Review Essay

Translating Greek into Arabic and Syriac: Remarks on a New Contribution to the Field

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John C. Lamoreaux’s Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq on His Galen Translations (= HGT) is a valuable edition and translation of the record that Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (d. 873) kept of the works by Galen that he found and translated into Syriac and Arabic over the span of his prolific career. The edition does not quite aim to supercede Gotthelf Bergsträsser’s 1925 edition and the corrections and collation of the text published in 1932.1 As L. observes, a full collation of the two direct witnesses of the Letter “would have been longer than a complete edition of the text” (HGT, xx). Bergsträsser’s edition and later corrections and emendations evince greater concern for philological and text critical detail, and thus will remain important to scholarship in the future. Lamoreaux’s book, on the other hand, makes it easier for historians to understand, navigate, and consult one of Ḥunayn’s most important works. Published in the Eastern Christian Texts Series

by Brigham Young University Press, this book will be a boon for Syriacists, Arabists, Classicists and to intellectual and medical historians.

Originally entitled “Ḫunayn ibn Isḥāq’s letter to ʿAlī ibn Yahyā wherein is mentioned Galen’s books that to his [Ḫunayn’s] knowledge have been translated and some that have not been translated (Risālat Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq ilā ʿAli ibn Yahyā fī ḏikr mā turǧima min kutub Ğālīnūs bi-ʿilmīhi wa-baʿḍ mā lam yutarǧam),” Ḥunayn’s Letter gives insight into the history of the translation of medical texts in Syriac and Arabic in ninth-century Baghdad. Among many other uses, this text reveals a great deal about the scholarly patronage Ḥunayn received, the relationship between Syriac and Arabic in the creation of an Arabic scientific lexicon, the scientific community and institutions that drove the translation movement and the translation methods that Ḥunayn used in his translations of Galen.

Above all else, HGT aims to make Ḥunayn’s text easier to access. As noted by L., the way Ḥunayn recorded and updated his inventory is in part responsible for why Bergsträsser’s edition is so difficult to navigate. The Letter originates in the latter part of Ḥunayn’s career, but it was written in two stages and was regularly updated by Ḥunayn, and by others after Ḥunayn’s death. L. notes that the original treatise was written in Syriac in 855 or 856, which accounts for the fact that there are first and second author’s introductions in the text. At some later stage, Ḥunayn translated the Syriac text into Arabic. About nine years before his death (so around March 864) Ḥunayn put a second Arabic version of the Letter into circulation, and continued to update the inventory of translations and manuscripts until his death in 873.

Copies of the Syriac original and the first Arabic translation of the text no longer exist. Thus, the direct manuscript witnesses that Bergsträsser and L. use for their editions go back to the second Arabic version of the Letter that Ḥunayn produced after 864. Yet, L. observes that the two witnesses (MSS Istanbul, Ayasofia 3631, which L. designates as “A” and Ayasofia 3590, which L. designates as “B”) represent two substantially different recensions of the second publication of the Letter in Arabic. It is not easy to tell the exact relationship between A and B. Based on philological evidence, however, L. concludes that “the recension witnessed by B predates that of A” (HGT, xxii). L. says that A “represents a substantially revised version of the treatise,” yet B clearly does not represent the Letter as it “left Ḥunayn’s hands” (HGT, xxiii) either. For there are numerous instances in the both witnesses that indicate that the inventory of translated works by Galen in the Letter continued to be updated after Ḥunayn’s death. Unlike Bergsträsser, however, whose 1925 edition is based on A, L.’s edition is based on B, the earlier recension of the Letter, recording mainly in the English notes those instances “where A differs from B in historically significant ways”