

Book Review

Challenging the Historiography of Philosophy, Science, and Religion through Greek-into-Arabic Translations from Eleventh-Century Antioch

Alexandre M. Roberts. *Reason and Revelation in Byzantine Antioch: The Christian Translation Program of Abdallah ibn al-Fadl* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), xiii + 357pp. ISBN 978-0-520-34349-8. Price: \$95.00 (cloth), £74.00 (e-book).

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R*Reason and Revelation in Byzantine Antioch: The Christian Translation Program of Abdallah ibn al-Fadl*, by Alexandre M. Roberts, is a remarkable achievement. To fully understand the importance of the book's contributions, it is worth briefly introducing the scholarly fields with which the volume engages.

In recent times, scholarship has focused on the relationships between the Islamicate and Byzantine worlds by examining manuscripts that provide traces of exchanges between the two. Benefiting from nineteenth- and twentieth-century catalogs and surveys of translations from Arabic into Greek and vice versa, new approaches to manuscript analysis, codicology, and paleography have allowed scholars to reach a deeper understanding of the historical dimension

of translations. They have revisited old conclusions, undertaken new surveys, and arrived at a new state of the art. Yet scholarship has yet to provide a fine-grained, comprehensive account of the complexity of historical phenomena related to these translations. The working questions include the following: To what extent are Arabic-into-Greek translations of philosophical and scientific texts connected to the translations undertaken in ninth-century Baghdad? What kinds of exchanges (if any are traceable) took place between translators from Arabic into Greek working in Byzantine territories in the tenth and eleventh centuries and translators of Christian textual materials from Greek into Arabic? And what impact did translators' religious beliefs have on the translation processes? The nature of

the demand for translations from Arabic on the Byzantine side and the impact of these translations on Byzantine intellectual history and politics are currently under exploration; it remains to be fully established what strategies were employed to absorb Arabic-into-Greek translations into the Greek curricula. Moreover, it is still unclear whether religious concerns and struggles—such as the emergence of iconoclasm—were responsible for what is usually deemed a loss of scientific and philosophical heritage in the Byzantine world, a heritage whose transmission is ordinarily assumed to have been kept alive thanks to Arabic or Syriac translations.

To tackle such questions is difficult not only because a scholar faces problems of ethnocentrism, such as the Hellenophilia implicit in the narrative of the rebirth of Greek philosophy and science in the Renaissance, but also because she or he must deal with several crystallized—and still popular—theses having to do with Byzantine and Islamicate civilizations. Prominent among these is the view of Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, of Byzantium as a period of general decline, and the repercussions of this thesis in modern scholarship. Under the influence of this thesis, the rises of Christianity and Islam are usually deemed (e.g., by Karl Popper) to be responsible for the decline of philosophy and science as cultivated by the Greeks.

In this wide and complex scholarly frame, Roberts's contribution, as presented in the book under review, is relevant for at least two reasons. First, it provides a step forward in understanding the intellectual networks that linked the Byzantine and Islamicate worlds and the connections between Arabic and Greek

scholarship after Late Antiquity. Second, it shows, through textual evidence from unpublished sources that the author has often edited and translated for the first time, how the narrative of the decline of Greek philosophy and science needs to be urgently readdressed in the historiography of science and philosophy between Late Antiquity and early modernity.

Roberts's volume is arranged in two parts. The first part, "Translation," reconstructs the content and social context of the translation program of the deacon Abdallah ibn al-Fadl. The section contains three chapters: chapter 1 "A Scholar and His City"; chapter 2 "A Translation Program"; and chapter 3 "A Byzantine Ecclesiastical Curriculum." Working in the multicultural setting of eleventh-century Antioch, Ibn al-Fadl faced a unique Arabic-speaking milieu whose intellectual features he had to accurately apprehend in order to select fundamental theological (patristic), philosophical, and scientific texts and translate them from Greek into Arabic in such a way that the content could be delivered effectively and received within those frames (faith, style, language, rhetoric). The Greek corpus that the Antiochene deacon worked on for his translations appears at first glance to be strictly religious, but a closer examination proves the superficial reader wrong. In the first part of the book, one learns to put aside modern and contemporary categorizations of knowledge fields and to adopt the lens of a historico-critical approach. As a matter of fact, Basil's *Hexaemeron*—whose time-consuming translation Ibn al-Fadl undertook—concerns itself with matters of philosophy, astronomy, and cosmology. Undoubtedly,

Ibn al-Fadl needed what we would consider a scientific and philosophical background to understand Basil and the other authors with whom he engaged for his translations, such as Isaac the Syrian, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, John of Thessaloniki, and Maximos the Confessor.

In the second part of the book, "Philosophy," the reader can all but see Ibn al-Fadl's program through the eyes of the translator himself, for Roberts offers an aesthetic experience of immersion in the Antiochene deacon's philosophy of translation. This section, in continuity with the first part, covers the textual typologies and topics the Antiochene scholar dealt with, and it contains the following chapters: chapter 4 "Purpose in the Prefaces"; chapter 5 "Education in the Margins"; chapter 6 "Logic"; chapter 7 "Physics"; chapter 8 "Cosmology"; chapter 9 "Astronomy"; and chapter 10 "A Shared Scholarly Culture." The author provides editions and English translations of prefaces and other relevant texts, including marginalia, authored by Ibn al-Fadl or taken from his sources. Primary sources are reproduced in the original Arabic or Greek, with significant variant readings in footnotes (the sigla of all manuscripts are given in the bibliography). A translation is placed below each original text. In the case of text portions with unintuitive interpretations in English, the reader finds between brackets transliterations of the relevant words or sentences. Accordingly, Roberts's choices are explained either in footnotes or in the commentary that accompanies the source. All of this material reveals the rationales behind Ibn al-Fadl's translation choices in fields ranging from theology and moral philosophy to logic, natural philosophy,

cosmology, and astronomy. With the primary sources presented in such detail, it is possible to grasp how the translator deploys rhetoric and style to present the content of the translated texts within the Aristotelian framework that was familiar to the Arabic-speaking elite of Antioch. By reading Ibn al-Fadl's own texts alongside Roberts's commentary, the reader learns an essential trait, one that is decisive to understand the importance of the author's intellectual labor. Many of the texts that Ibn al-Fadl translated into Arabic and commented upon were already available in that language before him. From that point of view, there would appear to be nothing new about his work. Nevertheless, the Arabic elites whom Ibn al-Fadl was addressing needed to be approached with proper stylistic codes that would sound appropriate to them. Herein lies the importance of rhetoric to the educational purpose of Ibn al-Fadl's translation program. Greek theological, philosophical, and scientific texts would not have been received without the prefaces, the rhetoric, the corrections, and the stylistic improvements that Ibn al-Fadl adopted and whose traits are reconstructed and displayed in part two of Roberts's book. The reader is further aided by Arabic and Greek indexes at the end of the volume, which prove useful in consulting the sources presented in the book.

Ibn al-Fadl's skills in the art of translation can be fully appreciated in the cases in which Roberts has identified, in addition to the Greek original, the Arabic sources that the Antiochene scholar had at his disposal. The reader can even compare the different Arabic versions of a text thanks to Roberts's decision to print

in boldface those textual portions that are identical in Ibn al-Fadl's own version and in the source he used. An emblematic case is his reworking of a passage from Basil's *Hexaemeron* concerning cosmology, which we can find both in an anonymous Arabic version in MS Sinai arabicus 270 and in Ibn al-Fadl's translation in MS Damascus OP arabicus 142 (see pp. 200–221). Reading the overlapping passages presented in user-friendly boldface not only readily reveals the translator's choices but also sheds new light on his conceptual and terminological background. The relevance of Ibn al-Fadl's reworked version—as Roberts's commentary accurately explains (pp. 221–30)—is manifold. Among others, (1) the general terminology is kept unmodified: *'illa* stands for the Greek *aitia* (cause), *al-kull* for *ta hola* (universe, all things, the whole), *'alam* for *kosmos* (the world), and *al-mubṣarāt* for *ta horata* (the visible things); (2) the specific Aristotelian terminology does not change: *al-asbāb al-hayūlāniyya* stands for *hylikai hypotheseis* (material causes) and *istiṣṣāt/istiṣṣāt* for *stoicheia* (elements); and (3) Ibn al-Fadl translates the Greek *aitia emphrona* (intelligent cause) with *'illa 'āqila*, while the previous translator had chosen *'illa mafhūma* (intellected cause). This choice not only proves the value of Ibn al-Fadl's philosophical background but also gives a radically different meaning, as Roberts points out: “Aside from making God, usually considered beyond comprehension, into something that can be ‘understood,’ the Anonymous Translation had missed, or at least, weakened, the point of the passage, which is that the world did not arise out of mindless matter, but rather out of a First Cause with mental capacity” (p. 222). On the basis of this and many other critical

examinations of the sources presented in his volume, Roberts argues convincingly for the importance of *retranslations* (which he explains in detail on p. 289) in educating the Arabic elites of Antioch, who shared a distinctive style of thought and were accustomed to receiving content in a specific rhetorical style. Retranslations by Ibn al-Fadl show that questions about the transmission of Greek science and philosophy into a Christian context were not solved once and for all thanks to the reasoning of Church Fathers such as Basil, Chrysostom, and Gregory and that the efforts of previous translators from Greek into Arabic in Arabic-speaking contexts needed to be revisited. Churchmen like Ibn al-Fadl understood that science and philosophy are not independent of the stylistic codes of the language in which they are conveyed. On this account, Roberts has shown not only that translating science and philosophy from Greek into Arabic preserved those branches of knowledge but also that being Christian played an essential role in challenging the receiving culture and in starting a process of appropriation and transformation of Greek science and philosophy. In light of cases such as Ibn al-Fadl's, it is evident that the old-fashioned thesis concerning the rebirth of Greek science in the Renaissance after its decline in Byzantium breaks down. On the contrary, it was thanks to “religious” scholars such as Ibn al-Fadl that Greek science and philosophy thrived. Further discussions on the historiography of science and philosophy between Late Antiquity and early modernity must consider translation processes more accurately by analyzing the social context in which they occurred and by taking manuscript analysis into account and

studying texts as entities embodied in their transmission and in the flux of history, rather than as abstract entities as in old-school philology.

In sum, Roberts has produced not only an impressive work of intellectual and social history but also an accomplished exemplar of the exploration of unpublished sources with insightful philological and linguistic examinations. Since his book does not deal with the translation program alone, the title does not entirely capture the relevance of the topics contained in the volume. This is a minor problem, of course, but readers should be aware that the book goes beyond the focus on translation suggested by the subtitle and also engages extensively with the practice and philosophy of translations (especially in its second part), as summarized above.

Most of the chapters contain introductory parts, which provide an almost encyclopedic survey of the literature on a given topic. Although this enhances the clarity of the author's arguments for nonexperts and provide a helpful guide to novices, they could have been condensed, as the relevant literature is cited in the footnotes. In my opinion, as Roberts has demonstrated his talent in dealing with unpublished sources and conveys his discoveries in a detailed manner, even the omission of these introductory sections would have detracted little from his achievements.

Despite these minor issues, the volume manages to strike a balance between the reconstruction of unpublished sources, the translations, and discussion of the extant literature (primary and secondary sources).

The practice of translating works of science and philosophy in an Arabic-speaking context has shed new light on the nature of the transmission of science and philosophy and on the nexus between transmission and its historical context. The topic of retranslations, in my view, has strong potential to foster future scholarship and might bring philology into dialogue with the histories of science, philosophy, and religions, and with the philosophy of science and religion. Indeed, Ibn al-Fadl's retranslations reveal the necessity of shaping scientific and philosophical content according to expected styles in order to communicate that content to a specific community (in this case an Arab elite within a Christianized Aristotelian framework) so that it can be received, accepted, and transformed. Such a view is not so distant from reflections on the role of language and styles with reference to the nature of science as elaborated by philosophers such as Ludwik Fleck, Thomas Kuhn, and Ian Hacking. To what extent are retranslations connected to the communication of scientific discoveries and their acceptance or rejection? This is just one of the many questions that arise upon reading Roberts's book.