REVIEW ESSAY

THE “FLUCTUATING FORTUNES OF SCHOLARSHIP”:
A VERY LATE REVIEW OCCASIONED BY A FALLEN BOOK

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1. Introduction

The last published paper of the late David Jackson, “Scholarship in Abbasid Baghdad with Special Reference to Greek Mechanics in Arabic” (1987-8), closes with a comment on the “fluctuating fortunes of scholarship in Abbasid Baghdad.” One may use similar words concerning scholarship on Abbasid Baghdad.

For the longest time—almost twenty years since its earliest presentation in Venice (1986)—Jackson’s paper has remained unknown and unacknowledged despite its direct relevance to several major studies published since, on both early science and Abbasid Baghdad. As a misfortune of a different form and magnitude, Jackson’s paper was itself published between a doctoral thesis, which was never published (Cambridge University, 1970), and a book that his unexpected passing away in 2001 prevented from ever being published—leaving two short publications in the long period in between.1


A reversal of fortune took effect not long ago through a chance encounter: the falling of a copy of the Venetian conference proceedings from a lose pile of books into the right hands—those of Giuseppina Ferriello, an Italian researcher on Persian mechanics, who happened to be studying in the reading room of the “Istituto Universitario Orientale” in Naples at the time (1997), and who thankfully gave me a copy of Jackson’s paper recently as something that had literally “fallen from above.” In the meantime, “Scholarship” continued the unfortunate life of a static monologue, without anyone appearing to take any notice of it, even in the context of research for which its results and arguments would have been quite relevant.

A brief chronology from 1997 to the present reflects this clearly. The first relevant publications are two successive studies (1997, 1998), respectively by Endress and Gutas (the co-editors of *A Greek and Arabic Lexicon*, 1992–), that aim, like Jackson’s, to integrate the social context of ninth-century Baghdad into its intellectual history. In the “Circle of Al-Kindi,” Endress’s arguments for “fierce competition” and “inveterate estrangement” between specific circles in Baghdad quite naturally invokes the polarity surrounding the Arabic translations of Heron and Pappus of Alexandria’s *Mechanics*, which Jackson had since the days of his dissertation associated with two rival groups of that time and place. But when reference is made to Jackson’s work for the respective circles around those translations (al-Kindi and the Banū Mūsā brothers, which should be corrected in their pairing in Endress, pp. 47-48, n. 10), the reference is made to Jackson’s earlier, and more problematic, “Arabic Translation of a Greek Manual of Mechanics” of 1972, not to his later and much more

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3 Giuseppina Ferriello, “Problemi di storia della scienza nel trattato medievale di idraulica del persiano Karagi,” *Oriente Moderno: Rivista d’informazione e di studi per la diffusione della conoscenza della cultura dell’Oriente soprattutto musulmano*, 14 (75) (1995), 267-285. I am also grateful to Jeffrey Waller of Cambridge University Library and George Stone of Inverness, Scotland, for their generosity in conversation and guidance with respect to the works of the late David Jackson during my visit to Britain in fall 2004.