭabarī (d. after 812).20 If this information is correct, ʿUmar ibn al-Farraj al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr of the Tetrabiblos, completed in 812 and extant in MS Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek 203, would have to be based on al-Bīṭrīq’s translation.21 It is, however, possible that ʿUmar ibn al-Farraj al-Ṭabarī’s version or paraphrase of the Tetrabiblos (if this is how the word tafsīr is to be understood) is derived from Middle Persian sources, as argued by several scholars.22 This remains to be verified. There is perhaps also a third, harmonizing solution: ʿUmar ibn al-Farraj al-Ṭabarī’s tafsīr of the Tetrabiblos may be derived, by and large, from Middle Persian sources, but in producing this tafsīr he could have consulted al-Bīṭrīq, who may have provided translation of select passages from the original Greek and/or helped resolve difficulties in the Middle Persian sources. If this last solution is to be adopted, this would imply that al-Bīṭrīq was still alive in the early ninth century (more on this possibility below).
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Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a argues that al-Bīṭrīq was a prolific and good translator, though inferior to Ḥunayn (lahu naql ǧayyid, illā annahu dūna naql Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq); he also claims that he saw many medical works by Hippocrates and Galen in al-Bīṭrīq’s Arabic versions. One of al-Bīṭrīq’s Hippocrates translations is indeed extant in MS Istanbul, Ayasofya 3632: the De alimento / Kitāb al-ġiḏāʾ (fol. 106v–110r). At least one Galenic translation is extant as well: Book VI of Galen’s On the Faculties and Powers of Simple Drugs / Fi l-adwiya al-mufrada (MS Istanbul, Saray Ahmet III 2083), though the translator’s name is not indicated in the manuscript. Several other Galenic translations ascribed to al-Bīṭrīq are mentioned in medieval sources. Curiously enough, despite his involvement in medical translations, al-Bīṭrīq is never mentioned in Ḥunayn’s Risāla.

I should now like to call attention to a hitherto unnoticed Syriac source, which possibly refers to al-Bīṭrīq. This is a section of Bar-Hebraeus’s Chronicon Ecclesiasticum that deals with the early years of Timothy’s tenure as catholicos of the Church of the East (i.e., the early 780s). According to Bar-Hebraeus, a certain Joseph, the Nestorian metropolitan of Merv, who had been publicly convicted of « sodomy » (sḏōmāyūṯā), converted to Islam and plotted against the Christians. He claimed that the Nestorians were, effectively, the « fifth column » who prayed day and night for Byzantium’s victory over the Muslims. A certain Byzantine patrikios was then summoned before the caliph, who, being aware of this allegation, helped refute it. Here is the relevant passage:

27 See, for example, Hunayn’s discussion of Galen’s On Simple Drugs: Lamoreaux, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, p. 66–69 (work No. 53). The following phrase may be an oblique reference to al-Bīṭrīq’s translation: « Yuhannā ibn Māsawayh asked me to collate for him the second part of this book and correct it, which I did, although it would have been more accurate to translate it [anew] » (§56.11).
There was there [i.e., in Baghdad] a certain Roman [i.e., Byzantine] *patrikios*, an honourable man, who was a prisoner (*ʾašrat abyāt fīhim al-qūmis*). The caliph summoned him in and asked him about the Nestorians, what [the Byzantines] thought of them. The *patrikios*, having heard of the accursed Joseph’s libel, wanted to confute him, and so responded as follows: « In our view, the Nestorians are not even Christians, and if any of them is present in [our] lands, we do not allow him to enter any of our churches. In truth, they are closer to the Arabs than to us ». In this way the caliph’s anger was calmed.28

Bar-Hebraeus’s source for this information seems to be contemporary with the events described: this may have been Timothy’s lost letter to the people of Gondēşāpūr, in which he addressed Joseph of Merv’s affair, or some other eighth-century document.29 If the Byzantine *patrikios* (Syr. *paṭrīq(ā)*) mentioned by Bar-Hebraeus is, in fact, our translator al-Biṭrīq, as seems quite likely, this would serve to confirm an important point: that al-Biṭrīq was a prisoner of war.

The chronological setting of Bar-Hebraeus’s report in the early 780s suggests that al-Biṭrīq may have been among the prisoners captured in 780 during the Muslim siege of Şamālū (*Gr. τὸ Σημαλῶς κάστρον* = Cemele / modern Çayağzı midway between Caesarea / Kayseri and Ancyra / Ankara).30 The campaign against Şamālū was led by the sixteen-year-old prince Hārūn – the future caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd (r. 786–809) – under the auspices of the Barmakids Ḥālid ibn Barmak (d. 781/2) and his son Yahyā ibn Ḥālid (d. 806), then Hārūn’s tutor. The Şamālū garrison – « ten households together with the *komēs* » (*ašrat abyāt fīhim al-qūmis*), as al-Balāḏurī informs us – surrendered on the condition that their lives be spared and that they not be separated; they were then re-settled in the al-Šammāsiyya quarter in Baghdad.31 Significantly, al-Šammāsiyya had been given by the caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) as a fief (*iqṭāʿ*) to Ḥālid

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28 Bar-Hebraeus, Gregorii Barhebraei Chronicon Ecclesiasticum, ed. and trans. Johannes Baptista Abbeloos, Thomas Josephus Lamy, Section II, vol. III, Maisonneuve, Paris–Peeters, Louvain 1877, col. 173–174; David Wilmshurst (ed. and trans.), Bar Hebraeus, The Ecclesiastical Chronicle, Gorgias, Piscataway, NJ 2016, p. 360–363; the translation from Syriac is my own, though I have borrowed a few phrases from Wilmshurst. This passage is briefly referenced in Fiey, « Rûm », p. 373, fn. 43, but he does not draw the connection to al-Biṭrīq. The caliph mentioned in this passage is probably al-Mahdī (r. 775–785).


ibn Barmak.\textsuperscript{32} The possibility that some of the Ṣamālū prisoners of war became involved in translations in Baghdad – an activity sponsored by the Barmakids\textsuperscript{33} – was raised by Jean-Maurice Fiey and was then imaginatively developed by Benjamin Jokisch.\textsuperscript{34} Jokisch even attempted to identify al-Biṭrīq with Gregorios Mousoulakios, the komēs of Opsikion (the Byzantine theme in the northwestern Asia Minor), who also held the title of patrikios.\textsuperscript{35} Though this identification – along with many other of Jokisch’s extravagant theories – is to be rejected, the possibility that some of the Ṣamālū prisoners became involved in Graeco-Arabic translations ought to be considered seriously. If al-Biṭrīq was a prisoner of war, as suggested by Bar-Hebraeus’s report, he may well have belonged to this group.

Of course, if this should be the case, we would need to modify al-Biṭrīq’s floruit: he can no longer be considered as active during the reign of al-Manṣūr (r. 755–775), but during the second half of the reign of al-Mahdī (r. 775–785) and the reigns of his sons al-Ḥādī (r. 785–786) and Hārūn al-Raṣīd (r. 786–809). This would help resolve the chronological difficulty arising from the fact that the floruit of al-Biṭrīq’s son Yūḥannā (or Yaḥyā) ibn al-Biṭrīq is placed by the sources as late as the reign of al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833). This would also help explain how al-Biṭrīq could have collaborated with ʿUmar ibn al-Farruḥān on a tafsīr of the Tetrabiblos completed in 812, as discussed above.

We know of yet another Barmakid-sponsored Graeco-Arabic translation project. According to an important note in the preface to the Arabic translation of Vindonius Anatolius of Berytus’ Collection of Agricultural Practices (the « Anatolius B » version in Carlo Scardino’s classification), « this [text] is [part] of the wisdom which the patriarch of Alexandria, the metropolitan of Damascus, and the monk Eustathius / Arsenius / Eusebius (?) extracted for Yaḥyā ibn Ḥālid ibn Barmak and translated from Greek into

\textsuperscript{33} On the Barmakids’ sponsorship of translations (not only from Greek, of course, but even more so from Middle Iranian languages and Sanskrit), see GUTAS, Greek Thought, p. 114 and 128–129; KEVIN VAN BLADEL, « The Bactrian Background of the Barmakids », in ANNA AKASOV, CHARLES BURNETT, RONIT YOELI-TLALIM (eds.), Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes, Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington 2011, p. 43–88, esp. p. 74–86.
\textsuperscript{34} FIEY, « Rūm », p. 386 and 415; JOKISCH, Islamic Imperial Law, p. 81–90.
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Arabic; this took place in the month of Rabīʿ al-Awwal [MS G] / Rabīʿ al-Āḥar [MS S] of the year 179 [AH], i.e., 795 CE.36

In this team of Melkite clerics, the patriarch of Alexandria must be Politianus (patriarch 140–186 AH / 757–802 CE).37 Indeed, as we know from Eutychius, Politianus, who was a physician by training, visited Baghdad and healed Hārūn al-Raṣīd’s concubine; this is supposed to have taken place c. 796.38 Though Eutychius’s report suggests that Politianus was specifically summoned to Baghdad to heal the concubine, it is more likely that he had arrived in Baghdad earlier on ecclesiastical business – to plead with the caliph to restore to the Melkites church buildings appropriated by the Jacobites, which is the goal specifically mentioned by Eutychius – and stayed there long enough to participate in the Anatolius translation project completed in 795 and to heal the concubine c. 796.39

We do not know who was the Melkite metropolitan of Damascus in 795,40 but it is very tempting to identify him with the translator Basil al-Muṭrān mentioned in the

36 CARLO SCARDINO, Edition antiker landwirtschaftlicher Werke in arabischer Sprache, Band I: Prolegomena, Walter de Gruyter, Boston–Berlin 2015, p. 201–204. Scardino provides a critical edition of the preface based on the only two known manuscripts of the text: G = MS Madrid, Gayangos 30 and S = MS Aleppo, Salem, Ar. 377 [olim Sbath 1200]; I thank the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library for facilitating access to the Aleppo manuscript: <https://www.vhmml.org/readingRoom/view/501336> (Accessed May 2021). I am reproducing the Arabic text here with two corrections (explained below):

وھﻮ ﻣﻦ اﻟﺤﻜﻤﺔ اﻟﺘﻲ اﺳﺘﺨﺮﺟﮭﺎ ﻣﻄﺮﺑﻠﯿﻂ* دﻣﺸﻖ وأوﺳﺘﺜﻲ** اﻟﺮاھﺐ ﻟﯿﺤﯿﻲ ﺑﻦ ﺧﺎﻟﺪ ﻋﻦ ﺑﺮﻣﻚ وﻓﺴّﺮوه ﻣﻦ اﻟﺮوﻣﻲ إﻟﻰ اﻟﻌﺮﺑﻲ، وذﻟﻚ ﻓﻲ ﺷﮭﺮ ﻣﺎﺋﻮرة اﻷوّل / ا

At (*) G reads ﻣﻜﺮﻟﯿﻂ, which is, obviously, a corruption of ﻣﻄﺮﺑﻠﯿﻂ; S reads ﻣﻄﺮان: clearly, ﻣﻄﺮﻧﺎ was the original reading, which became corrupted in G and was replaced by a less archaic term in S. At (**) G reads أرﺳﻨﻲ, which is then corrected to أوﺳﻨﻲ: clearly, the final /ḥ/ in both manuscripts is a misreading of the original final /y/ with the tail pointing backwards. أورستين (Eustathius – more commonly, however, spelled أرستيوس, أورستين, or أورستيوس (Eusebius) are possible readings. Scardino corrects the text to أورستات (Eustathius), following Sbath’s conjecture; cf. ENDRESS, « Building the Library », p. 348, fn. 85.

37 Politianus’s dates are given by Eutychius as « four years into the caliphate of [al-マンṣūر] » (i.e., 140 AH / 757–8 CE) till « sixteen years from the caliphate of [Hārūn] al-Raṣīd » (i.e., 186 AH / 802 CE); he is said to have been patriarch forty-six years (lunar years are clearly meant here) – see EUTYCHIUS, Etychii patriarchae Alexandrini Annales, ed. LOUIS CHEIKHO, vol. II, Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, Louvain 1960 (CSCO 51 / Scriptores Arabici 7), p. 49:14–15 and 52:12–16. von Gutschmid proposed a revised chronology, according to which Politianus died in 197/813 – see ALFRED VON GUTSCHMIDT, « Verzeichniss der Patriarchen von Alexandrien », in FRANZ RÖHL (ed.), Kleine Schriften von Alfred von Gutschmid, Teubner, Leipzig 1890, vol. II, p. 395–525, at p. 484; this revised chronology is often cited and accepted.


40 For a fairly complete listing of all the known Melkite metropolitans of Damascus, see KLAUS–PIETER TOBT, « Griechisch-Orthodoxe (melkütische) Christen im zentralen und südlichen Syrien: Die Periode von
This conjecture, originally put forward by Paul Sbath, is strengthened by two facts: (1) Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Tamīmī (d. 980) in his Kitāb al-Mursīd cites the Kitāb al-Filāḥa al-rūmiyya and claims that it was translated into Arabic by (or under the auspices of) a certain Eustathius (spelled Usṭāṣ) among the Arabic translators of Kitāb al-Filāḥa al-rūmiyya. Whatever the case might be, this Eustathius (if this is the correct reading of his name) must be differentiated from the translator Usṭāṯ, who some forty years later worked for al-Kindī.

Whatever the exact identification of the translators involved in the Anatolius project, we have evidence of three Melkite clergymen collaborating on a Graeco-Arabic translation under Barmakid patronage. Moreover, the heading of « Anatolius


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B » implies that the same team produced other Graeco-Arabic translations as well: « Anatolius B » is said to be « [part] of the wisdom » (min al-ḥikma) which the team « extracted for Yaḥyā ibn Ḥālid ibn Barmak and translated from Greek into Arabic » (istahrağaha ... li-Yaḥyā ibn Ḥālid ibn Barmak wa-fassarāhu min al-rūmī ilā l- arabī). 45

With the onset of the ninth century, the Melkites continued to play an important role in Graeco-Arabic translations. At least two Melkite translators worked for the ʿAbbāsid general and governor al-Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn, nicknamed « the ambidextrous » (Ḍū l-Yamīnayni) for his ability to wield a sword with either hand. These are:

(1) a certain Basil (spelled Bāsīl), who may or may not be identical with the aforementioned Basil al-Muṭrān and may or may not be the one to whom a translation of the first four books of Porphyry’s commentary on Aristotle’s Physics is ascribed; we do not know what specifically this Basil translated for al-Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn (this could be Porphyry’s commentary on Aristotle’s Physics or something else); 46

(2) the famous Melkite theologian Theodore Abū Qurra, who translated the Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise De virtutibus animae. 47 This translation was probably prepared c. 816, when al-Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn was stationed in the north-Syrian city al-Raqqā (the ancient Callinicum) and when, according to Michael the Syrian’s testimony, he engaged in the study of philosophy. 48


Most significantly, the Melkites seem to have played a central role in the « circle of al-Kindī » – a workshop of Christian translators, founded, directed, and financed by the Arab Muslim aristocrat and prominent philosopher al-Kindī (d. c. 870), who was a tutor to prince Aḥmad, son of the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Mu’tasim (r. 833–842).⁴⁹ Owing especially to Gerhard Endress’s research, we are well-informed about the activity of the circle of al-Kindī.⁵⁰ Its literary output included Arabic translations and adaptations of such works as Plotinus’s *Enneads* IV-VI (translated by ‘Abd al-Maṣḥī Ibn Nā’ima al-Ḥimṣī and transmitted in three texts, the most important of which is the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*),⁵¹ sections of Proclus’s *Elements of Theology* and other works,⁵² Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (translated by a certain Eustathius / Usṭāṯ),⁵³ and several others. The translator Yūḥannā (or Yahyā) ibn al-Biṭrīq, the son of al-Biṭrīq the Byzantine patrikios mentioned earlier, may have also belonged to the circle of al-Kindī. He is credited with an Arabic paraphrase of Plato’s *Timaeus* (no longer extant), Arabic translations of Aristotle’s *De caelo*, *Meteorology*, and some zoological works, an Arabic paraphrase of Aristotle’s *De anima*, and Arabic translations of several medical works.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ ENDRESS, « The Circle of al-Kindī »; ENDRESS, « Building the Library ».
All of al-Kindī’s Christian translators seem to have been “Westerners” rather than “Easterners” – and most of them, it would seem, were Melkites.

In the case of one of them, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Ibn Nā’ ima al-Ḥimṣī, both the Melkite and the Maronite scenarios seem possible. I have explored this subject in an earlier study entitled “Palestinian Origenism and the Early History of the Maronites: In Search of the Origins of the Arabic Theology of Aristotle.” There, I attempted to trace the confessional and educational background of ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Ibn Nā’ ima al-Ḥimṣī. In the absence of substantial biographical information about him, I had to rely on the only five known facts: (1) he was a Christian from the city of Homs in western Syria; (2) he worked for al-Kindī; (3) he translated directly from Greek rather than Syriac, though he may have known Syriac as well; (4) he had access to a Greek manuscript of Plotinus (and may have been operative in procuring it for al-Kindī); (5) he produced a sophisticated Arabic adaptation of Plotinus.

My argument can be summarized as follows: ‘Abd al-Masīḥ Ibn Nā’ ima’s provenance from Homs makes it certain that he was a “Westerner” (i.e., a Melkite, a Maronite, or a Jacobite) rather than an “Easterner” (a member of the Church of the East). The fact that he translated from Greek rather than Syriac makes it unlikely that he was a Jacobite. We are therefore left with two scenarios: that he was a Melkite or that he was a Maronite. In either case, the fact that he produced a sophisticated Arabic adaptation of Plotinus indicates that he had a strong background in philosophy, including Neoplatonism.

Building on Sebastian Brock’s path-breaking article “A Syriac Intermediary for the Arabic Theology of Aristotle? In Search of a Chimera”, I suggested that the best way to


Treiger, “Palestinian Origenism”.


It is possible, but not entirely certain, that al-Ḥimṣī knew Syriac. Ibn al-Nadīm indicates that al-Ḥimṣī translated Aristotle’s Sophistical Refutations [from Greek] into Syriac, and subsequently Ibrāhīm ibn Bakkūš translated his translation into Arabic while correcting it. This information may or may not be correct. It is significant that the oldest extant Arabic translation of the Sophistical Refutations is attributed to “al-Nā’ ima”, i.e., presumably, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ ibn Nā’ ima al-Ḥimṣī; however, it makes no mention of Ibrāhīm ibn Bakkūš and is possibly translated directly from Greek rather than Syriac. For an overview of the Syriac and Arabic transmission of the Sophistical Refutations, see Henri Hugonnard-Roche, “Les Réfutations Sophistiques”, in DPA, vol. I, p. 526–528; Gerhard Endress and Pieter S. Hasper, “The Arabic Tradition of Aristotle’s Sophistici Elenchì”, Studia Graeco-Arabica, 10 (2020), p. 59–110.

account for ‘Abd al-Masih ibn Nāˈima’s philosophical expertise, as well as for the fact that he had access to a Greek manuscript of Plotinus – in the ninth-century Middle East a rare commodity indeed – is a background in Christian Platonism: the intellectual movement which had been condemned by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 under the umbrella of «Origenism». Consequently, the question of ‘Abd al-Masih ibn Nāˈima’s philosophical training can be redefined in terms of a survival of Christian Platonism («Origenism») after the Fifth Ecumenical Council all the way to the ninth century. I have argued that such a survival is possible and, indeed, plausible among the Chalcedonian Christians of the Middle East: both Melkites and Maronites. Though – despite some tantalizing clues – we are still very much in the dark about the historical specifics of this survival, I would argue that the very fact of Neoplatonism’s resurgence with al-Kindī can be regarded as a testimony to a continuous Platonizing trend among contemporary Middle Eastern Christians.

In another recent study, I have presented further evidence of Chalcedonian / Melkite involvement: one passage from al-Kindī’s Book of Definitions originates from Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary on the Song of Songs. This is the famous definition of ‘išq (=ἐρως) as ifrāṭ al-maḥabba («excess of love»), which is derived from Gregory of Nyssa’s phrase ἐπιτεταμένη γήρ ὁ γάπη ὁ ἐρως λέγεται («for eros is said to be excessive / intense love»). I am calling this definition famous, because in its Arabic garb it appears in a wide variety of Muslim and Jewish authors, e.g., philosophers of the Kindian tradition (al-Saraḥṣī and Miskawayh), the tenth-century Jewish Neoplatonic philosopher Isaac Israeli of Kairouan, the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, 59


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the thirteenth-century Muslim mystic Ibn al-Dabbāḡ, and the twelfth-century Judaeo-Arabic Sūfī author Abraham he-Ḥāsīd.62 I can now confirm that this Arabic definition is derived directly from the Greek (whether of Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary on the Song of Songs or of a later Greek source that cites it) rather than the intermediate Syriac translation of Gregory of Nyssa.63

This information complements the important observation made by Tamar Frank in her Yale doctoral dissertation from 1975 (written under the supervision of Franz Rosenthal) that several entries in al-Kindī’s Book of Definitions originate from John of Damascus’s Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, chapter 36 [II.22].64 This fact is particularly significant because it confirms that al-Kindī’s Christian collaborators involved in the production of the Book of Definitions – his « research assistants », so to speak – were Melkites.

III. Nestorian Translators

The Melkites’ main rivals in the translation business were scholars of the Church of the East. The Abbāsid revolution and the founding of Baghdad provided this Christian community with a much-needed opportunity to regain its influence at the caliphal court and reassert itself as the dominant, quasi-official form of Christianity in the

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62 See references provided in TREIGER, « From Dionysius to al-Ḡazālī », p. 219.
63 For the Syriac text of this passage from Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary of the Song of Songs, see MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. syr. 106, fol. 140v, col. 2–3: ܘܪܚܡܬܐ ܓܝܪ ܡܐ ܕܐܬܬ ܠܗ ܠܬܪܒܝܬܐ ܣܓܝܐܬܐ ܪܓܬܐ ܡܬܩܪܝܐ. On this Syriac translation, see CESLAS VAN DEN EYNDE, La version syriaque du Commentaire de Grégoire de Nyssse sur le Cantique des Cantiques: ses origines, ses témoins, son influence, Bureau du Muséon, Louvain 1939. Though Gregory of Nyssa’s Commentary of the Song of Songs was also translated into Arabic, this took place much later, in the eleventh century; the translator is, probably, ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Faḍl of Antioch – see ALEXANDRE M. ROBERTS, Reason and Revelation in Byzantine Antioch: The Christian Translation Program of Abdallah ibn al-Fadl, University of California Press, Oakland 2020, p. 45. To the list of manuscripts provided in GEORG GRAF, Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur, 5 vol., Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City 1944–1953, vol. I, p. 332–333, the following should be added: MSS Sinai ar. 278 (c. thirteenth cent.); Sinai ar. 279 (c. twelfth cent.); New Haven, Beinecke, ar. 349 (year 1750); Damascus, Rûm Orthodox Patriarchate, 117 (year 1643), No. 6; Damascus, Rûm Orthodox Patriarchate, 271 (year 1828), No. 1; Ḥarīṣā, Bibliothèque des missionnaires de Saint Paul, 36 (year 1797). The section containing the phrase ἐπιτετμημένη γὰρ ἁγίῃ δ ὁ ἑρῴς λέγεται seems to be omitted in this Arabic translation – see MS Sinai ar. 278, fol. 242r.
Islamic empire. It is for this reason that Timothy I, catholicos of the Church of the East for over forty years (r. 780–823), relocated his patriarchal residence from the old Sasanian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad. He quickly established himself as the pre-eminent Christian official of the Caliphate and in this capacity engaged in presenting the Christian faith to the Muslim rulers, as evidenced by his famous disputation with the caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–785).66

As is well known, al-Mahdi commissioned Timothy to prepare an Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Topics*. The way Timothy himself tells the story in one of his Syriac letters written c. 782/3 is quite remarkable:

The royal command required us to translate the *Topika* of the philosopher Aristotle from Syriac into the Arabic tongue. This was achieved, with God’s help, through the agency of the teacher Abū Nūḥ [al-Anbārī]. A small part was done by us as far as the Syriac is concerned, whereas he did it in its entirety, both Syriac and Arabic; the work has already reached a conclusion and has been completed. And although there were some others who were translating this from Greek into Arabic – we have written to inform you how and in what way it happened that all this took place – nevertheless (the king) did not consider it worth even looking at the labours of those other people on the grounds that they were barbaric, not only in phraseology, but also in sense, whether because of the natural difficulty of the subject […] or as a result of the lack of training of those who approached such things. For you know the extent and magnitude of the toils and labours such a task requires. But (the king) entirely approved of our labours, all the more so when from time to time he compared the versions with each other.67

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Who were those hapless « others » involved in the translation of the Topics (and presumably other philosophical and scientific works) about whom Timothy speaks with triumphalism? Given that they worked from Greek (as opposed to Syriac) into Arabic, it seems evident that these « others » were Melkites – such as Timothy’s contemporary al-Biṭrīq. Timothy’s scornful remark about the « barbaric » style of their translations is surely in reference to their language, which must have been the Melkite Middle Arabic of the time, far removed from Classical Arabic standards.68 His comment about the translators’ « lack of training » must refer to the fact that they were still – in these early stages of the translation movement – simple Melkite clerics, monks, and (as we have seen) prisoners of war who lacked thorough training in philosophy and the sciences. When Timothy was commissioned to prepare an Arabic translation of Aristotle’s Topics, he must have seized this opportunity not in the least with a view to demonstrating to the caliph that professionals of the Church of the East could outdo their ecclesiastical rivals. Interestingly, however, Timothy also acknowledges his debt to the future Melkite patriarch of Antioch Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq – a bilingual (Syriac-Arabic) Nestorian Christian from al-Ḥīra, who had come to master

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Though several of Hunayn’s patrons were Muslims, others were Nestorian Christians, particularly physicians, whose preferred language was Syriac and who therefore commissioned translations from Greek into Syriac rather than Arabic.

Like Timothy before him, Hunayn, too, frequently found fault with other Christian translators; in his case it was often a matter of criticizing – and revising – earlier translations of Galen into Syriac and Arabic, prepared by specialists from rival ecclesiastical factions. Hunayn’s son Ishāq and other members of Hunayn’s team were active in revising philosophical translations as well as preparing new ones with a view to supplanting earlier versions. Thus, Ishāq’s Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *De anima* – to take just one example – may have been attempted with the specific goal of supplanting the Arabic paraphrase of the *De anima* translated by Yūḥannā (Yahyā) ibn al-Bīṭrīq as well as an earlier version of the *De anima* (the so-called « Pseudo-Ishāq ») and of producing a « definitive » translation of this Aristotelian treatise.

From the perspective of intra-Christian ecclesiastical politics, Hunayn’s translation workshop functioned, in many ways, as a Nestorian competitor of the circle of al-Kindī. This dovetails well, and sheds further light on, the fascinating examples, pointed out by Endrēss, of the bitter rivalry between al-Kindī on the one hand and

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70 In the early ʿAbbāsid period, Greek was more readily available to the Melkites, who still maintained it in their Church services, and to a lesser degree to the Jacobites and the Maronites, than it was to the Nestorians. The Nestorians, in fact, had to make a special effort to familiarize themselves with Greek. On Hunayn’s acquisition of Greek, see Gotthard Strohmaier, « Hunain ibn Ishāq: An Arab Scholar Translating into Syriac », *Aram*, 3 (1991), p. 163–170, at p. 165–166. For more on Hunayn’s and his team’s translations, see the references provided in fn. 13 above.

71 Notably, Sergius of Rēš ayān (6th century) and Hunayn’s older contemporary Job of Edessa (Ayyūb al-Ruhāwī, d. after 832) – see Sebastian P. Brock, « The Syriac Background to Hunayn’s Translation Techniques », *Aram*, 3 (1991), p. 139–162, esp. p. 141–142. Job of Edessa is often considered to be a Nestorian (and this much is affirmed by Bar-Hebraeus), but his Edessene origin makes this somewhat unlikely, and it is for this reason that Alphonse Mingana, the editor of Job’s only surviving Syriac work, *The Book of Treasures*, assumed that he was a Melkite or a Jacobite who converted to the Church of the East at some point in his life – see Barbara Roggemans, « Job of Edessa », in David Thomas et. al. (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* [= CMR], 16 vol. to date, Brill, Leiden 2009–in progress, vol. I, p. 502–509, here p. 503. The question of Job of Edessa’s confessional affiliation merits a special investigation.

72 On Ishāq’s translation of the *De anima*, see Alexander Treiger, « Reconstructing Ishāq ibn Hunayn’s Arabic Translation of Aristotle’s *De anima* », *Studia Graeco-Arabica*, 7 (2017), p. 193–211. (For reasons unknown to us Ishāq’s translation remained incomplete: it reached only as far as 431a14, i.e., near the middle of *De anima*, III 7.) On the Arabic paraphrase of the *De anima*, see Arinzhen, *Aristoteles’ De anima*. On the earlier Arabic version of the *De anima* (curiously, misattributed to Ishāq ibn Hunayn in the manuscript – hence « Pseudo-Ishāq »), see Arinzhen, *Aristoteles’ De anima*, p. 690–707.
 Hunayn’s Muslim sponsors, the three mathematicians Banū Mūsā on the other. 73 Al-
Kindī was an Arab Philhellene and, for this reason, got along particularly well with Melkites. 74 The Banū Mūsā, by contrast, were Iranians of Ḥurāsānī origin, sympathetic
to the Persian nationalist Šu’ūbiyya movement; their Christian collaborators were thus, predictably, members of the Christian community that had had a long history in
Iranian lands: the Nestorian Church of the East.

This rivalry between Melkite and Nestorian translators is echoed in the much-
discussed passage by the Muslim scholar al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363) contrasting the literal (ad
verbum) method of translation with translation according to sense (ad sensum).

The translators use two methods of translation. One of them is that of Yuḥannā b. al-
Biṭrīq, Ibn an-Nāʿimaḥ al-Ḥimṣī and others. According to this method, the translator
studies each individual Greek word and its meaning, chooses an Arabic word of
corresponding meaning and uses it. Then he turns to the next word and proceeds in the
same manner until in the end he has rendered into Arabic the text he wishes to translate.
This method is bad for two reasons. First, it is impossible to find Arabic expressions
corresponding to all Greek words and, therefore, through this method many Greek words
remain untranslated. Second, certain syntactical combinations in the one language do
not always necessarily correspond to similar combinations in the other; besides, the use
of metaphors, which are frequent in every language, causes additional mistakes.
The second method is that of Ḥunain b. Ḥaqq, al-Jauhari and others. Here the translator
considers a whole sentence, ascertains its full meaning and then expresses it in Arabic
with a sentence identical in meaning, without concern for the correspondence of
individual words. This method is superior, and hence there is no need to improve the
works of Ḥunain b. Ḥaqq. 75

While the contrast between the two methods of translation does not hold water, and
in this sense the passage just cited has been rightly characterized as misleading, it is
nonetheless remarkable for another reason: the two supposed examples of the « bad »
ad verbum method (Yuḥannā ibn al-Bīṭrīq and Ḥabd al-Masīḥ Ibn Nāʿima al-Ḥimṣī) are
scholars affiliated with the circle of al-Kindī, while of the two « good » ad sensum
translators one (Ḥunain) was a Nestorian Christian, and the other (al-Ǧawhari), a

74 This contrasts with, and complements, what Dimitri Gutas has discussed under the heading of « anti-
Byzantinism as Philhellenism » – see GUTAS, Greek Thought, p. 83–95.
75 I am citing the passage in Rosenthal’s translation – see FRANZ ROSENTHAL, The Classical Heritage in Islam,
Thought, p. 142; BROCK, « Syriac Background », p. 147–148.
Persian Muslim. Leaving al-Ǧawharī aside as a non-Christian, we can readily discern in al-Ṣafadī an echo of the Church of the East’s marketing of its translation methods as superior to those of their ecclesiastical rivals.

Of course, criticism went both ways. For example, a member of the circle of al-Kindī, probably a Melkite Christian, criticized the « confusion of thoughts (Heb. šīḇbāš mahāšāḇē) of Ḥabīb ibn Bahrīz the Nestorian, who translated [Nicomachus of Gerasa’s Introduction to Arithmetic] from Syriac into Arabic for al-Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn the ambidextrous (Heb. ba’ al šānē hay-yāmīnîm = Ar. dū l-yāmīnayn).”

Despite this rivalry, however, Melkite and Nestorian translators collaborated as well. We know of two Melkite translators, the brothers Iṣṭīfān ibn Basil and Taḍārī (or Tiyādūrus) ibn Basil (probably sons of one of the two Basils mentioned earlier), who collaborated closely with Ḥunayn and submitted their translations to him for revision. Iṣṭīfān ibn Basil is mentioned numerous times in Ḥunayn’s Risāla. For

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76 The mathematician and astronomer al-ʿAbbās ibn Saʿīd al-Ǧawharī (d. after 843) is meant here; on his superb knowledge of Greek (quite unusual for a Muslim scholar), see GUTAS, Greek Thought, p. 139 (based on a passage in the Melkite scholar Qūṣṭā ibn Lūqā’s polemical letter to Ibn al-Ṣafadī). Al-Ǧawharī is also credited with a translation of Ṣānāq al-Ḥindī’s Book of Poisons from Syriac into Arabic (see GAS, vol. V, p. 243–244; cf. vol. III, p. 193–197; vol. VI, p. 138–139).

77 Ḥabīb ibn Bahrīz’s translation was subsequently edited by al-Kindī; presumably, after al-Kindī’s death, a member of his circle (who, I presume, was a Melkite Christian) added a prologue and restored the missing first section of the translation; the resulting text is lost in the original Arabic, but is preserved in a fourteenth-century Hebrew translation – see GAD FREUDENTHAL, TONY LÉVY, « De Gérase à Bagdad: Ibn Bahrīz, al-Kindī, et leur recension arabe de l’Introduction arithmétique de Nicomaque, d’après la version hébraïque de Qalonymos ben Qalonymos d’Arles », in RÉGIS MORELON, AHMAD HASNAOUI (eds.), De Zénon d’Élée à Poincaré: Recueil d’études en hommage à Roshdi Rashed, Peeters, Louvain–Paris 2004, p. 479–544, at p. 514–515; cf. GAD FREUDENTHAL and MAURO ZONTA, « Remnants of Ḥabīb ibn Bahrīz’s Arabic Translation of Nicomachus of Gerasa’s Introduction to Arithmetic », in Y. TZVI LANGERMAN, JOSEF STERN (eds.), Adaptations and Innovations: Studies on the Interactions between Jewish and Islamic Thought and Literature from the Early Middle Ages to the Late Twentieth Century, Dedicated to Professor Joel L. Kraemer, Peeters, Paris–Louvain–Dudley, MA 2007, p. 67–82; GAD FREUDENTHAL, « The Tribulations of the Introduction to Arithmetic from Greek to Hebrew via Syriac and Arabic: Nicomachus of Gerasa, Ḥabīb ibn Bahrīz, al-Kindī, and Qalonymos ben Qalonymos », in IRENE CAIAZZO, CONSTANTINOS MACRIS, AURELIEN ROBERT (eds.), Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2022, p. 141–170.

78 On Iṣṭīfān ibn Basil, see NASRAIΛ, Histoire, vol. II.2, p. 79–81; ROGER ARNALDEZ, « Iṣṭīfān b. Basil », in EI², vol. IV, p. 254–255; MANFRED ULLMANN, Untersuchungen zur arabischen Überlieferung der Materia medica des Dioskurides, mit Beiträgen von RAENER DEGEN, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2009, p. 21–24. The name is spelled ʾaṣṣīṭīfān, but it is typically assumed that the last vowel is long (scriptio defectiva); I follow this convention here. On Taḍārī ibn Basil, the Arabic translator of Aristotle’s Prior Analytics, see TEDDY J. FASSBERG, « Prolegomena to any Future Edition of Aristotle’s Prior Analytics: Theodore’s Arabic Translation », Classical Philology, 116 (2021), p. 247–266 (I am deeply grateful to Joe Glynias for a
example, in the entry on Galen’s On the Causes of Breathing (work No. 37), Ḥunayn writes:

Ayyūb produced a translation of it [into Syriac], which was unintelligible. Iṣṭifān also translated it into Arabic. Abū Ğafar [Muḥammad ibn Mūsā, Ḥunayn’s patron] asked me to do the same thing he had asked for regarding the previous book [i.e., go over the Greek and correct any mistakes in the translation], and he ordered Iṣṭifān to collate [it] with me. I corrected both the Syriac and the Arabic at the same time, until the Syriac text became intelligible, with no shortcomings, because I wanted to keep a copy [of it] for my son, and [I did] the same for the Arabic, though it had been, to begin with, much more accurate than the Syriac.

Iṣṭifān ibn Basīl also produced Graeco-Arabic translations of Dioscurides’s Materia medica and (possibly) Menander’s Statements (in the version Men. ar. I). My own research indicates that the Arabic citations of Plato’s Phaedo in al-Bīrūnī’s India are similar in their terminology to the Arabic Menander (Men. ar. I). If the Menander
translation was indeed produced by Iṣṭifān ibn Basil, we would have to attribute to him al-Bīrūnī’s quotations from the *Phaedo* as well.

Iṣṭifān ibn Basil’s brother Taḏārī (or Tiyāḏārūs) ibn Basīl is the Arabic translator of Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*. According to the testimony of the *Fihrist*, he « showed » his translation to Ḥunayn, and Ḥunayn « corrected » it (‘arāḍahu ‘alā Ḥunayn ǧa-aşlahahu).84 Thus, Taḏārī acted in much the same way as his brother Iṣṭifān – he submitted his Arabic translation to Ḥunayn, who corrected it, probably also improved its style, and put the finishing touches on it.

It is remarkable that the type of Melkite-Nestorian collaboration on display here is quite different from the one observed some seventy years prior with Timothy’s (and his assistant Abū Nūḥ’s) translation of Aristotle’s *Topics*: while Timothy believed his skills to be superior to those of Melkite translators (such as Timothy’s contemporary al-Bīrūnī), he nonetheless had recourse to Melkite informants, because they were native Greek speakers and had a better grasp of rare Greek terms. Here, by contrast, we observe two Melkites – and presumably native Greek speakers – Iṣṭifān ibn Basīl and his brother Taḏārī, to the contrary, come to the Nestorian translator Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq for assistance.

Though the Melkites continued to be involved in Graeco-Arabica in the late ninth and tenth centuries – the translators Qustā ibn Lūqā al-Ba’labakkī (d. 912), who was also an accomplished physician, philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician,85

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Yumn (mid-tenth century), presumably the latter’s son Naẓīf ibn Yumn the Melkite priest (al-qass al-rūmī) (d. 990), and Yūḥannā the Greek priest and geometer (al-qass al-yūnānī al-muhandis) known as Ibn Fatīla (late tenth century)88 deserve mention – the Nestorians maintained their pre-eminence, having permanently secured for themselves, despite initially less immediate access to Greek sources, a central place in the Graeco-Arabic translation movement.

86 This Yumn, who was a son of an old Greek (rūmī) man, assisted the historian Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. after 961) in translating a historical work in Yumn’s father’s possession from Greek into Arabic: وھﺬھِ نﺎﺟﻞ روّمﻲ ﺑﺎﻧ ﻓﺮّاﺷﺎً ﻷﺣﻤﺪ ﺑﻦ أﺑﺪ اﻟﻌﺰﯾﺰ ﺑﻦ دﻟﻒ ﻓﻮﻗﻊ ﻋﻠﯿﮫ اﻟﺴﺒﺎء وھﻮ رﺟﻞ ﺑﺒﯿﺮ ﯾﻘﺮأ وﯾﻜﺘﺐ ﺑﺎﻟﺮوّمﻲ وﻛﺎن اﻟﺘﻮارﯾﺦ أﺧﺬﺗﮭﺎ ﻋﻠﯿﮫ  ﻷﻧﺒﻌﺚ ﻓﻲ اﻟﻨﻄﻖ ﺑﺎﻟﻌﺮﺑﯿﺔ إﻻّ ﻗﺠﮭﺪ وﻛﺎن ﻟﮫ اﺑﻦ ﻣﻦ ﺟﻨﺪ اﻟﺴﻠﻄﺎن ﻣﻨﺠّﻢ ﻓَﮭِﻢٌ ﯾﻘﺎل ﻟﮫ ﯾُﻤﻦ ﻓﺘﺮﺟﻢ ﻟﻲ ﻋﻦ ﻟﺴﺎن أﺑﯿﮫ أﻣﻸ ﻣﻦ ﻟﻜﺘﺎب روّمﻲ اﻟﺨﻂّ ھﺬھِ اﻟﺘﻮارﯾﺦ – see ḤAMZA AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ, Hamzae Ispahanensis Annalium Libri X, ed. and trans. JOSEPHUS M. E. GOTTWALDT, 2 vol., Leopold Voss, Saint Petersburg–Leipzig 1844–1848, vol. I, p. 70; cf. NASRALLAH, Histoire, vol. II.2, p. 76.


88 He collaborated with ʿAbū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Bakkūṣ on an Arabic version of Aristotle’s Sophistici Elenchi – see ENDRESS and HASPER, « Arabic Tradition », p. 68. We know this from Ibn Suwār’s colophon in the famous Paris Organon manuscript (MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ar. 2346, fol. 380v);: « I have got information that Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Bakkūṣ translated this book from Syriac into Arabic and that he cooperated with Yūḥannā the Greek priest and geometer known as Ibn Fatīla in revising parts of it from the Greek; this has not become available to me »; for the Arabic text, see ʿABD AL-RĀMĀN BADAWĪ (ed.), Manṭiq Arisṭū, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, Cairo 1948–1952, p. 1018; reprint: Wakālat al-maṭbūʿ āt, Kuwait 1980, p. 1054.
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