INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

ARISTOTLE IN THE SYRIAC WORLD

The Importance of the Syriac Aristotle

It has become a commonplace observation that Aristotelian philosophy, abandoned by the ‘barbaric’ West, was preserved after the end of antiquity by the enlightened philosophers of Islam, that Aristoteles Semiticus was ‘rediscovered’ by Western Europe in the Middle Ages by way of Muslim Spain, whence Aristotle became ‘the Master of those that know’, the foremost authority on matters philosophical in the blossoming universities of Western Europe. This traditional narrative has held and continues to hold a firm place within a History of Ideas, although it without doubt needs, and is receiving, modifications in various directions.¹

However, despite the widespread interest that this narrative engenders, both within the scholarship and the wider world, the origins of Aristoteles Semiticus remain surprisingly obscure. Just how it was that Aristotelian philosophy made its first tentative steps in this new Semitic dress, how it initially fumbled around in unfamiliar garb and then, over time, having become increasingly self-assured and self-aware, how it grew in stature and maturity, these questions form a

¹ In recent years, for example, George Saliba’s 2007 book, Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance, has warned against reducing the Arabic Aristotle merely to a staging post in the advance of Western thought. The controversial work of Sylvain Gouguenheim (Aristote au Mont St Michel) takes an extreme view in suggesting that West European philosophy was more autochthonous than is usually assumed; yet it is surely right not to overplay the importance of the role of the Iberian Arabic tradition in the Western reception of Aristotle—much was taken direct from Greek sources; where the Arabic was more influential, it was in most cases more a matter of commentaries than translations. See, for instance the summaries in Bernard G. Dod, “Aristoteles Latinus.” In N. Kretzmann, ed., The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy. Cambridge, 1982: 45-79.
broad and exciting research project of which the present edition is a small yet hopefully significant contribution.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the Arabic Aristotle was not an entirely new creature to appear on the philosophical stage during the so-called golden age of Islamic philosophy in ‘Abbāsid Baghdad. The exertions of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sīnā stood on the shoulders of an already long tradition of dimly-perceived giants. One of the most fascinating aspects of ‘golden-age’ Islamic philosophy is the battle over ownership of this very tradition, as a careful reading of certain key texts has made clear.²

Many of the leading logicians of ninth and tenth century Baghdad, and especially those who identified themselves as belonging to the Syriac-speaking Christian communities, were keenly aware of a long tradition of logical studies in their own tongue, a tradition nurtured in the Graeco-Syriac monasteries since at least the sixth century. This tradition was now ready to feed those new and exciting developments which Arabic-speaking philosophers (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish) were preparing to bring to its future progress.³

At the same time, it is important not to overplay the role of the Syriac logicians within this narrative. Western scholasticism often took its initial impetus from the tradition of the Arabic Aristotle, and yet quickly thereafter gained a direct access to the Greek originals which superseded the ‘Arabic’ route. The Arabic philosophers similarly were able to achieve far more in the sphere of logical studies than the Syriac tradition upon which they initially depended because they were not limited to what that tradition could provide.

There is an ongoing debate, sometimes with more at stake than disinterested inquiry, over the problem of the Arabic origins of Western philosophy and science. Within the sphere of Arabic philosophy there is a parallel debate over the degree of the latter’s dependence upon a knowledge of Aristotle which was mediated only via Syrian Christians; or, to put the other extreme, whether it was not rather the case

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² This appears to be the point at issue in al-Fārābī’s imaginative reconstruction of the ‘Alexandria to Baghdad’ story, according to Watt, Al-Farabi and the History of the Syriac Organon, esp. 775-78; in his article, “The ‘Alexandria to Baghdad’ complex of narratives,” Dimitri Gutas underlines how the canonical narrative was indeed truly concerned with a battle over ownership of the past, although his conclusions about what ‘really’ happened differ from those of Watt.

³ The significance of monasteries as the bearers of the tradition is shown by the findings of Watt, Von Alexandrien nach Bagdad.