CHAPTER 1

The Syriac Aristotelian Tradition and the Syro-Arabic Baghdad Philosophers

John W. Watt

While Christians of Syriac tradition are generally agreed to have been significant participants in the intellectual life of Baghdad during the classical period of Islam, a precise delineation of their contribution to philosophical activity at that time is still subject to varying interpretations. Their importance as translators of Greek philosophical writings is beyond dispute, and since the upsurge of Muslim interest in philosophy cannot be divorced from the “Translation Movement” of the period, the technical ability of Syriac translators (whether from Greek to Syriac, Syriac to Arabic, or Greek to Arabic) was an essential precondition for the successful appropriation of Greek philosophy by Muslims. Beyond the process of translation, however, the issue of any Syriac Christian engagement with the content of these writings, and the relation of that to the interest in them of Arab Muslims, remains a subject of debate. Since during the fourth/tenth century, Arabic replaced Syriac as the preferred language for philosophical writing even among Christians of Syriac tradition, extant material in Syriac which can shed light on this question is sparse. So far as our knowledge goes, while the most significant philosophers of Syriac tradition in this period were the fourth-/tenth-century Baghdad Aristotelians of the school of Abū Bishr Mattā (who wrote in Arabic), anything they may have written in Syriac (along with any other philosophers’ writings in Syriac) has not come down to us. Furthermore, these authors were active in the latter part of the period presently under consideration, when Muslim interest in philosophy was well established, so they may not necessarily reflect the motivations of Syriac Christians studying philosophy in the second/eighth or third/ninth centuries. For this reason it is best to start such an investigation by looking at the earlier, pre-Abbasid phase of Syriac philosophy. While of course, it cannot simply be assumed without further enquiry that whatever reasons lead these earlier scholars to study or translate Greek philosophy were the same as those motivating those of the Abbasid period, it may be that once those of the earlier period are better-understood, some continuity between the two periods can be seen which would help us better appreciate the extent of (and reasons for) Syriac Christian engagement with philosophy in the classical period of Islam.
Three figures are known to us at the beginning of the Syriac involvement with Aristotelian philosophy in the fifth or sixth century CE: Sergius of Rēshʿaynā, Probus, and Paul the Persian. The most important is Sergius, both for the depth of his engagement and for his influence on the later tradition as far as the classical Islamic period. From the evidence we may assume that he studied both medicine and philosophy in Alexandria, and was therefore proficient in Greek and competent in Galenic medicine and Aristotelian philosophy. If Sergius is designated as the originator of a “Translation Movement” in Syriac, it should be noted that it did not include the main school corpus of Aristotle. Sergius translated many treatises of Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Pseudo-Dionysius, as well as Pseudo-Aristotle’s *De mundo*, but he translated no works by Aristotle himself.¹ For the Aristotle of the school corpus, Sergius was the originator not only of a “Translation Movement,” but also a “Commentary Movement.” His intention was to comment on the entire corpus, but whether that intention was frustrated by his (seemingly unexpected) death, or whether other works have not survived in the manuscript tradition, only his Commentary on the *Categories* is extant, containing however at its beginning his discussion of some of the preliminary questions to the study of the entire corpus, in the manner of the Alexandrian commentators.² Sergius clearly did not assume that his readers would have access to a Syriac translation of the *Categories*; he did not produce one himself, and he did not coordinate his commentary with the old anonymous translation produced at around the same time (but probably slightly later). Unless we make the unlikely assumption that he expected his readers to study his commentaries without ever having access to the text of Aristotle himself, we must assume that he was writing Syriac commentaries for those who could read Aristotle in Greek.³

From this, some points emerge which—if Sergius is at all representative of subsequent Syriac tradition (or at least a part of it)—are important for the understanding of later periods. In the first place, his interest is in the whole Aristotelian corpus, not just the logic (*Organon*). For Sergius, the entire school

---

² Cf. ibid. 165–231 = Chapters VIII–IX, the former originally published in 1997; and Watt, *From Sergius to Mattā* 239–41.