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The Dynamics of the Philosophical and Theological Cultures in the Levant and Mesopotamia in Late Antiquity (6th-9th c.). A glimpse into the transfer of Aristotle from Greek culture into Syriac and Arabic¹

Abstract:

This paper introduces the reader into the cultural and linguistic dynamics of the Levant during the 6th-9th centuries, a period characterized by the interaction of Greek and Syriac-Aramaic culture, and their transfer to the Arab world. The Levant was culturally diverse. The Syriac theologians have contributed decisively to this diversity. Personalities such as Sergius of Rēš‘ainā, Athanasius of Balad and Jacob of Edessa translated the Greek philosophers and incorporated this type of philosophical reasoning into their theological treatises. The inheritance of Greek thought was also present at the Medical School of Gundīšāpūr, at the Theological Academies of Nisibis and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and in the monastery centres such as Qennešrīn (near the Euphrates) and Mār Mattai (near Mosul). It was during this time that both concepts and modes of philosophical reasoning became part of the Syriac-Aramaic theology. This transfer continued between the 8th and 9th centuries to the Arab world, when actors such as Ḥunain ibn Ishāq returned to Greek culture, and assimilated it at the Caliphs’ court in Baghdad through Syriac-Arabic traductology.

Keywords:

Philosophy, Theology, Greek, Syriac, Arabic, translation

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The questions lying at the heart of this paper are: how did Greek culture and philosophy penetrate the region between the Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, dominated by Syriac and Semitic cultures, and how was this then transferred further afield towards the Arab world where it would later become an integral part of Muslim theological rhetoric and literary civilization? Our focus will particularly fall on be the impact of *Aristotle Syriacus*, and respectively *Aristotle Arabicus* in the theological culture of the Levant. By concentrating on this aspect, we shall, of course, limit ourselves to some subtopics and authors that more or less stimulated this transfer. In addition, another article appearing in this volume, penned by the most important expert in Syriac literature, Sebastian Brock, sets the framework for the assessment of this cultural transfer of translation.

Before turning to the point at hand, it is necessary for the reader to benefit from a brief introduction to the world of Syriac Christianity which we shall offer in the following lines. The Levant represented a very dynamic milieu where Greek language and civilisation met the Semitic culture. This space was deeply shaped by religion, with Judaism and Christianity the main religious systems that inspired the thinking and liturgical practice of the people up until the 7th century when a third religion, Islam, emerged in this area. Syriac Christianity was centred in the region of Antioch, the place where Christ's followers were for the first time called by the name 'Christians'. Important communities were developed eastwards, in the former Sassanid capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the Persian Gulf, and even beyond the Mesopotamian area, going as far as the far reaches of Asia.

The Syriac-Aramaic Christian tradition incorporated two sister-churches that split up in the 5th century following a series of christological controversies. The problem that marked the entirety of Christendom at that time was whether Christ had two united *physeis*, or natures, in one person; how this axiom was to be understood from a rational point of view, with arguments based on what conceptual framework. The issue had led to a split in Christian beliefs. For this reason, the Syriac-speaking Churches of the Levant now became competitors and opponents: on one side, the "East Syriac" (or "Assyrian") Church², and on the other, the

² As preserver of the Antiochian tradition, the Church of the East, with its center in Mesopotamia (in Seleucia Ctesiphon), achieved autonomy from Antioch during the period of reorganization at the councils that took place in 410, 424 and 486. Located in the Persian Empire, the East Syriac Church had developed far away from the Church of Imperial Byzantium and grew up as a universal Church,

“West Syriac”, or “Jacobite”, Church³. Their names are related either to their geographical situation, or to the personalities which most influenced their doctrines.

Since the first centuries AD, Syriac Christianity had tangential interactions with the Greek world of Levant. The Aramaic-speaking population living on the both sides of the Euphrates had been under Greek influence for a long time; a first example of this is reflected in the kings of Oshroene, clients of Rome from 165 AD⁴. If we think in terms of a mixture of cultures, this area presents an interesting case. The kingdom of Oshroene benefited from a strategic position at the crossroads of Roman and Parthian influence, and later between Byzantium and the Sassanid Empire. In this semi-autonomous frontier province, Greek traditions encountered the Syriac culture⁵. Greek studies in this Syriac area were already attested to in the 5th century at the Persian School in Edessa, where the exegetical work of Antiochene theologians Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia permeated the school’s curriculum⁶. Beginning in the 6th century, ‘phil-hellenism’ became more present in the

leading independent missions in China and India. This easternmost Church had only adopted the first two ecumenical councils. Its Christological tradition was *diophysite*, and involved two *kyañē* and two *qnoñē* in a *parṣōpā* of Jesus Christ (see Chediath, 1982, p. 189; Engelmann, 2013, p. 126; Winkler, 2003, p. 105). The most important Syriac scholars argued that names such as “Nestorian Church” or “Pre-Ephesenian Church” to denote this church are misleading from a theological point of view. Even the name “Persian Church” is incomplete, because this church was not only confined to the Persian Empire, but had Christian communities in China and India as well. For this reason, one correct name would be the “East Syriac Church” or the “Church of the East”; because, geographically, it was situated to the East of the Byzantine Empire. Another legitimate name would be the “Assyrian Church”, which takes into account an old ethnic tendency (Hage, 2007, p. 269, p. 275; Baum & Winkler, 2000, pp. 11-12, pp. 22-34; Brock, 2006, pp. 1-14).

³ The “West Syriac”, or “Jacobite” Church, preserved the Miaphysite tradition. The term “Jacobite” goes back to the time of Jacob Baradaeus, its main figure in the 6th century. As a participant at the Council of Chalcedon, Jacob revived the Miaphysite tradition in Syria as well as in the Persian area (Grillmeier & Hainthaler, 2002, p. 197; Hage, 1966. For a theological profile of Jacob Baradaeus, see Mellon Saint-Laurent, 2015, p. 98f.).

⁴ Watt, 1993, p. 48.

⁵ Hunter, 2002, p. 225.

⁶ See King, 2010, pp. 3-4; Vööbus, 1965, p. 15: “Because Edessa had an advantage in view of its geographical location, being located between the Hellenistic culture and that of the Syrian Orient, it utilized this advantage by employing Greek philosophy in its curriculum.”

Syriac Levant, from then on constituting a part of its cultural heritage through the transmission of Aristotle's Greek text into Syriac.

What is worth discussing is the following question: in which context did Aristotle and Greek literature at large invade Syriac thinking? The separation each from another of these both Syriac Churches which had strong common roots represented a cultural stimulus for the transfer of Greek culture towards the East. To detail this aspect, let us turn to Jack Tannous's rhetorical question which reveals how these confessions were engaged in missionary activity, and how they tried to attract as many believers as possible: "How could one win hearts and minds in the 7th century and then keep them won?"⁷ For a start, both Syriac Churches established learning centres in monasteries in this Scholastic age of the Christian East⁸, in order to instruct their theologians in dogmatics based on Aristotelian logic and rhetoric. These were considered necessary tools to elite Christians, so that they may triumph in confrontations and controversies with confessional and non-Christian rivals⁹. The monastery of Qennešrīn, located on the west bank of the Euphrates, represented the heart of Greek studies in the region. Elsewhere, other intellectual cores were the theological schools at Nisibis and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and the medical academies at Bēth Lāpāt or Ġündīšābūr¹⁰, respectively.

Beyond these institutional centres, there have been perspectives into this process of philosophical transfer, associated with some concrete Syriac personalities: writers or bishops. The first Syrian engaged in translating works of Greek philosophy into Syriac was Sergius of Rēšāīnā (d. 536), a scholar instructed in Alexandria, a translator of Aristotelian texts¹¹ with a keen interest in logic and science. The important dimension that Greek philosophy adopted in this period, at least among the Syriac Christians, is also attested to by the fact that contemporary literature manifests a profound preoccupation with a number of Aristotle's philosophical motifs. This tendency is also certified by the multitude of texts translated or re-translated into Syriac over the course of the 6th and 7th century. Most probably, this was the reverse of another phenomenon; namely that, in this period, philosophical thought in the Greek-speaking world seems to enter a cone of shadow¹². As for the philosophical

⁷ Tannous, 2013, p. 96.

⁸ See Moeller, 1951, pp. 638-642; Bruns, 2003, p. 31.

⁹ Brown, 1997, p. 173; King, 2013, p. 61.

¹⁰ See Brock, 1989, p. 273.

¹¹ On Sergius, see Baumstark, 1922, pp. 167-169; Brock, 1982, p. 21.

¹² See Brock, 1989, p. 272.

materials now being generated among the Syriac literary elites, three distinct genres emerged: translations of Aristotelian texts; texts that contain definitions; and *propaedeutics*, texts that introduce the reader to the major themes and philosophical notions of the day¹³. A cultural current was also taking shape at this time: it is notable that most Syriac translators, editors or improvers upon previous translations were theologians and former students of the Monastery of Qennešrīn. Severus Sēbōkt, a 7th century scholar, became known through his profane and philosophical translations, among which were a number of works by Aristotle¹⁴. Severus' disciple, Athanasius of Balad, appears to have been one of the translators who dominated the field in the 7th century, up to his death in 684. Among the philosophical translations he left behind were Aristotle's *Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*¹⁵. Other West Syriac scholars and bishops, successors to this literary heritage, were Jacob of Edessa and George, Bishop of the Arab Tribes; Jacob allegedly revised a translation of Aristotle's *Categories*¹⁶, and George of the Arabs, a direct disciple of Athanasius, was involved in a similar endeavour. In a narrow sense, George can be also considered an interpreter as he was not only prolific in his translation activity, but in addition he also prepared introductions and commentaries to the philosophical materials (*Categories*, *On Interpretation* and *Analytics*)¹⁷.

Of course, through voicing such concerns, these Syriac writers and religious leaders contributed to shaping the tendencies and direction of their churches, not only in terms of theology but also influencing the general mentality in their own communities and, first of all, highlighting the demarcation from what was different to their confessional tradition. In an age of confessional and inter-religious encounters, the Church's discourse was fully adopted by the Syriac Christian parishes in the Islamic period, as the church was trying to keep its parishioners from straying far from its tenets; philosophy was one of these new tools, disseminated through the bishops' interest in equipping their parishioners with principles of rational discourse. The basical theological reflections were made accessible to the people, wherefrom they were very quickly passed from one literary community to another and from one parish to another.

¹³ King, 2013, p. 64.

¹⁴ Baumstark, 1922, p. 246f.; Hage, 1966, p. 58.

¹⁵ See Tannous, 2013, p. 100; Brock, 1999, pp. 238-246. Brock, 1993, pp. 4-5.

¹⁶ See Baumstark, 1922, p. 251, p. 255; Tannous, 2013, p. 100.

¹⁷ See Baumstark, 1922, p. 257; Tannous, 2013, p. 100.

Indeed, from records of the synod of Dirin¹⁸ we learn that believers had to be trained in their own doctrine. Returning to George and to the Syriac tradition in which he worked, we can see that he made use of Aristotle both to win debates with rival churchmen and to acquire knowledge of the singular principle of everything¹⁹. On one hand, George's attitude exemplifies the utility of philosophy in confessional or religious imposition; but it is also representative of an insatiable appetite for knowledge. To overlook this appetite for deepening one's own philosophical reasoning embodied by the Syriac preoccupation with philosophy would consequently limit our understanding of Aristotle's transfer into Syriac to the mere circumstantial utility of the community's survival in the face of confessional assault from religious Others.

The scholarly consensus is that this process of translation was 'institutional' in the West Syriac tradition, and went hand in hand with the genesis of a Syriac-speaking Miaphysite movement in the monastic tradition of the 7th century. Here, we have the examples of Qennešrīn, Mār Mattai and Mār Zakai²⁰. Within these intellectual centres, the church's leadership was trained in the basics of Greek rhetoric and philosophy, in order to be able to provide satisfactory answers to the questions of a confessional rival. In addition to this institutional principle, another aspect should not be neglected: namely that, in parallel with the above-mentioned institutional level, there was enough individual concern on the part of Syriac authors with ideas and notions of philosophy in the Aristotelian tradition that these same elites frequently referred to the Greek sources, and moreover contributed to their definitive translations into Syriac. Externally, the Muslim environment and the mounting tensions between religions, in terms of theological discourse as well as confessional competition, sped up the translation process and made it a public task by pushing it as far as the Caliph's court. In this manner, the

¹⁸ See Chabot 1902, pp. 216-217 (Syr.), p. 482 (Fr.); see also Pinggéra, 2012, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹ In a passage from the commentary on the *Categories*, written by George, the Bishop of the Arabs invokes as quintessential the question of the 'end' of Aristotelian philosophy: "What is the end of the Aristotelian philosophy? We say [it is] that we may know the one principle, cause, and creator of all. For the Philosopher demonstrates in the treatise called *Metaphysics* (Syr. *baṭar kyānyāṭā* = Gr. *meta ta physika*) that the principle and cause is one, bodiless, from which everything has come into being." Watt, 2017, pp. 173-174. For an English translation and discussion of the prolegomenon, see Watt, 2015, pp. 144-152.

²⁰ See Tannous, 2013, p. 101.

Aristotelian tradition was imparted beyond the boundaries of the Christian confession.

In what follows, we shall briefly sketch the Arab phase of Aristotelian translation works. In the 7th century, Syriac shared its supremacy with Arabic. While Syriac still remained the language of Christians living under Muslim rule, Arabic gradually became the dominant literary culture of communities in the Near East²¹. It is clear that without the mediation of Syriac language, the transfer of Aristotelian writings to the Arabs may or may not have occurred at all. As often discussed in the works of Sebastian Brock, it is due to Aramaic and especially Syriac that “Arab culture became aware of the intellectual achievements of Greek civilization”²². *Aristotle Syriacus* became, a century later, *Aristotle Arabicus*, when the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Mahdī authorized the East Syriac patriarch Timothy I (together with a Christian named Abū-Nūh) to undertake an Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Topics*²³.

The ‘Abbāsid period was prolific for cultural transfers. The caliphate had an open-minded attitude towards Greek literature and, under the policies of caliph Al-Manṣūr – who founded Baghdad as the capital of the Caliphate in July of 762 –, a flourishing literary culture was encouraged, especially in regard to the translations of medical and philosophical texts. One of Al-Manṣūr’s successors, al-Ma’mūn, also supported this translation policy at the beginning of the 9th century. Through the establishment of the “*House of Wisdom*” in Baghdad in 825, al-Ma’mūn consolidated the process of Aristotelian Greek’s transmission to the Arab world²⁴. In this perfect environment, numerous Syriac texts containing Aristotelian texts and other philosophical materials were used as the basis for Aristotle’s definitive translation into Arabic. As Sebastian Brock has argued, all these circumstances directly led to a development of a second phase of translation in the 9th century. This advanced stage was built on experience²⁵, accumulated through the long tradition of transferring Greek materials into the Syriac literary heritage. And, of course, the final stage was much more complex, dividing the effort into two stages: as was the case with physician Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq al-‘Ibādī, who first saw the necessity of an initial translation from Greek into Syriac,

²¹ See Brock, 1989, p. 268.

²² Brock, 1989, p. 268.

²³ See Becker, 2003, p. 389.

²⁴ El-Khoury, 1975, p. 126.

²⁵ See Brock, 1989, p. 272.

and then a further translation of these materials from Syriac into Arabic. Sebastian Brock's argument with regard to this initiative states that, "since there was no previous experience of translating directly from Greek into Arabic, it was found simplest to make the translation into Arabic from a related Semitic language, namely Syriac, rather than directly from an Indo-European like Greek, with a very different linguistic structure"²⁶.

The maturity that Christianity had already attained by the onset of Islam notwithstanding, it can be argued that the process of this transfer of Aristotelian philosophy into Arabic was also amplified by the necessity for dialectical arguments, or "the roots of *kalām*"²⁷, that the Christian-Muslim disputes required²⁸. The discursive competitions that emerged with the birth of Islam implied a combined use of theology, logic, rhetoric and philosophy. As Adam Becker posits, "this space of rationality opened up a link between the different faiths and made intellectual conversion possible"²⁹. We can certainly imagine such a framework of Aristotle's birth and respectively of Aristotle's Renaissance in the Islamic world. The translation movement irrevocably encouraged the Syriac Christians to make "good use of their philosophical traditions, to construct philosophically-sophisticated apologies against Islam (e.g. Yahya ibn 'Adi, Theodore Abū Qurra)"³⁰.

In conclusion, the transfer of Greek philosophy to the Syriac Christians occurred through a perspectival shift regarding profane culture. This can be illustrated by the following example: the Syriac Church Father Ephraem of Nisibis, a figure that has greatly influenced the literary development of Syrian Christianity, speaking on the unceasing Christological controversy, exclaimed: "Blessed is the man who has not

²⁶ Brock, 1989, pp. 272-273.

²⁷ Becker, 2003, pp. 390.

²⁸ See Cook, 1980, pp. 32-43; Gutas, 1998, p. 70: "In the first place, it is generally acknowledged that the first discussions among Muslims that might be called 'theological' were the result of political and social developments during the first century of Islam, before the beginning of the translation movement. The questions of legitimacy of succession, the relationship of leadership to faith and the concomitant problem of unbelief: when that relationship was not deemed adequate, appear to have been, understandably, at the center of discussion. So also were disputations with non-Muslims. Out of this background there arose a 'theology of controversy', as termed by van Ess, which, in essence, constituted part of the political discourse of the nascent Muslim Arab society". See also Van Ess, 1991, p. 48f.

²⁹ Becker, 2003, pp. 390-391.

³⁰ King, 2013, p. 78.

tasted the poison of the Greeks!”³¹. A long time later, in the 8th century, a well-educated monk by the name of David bar Paulus wrote a letter to a young novice about the usefulness of pagan education in which he expressed his enthusiasm for Aristotle, characterizing him as “Solomon among all Greek philosophers”³². Regarding this Syriac change of paradigm, Peter Bruns noted that: “between the two authors stand not only four centuries, but also a highly variable process of reception, in which course, the Syriac theologians had changed from the most energetic critics of Hellenism to its most zealous advocates in the now Arab-influenced East”³³. These attitudes show how complex and dynamic this environment was in terms of the interaction and transfer of intellectual values. The Levant remains a spiritual space characterized by the complexity of regional confessions, religions, social motifs and cultural currents originating in the Mediterranean and disseminated beyond Mesopotamia or vice-versa.

³¹ Beck, 1955, p. 14; see also Bruns 2003, pp. 38-39.

³² Bruns, 2003, p. 39.

³³ Bruns, p. 39: „Zwischen beiden Autoren liegen nicht nur vier Jahrhunderte, sondern auch ein äußerst wechselhafter Rezeptionsprozeß, in dessen Verlauf sich die syrischen Theologen von den energischsten Kritikern des Hellenismus zu dessen eifrigsten Befürwörtern in dem nunmehr arabisch geprägten Orient gewandelt hatten.“

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