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Using Arabic Translations to Understand Greek Philosophy and Science

It is now well known that practically all philosophical, scientific, and medical literature available in Greek manuscripts during the course of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries was translated into Arabic. This Graeco-Arabic translation movement, which was nothing less than the transfer of every available potentially useful work from the ancient language into the current language of prestige and scholarship, was carried out and supported by members of every ethnic and religious group within the state that had replaced half of the Roman Empire. This presentation offers, by specific examples and without entering into discussions of Arabic literature as such, ways in which the study of Arabic translations of Greek scientific and philosophical works enlarges our understanding of the original Greek. What can the Hellenist profit by knowledge of the Arabic sources? Examples of the following problems are introduced.

The first benefit the Arabic translations have to offer the Hellenist is an important witness to the text of classical Greek works. Most of the Arabic translations were made from manuscripts some centuries earlier than the Greek manuscripts extant in most cases today. Although *recentiores* are not necessarily *deteriores*, frequently the ancient readings of a Greek text can be improved or assisted by a comparison with its Arabic version. Critical editions aiming at the ancient archetype of a Greek text should take the Arabic versions into account. Since every translation is also to some degree a paraphrase, in many cases our understanding of the meaning of a passage can also be improved by the rendering of the translators, some of whom were Greek scholars of the highest rank. Illustrative examples of variants between the Greek manuscripts and the Arabic translations will be introduced and discussed, showing how some texts can be improved in this way.

Another resource offered to Hellenists by the Arabic translations is that they preserve many fragments of works, occasionally entire works, otherwise lost in Greek. Until recently, this treasure has scarcely been appreciated in the collections of the fragments of classical Greek authors. A working list of scientific Greek works preserved at least partly only in Arabic translation will be presented with comments.

The Arabic translations of medical and philosophical texts preserve information about the organization of the Late Antique school curricula not available to us in the Greek sources. The Arabic commentary tradition offers an important resource for interpreting ancient Greek texts; classicists who value the scholia of a Psellus should be at least as interested to read the slightly earlier commentaries of a Farabi.

Thus the study of Greek philosophy and science not only has much to gain from the study of the Arabic translations, but it can not afford to ignore it. In the context of Greek philosophy, science, and medicine, Arabic - not Latin - is the second classical language, both in the extent to which it preserves these Greek traditions and in the degree to which its literature built upon them.

Basic bibliography: Gerhard Endress, "Die wissenschaftliche Literatur," in *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, Ludwig Reichert, 1987-1992, vol. II, 400-506, vol. III, 3-152;
Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, Routledge 1998.