

FINANCIAL POWER AND THE THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE: THE FIRST ARABIC TRANSLATION MOVEMENT (8TH TO 10TH CENTURIES)

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ABSTRACT: The first Arabic translation movement was the largest translation effort ever in terms of scope and involvement of public and private institutions. According to ancient sources, the Abbasid era saw unparalleled translator remuneration, even by modern standards. The Banū Mūsā brothers paid an in-house translator 500 dīnārs a month (equivalent to 132,000 USD in today's terms), while al-Ma'mūn, the seventh Caliph of the Abbasids, paid the weight of the book in gold. The purpose of this article is to explore the factors that were conducive to such a massive translation enterprise, including the motivations of the various patrons and sponsors, and the material underpinnings of the endeavour.

KEYWORDS: Abbasid Caliphate, Translation Movement, Translation Patrons, Translation Remuneration, Baghdad

1. Introduction

According to historical sources, the remuneration paid to translators during the first Arabic translation movement was quite probably the highest that such professionals have ever received. The tenth-century writer and copyist, ibn an-Nadīm, describes in his *Fihrist* (c. 998) (1970, p. 585) how the Banū Mūsā (a wealthy family of scholars and translation patrons living in Baghdad in around the ninth century) paid a monthly salary of 500 dīnārs for an in-house translator at a time when a dīnār was worth 4.25 grams of almost pure gold. The monthly salary was, therefore, 2125 grams, or almost 75 ounces, of gold. If we convert this to present-day values (an ounce of gold today¹ is 1,769.00 USD), it equates to a monthly salary of 132,467 USD – a sum that no modern translator could even dream of.

There are other indications of how much translation was valued in this period. The Muslim historian and scholar al-Ṭabarī (1991, p. 31) records, in his *Tarīḥ* of 915, that Muhammad ibn-'Abd-al-Malik az-Zayyāt, a rich oil merchant and industrialist and three times vizier under three successive caliphs, would spend 2000 dīnārs per month on translators and scribes as many other sources concur (see ibn 'abī-Uṣaybi'a, 1996, and ibn an-Nadim, 1970, p. 268). According to ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, in his *Uyūn ul-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'* (*Sources of News on Classes of Physicians*, 1245), al-Ma'mūn – the seventh Abbasid caliph, who reigned from 813 until 833 – would pay the weight of the book in gold, a method of calculation that seems to have been taken advantage of by his head translator,²

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² Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (809-873), an influential Nestorian Christian scholar, known in the West as Johannitus, who is described as head of a corps of translators by several sources (including Salama-Carr, 1990; Cooper, 2019, p. 179; Cottrell, 2021), though this is disputed by others. Hunayn is said to have translated, supervised and corrected 100 books and authored 50 more (Cottrell, 2021). Knowing the sums paid to translators, we can imagine the sums of money he will have amassed during his professional career.

who would use especially thick paper to ensure that the translated book would be as voluminous and heavy as possible.

Why would the Caliph and other sponsors and patrons pay such hefty sums for translations? Was the need for it so absolutely pressing that it took precedence over other needs? And how did translation become such a profitable activity for the actors involved?

The objective of this paper is to try to find some tentative answers to these questions, while highlighting the material underpinnings of this translation movement. Our sources for such information are ultimately the ancient authors that bore witness to the translation movement as it was actually happening or lived a relatively short time after. Key texts include: the *Risāla (Epistle)* of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (809-873), mentioned above, to his friend 'Alī ibn Yaḥya providing information about the translations of Galen done into Syriac and Arabic (including his own); *al-Fihrist (The Index)*, a catalogue of writers and books of Islam by ibn an-Nadīm (c. 932-995), which references around 10,000 books and 2,000 authors, and provides invaluable information about all the actors of the translation movement; *Tārīḥ (History)* of aṭ-Ṭabarī³ (*The History of al-Ṭabarī*), a forty-volume chronicle of the world, with twelve volumes dedicated to the rise of the Abbasid caliphate, including information about the cultural and scientific life and translation movement; ibn Ḡulḡul's (944-994) *Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā wal-Ḥukamā (Generations of Physicians and Wise Men)*, a tenth-century history of medicine, which presents information about the early Syriac translations into Arabic as well as biographies of fifty-seven physicians and philosophers of Islamic, Greek, African and Spanish origin;⁴ and the *Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā' (Sources of News on Classes of Physicians)* mentioned above, a biographical encyclopedia of physicians from ancient Greece, Rome and India as well as Muslims, compiled by ibn abī-Uṣaybi'a (1203–1270), an Arab physician from Syria.

As for contemporary scholarship, my main sources are Dimitri Gutas's *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society* (1998), Myriam Salama-Carr's (1990) book *La traduction à l'époque abbaside*, as well as more recent articles by her (e.g. 2006), and additional texts by Saliba (2007), Cooper (2019), Cottrell (2021) and others.

The sheer demand for translation during this period is evident in the account given in Ḥunayn's *Risāla* (2001) of the translations of Galen. According to this, a total of 129 of Galen's books were translated in an undertaking that involved 11 Arabic translators, 8 Syriac translators, and 22 patrons. With more patrons than translators, demand clearly exceeded supply, which meant that translators' rates would inevitably be high. In some cases, the translations were done into Syriac before being rendered into Arabic, and many books were translated multiple times into the same language by different translators, sometimes because the commissioner was unaware that a prior translation existed, and sometimes due to dissatisfaction with the first version. Thus, though there were 129

³ Aṭ-Ṭabarī (c. 838-923) was a Muslim historian and scholar from Amol, Tabaristan.

⁴ This was compiled, apparently in Cordoba, by ibn Juljul, an influential physician and pharmacologist of Andalusian Arab origin.

volumes by Galen in total, there would have been hundreds of translation acts. One can only estimate the enormous sums of money that will have changed hands in connection with this author alone.

2. The launch of the translation movement

The first Arabic translation movement was a colossal enterprise centered on Baghdad that produced translations in Arabic of almost all the non-religious Greek works that were available in late antiquity, including astrology, alchemy, physics, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy. It resulted indirectly from the decision in c. 696 of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik to make Arabic (previously an obscure tribal dialect of the Arabian Peninsula) into the official language of his imperial administration, replacing Greek in the West and Persian in the East (Cooper, 2019, p. 180). The language shift will have generated new translation needs, as well as resulting in the displacement of men with a knowledge of Greek and Persian, who now found new careers as freelance translators for the Arabic regime (Saliba, 2007, pp. 58- 72).

Though the first attempts to translate began in the seventh century during the Umayyad reign, it really got going in the eighth, with the advent of the Abbasid dynasty, and lasted up until the Būyid era (945-1055), by which time scientific and philosophical research in Baghdad had become autonomous (Gutas, 1998, pp. 151-5, 169). Never in history has a translation movement been as massive in scope, or enjoyed such a level of government support, commercial sponsorship, and translator remuneration. Unsurprisingly, it had a massive impact on Arab cultural and scientific life, introducing new areas of knowledge that Arabs had not encountered before, and leading to the appearance of new professions, as described below.

Al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775), the second Abbasid caliph and true founder of the state, is generally credited by Arabic authors with initiating and promoting the translation movement. He is remembered not only for being the builder of Baghdad, establishing a multicultural and multilingual hub that was conducive to translation, but also for being the first caliph to specifically have books translated from foreign languages into Arabic,⁵ books that were then “published among the people, who examined them and devoted themselves to knowing them” (al-Akbari in Gutas, 1998, p. 30).

Al-Manṣūr also invited the first member of the Buḥtišū' family of Nestorian Christian physicians (Ġurġis ibn-Buḥtišū') to go to Baghdad to treat him, and commissioned translations of Greek works from him, as testified by ibn abi-Uṣaibi'a (1996).⁶ Over the years, different generations of this family served as court physicians under six caliphs up

⁵ According to tenth-century historian Muhammad al-Akbari, these included 'books by Aristotle on logic and other subjects, the *Almagest* by Ptolemy, the *Arithmetic* [by Nicomachus of Gerasa], the book by Euclid [on *Geometry*], and other ancient books from classical Greek, Byzantine Greek, Paylavi [Middle Persian], Neopersian and Syriac' (Gutas, 1998, pp. 29-30).

⁶ See also ibn an-Nadim (1970), al-Ṭabarī (1991) and ibn-Ġulġul (1995)

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to al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), contributing to the translation movement as both translators and patrons.

Al-Mansūr's grandson, Caliph Harūn ar-Rašīd (786-809), and his great-grandson, Caliph al-Ma'mūn, (813-833) were other important figures of the translation movement. Harūn ar-Rašīd is credited by many historians with the establishment of the great library Bayt al-Ḥikmah (the House of Wisdom), and it was under his rule that Baghdad truly began to flourish as a centre of knowledge and culture. Under al-Ma'mūn, the library seems to have become something akin to a research or study centre, particularly for mathematics and astronomy, though information is scanty about its precise functions. Whether or not translation was actually undertaken within its walls is by no means clear. What it did do, however, was to foster a climate in which translation could be systematically commissioned and undertaken, thereby institutionalizing a translation culture (Gutas, 1998, p. 59).

We also know, from the *Index* of ibn-al-Nadīm, that al-Ma'mūn sent emissaries to the emperor of Byzantium to request Greek books, reputedly on the strength of a dream in which Aristotle came to him and urged him to pursue knowledge. What is more, several translators (such as al-ḥaḡḡāḡ b. Maṭar, ibn al-Baṭrīq, and Salm, the “master of the Bayt al-Ḥikmah”) seem to have participated in these missions (Ibn an-Nadīm in Saliba, 2007, pp. 47-49).

3. The material underpinnings of the movement

When the Abbasids seized power in 750, the Islamic Empire extended from Spain and the Pyrenees in the west to India in the east, Armenia in the north and Sudan in the south. This meant that Egypt and the Fertile Crescent were reunited with Persia and India politically, administratively, and most important, economically, for the first time since Alexander the Great, allowing the free flow of “raw materials and manufactured goods, agricultural products and luxury items, people and services, techniques and skills, and ideas, methods, and modes of thought” (Gutas, 1998, pp. 11-12).

In 762, the capital of the Islamic Empire shifted from Damascus to Baghdad, newly built by al-Manṣūr after the fall of the Umayyads. Taxes levied from all the provinces of the Empire were sent to it, and as a result, it soon became an extremely wealthy cosmopolitan capital. This meant that craftsmen, industrialists, and physicians from all the provinces of the empire would flock there to seize better opportunities. The Empire also brought to Baghdad scholars and scientists from different language backgrounds (Persian, Indian, Greek, Syriac, Latin), many of whom may have been bureaucrats in the Greek and Sassanian (Persian) empires, forced to re-qualify when Arabic was installed as the official language (Saliba, 2007, pp. 58- 72). This then created a pool of potential translators.

The founding of this new capital also marked a shift in state ideology, ethnic composition, and social class. Apart from the caliph and his dynasty, all components of society were of more or less equal status; that is to say, there seems to have been no hegemonic group. According to tenth-century historian and geographer ibn al-Faḡīh al-

Hamadānī, “opponents of the Shi’ites live together with the Shi’ites, opponents of the Mu’tazilites together with the Mu’tazilites, and opponents of the Ḥārīḡites together with the Ḥārīḡites; each group holds the other one in check and prevents it from setting itself up as leader” (Gutas, 1998, p. 190). The new city was now multiracial, multi-ethnic and most importantly multilingual – a “demographic background conducive to the translation movement” (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Bayt al-Ḥikmah (the so-called ‘House of Wisdom’) was an important intellectual centre, built shortly after the establishment of Abbasid rule. It was a library containing a vast collection of important books and treatises from the Greek, Persian and Indian civilizations, and may have been attached to the palace. Some authors have also claimed that it served as a translation institute, where translation was both practised and taught in the form of translation workshops,⁷ though the claim seems to rest on tenuous evidence and contemporary scholars (Gutas, 1998, pp. 54-60; Cooper, 2017, p. 179) dispute it. Instead, they argue that, rather than a single large-scale translation enterprise, there may have been several translation “schools”, one associated with Ḥunayn and another around the philosopher Yusuf al-Kindī (c. 801–73) (Cooper, 2017, p.180).

Baghdad's geographical proximity to Persia will also have facilitated the translation movement. The Persians, many of whom held high positions in the Abbasid administration, had a long history of translation and the pursuit of knowledge in astrology and other sciences, as well as the establishment of institutions similar to Bayt al-Ḥikmah. The Sasanian culture of translation thus seems to have been pivotal in stimulating the translation movement of the Abbasid administration (Gutas, 1998, pp. 40-45, 165).

As for the translators, most of these were of non-Arab origin and of faiths other than Islam, brought together by a thirst for knowledge and desire to make money working in the Empire's capital. They were largely scholars themselves – scientists, philosophers and physicians – who swarmed into Baghdad from the various provinces and even from territories outside the Empire after having heard that their colleagues were very well paid there. In the *al-Fihrist* (1970, p. 586-590), ibn-an-Nadīm mentions 45 translators into Arabic from foreign languages, 14 translators from Persian into Arabic and three translators from Indian into Arabic. We learn some of their names and identities: for example, there was Yahya ibn al-Bitriq, an Assyrian scholar, who translated the main medical works of Hippocrates and Galen for al-Ma’mūn, as well as Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos*; al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ [ibn Yūsuf] ibn Maṭar, a mathematician, who translated Euclid’s *Elements* for Yaḥyā ibn ḥālīd (the Vizier of Caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd) and later retranslated Ptolemy’s *Almagest*; Habib ibn Bahriḡ, a metropolitan bishop of the Eastern Church who wrote summaries of Aristotle’s *Categories* and *On Interpretation*, as well as translating many books from Syriac; at-Tamīmī, who translated from Persian into Arabic for al-Ma’mūn, including the Astronomical Tables of al-Shahriyar; and ibn Dahn, al-Hindī, director of the

⁷ See, for example, Salama-Carr (1990, pp. 31-36), who bases her argument on the use of the word “pupil” or “disciple” in Ḥunayn’s *Epistle*. She later (2006) renounces the claim, however.

Barmak family hospital, who translated from Indian languages into Arabic for al-Ma'mūn.⁸ In short, it is clear from this catalogue that the translators came from many different religions, professions and walks of life, though were clearly intellectuals.

The process of translating books was anything but simple. It usually began when a need for a specific book was expressed by one of the actors in the translation movement, such as a caliph or one of his courtiers, a scientist, researcher, physician, or wealthy individual. If the book could be found locally, it was purchased, and one of the translators was assigned to translate it. If the book was not available locally, which was frequently the case, an emissary was dispatched to purchase it from territories near and far away (which in the case of Greek works was usually from the Byzantine Empire).

The translations of Greek scientific works were often done via Persian (Pahlavi) or Syriac intermediaries, though with the increase in the range of subjects required in Arabic, demand later grew for them to be done directly from Greek. Gutas (1998, pp.136-7) reports a scarcity of translators able to work directly from Greek into Arabic, a claim derived from records that show Arabic translations from Greek (of, for example, Aristotle's *Topics* and Anatolius's *Synagoge*) being commissioned from high-ranking Patriarchs of the Christian Church – though Gutas is at pains to point out that the patriarchs did not necessarily carry out the translations themselves.

A whole set of new professions came into being as a result of this translation movement, such as the emissaries charged with purchasing the source texts, editors, book binders, librarians and, most significantly, paper makers. According to Gutas (1998, p. 13), one consequence of the conquests and “arguably the most important factor for the spread of knowledge” was the introduction of paper-making technology by Chinese prisoners of war (in 751). Ibn Ḥaldūn, in his *Muqaddimah* (2005, p. 488), states that “copies of scholarly works, government correspondence, and diplomas” used to be written on parchment “prepared from animal skin”, but, as translations grew more numerous, there was not enough parchment to cover the growing needs, so a strategic decision was taken to replace it by paper. Interestingly, the various types of paper developed during that time actually bore the names of some prominent patrons of the translation movement: for example, Ġa'farī paper was named after Ġa'far al-Barmakī, while ṭalḥī and ṭāhirī paper were named after two members of the Tāhirid clan.⁹ This clearly demonstrates that translation was also an income-engendering activity in that it ensured a return on investment in the form of paper sales money. Ibn an-Nadim mentions the Warrāq profession, who was a book and paper seller as well as sūq al-warrāqīn, which was a paper market in Baghdad and is believed to contain 100 paper and book shops (see *al-Fihrist*, p. 320 and p. 236).

Another profession that was boosted by the translation movement was that of copyist or scribe. As most individuals could not afford to hire a translator to translate a

⁸ We also learn some curious details, such as the fact that Ibn Šahda al-Karḥī, who translated Hippocrates' book on embryos “badly” (from Syriac) into Arabic, or that Midlāğij (Marlāḥī), who had good knowledge of Syriac, stammered in pronouncing Arabic.

⁹ We find in (*al-Fihrist*, 1970) several accounts of paper types, paper shops and paper market.

book, they would hire a scribe instead to duplicate one that had already been translated. *Al-Fihrist* records the following anecdote:

Abū Zakariyā' [Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī] said that he offered fifty gold coins (s., dinar) to Ibrahim ibn 'Abd Allah for a copy of the Sophistici, a copy of the Oratory [Rhetorica], and a copy of the Poetry [Poetica], as translated by Ishāq, but he would not sell them. (al-Fihrist, 1970, p. 609)

Scribes would also copy books for the Abbasid caliphs, such as Hārūn ar-Rašīd and al-Ma'mūn. Indeed, ibn an-Nadīm seems himself to have been such a copyist, judging by his epithet 'al-Warrāq.¹⁰

4. The patrons

According to Gutas (1998, p. 5), translation patrons included many different ethnicities, religions and professions: "Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims, Sunnīs and Shī'ites, generals and civil leaders, merchants and land-owners". This suggests that the translation movement was a phenomenon that cut across all lines of society – though some groups will of course have been more prolific than others, and responsible for the translation of a greater number of books.

4.1 The Caliphate

As previously mentioned, the Abbasid caliphs are often seen as responsible for starting the translation effort. The construction of Baghdad as a cosmopolitan multilingual capital, and their ongoing efforts to stabilize the Islamic empire by securing the borders and quelling any internal rebellion, indicate that these caliphs contributed to the translation movement at least indirectly by creating the conditions necessary for it to flourish.

However, in addition to their indirect role, Abbasid caliphs like al-Manṣūr, ar-Rašīd and al-Ma'mūn (other caliphs to a lesser extent) also championed the translation movement by appointing scribes, directors, and translators to Bayt al-Ḥikmah, communicating with foreign kings, and dispatching emissaries to foreign nations to bring back books. For example, ibn-Ḡulḡul's *Tabaqāt* (1955, p. 65) states that Caliph Harun ar-Rachid brought all the books he took as war booty in his invasions of Ankara, Amorium and parts of the Roman Empire, appointed ibn Māsawayh as Chief interpreter and appointed scribes to his service.

There is also evidence that other less important members of the caliphal family, such as princes and princesses, and even low-ranking members of the caliphal household, ordered the translation of some books. According to the *Fihrist* (1970, p. 694) Caliph al-Mutawakkil's (r. 847-861) slave concubine and mother of his son 'commissioned from the great Ḥunayn himself a book on eight-month embryos. The importance of the Abbasid caliphs' contribution to the translation movement not only lies in the number of

¹⁰ The nickname means 'the copyist of manuscripts' and also 'book and paper seller' (al-Nadim's *Fihrist*, 1970, p. xvii).

translations they commissioned but also in the example they set, which was followed by all scientific, administrative, military elites of Baghdadi society (see below).

4.2 Courtiers, officers of the state and military administration

The close circle of the caliphal dynasty was also involved in the translation effort. Some courtiers were scholars, such as the Banu-l-Munağğim (Banū Mūsā) family that had been brought to the Abbasid court from Persia precisely because of their learning and who frequently patronized translation (Gutas, 1998, p. 127). Others may have felt compelled to act as translation patrons in order to please the caliph. All the families mentioned in the section below were scientists, translation patrons and as such were close to the caliphal circles and deserved the courtier epithet.

The same applies to state and military officials. Members of the Barmakid family, for example, who held important administrative positions in the apparatus of state under the early Abbasids, figure as prominent sponsors of translation in the domains of astronomy and agriculture, while Tahir, al-Ma'mūn's general, also commissioned numerous translations, presumably on technical subjects (Gutas, 1998, pp. 128-9).

4.3 Scientists, scholars and physicians

The three Banū Mūsā brothers, scholars of Persian descent, who, in the ninth century, researched in the House of Wisdom and in astronomical observatories established by the Caliphate, and wrote works on geometry and mechanical applications, were also patrons of scientific translation. According to the *al-Fihrist* (1970, p. 584), they sent translators and emissaries to "the Byzantine country" to "bring them rare books and unusual compositions about philosophy, geometry, music, arithmetic, and medicine."

As for the Buḥtīšū' family, mentioned above, Gutas (1998, p. 118) tells us that, in addition to practicing medicine in the Abbasid court, they also engaged in medical research, wrote medical textbooks, and, most importantly, commissioned translations. Indeed, as we have seen, they spent colossal amounts on this, sending emissaries to near and far away countries to purchase medical books and then having them translated.¹¹

4.4 Merchants and bankers

Many merchants and bankers also commissioned translations. We have already seen how Muhammad ibn-'Abd-al-Malik az-Zayyāt (d. 847), a rich oil merchant and industrialist and three times vizier under three successive caliphs, 'would spend 2000 dīnārs per month on translators and scribes' (ibn 'abī Uṣaibi', cit. Gutas 1998, p. 130). However, we do not know what kinds of texts he required nor why he requested them.

All these different actors clearly found the necessary financial resources to contribute to the translation movement and had various motivations to do so. The final

¹¹ What was said about the Banū Mūsā and the Buḥtīšū' family also applies to the Māsawayh and Ṭaifūrī families (see for instance *al-Fihrist*, 1970).

part of this paper will be dedicated to the individual motivations of each stakeholder in order to arrive at some tentative conclusions as to why translation was such a highly valued activity in this period.

5. The need for translation

Many theories have been put forward to explain the explosion in translation experienced during the Abbasid era. In this section, I will suggest some possible reasons that led the Caliphate as a whole, and certain actors in particular, to commission translations.

5.1 *The desire for a legacy*

On the part of the Abbasid rulers, who, as we have seen, were the real engines of the translation movement, the overwhelming motive seems to have been the need for achievement. All the preceding caliphs including the Umayyads had had an achievement to their credit,¹² and the Abbasids, who overthrew them, wanted to leave some legacy as well. Yet there were few options available. The Empire had been stretched to its utmost limits, beyond which it would be impossible to control, and the Abbasids were left with the burden of holding on to those territories (the wars they fought were all in that direction). On the religious front, the Qur'an had been compiled and vowelized, and the Arabic language had been standardized. The solution they found was to seek a quite different frontier to conquer: the frontier of knowledge.

5.2 *Religious duty*

The Islamic religion also constitutes an important factor that contributed to the instigation of the translation movement. Many sacred texts urge Muslims to seek knowledge: the first word of the Qur'an is the imperative form of the verb 'to read',¹³ and various other Koranic verses and Hadiths exalt the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.¹⁴ Seeking knowledge was

¹² For example, Caliph Abū Bakr (632- 634) fought pagans (murtaddīn) and succeeded in uniting the Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam, as well as compiling the Qur'an into a single book; Caliph Umar (634-644) conquered large parts of the Roman Empire (including modern Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan) as well as the Sassanian Empire (including Modern Persia and Iraq) during his reign; Caliph 'Uthman (644-656), for his part, conquered North Africa (which included modern Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria). As for Caliph Ali (656-661), his reign was so turbulent that it was impossible to achieve anything other than keeping the Islamic Empire minimally united, an objective that paid for with his life. In general terms, the major achievement of the Umayyads were to extend the Islamic Empire to unprecedented limits, quell revolts, but also vowelize the Qur'an and establish a new spelling system for the Arabic language (something that had become particularly necessary with the influx of so many different nationalities within the Islamic empire).

¹³ 'Read! in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created— / Created man, out of a leech-like clot:/ Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, —/ He, Who taught (the use of) the Pen,— /Taught man that which he knew not.' (Sūrat 96, Āyat 1–5)

¹⁴ For example: "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim" (ibn Mağāh, 2007, Hadith 224); "Allah will raise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and those and who have been granted knowledge." (Sūrat 58, Āyat 11); "Whoever follows a path in the pursuit of knowledge, Allah will make easy for him a path to Paradise. The angels lower their wings in approval of the seeker of knowledge, and everyone in the heavens and on earth prays for forgiveness for the seeker of knowledge, even the fish in the sea. The superiority of the scholar over the worshipper is like the superiority of the moon above all other heavenly

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therefore understood to be a religious duty and a virtue that would be lavishly rewarded by Allah.¹⁵ By following this important commandment, Abbasid rulers would have been seeking moral legitimacy after their (controversial) overthrowing of the Umayyads.

5.3 Religious ideology

Another reason may have been the *miḥna* or deadly conflict between the traditionalist perception of Islam and a more rationalist one espoused by the Mu'atazilites, especially under Caliph al-Ma'mūn. Although Gutas (1998, p. 161) admits that the conflict did not affect the translation movement directly, he argues that al-Ma'mūn's policies made the association possible because he 'used the translation movement as the basis of a rationalistic theology, Mu'tazilism, to be wielded for the purpose of concentrating religious authority in the hands of the caliph and his intellectual elite'. By encouraging the translation movement, the caliph was taking power away from traditionalist theologians and transferring it to a new category of rationalist theologians over whom he had more control.

5.4 Material and cultural shortfalls

In addition to these symbolic and ideological reasons, there were also more tangible needs resulting from the administration of the vast empire. In the Umayyad era (AD 661-750), once a territory had been conquered, the new rulers would appoint Arabs into key positions and impose Arabic as the official language. Unsurprisingly, the first documents to be translated were the accounting registers (taxation and fiscal records, public accountancy) to enable the new administrators to assess the financial situation there (Gutas, 1998, p. 23; Salama-Carr, 1990 p. 19). The model was also followed under the Abbasids because the prime need was to take stock of the financial situation of the conquered country, crucial for the formation of a powerful, efficient central authority to command and coordinate the rapidly growing empire.

There was also a need for books that might serve as training manuals for secretaries (*kuttāb*) or civil servants in the different state administrations. These usually followed Sasanian models, as most high-ranking state officials were of Sasanian descent, and contemplated a broad form of education that went beyond immediate technical needs. For example, ibn Qutaiba's *Adab al-Kātib* (*The Education of the Secretaries*, in Gutas, 1998, p. 110) states:

[...] it is indispensable for [the secretary] to study geometrical figures for the measurement of land in order that he can recognize a right, an acute, and an obtuse triangle and the

bodies. The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets, for the Prophets did not leave behind a Dīnār or Dirham, rather they left behind knowledge, so whoever takes it has taken a great share' (ibn Mağāh, 2007, Hadith 225).

¹⁵ In fact, we might wonder why the movement had not begun earlier. The answer to this is that the preceding caliphs will have been preoccupied with the more pressing need of spreading Islam, either peacefully or through Jihād if that failed.

heights of triangles, the different sorts of quadrangles, arcs and other circular figures, and perpendicular lines, and in order that he can test his knowledge in practice on the land and not on the [survey] registers, for theoretical knowledge is nothing like practical experience.¹⁶

Thus, under the Abbasids, not only were manuals composed specifically to train certain civil servants, but other books were also translated in the fields of geography and geometry for the education of the expanding number of secretaries, lawyers and engineers badly needed to work in the central and local administrations of the vast empire.

We can imagine that a similar shortfall will have been behind the translation of medical texts by Hippocrates and Galen, which, as we have seen, were in great demand, and also possibly of philosophy (all the extant works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were translated). And though we do not know what kinds of texts were commissioned by the merchants, bankers and industrialists mentioned above, it is likely that they will have been technical works, corresponding to another lack.

Cultural shortfall also explains why certain works were *not* translated. Almost all the ancient Greek heritage was translated into Arabic with the exception of literary works, which were excluded for two main reasons. First, poetry was the most elevated form of literature for the Arabs, used to express love and other emotions, to describe battles and heroic deeds, to mourn the dead, and to evoke other aspects of Arab life, to the extent that it was dubbed ‘the register of Arabs’ (Cachia, 2002, p. 2). This seems to have precluded an interest in the literary culture of the Greeks. Second, the constant struggle between gods and humans depicted in Greek literature was alien to Islam. Indeed, religious works were generally excluded from the translation movement, as the Arabs were more than satisfied with the message of Mohammed, regarding him as the last of all prophets. What they required, above all, was new or improved knowledge of the secular sciences, which, as we have seen, was also a religious duty.

5.5 Social mobility and status

According to one group of researchers (Goitein, 1963), the translation movement was also related to the rise of a new middle class and its desire for intellectual pursuits. As Gutas (1998, p.5) puts it, ‘intellectual activities /.../ presuppose literacy, which presupposes wealth and leisure, which presuppose urbanization and economic prosperity, which is precisely what happened in the Near East as a result of the initial Arab conquests. In fact, Gutas interprets the high monthly outlay of Muhammad ibn-‘Abd-al-Malik az-Zayyāt (the

¹⁶ Ibn Qutaybah adds that, according to the Sasanian model, “he who does not know the following would be deficient in his formation as state secretary: He who does not know the principles of irrigation [*iğrā’al-miyah*], opening access-canals to waterways and stopping breaches; [measuring] the varying length of days, the revolution of the sun, the rising-points [on the horizon] of stars, and the phases of the moon and its influence; [assessing] the standards of measure; surveying in terms of triangles, quadrangles, and polygons of various angles; constructing arched stone bridges, other kinds of bridges, sweeps with buckets, and noria waterwheels on waterways; the nature of the instruments used by artisans and craftsmen; and the details of accounting”.

rich oil merchant, mentioned above) as a way of proving that he “belonged by right to his newly acquired status” (see also aṭ-Ṭabarī, 31).

In short, the new middle class formed of physicians, merchants and craftsmen all had a certain interest in translation, either because they needed it for professional reasons or because ordering translated books was a status symbol.

Finally, we must consider that there may have been some scholars and scientists that were interested in knowledge for its own sake, particularly those of Persian descent who had a long tradition in this regard (the Banū Mūsa, mentioned above, seem to fall into this category). But ultimately, it is not easy to clearly separate motivations in this way. The Buḥtīšū' family, who supplied generations of physicians to the Abbasid court, may have had a genuine interest in the pursuit of knowledge, but will also have been influenced by social factors, such as the desire to maintain scientific superiority. As Gutas (1998, p. 118) puts it, ‘their high social status as caliphal physicians and the consequent wealth they amassed depended on their medical expertise’.

6. Conclusion

As territorial conquest ceased, translation became the new means of appropriating the other, of domesticating and subduing the foreign. Acquiring science was the new war booty that could be acquired without actually engaging in conflict, a way of extending the frontier, and of capturing the infidels' spirit and knowledge without actually taking their lives. It was also a response to specific needs, both tangible and symbolic, such as performing a religious duty or marking an ideological position.

The translation movement would not have been possible without the massive investment made by all translation patrons at every stage of the process. At the outset, the Abbasid would never have considered instigating this movement if the Islamic Empire had not been stable and prosperous following the successful conquest conducted by the Umayyads. And the movement would not have been possible without the building of Baghdad, far from the Byzantine threat. The new capital was so prosperous and cosmopolitan that scholars, craftsmen and merchants flocked to it from all the conquered territories, many of them assuming a role in the movement as a translator or patron, and sometimes both.

Because of the Empire's material prosperity, there were, in its society, a great many very rich men, all of whom wanted to translate books for various reasons. In this sense, therefore, money in all its forms played a preponderant role in the translation movement. Aside from the unrivaled remuneration reserved for individual translators, it ensured a material and institutional infrastructure that stimulated the acquisition of books and creation of libraries, generating an intellectual culture that valued and stimulated the pursuit of knowledge by all members of Abbasid society.

I can confidently assert, therefore, that this colossal translation movement would never have occurred if the financial basis had not been there to support it at every stage of its development.

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