

Pathways of Knowledge Transmission: From the Greek to the Arabic Tradition

Simona Olivieri



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hel/5718>

DOI: 10.4000/12v66

ISSN: 1638-1580

Publisher

Société d'histoire et d'épistémologie des sciences du langage (SHESL)

Printed version

Date of publication: December 6, 2024

Number of pages: 73-89

ISBN: 979-10-91587-25-9

ISSN: 0750-8069

Electronic reference

Simona Olivieri, "Pathways of Knowledge Transmission: From the Greek to the Arabic Tradition", *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* [Online], 46-2 | 2024, Online since 06 December 2024, connection on 07 December 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hel/5718> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/12v66>



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

PATHWAYS OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION: FROM THE GREEK TO THE ARABIC TRADITION*

Simona Olivieri

Freie Universität Berlin & Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Abstract — This paper discusses scholarly exchanges between the Greek- and Arabic-speaking worlds during early Islamic times by outlining pathways of knowledge transmission within the broader framework of Arabs' keen interest in knowledge acquisition. It contextualizes the hypothesis on the Greek contribution to the Arabic linguistic thinking and discusses challenges in documenting direct access to Greek sources by early Arabic grammarians. By bridging the roles of the caliphate and scholarly activities, it finally delves into the role of knowledge circulation and the significance of indirect influences.

Keywords — Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Byzantine, linguistic traditions, knowledge circulation, direct and indirect influence

Résumé — Cet article discute les interactions scientifiques entre les mondes grec et arabe au début de la période islamique. Plus exactement, il vise à montrer quelles furent, dans le cadre plus large de l'intérêt que les Arabes ont affiché pour l'acquisition de connaissances, les voies de transmission du savoir entre ces deux mondes. Replaçant dans son contexte l'hypothèse de la contribution grecque à la formation de la pensée linguistique arabe, il examine les difficultés rencontrées pour documenter l'accès direct, par les premiers grammairiens arabes, aux sources grecques. En établissant un lien entre le rôle du califat et celui des activités savantes, cet article examine enfin les mécanismes de circulation des connaissances et souligne l'importance des influences indirectes.

Mots-clés — Arabe, Syriaque, Grec, Byzantin, traditions linguistiques, circulation des connaissances, influence directe et indirecte

INTRODUCTION

In the late antique and early Islamic period, complex exchanges took place between the Byzantine and Arab(ic)-Islamic worlds. Most investigations on the subject have looked into military history and religious exchange.¹ More recently, the extent and scope of this exchange has been explored in a more nuanced way, also accounting

* The research for this contribution was primarily conducted at Freie Universität Berlin, where I was affiliated until March 2024. The ideas presented in this paper belong to a working hypothesis that is being further investigated in the framework of the “ALiDiM – Arabic Linguistic Discourse in the Making” project, started in May 2024 and based at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. The ALiDiM project is funded by the European Union (ERC, ALiDiM, 101115616). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

¹ Gutas, Kaldellis & Long 2017: 79.

for the influences exercised through the everyday interactions, the so-called *voie diffuse*.² This includes several other areas in which interactions have taken place, such as the “religious, artistic, and also intellectual exchanges, thus puncturing the barriers of hostility between the two worlds.”³

The *journée d'étude* organized by Lionel Dumarty and Margherita Farina in Paris in December 2022, titled “*La connexion abbasside: circulation des théories linguistiques entre les savants grecs, syriaques et arabes du VI^e au X^e siècle*,” provided a platform to delve deeper into these connections.⁴ The workshop facilitated an examination of historical accounts alongside (meta)linguistic perspectives, exploring the exchange among the Greek, Syriac, and Arabic traditions.

With this contribution, we continue the reflections initiated during the *journée d'étude* on the intellectual exchanges between Arabic-speaking and Greek-speaking worlds, preceding and paralleling the translation of scholarship from Greek into Arabic. Regarding linguistic scholarship, a significant challenge is the difficulty in finding concrete evidence of Arabic grammarians' access to Greek sources before the 9th-10th centuries CE. Although there is evidence of a general interest in Greek works dating back to the early Islamic period, pinpointing direct access to these sources by Arabic grammarians during the formative stages of the linguistic tradition remains challenging. Based on their works, early Arabic scholars appear not to engage with external circles, as they do not acknowledge or explicitly reference knowledge from non-Arabic or non-Islamic sources. Additionally, the limited biographical information available suggests a lack of overt connections to other scholarly environments. However, as we will discuss in this paper, Arabs' exposure to other cultural milieux during early Islamic times is historically noticeable. One possible explanation for the lack of overtly acknowledged connections could be the matter of distinctive identity, for which the Arabic language played a crucial role in the emerging community.⁵ As noted by Fassberg,⁶ while the Greek-Syriac connection is overtly acknowledged by Syriac authors, Arabic scholars might have resisted external influences (or the acknowledgment thereof) to safeguard the distinctive Arab(ic)-Islamic traits of the language. Indeed, the ideological foundations of grammar-making highlight specific features attributed to Arabic, namely its ability “to provide a coherent definition of the nation from within its linguistic resources,”⁷ and is in line with an assert of distinctiveness from neighboring cultures.

2 Thillet 1958; also Versteegh 1977.

3 Gutas, Kaldellis & Long 2017: 79.

4 I am especially grateful to Margherita Farina and Jean-Patrick Guillaume for their valuable insights. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the paper.

5 See Suleiman 2003, 2011, 2012.

6 Fassberg 2022: 193.

7 Suleiman 2011: 22.

In this paper, we explore the transmission of knowledge from the Greek to the Arabic-speaking world, highlighting the Arabs' strong interest in knowledge acquisition. The contribution examines the exchange between Byzantium and the Islamic empire, focusing on the role of Greek scholarship within the Arabic-Islamic community during the translation movements and before the Abbasid era. By outlining this framework, we will present the context for the circulation of Greek scholarship, emphasizing the vibrant interest that Arabic scholars had in disciplines developed in other traditions, including language studies. This contribution thus aims to present a framework for knowledge circulation, with further research currently being conducted in the ALiDiM project. Through this, we aim to deepen our understanding of how Greek influence may have affected Arabic linguistic thinking, contributing to the development of traditional linguistic discourse. This involves examining connections among key figures, scholarly circles, and places with relevant archival traditions,⁸ among other factors.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT FOR THE EXCHANGE

Within approximately one century from the rise of the Arab-Islamic empire, the socio-political power that had emerged in the Arabian Peninsula conquered an area extending from the Iberian Peninsula to the west of India. The conquests enabled the rapid spread of Islamic civilization, but also exposed the Arab-Islamic community to the knowledge produced by the communities that already inhabited the conquered territories.

With the Arab conquest of the Syrian region, and especially with the establishment of the capital in the area when the Umayyads elected Damascus as the political and administrative center of the empire in 41/661, the Arabic-speaking communities came increasingly into contact with Greek philosophy and sciences. The Syriac-speaking groups, who had a Christian background and had inhabited the area long before the arrival of the Arab military expeditions, were well versed in the translation of Greek texts and had already acquired a broad knowledge of Greek philosophy and science. Since the late 4th century CE, these communities had undertaken translations of Greek texts into Syriac, covering several scholarly fields.⁹ The translations mostly targeted religious texts, such as biblical texts in Greek and patristic texts; however, Syriac scholars also familiarized themselves with the scholarship of several fields, from medicine to philosophy and rhetoric. The Syriac language had become the standard for the literary production of various Christian groups, and it was used also for scholarly texts; at the same time, the theological

8 Wilson 1967; Ryholt & Barjamovic 2019.

9 For a general account of the translations from Greek into Syriac, see Fiori 2020.

debate was largely conducted in Greek, the language of a culture that was widely regarded as the most prestigious.¹⁰ The Syriac tradition, intensely engaged in the study of Greek thought and culture, had gone through a process of assimilation,¹¹ but also of exchange, so that by the eleventh century CE Syriac texts were being translated into Greek.¹²

As the Syriac communities became further integrated into the new political framework of the region, the newly established Arab-Islamic empire, their experience with the broader scholarly framework of the region placed them in a prominent role in the translation movements that had Arabic as the target language. Their mastery of the language ultimately gave the Arabic-speaking world access to the Greek intellectual heritage. Particularly at the beginning of the translation movements, their long tradition in the field formed the entry point for a wider reception of the Greek knowledge into Arabic, with Syriac scholars translating from Greek into Syriac and then from Syriac into Arabic. The Greek thinking had permeated the Syriac tradition so much that “the Christians of Syria had already moved from antagonism to assimilation of Greek culture.”¹³

Already during the Umayyad rule, translation activities laid the groundwork for a deeper engagement with Greek knowledge, a trend that continued and intensified under the ‘Abbāsid caliphate. As noted by D’Ancona, “some ancient sources point to the policy of the first ‘Abbāsid rulers, as does Ibn al-Nadīm, who devotes a chapter of his book to ‘the reason why books on philosophy and other ancient sciences became plentiful in this country’ (*K. al-Fihrist*, 243), pointing to the caliph al-Ma’mūn (r. 198–218/813–33) as the instigator of the translations.”¹⁴ Among his initiatives, al-Ma’mūn (d. 218/833) dispatched a commission to Leo the Armenian, the Byzantine emperor who lived between 775 and 820 CE,¹⁵ to acquire the books he desired for his library.¹⁶

From the available accounts, it appears that envoys dispatched by early ‘Abbāsid caliphs to collect manuscripts saw libraries during their missions and reported on the works preserved therein, offering valuable insights into their scholarly tradition. Their accounts suggest that libraries held a certain fascination, as indicated by the “description of a marvelous palace which his informer saw three days’ journey from

10 Taylor 2007: 1190.

11 See Brock 1982.

12 Brock 1977.

13 D’Ancona 2016: § 1; with reference to Brock 1982.

14 D’Ancona 2016: § 2.

15 Skylitzes 2010: 15-26.

16 *Fihrist*: 243.

Constantinople. In it was a large quantity of ancient books, some very dilapidated, others in good condition,”¹⁷ referenced in the *Fihrist*¹⁸ by Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995).

The Arabs’ keen interest in acquiring Greek materials, extensively described by scholars such as Gutas¹⁹ in terms of background, scope, and circulation, can be traced back to early ‘Abbāsīd times. It was during this time that the dynasty actively promoted Greek learning on a large scale, with figures like al-Manṣūr (d. 136/754) emerging as early patrons of this endeavor. In contrast, evidence for similar acquisitions during the Umayyad era is considerably scarcer.²⁰

Although these historical accounts represent clear evidence of Arabs’ interest in acquiring knowledge produced in other circles, the very same framework also constitutes the basis for the main criticism against the so-called Greek hypothesis, namely the influence of the Greek tradition on the origin and formation of the Arabic linguistic thinking. In fact, as briefly outlined here, translations from Greek into Arabic were mainly undertaken during the period of the ‘Abbāsīds, whose dynasty began in 750 CE. The caliph al-Ma’ mūn, the founder of the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*,²¹ was one of the main actors in promoting translation activities by supporting the work of translators and acquiring Greek manuscripts from Constantinople on a large scale during his reign. On the other hand, the foundational text of Arabic grammar that we know of, the *Kitāb* by Sībawayhi (d. ca. 180/796), was produced way before this time and in a period for which we have no evidence that the Arabic grammarians would know of the Greek sources.²² Considering this setting, a direct influence of Greek scholarship on the early stages of grammar-making that took place before al-Ma’ mūn can clearly not be postulated.²³

17 Mackensen 1935: 29.

18 *Fihrist*: 243; quoted by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a: I: 187, II: 26-27.

19 See, in particular, Gutas 1998.

20 On the topic of libraries and scholarship acquisition during Umayyad times, see e.g., the works by Mackensens 1936, 1937b, 1937a.

21 On the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, see Sourdel 1986; Gutas & van Bladel 2009.

22 Goldenberg 1988 and then Guillaume 2004 have shown, however, that Sībawayhi used the term *musnad ‘ilayhi* in the same way as Ibn al-Muqaffā‘ in his *Mantiq*, where he redoubles the *maḥmūl ‘alayhi*. On this point, see Larcher 2019a. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this aspect.

23 On the Greek influence on the Arabic linguistic thinking, see Merx 1889, 2023, and Versteegh 1977, 1993; the 1993 publication by Versteegh notably moderates the conclusions presented in the publication of 1977, providing a nuanced perspective. See Guillaume 2021 for an overview and analysis on the discussions revolving around the hypothesis of the Greek influence on the Arabic linguistic thinking. A different approach to the origins of the Arabic linguistic thinking is that of the influence from other Arab-Islamic sciences, with a special focus on the legal studies (*fiqh*), outlined by Carter (see 1972, 2016, 2017). However, as discussed also in other instances, the approaches are not mutually exclusive.

2. LATE ANTIQUITY AND EARLY ISLAMIC TIMES: A COMPLEX FRAMEWORK OF KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

It is with the introduction of the concept of *voie diffuse*, used to indicate the indirect influence exercised through the everyday contact between the Arabic and Greek culture,²⁴ that the possibility of describing a different way of knowledge transmission opened up, laying the foundations for further research into how Arabic scholars who lived well ahead of the translation movements might have been influenced by the Greek tradition.

The contact between the Greek and the Arabic worlds clearly goes beyond the translations of the Greek scholarship into Arabic.²⁵ Throughout and following the military campaigns of the first century of the Islamic era, which resulted in the rapid expansion of the Arab-Islamic empire, Arabs absorbed knowledge and methods from the diverse communities inhabiting the conquered territories.²⁶ Through daily interactions, Arab engagement with local communities resulted in multifaceted exchanges that are historically noticeable. Thus, the extent of scholarly exchange between Arabic and Greek scholarship must necessarily be framed within the broader context of interactions during late antiquity and early Islamic times, characterized by an intensive engagement with the Greek and the Syriac traditions²⁷ beyond the translation movements. Such interactions involved exchanges in several fields, including specialized scholarships. The evidence for engagement with texts is limited to a number of instances; as far as the linguistic disciplines are concerned, there is yet no evidence that early Arabic scholars such as Sībawayhi, al-Ḥalīl (d. ca. 175/791), al-Mubarrad (d. 285/898), and others were familiar with or ever accessed Greek sources. Although some passages in linguistic descriptions of early works suggest that scholars may have been aware of Greek formulations²⁸ ahead of the translations, the early works in linguistic studies never mention non-Arabic sources, and certainly never cite or reference Greek scholars in any way. Our working hypothesis on this is that the seemingly Greek-inspired metalinguistic descriptions may rather indicate that Arabic scholars had learned and applied a certain methodology in their theorizations.²⁹ The assumed use of Greek arguments shall not be interpreted as a process of copying and pasting; on the contrary, aspects of the Arabic metalinguistic framework may rather suggest an interest in knowledge acquisition, and possibly a

24 Thillet 1958; see also Versteegh 1977.

25 See Sartori 2019.

26 Gutas 1998: 107ff.

27 Gutas, Kaldellis & Long 2017: 79.

28 See, e.g., the six notions that Merx suggests were borrowed from Greek logic (Merx 1889: 141-148; 2023: 238-245; see also Versteegh 1993: 22ff.). See Kouloughli 2016 and Guillaume 2021 on transitivity; Olivieri 2020 on *'i'rāb*.

29 See Olivieri Forthcoming.

process of appropriation of a methodological framework and its application to the specific Arabic case. From historical recounts, in fact, we do know that Arabs were generally interested in the acquisition of a theoretical knowledge, needed as the foundation for building their own; the approach to the earliest Greek-into-Arabic translations upholds this theorization and shows how the “needs of applied research were at the basis of the translation movement from the very beginning.”³⁰

2.1. The role of Greek in early Islamic times

The official role of Greek in the early phases of the Arab-Islamic empire was so prominent that the Arabic-speaking communities should familiarize themselves with the Greek language in order to gain access to certain areas of the administrative infrastructure. The role of Greek was thus extremely prominent during the Umayyad era. In fact, it was only under ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 86/705), the fifth caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, that the caliphate adopted Arabic as the language of the administration; prior to that, Greek was the main language of the empire as far as its official and formal infrastructures are concerned. In recent research, Mavroudi (2014, 2017, 2023) has examined the role that Greek played in the early Islamic times investigating the impact that its official status had on the Arabic-speaking communities also before the ‘Abbāsids; among others, the author has discussed how fundamental the knowledge of Greek was in early Islamic times due to the primacy of the Greek language in various fields, including prominent ones such as education and administration. The educational models of the Byzantine provinces represented catalyst centers for the promotion of the Greek and scholarship produced in this language.³¹ They promoted Greek-inspired curricula, which acquired a certain relevance not only within the Byzantine tradition itself, but also among the Arabic-speaking communities; this was due to the necessity of acquiring a certain proficiency in Greek so as to be admitted working in the administrative infrastructure of the empire. The interest in the Greek language by speakers of Arabic was thus mostly functional to the access to the administrative cells of the system. At the same time, Greek grammar was a subject “also taught in late antique and medieval schools in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic, both in Byzantium and the Muslim world,” and the subject was widely cultivated, also “by a number of authors writing in Muslim lands during the eighth and ninth centuries.”³²

Educated circles within the Arabic-speaking world, particularly those situated in the core areas of the empire near political, religious, and scholarly centers, were thus more exposed to the circulation of the Greek materials. Interest in the Greek

30 Gutas 1998: 116.

31 See Olivieri Forthcoming.

32 Mavroudi 2014: 327-328.

approach to language studies appears to have been widespread among such scholarly circles in the eighth century CE, insofar as scholars versed in the translation and exegetical traditions should familiarize themselves with the study of Greek. Knowledge of Greek and of its grammar was considered an access point to literary Greek, a type of knowledge considered relevant for several areas of the caliphate infrastructure, such as the already-mentioned administration system. Furthermore, we do have evidence of speakers of Arabic engaging with Greek also at the oral level, indicated by how Greek terms and proper names were transliterated into Arabic,³³ with transliterations “according to how they would have been pronounced in the living Greek of the Byzantine period; and the mistakes committed in comprehending the ancient Greek text are frequently those that a Byzantine (speaking a different register of the same language) would have made.”³⁴

Historical accounts thus indicate that before the ‘Abbāsids, in the first century of the Islamic era, Greek knowledge circulated in educated circles of the core of the empire. In order to investigate the circulation more in detail, recent research by historians of Byzantine scholarship has focused on the examination of technical texts, sometimes marginalized due to difficulties in their dating, and has shown how the “Byzantine literary production between the 7th and the 9th centuries” was deemed relevant “for at least two fields, medicine and astronomy.”³⁵ The importance of the scholarship that circulated in the Byzantine provinces can be traced in Arabic written production, e.g., in the later *Muqaddima* by Ibn Ḥaldūn (d. 808/1406). In his description of the relations between the newly established political power and the Byzantines, the fourteenth-century scholar emphasized the long history of philosophical and scientific studies of Hellenistic culture and the fact that their works were preserved in libraries and survived the Roman conquests. Ibn Ḥaldūn pointed out that in the 8th century CE, at the time of al-Mansūr (d. 159/775), the caliphate had shown an interest in learning what the Greeks had produced and acted accordingly by acquiring scholarship in Greek:

Then they desired to study the philosophical disciplines. They had heard some mention of them by the bishops and priests among their Christian subjects, and man’s ability to think has aspirations in the direction of the intellectual sciences. Abū Ğa’far al-Mansūr, therefore, sent to the Byzantine Emperor and asked him to send him translations of mathematical works. The Emperor sent him Euclid’s book and some works on physics. The Muslims read them and studied their contents. Their desire to obtain the rest of them grew. (*The Muqaddima* h, III: 115)

33 See Endress & Gutas 1992; Ullmann 2002.

34 Mavroudi 2014: 331. Mavroudi indicates a number of examples of these. Among others are the suppression of the *spiritus asper* and the abundance of iotacisms (Mavroudi 2014: 331, fn. 159 and 160). The author further refers to the examples described in Gutas 2011.

35 Mavroudi 2017: 131.

2.2. Arabs' interest in Greek scholarship

The production by the contemporary Byzantines represented a significant source for knowledge acquisition for the Arabs and constituted one of the access points to the wisdom of the Greeks. The contemporary Byzantines can in fact be considered the real origin of what some Arabic sources considered to be from the ancient Hellenistic culture, with part of the Greek scholarship being received in Arabic not only via the Syriac but also via the Byzantine hermeneutical tradition.³⁶

Arab-Islamic disciplines were exposed to and drew from the cultural and intellectual exchanges with other traditions, which contributed to their formation and development. While the contemporary Byzantine production may have provided a source of knowledge acquisition for the Arabs, it was the specific milieu in which Arabic scholarship emerged that shaped its unique character. Grammarians, lexicographers, and scholars of Arabic language not only delved into the specificities of the language but also recognized the language's pivotal role within their community and emerging political structures.³⁷ At the same time, theoretical knowledge was needed to initiate the local disciplines.³⁸ Thus, key figures turned to knowledge produced in other contexts to acquire the necessary foundations and methods needed, e.g., to build the infrastructure essential for the functioning of the newly established empire, among other endeavors.

This pursuit necessitated seeking theoretical foundations and methodologies from diverse sources, including those outside their immediate cultural sphere. For example, personalities such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 260/873)³⁹ and the already mentioned al-Ma'mūn can be considered substantial mediators between Greek and Arabic intellectual traditions, insofar as they facilitated the acquisition, use, and dissemination of Greek scholarship within the Arabic-speaking world, albeit with different methods and purposes. At the same time, their endeavors exemplify the intricate web of cultural and intellectual exchanges that characterized the development of scholarly thinking in the Arabic-speaking world.

Ḥunayn b. Ishāq represents a peculiar case compared to other scholars; his role in the reception of Greek knowledge under the 'Abbāsid caliphate is second to no other, and he is possibly the most important translator of Greek texts into Syriac and Arabic. His multilingualism and his knowledge of several scholarly fields made him, if not an exception, surely a very particular instance of scholarly endeavor. This scholar is also a figure whose role in the transmission of the scholarship has recently been investigated from new perspectives by scholars such as Serikoff (2019) and

36 Mavroudi 2014: 332. See also Strohmaier 1980: 196, cited in Mavroudi 2014: 332.

37 See, e.g., Versteegh 2014 [1997]: 130-131. See also Suleiman 2003, 2011, 2012.

38 Gutas 1998: esp. 116ff.

39 On Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, see Gabrieli 1924; Strohmaier 2017.

Vidro (2020). In their works, although they look at both the scholar and his works from different perspectives, Serikoff and Vidro highlight the use that Ḥunayn b. Ishāq made of Greek scholarship in his work. Serikoff investigates the sources in the *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm, which seem to include “information taken by the author (or his informant) from an educated Byzantine,”⁴⁰ that Serikoff identifies as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq. Vidro, on the other hand, describes a newly identified work, preserved fragmentarily, that emerges as a “treatise on Arabic inflexion that does not belong to the Arabic grammatical tradition. It uses concepts and terminology characteristic of philosophers, logicians and scholars familiar with Greek grammar.”⁴¹ Vidro identifies that author of the treatise as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq basing the analysis on the information extracted from the fragment, in which “knowledge of the Greek grammatical tradition and Galen are mentioned,” in addition to his “mastery of Classical Greek and Syriac together with some familiarity with Persian, Byzantine Greek, and Coptic.”⁴² The treatise is notably intriguing because the description of the parts of speech deviates from the established canons of the Arabic tradition at the time of the author. Instead, it aligns more closely with the Greek tradition, with the author asserting that in Arabic “there are seven types of parts of speech [...] *ism, kalima, rābiṭ, ḥālifa, wāsiṭa, wāṣila, ḥāṣiya*.”⁴³

Some scholars versed in linguistic disciplines would have thus been acquainted with Greek approaches to linguistic matters, and some may have integrated these methods into their Arabic-specific linguistic research. This was facilitated by the circulation of Greek texts, made possible through the efforts of translators who were familiar with the Greek, Syriac, and Arabic traditions. In fact, some of the translations of the Greek texts were done working directly on the original source (or its Byzantine reception); other translations came via the Syriac medium. Consequently, scholars with strong backgrounds in both languages were sought after. In the ninth century CE, Ḥunayn b. Ishāq was possibly the most competent scholar for this task. He also established his own school, which witnessed the significant contribution of his famous son, Ishāq b. Ḥunayn.

2.3. Acquisition of Greek scholarship before the ‘Abbāsids

The work of scholars like Ḥunayn b. Ishāq was also made possible by the active promotion of these studies by the caliphate’s governing unit. As mentioned above,

40 Serikoff 2019: 122-123.

41 Vidro 2020: 26.

42 Vidro 2020: 31.

43 Vidro 2020: 27. For further discussion on the linguistic works by Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, see Larcher 2019b: esp. 273-277.

al-Ma'mūn significantly boosted the acquisition and translation of Greek texts, especially through the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*.

However, as also discussed by Eche,⁴⁴ while al-Ma'mūn can be regarded as the major promoter of these movement, the *Bayt al-Ḥikma* that he promoted was preceded by another institution of the same name, which had been founded already during the Umayyad times by Mu'āwiya (d. 61/680). This was taken over by Ḥalid ibn Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya (d. 64-683),

who was also the first to further the translation of medical and astrological books. Under the 'Abbāsīd caliphs al-Manṣūr, al-Mahdī, and Hārūn ar-Rašīd the collection of Greek books increased. But the apogee of the *Bait al-ḥikma* was to be under al-Ma'mūn, who thought of himself as a patron of the sciences, and who was interested in purchasing books in Byzantium. (Versteegh 1977: 117, fn. 18)

From Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, we know that Ḥalid ibn Yazīd promoted translations of Greek texts into Arabic. According to the scholar, these were the first translations made under Islam, when a group of Greek scholars based in Egypt translated from Greek (and from Coptic) for Ḥalid ibn Yazīd, who was mentioned as "the philosopher of the family of Marwān who was a lover of the sciences."⁴⁵

The acquisition of texts from Byzantium represented a vibrant exchange, with educational centers in Byzantine provinces actively engaging in activities conducted in Greek and centered on Greek texts, which they preserved and circulated. Interest in Byzantine knowledge did exist among the Arabs, although during Umayyad times, "the attitude of the Umayyads to the Byzantines was primarily bellicose [...], and because, more importantly, they had available among their local populations in Syria and Palestine sufficient numbers of Greek-speaking Byzantines [...] with whom they could interact culturally without the need to travel to Constantinople."⁴⁶ Furthermore, during these times, "manuscripts of ancient Greek and Byzantine authors were numerous enough in eighth-century Byzantium that many could be diverted to the caliphate,"⁴⁷ and therefore translators could access the works of contemporary Byzantine authors. This was especially true for scholars of a Christian background, such as George (d. 724 CE), bishop of the Monophysite Arabs in Iraq from 686, who lived in Kūfa and whose main work is a version of the *Organon* of Aristotle with a commentary.⁴⁸ Syriac Christians played a crucial role in the intellectual landscape of the caliphate during early Islamic times. While their influence on the caliphate is hard to ascertain, their mastery of the Greek language and their

44 Eche 1967: 9-57.

45 Mackensen 1937a: 52; *Fihrist*: 242.

46 Gutas, Kaldellis & Long 2017: 82-83.

47 Mavroudi 2014: 322.

48 Mackensen 1937a: 51.

knowledge of the Greek tradition placed them in a prominent role, facilitating the transmission of Greek knowledge to the Arabic-speaking world.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we have followed up on the discussions held at the *journée d'étude* “*La connexion abbasside*” in Paris in December 2022. One crucial aspect extensively explored during the workshop was the depth of scholarly interactions between the Arabic and Greek traditions, potentially facilitated through the Syriac medium.

The historical records detailing Arabs’ interest in the Greek-language studies highlight the convergence of two significant elements: the central authorities and the vibrant world of cultural centers and libraries also within the Byzantine realm. The caliphate’s governing body played a pivotal role in fostering scholarly endeavors pertaining to Greek-to-Arabic translation. This support was evident through the allocation of funds for text acquisition and scholarly activities aimed at furthering the dissemination of Greek knowledge within Arabic-speaking communities. After these first stages, the movement later “developed in two ways: first it expanded in the direction of scholarly precision and accuracy for the existing fields, and second into increasingly new areas and subjects considered worthy of translation.”⁴⁹

While evidence indicates intense interactions during the ‘Abbāsīd period, especially from the 9th-10th centuries CE onwards, the Umayyad and early ‘Abbāsīd times present challenges in terms of documentation, especially as far as the linguistic disciplines are concerned. The works from the early stages of the Arabic linguistic tradition, such as those by Sībawayhi and al-Ḥalīl, portray the scholarly circles in a way that does not seem to reflect what is presented in historical accounts of Arabs’ engagement with knowledge produced in other environments. As far as we can infer from their works, early Arabic scholars appear not to engage with any external circles; e.g., as they do not acknowledge or explicitly reference any piece of knowledge that originated in non-Arabic or non-Islamic contexts. Moreover, the scant information we have about the biographies of such figures seems consistent with the absence of overt connections to other scholarly milieux.

However, while this lack of overt connections may be true for the early generation of scholars who are considered the founders of the discipline, such as Sībawayhi and al-Ḥalīl, there were a number of figures operating before them who had engaged in studies from the same fields. Even if we disregard al-Du’alī’s (d. 69/688) contribution, which we can assume was “merely the stuff of legend, we still cannot dismiss the report that al-Ru’āsī’s [...] uncle Mu‘ādh b. Muslim (d. 188 or 190/802 or 805 in Baghdad) studied questions of grammar (Ibn al-Anbārī, *Nuzha* 64, Ibn Khall. 696,

49 Gutas 1998: 116.

al-Suyūfī, *Bughya* 293).⁵⁰ In addition, the research conducted by Talmon⁵¹ has shed light on the extremely lively scholarly circles that engaged in studies on the Arabic language and that have provided the ground for later engagements on the subject. Regarding these circles, though, the speculations on their possible background and influences so far have remained largely inconclusive.

The absence of information regarding Sībawayhi's predecessors and their backgrounds poses a significant challenge when attempting to identify the dynamics leading to the formation of Arabic linguistic thinking. As Bernards pointed out, although Sībawayhi's *Kitāb* "is considered the crowning achievement in the field of Arabic grammar [...], how Sībawayhi got there is still unknown due to the lack of extant grammatical works dating from before his time."⁵² Bernards suggests that "one way to fill this gap is to use a method that does not need such extant works, like Social Network Analysis,"⁵³ which she applied to investigate the social and intellectual circles of Ibn Abī Ishāq, presenting the results in the 2020 paper. Research in this direction could mark a substantial stride forward in understanding the formation of the Arabic linguistic thinking.

There are several indications suggesting that early Arabic scholars may have had greater exposure to Greek productions than previously assumed. Among these are the seemingly Greek-inspired metalinguistic descriptions found in early Arabic works. Additionally, there are glimpses of information gleaned from the general narratives, with Arabic scholars indicating that prior to Sībawayhi there were grammarians interested and versed in the study of Greek. Brockelmann reports that "from his contact with Abū Muslim, the teacher of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān, it is reported that Abū Muslim ridiculed the grammarians because they also studied the languages of the Zanj and the Rūm, whereupon Mu'ādh and his colleagues are said to have defended themselves in verse,"⁵⁴ further suggesting that the linguistic reflection was originated exactly because of these engagement with other cultures.⁵⁵

Bridging together the historical and metalinguistic levels, there seems to be a common ground which we can identify in the general interests conveyed in historical records regarding Arabs' pursuit of knowledge. In fact, although the translations surely played an important role in the shaping of the Arabic scholarship, the role of the translators and of the indirect circulation of knowledge can be traced back to earlier than the major translation movements. The newly established empire was

50 Brockelmann 2016: 151.

51 See, e.g., Talmon 2000, 2003.

52 Bernards 2020: 10.

53 Bernards 2020: 10.

54 Brockelmann 2016: 151.

55 "And this, again, confirms the general rule (see v. d. Gabelentz, *Sprachwissenschaft*², 24) that it is always the differences between various languages that give rise to linguistic reflection" Brockelmann 2016: 151.

inhabited by key figures in different provinces who not only knew Greek, but also the system of Greek grammar as it was still taught in the Byzantine provinces.

Further investigation into the role played by the Byzantine contribution to the circulation of Greek production in the Arabic-speaking world could thus be key to finding the possible missing link also when it comes to early language studies; the evidence currently available clearly cannot provide definitive answers as to whether this ever exerted any influence on the formation of Arabic language scholarship. While gaps and challenges persist in tracing the influences on early Arabic linguistic scholarship, continued research into knowledge circulation, social networks, and the contribution of Byzantine production holds the potential to uncover missing links and deepen our understanding of the interplay between the Arabic and the Greek traditions in the shaping of the Arabic linguistic thinking.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources

- Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, Aḥmad Ibn al-Qāsim. 1882. *‘Uyūn al-Anbā’ fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā’*, ed. by August Müller. 2 vols. Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Wahbiyya.
- Ibn al-Nadīm, Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq. 1871. *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. by Gustav Flügel. 2 vols. Leipzig.
- Ibn Ḥaldūn, Abū Zayd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. 1981. *Muqaddimat Ibn Ḥaldūn li-Kitāb al-‘Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada’ wa-l-Ḥabar fī ‘Ayyām al-‘Arab wa-al-‘Ajam wa-al-Barbar, wa-man ‘Aṣarahum min dawī al-Ṣulṭān al-‘Akbar*, ed. by Khalīl Shahāda. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
- Ibn Ḥaldūn, Abū Zayd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. 1967. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History – Abridged Edition*, ed. by N. J. Dawood & transl. by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton: Bollingen, 2nd ed.
- Sībawayhi, ‘Abū Biṣr ‘Amr ibn ‘Uṭmān. 1881. *Kitāb = Le livre de Sībawaihi*. Ed. by Hartwig Derenbourg. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale.

Secondary sources

- Bernards, Monique. 2020. Ibn Abī Ishāq (d ca 125/743) and His Scholarly Network. *Islam at 250*, ed. by Petra M. Sijpesteijn & Camilla Adang. Leiden & Boston: Brill. 9-31 [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004427952_003].
- Brock, Sebastian P. 1977. Greek into Syriac and Syriac into Greek. *Journal of the Syriac Academy* 3. 406-422.
- Brock, Sebastian P. 1982. From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning. *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. by Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews & Robert Thompson. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies. 17-34.
- Brockelmann, Carl. 2016. *History of the Arabic written tradition. Supplement Volume 1*. Transl. by Joep Lameer. Handbook of Oriental studies Section 1, The Near and Middle East; volume 117, Supplement Volume 1. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Carter, Michael G. 1972. Les origines de la grammaire arabe. *Revue des études islamiques* 40. 69-97.
- Carter, Michael G. 2016. *Sībawayhi’s Principles: Arabic Grammar and Law in Early Islamic Thought*. Resources in Arabic and Islamic Studies, Number 5. Atlanta: Lockwood Press.

- Carter, Michael G. 2017. The Origins of Arabic Grammar. *The Early Islamic Grammatical Tradition*, ed. by Ramzi Baalbaki. London: Routledge. 1-26.
- D'Ancona, Cristina. 2016. "Greek into Arabic." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, ed. by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Danis Matringe, John Nawas & Devin J. Stewart. Leiden & Boston: Brill [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27523, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Eche, Youssef. 1967. *Les bibliothèques arabes publiques et semi-publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Égypte au Moyen Âge. Les bibliothèques arabes publiques et semi-publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Égypte au Moyen Âge*. Damascus: Inst. Français de Damas.
- Endress, Gerhard & Dimitri Gutas, eds. 1992. *A Greek and Arabic Lexicon: (GALex): Materials for a Dictionary of the Mediaeval Translations from Greek into Arabic*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Fassberg, Teddy. 2022. The Greek Death of Sībawayhi and the Origins of Arabic Grammar. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 85(2). 173-193 [<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X22000593>, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Fiori, Emiliano. 2020. Translations from Greek into Syriac. *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. by Henrik Lagerlund. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. 1959-1962 [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1665-7_502, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Gabrieli, Giuseppe. 1924. Hunayn Ibn Ishaq. *Isis* 6(3). 282-292.
- Goldenberg, Gideon. 1988. Subject and Predicate in Arab Grammatical Tradition. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 138(1). 39-73.
- Guillaume, Jean-Patrick. 2004. Nouvelles élucubrations sur l'apport et le support. *Langues et littératures du monde arabe* 5. 69-79.
- Guillaume, Jean-Patrick. 2021. L'« hypothèse grecque » et le débat sur les origines de la tradition grammaticale arabe. *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 43(1). 61-72 [<https://doi.org/10.4000/hel.635>].
- Gutas, Dimitri. 1998. *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Gutas, Dimitri. 2011. "Greek Loanwords." *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*. Leiden & Boston: Brill. II. 198-202.
- Gutas, Dimitri & Kevin van Bladel. 2009. "Bayt al-Ḥikma." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, ed. by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Danis Matringe, John Nawas & Devin J. Stewart. Leiden & Boston: Brill [https://referenceworks.brill.com/doi/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_22882, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Gutas, Dimitri, Anthony Kaldellis, & Brian Long. 2017. Intellectual Exchanges with the Arab World. *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, ed. by Anthony Kaldellis & Niketas Siniouoglou. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 79-98 [<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107300859.006>].
- Kouloughli, Djamel Eddine. 2016. Sur les notions de transitivité (*ta'addī*) et d'intransitivité (*luzūm*): Considérations théoriques à propos d'une question controversée entre les grammairiens de Baṣra et de Kufa. Transl. by Jean-Patrick Guillaume. *Bulletin d'études orientales* 65. 13-26.
- Larcher, Pierre. 2019a. Kalām et Ġumla: Proposition, phrase, énoncé dans la tradition linguistique arabe. *Proposition, phrase, énoncé. Linguistique et Philosophie*, ed. by Franck Neveu. London: ISTE (Les concepts fondateurs de la philosophie du langage, 6). 45-72 [<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02274551>, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Larcher, Pierre. 2019b. Mais que vient donc faire Yaḥyā Al-Naḥwī ici ? Sur une citation du Lisān al-'Arab d'Ibn Manzūr. *Re-Defining a Space of Encounter. Islam and Mediterranean: Identity, Alterity and Interactions. Proceedings of the 28th Congress of the Union*

- Européenne Des Arabisants et Islamisants, Palermo 2016*, ed. by Antonino Pellitteri, Maria Grazia Sciortino, Daniele Sicari & Nessma Elsakaan. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 283. Louvain: Peeters. 279-282 [<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02375387>, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Mackensen, Ruth Stellhorn. 1935. Background of the History of Moslem Libraries (Continued). *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 52(1). 22-33.
- Mackensen, Ruth Stellhorn. 1936. Arabic Books and Libraries in the Umayyad Period. *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 52(4). 245-253.
- Mackensen, Ruth Stellhorn. 1937a. Arabic Books and Libraries in the Umayyad Period (Concluded). *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 54(1-4). 41-61.
- Mackensen, Ruth Stellhorn. 1937b. Arabic Books and Libraries in the Umayyad Period (Continued). *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 53(4). 239-250.
- Mavroudi, Maria. 2014. Greek Language and Education under Early Islam. *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. by Asad Q. Ahmed, Behnam Sadeghi, Robert G. Hoyland & Adam Silverstein. Leiden & Boston: Brill. 295-342 [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004281714_012].
- Mavroudi, Maria. 2017. Translations from Greek into Latin and Arabic during the Middle Ages: Searching for the Classical Tradition. *Byzantine Culture in Translation*, ed. by Amelia Robertson Brown & Bronwen Neil. Leiden & Boston: Brill. 126-154 [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004349070_009].
- Mavroudi, Maria. 2023. Byzantine Translations from Arabic into Greek: Old and New Historiography in Confluence and in Conflict. *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies* 2(1-2). 215-288 [<https://doi.org/10.3366/jlaibs.2023.0021>].
- Merx, Adalbert. 1889. *Historia Artis Grammaticae apud Syros*. Composuit et ed. Adalbertus Merx. Leipzig: Nendeln ; Liechtenstein : Kraus.
- Merx, Adalbert. 2023. *A History of the Study of Grammar among the Syrians: An English Translation of Historia Artis Grammaticae apud Syros*. Transl. by Daniel King. *Perspectives on Linguistics and Ancient Languages* 13. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press.
- Olivieri, Simona. 2020. The Formation of Arabic Grammatical Terminology. The Case of *'i rāb*. *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 72(2). 5-25 [<https://doi.org/10.13173/zeitara-blng.72.0005>].
- Olivieri, Simona. Forthcoming. Traditions Blending in: Contributions to the Arabic Linguistic Thinking. *Folia Orientalia* 61.
- Ryholt, Kim & Gojko Barjamovic, eds. 2019. *Libraries before Alexandria: Ancient Near Eastern Traditions*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sartori, Manuel. 2019. Entre influence et coïncidence: La réminiscence du grec dans l'arabe. Contribution à l'histoire de la grammaire arabe. *Historiographia Linguistica* 46(3). 1-32 [<https://doi.org/10.1075/hl.00049.sar>, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Serikoff, Nikolaj I. 2019. A note about the Greek script and the Greek language as found in *Kitāb al-Fihrist* by Ibn an-Nadīm. *Orientalistica* 2(1). 119-133 [<https://doi.org/10.31696/2618-7043-2019-2-1-119-133>].
- Skyllitzes, John. 2010. *John Skylitzes: A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057: Introduction, Translation and Notes Translated by John Wortley*. Transl. by John Wortley. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511779657>, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Sourdél, Dominique. 1986. Bayt al-Hikma. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill. 1, 1141.
- Strohmaier, Gottard. 1980. Homer in Bagdad. *Byzantinoslavica* 41. 196-200.
- Strohmaier, Gottard. 2017. Hunayn b. Ishāq. *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, ed. by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Danis Matringe, John Nawas & Devin J. Stewart. Leiden & Bos-

- ton: Brill [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30560, accessed July 24, 2024].
- Suleiman, Yasir. 2003. *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Suleiman, Yasir. 2011. Ideology, Grammar-Making and the Standardization of Arabic. *In the Shadow of Arabic: The Centrality of Language to Arabic Culture*, ed. by Bilal Orfali. Leiden & Boston: Brill. 1-30 [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004216136_002].
- Suleiman, Yasir. 2012. Ideology and the Standardization of Arabic. *Arabic Language and Linguistics*, ed. by Reem Bassiouney & E. Graham Katz. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. 201-213.
- Talmon, Rafael. 2000. The First Beginnings of Arabic Linguistics: The Era of the Old Iraqi School. *History of the Language Sciences. An International Handbook on the Evolution of the Study of Language from the Beginnings to the Present*, ed. by Sylvain Auroux, E. F. K. Koerner, Hans-Josef Niederehe & Kees Versteegh. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 1. 245-252.
- Talmon, Rafael. 2003. *Eighth-Century Iraqi Grammar: A Critical Exploration of Pre-Halilic Arabic Linguistics*. Harvard Semitic Museum Publications 53. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns.
- Taylor, David G. K. 2007. Early Translations in the Ancient Orient: From Greek into Syriac. *Übersetzung – Translation – Traduction*, ed. by Harald Kittel, Armin Paul Frank, Norbert Greiner, Theo Hermans, Werner Koller, José Lambert & Fritz Paul. Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft / Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science [HSK] 26(2). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 2. 1190-1193 [<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110171457.1190>].
- Thillet, Pierre. 1958. Sagesse grecque et philosophie musulmane. *Les mardis de Dar El-Salam*. 55-93.
- Ullmann, Manfred. 2002. *Wörterbuch zu den griechisch-arabischen Übersetzungen des 9. Jahrhunderts*. 4 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Versteegh, Kees. 1977. *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*. Leiden: Brill (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, 7).
- Versteegh, Kees. 1993. *Arabic Grammar and Qur'anic Exegesis in Early Islam*. Leiden & New York: Brill (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, 19).
- Versteegh, Kees. 2014 [1997]. *The Arabic Language*, 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Vidro, Nadia. 2020. A Book on Arabic Inflexion According to the System of the Greeks: A Lost Work by Hunayn B. Ishāq. *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 72(2). 26-58 [<https://doi.org/10.13173/zeitarabling.72.0026>].
- Wilson, Nigel Guy. 1967. The Libraries of the Byzantine World. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 8(1). 53-80.

