CHAPTER ONE

“GREEK INTO ARABIC”

Problems of translation history

The study of the Greek-Arabic translation movement is a scholarly field at the crossroads of a number of related subjects. On the one hand, it belongs to the domain of history, it is part and parcel of the political and intellectual history of medieval Islam. On the other, it is the subject of philological research by scholars of Arabic, Syriac and Greek. Other fields with an interest in the translation movement are the history of philosophy and the history of science but also linguistics, particularly the discipline of translation studies. That the character and outcome of past research depended to a large degree on the specific background of the scholars who worked in the field of Graeco-Arabica should therefore not come as a surprise. The same background sometimes also prevented them from asking important questions. Below, we will survey some of the issues that arose as a result of such individual perspectives. Some of them are inevitable and cannot be resolved satisfactorily. For some, however, remedies are available.

The philological perspective

Especially during the first hundred years of Greek-Arabic studies (which started in earnest around the middle of the nineteenth century), the majority of the pioneering scholars involved in the field came from a philological background associated with the Classics and Divinity. Given that they received their training in such an environment, scholars were at least in part motivated by the desire to search Arabic translations and literature for traces of Greek texts, either in order to check and possibly improve readings of extant Greek texts or even uncover such texts that had survived only in Arabic.

Apart from this strong motivation to study the Arabic translations, their background bestowed on some scholars what I would like to call their “philological outlook”: a tendency to look at the translation movement as a philological phenomenon in isolation from its political and
intellectual context. Studying Greek and Islamic science and philosophy in the form of isolated texts and comparing both traditions in a vacuum led to conclusions such as that the latter had to be completely dependent on the former—down to the level of particular terms and phrases.

In addition, this isolating perspective implies static concepts of meaning and translation, among them the (implicit) hypothesis that ideas expressed in a specific linguistic and cultural context retain their meaning unchanged from the moment of their creation and throughout their transfer into different languages. According to this view, there is an immutable semantic content which survives unscathed the history of translation of texts from Greek into Syriac, later into Arabic, later again into Latin and ultimately into the western vernaculars.¹

This implicit stance left little room for the role of adaptation, modification and assimilation of ideas beyond their mere rendering in a new language. It was incompatible with the idea of movement, development and change both on the side of the idealized and essentialized content of texts and the culture into which they were introduced. Incidences of social, cultural or intellectual continuity which require an even-handed appreciation of both pre-existing local cultures and the transmitted material interacting with it cannot be evaluated on the basis of an essentialist concept of the translation movement exclusively relying on texts. This perspective also underestimated the possibility of a diffusion and mutual inspiration of cultures in the Near East, be they Christian and Islamic or Greek and Arabic. The efficient and final causes of cultural interaction had to be textual, monolithic and codified.

The second aspect of what I have termed the “philological outlook” is its tendency to project a particular division of the “intellectual universe” on the medieval Islamic societies that initiated and nurtured the translation movement. Perhaps inevitably, the concept of a divide between science, philosophy and religion that is often taken as a point of departure for the study of the Greek-Arabic translations is our own, that of the contemporary observer. The writings of the eighth-century Islamic philosopher and polymath Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. ca. 870) illustrate very well why such modern distinctions between different intellectual spheres stand in the way of a full appreciation of

¹ In the words of Hans Robert Jauss (1982, p. 9), this crude idealism (which affected not just the field of Graeco-Arabica) sought “the focal point of knowledge in the origin or in the atemporal continuity of tradition, and not in the presence and uniqueness of a literary phenomenon. The recognition of the enduring within perpetual change released one from the labour of historical understanding.”