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Translation as Self-Consciousness: Ancient Sciences, Antediluvian Wisdom, and the ‘Abbāsīd Translation Movement*

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ONE of the most enduring achievements of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate (750–1258) was the support of the translations of most of the major works of ancient Greek, Persian, and Indian philosophies and sciences into Arabic from the eighth through the tenth centuries. The translation movement, as it was named in the twentieth century, breathed a new life into much of the intellectual legacy of the ancient world and opened new doors for cross-cultural scholarly engagement among a large cast of intellectuals, administrators, and rulers over many generations. It inspired the intellectual life of Muslim societies until modern times and affected the scientific and scholastic growth of the Latin West for centuries. Yet, many dimensions of this movement have not been sufficiently studied. This article contends that the ‘Abbāsīd learned elite, rulers, and administrators approached ancient sciences as legitimate and—being embedded in a past largely imagined to have been shaped by divine intervention—even pristine forms of knowledge. Although the ‘Abbāsīd learned elite knew that

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ancient sciences had come out of different cultural traditions and been practiced in different languages, they gradually embraced the idea that sciences originated from a single and ultimately divine source. That Ur-knowledge retained its original purity despite the Flood and Babel and despite the passage of history emanated from the idea that meaning was transcendental to language and immune from textual and historical effects. Such an understanding of meaning enabled the 'Abbāsīd learned elite to entertain the idea that it was possible to recover antediluvian knowledge in spite of historical and linguistic barriers.

The translation movement did not infuse the ancient sciences into a cultural and intellectual void. On the contrary, it engaged a broad intellectual discourse, which the 'Abbāsīd society knew as *'ilm*. Though this is not the place to elaborate on *'ilm*, the concept connoted learning, scholarship, and knowledge within the broad precepts of Islamic monotheism, even though those who took part in it came from diverse backgrounds.¹ The extraordinary increase in the study of Arabic, exegesis, *ḥadīth*, law, linguistics, theology, history, literature, and poetry before, during, and after the translation movement eclipses its enormity and provides a wider framework to study it.² Translations picked up momentum at precisely the same time that scholars developed an interest in the pre-Islamic Arab, biblical, Greek, and Persian pasts since the late seventh century. The transmission and spread of knowledge about the past had stimulating effects on Muslim scholarly consciousness and encouraged the Muslim elites to clarify and emphasize the position of their community among past and contemporary cultures. It is no wonder that the rise of universal histories in Muslim tradition also dates to the ninth century onward.³ It may be useful to

¹ It would be a mistake to equate *'ilm* with what we came to know as *al-'ulūm al-shar'īyya*, religious sciences, and their exponents such as jurists, *ḥadīth* transmitters, and theologians. The use of the word *'ilm* (pl. *'ulūm*) to describe a broad spectrum of learning is documented in a myriad of sources. For instance, Sahl ibn Hārūn (d. 830) and al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–833) use *'ilm* to mean sciences in general. 'Amr ibn Bahr al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol. 1, ed. Fawzī 'Aṭawī (Beirut: Dār Ṣa'ib, n.d.), p. 557. For a study of *'ulamā'* see Stephen R. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 187–227; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the 'Abbāsids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunni Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

² For the intellectual developments in early Islam, see Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973); Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³ I have studied this subject elsewhere. See Hayrettin Yücesoy, "Ancient Imperial Heritage and Islamic Universal Historiography: Al-Dīnawarī's Secular Perspective," *Journal of Global History* 2, no. 2 (2007): 135ff.

draw parallels here between the ideologies of conquest in early Islam and the translation movement as an act not only to retrieve ancient wisdom from its historical, linguistic, and cultural repositories but also to reclaim, repossess, and reuse it in a new context. Participants in the translation movement at once recognized differences and sought to replicate and match form and substance in another language—similar to conquest, which aims at matching, substituting, and ultimately displacing the rival.⁴

One would be ill advised to assess the development of any of the aforementioned scholarly fields independently from each other or to draw a distinction between “religious” and “secular” knowledge at this stage, for not only the patronage and language but also the debate on and competition in public life and politics made it necessary for scholars to develop views and discourses that made sense to others. When the systematic translation movement began, social and cultural developments were elaborate enough to mediate how ancient knowledge was going to be understood and employed in its new environment, even though no single group or institution alone could claim the responsibility for the translation movement. Similar to the transmission of biblical material, *isrāʿīliyyāt*, into the Muslim milieu, which was justified on the ground of being the sayings and deeds of biblical prophets, the ancient scientific knowledge had to undergo a process of legitimization to take root in its new context.

Popular as well as high intellectual discourses in public life, in particular the discourse of Islamic monotheism and the narratives of pre-Islamic prophetic wisdom as discussed in exegesis, prophecies, and legends circulating in the eighth and ninth centuries, functioned as legitimating tools of the ancient sciences during the translation movement. As illustrated in a ninth-century proverb—wisdom, *ḥikma*, is the believer’s lost possession, which should be acquired when found⁵—the

⁴ See Rita Copeland, “The Fortunes of Non Verbum Pro Verbo: Or Why Jerome Is Not a Ciceronian,” in *The Medieval Translator: The Theory and Practice of Translation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger Ellis (Wolfenbütel, N.H.: D. S. Brewer, 1989), pp. 17–18; George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspect of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 314; Lawrence Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 18–19; Edwin Gentzler, “Translation, Poststructuralism, and Power,” in *Translation and Power*, ed. Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2002), p. 202. Saint Jerome, the translator of the Septuagint bible into Latin, says: “he [translator] has carried meaning over into his own language, just like prisoners, by right of conquest (sed quasi captivos sensus in suam linguam victoris jure transposuit).” Citation in Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 281.

⁵ ‘Abdallah ibn Muḥammad ibn Abī Shayba, *Kitāb al-Muṣannaḥ fī al-Aḥādīth wa al-Āthār*, vol. 7, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt (Beirut: Dār al-Tāj, 1989), p. 240. This proverb itself would later become a *ḥadīth* attributed to the prophet Muḥammad.

discourse of monotheism and the narratives of prophetic and antediluvian origins of knowledge not only made it easier to defend ancient sciences as the common heritage of believers but also gave license to the translating culture to collect, categorize, analyze, amend, and transform the source culture and text.

IMPERIAL CULTURE AND SELF-AWARENESS

Scholars have long been interested in why the Muslims embarked on translations.⁶ Contemporary researchers recognize the practical needs and necessities of an expanding caliphate since the Umayyad period as a reason for the translation of ancient scholarship into Arabic. Modern scholarship has already pointed out that the caliphs and their administrators found it expedient to adopt the local conventions of administration, record keeping, tax surveys and collection, architecture, and artisanship, which we know formed the basis of early Islamic practice, to administer their territories. The translations of scientific work could have emerged from such needs.⁷ Saliba argued that since Umayyad times the competition between the “old” Persian-speaking and “new” Arabic-speaking (but not necessarily ethnically Arab) bureaucratic elite over control of government offices—and the resulting demand for the retooling of skills among ‘Abbāsīd bureaucrats and aspirants to office—played a role in setting up the translation movement.⁸ Faction politics at the ‘Abbāsīd court and various regional and cultural loyalties could have also motivated the translations.⁹ As Gutas pointed out, another important reason was the ideological needs of the caliphate and the corollary social demand for translations, especially since the establishment of the ‘Abbāsīd rule in 750. Gutas argued that the ‘Abbāsīds adopted the Sasanid imperial and Zoroastrian religious policies since

⁶ For a list and review of scholarship see Gerhard Endress, “Die wissenschaftliche Literatur,” in *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, ed. H. Gätje (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1987, 1992), 2:400–506 and 3 (supplement): 3–152; Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society (2nd–4th/8th–10th Centuries)* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. xiiiiff, p. iff., and bibliography, p. 197ff.

⁷ A. I. Sabra, “The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement,” *History of Science* 25 (1987): 236–237. Also see Gutas, *Greek*, p. 107ff.

⁸ George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 1–25.

⁹ Gutas, *Greek*, p. 43.

the time of the second 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775) and followed the policies of their Sasanid predecessors, including the interest in ancient sciences, in an attempt to lend legitimacy to their policies of inclusion and ideological accommodation of diverse social and cultural traditions.¹⁰

The role of the caliphate as a political institution cannot be denied. When the early Islamic conquests catapulted the new community of faith into world-historical context in the seventh century, it brought the Muslims as conquerors face to face with the representatives of ancient cultures east and west, thus opening the doors for confluence. Between 632 and 850, the caliphate unified extensive territories from Central Asia to Spain under one polity, developed an efficient bureaucratic system, established the use of the Arabic language in administration throughout its territories, and entered into a contestation with its rivals through the symbols of power. A good illustration of the contestation in art and architecture is the Dome of the Rock. Built by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (r. 685–705) on the site of Jewish and Roman temples, the Dome of the Rock marks the restructuring and therefore translation of ancient symbols, skills, and knowledge to reflect new sensibilities and carry new messages. As Grabar points out, this shrine asserts caliphal legitimacy and superiority in a universal political order, which it wished to foster, in medieval imperial idioms of art and architecture. It articulates the caliphal claim to divine favor, represented by Islam as the final revelation, and to imperial supremacy on a religiously and culturally significant spot and in a region where there were no more competitors to the caliphate besides Byzantium.¹¹

Yet, the creation of an imperial culture involved a much broader participation among the population than the caliphate alone could muster. Merchants integrated Umayyad (661–750) and 'Abbāsīd societies into the worldwide community in not only economic but also social, intellectual, and artistic life and fostered the growth of bustling urban centers. Circulation of caravans over land routes and merchant ships in the Indian Ocean expanded the trade network and contributed to drastic changes in human technology, habits, and diet across continents. With the wider production and distribution of an expanding range of products, the exploitation of new gold and silver resources, and the circulation of skills, scholars, artists, and artisans, commerce accelerated

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 75ff., 82–83.

¹¹ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 46–48.

the change in material and intellectual life. Conversion, the expansion of urban life, social competition, and interaction in an empire whose Muslim part formed only a small percentage of a diverse population resulted in an immense social and communal diversification, material and cultural exchanges in many fields, as well as new arenas of competition for religious and cultural minorities to influence public life. The developments in public life accelerated the diversification of the Muslim community along multiple sectarian and social lines, which encouraged diverse Muslim groups to reflect on their identity vis-à-vis other cultural and religious groups. Especially after the breakthrough in the local manufacture of paper, cross-cultural interaction manifested itself in the literary work that blossomed in the ninth century.

Although political support by the caliphs and administrators since the late Umayyad times was crucial and essential, it could not have ignited what appears to be a conscious and sustained interest in ancient sciences had there not been a broader intellectual and ideological engagement in public life with translations.¹² To limit the translation movement to the demand, planning, and execution of caliphs and goal-oriented administrator elites alone not only reduces 'Abbāsīd society into an amorphous mass controlled and swayed by despotic rulers but also dismisses as inconsequential the role of the rich intellectual movement, only a portion of which was the translation movement, and the social and cultural discourses shaping it in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹³

Unfortunately, modern studies have approached the translations largely as texts extracted from their original frameworks and inserted into new contexts without devoting much attention to theoretical questions involving translation. As Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, one of the most prolific 'Abbāsīd translators of the ninth century, remarked, the value of translation is determined by not only the text being translated, but also the translator and the recipient for whom the translation was made.¹⁴ Most recent theoretical approaches in translation studies also point to

¹² Gutas notes and discusses this dimension of the translation movement without reference to ideological motivations emanating from a particular religious consciousness. Gutas, *Greek*, p. 107ff.

¹³ For the debate on the reactions to the translation movement see Gutas, *Greek*, p. 155ff.

¹⁴ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Risālat Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq ilā 'Alī ibn Yahyā fī Dhikr mā Turjima min Kutub Jālinus bi 'Ilmihi wa Ba'd mā lā Yutarjam*, pp. 3–4. The treatise was published by G. Bergstrasser, "Hunain ibn Ishāq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersetzungen," *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 17, 2 (Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1925), pp. 2–3.

the complex issue of how the social and intellectual discourses of the target language and culture work themselves into the translation. They ask for attention to subtle matters of self-awareness, language and its multiplicity, the social and cultural discourses embedded in language, and assumptions about meaning.¹⁵ In his seminal work, George Steiner outlines four major steps in the act of translation. The hermeneutic motion, he argues, begins with initiative trust in the meaningfulness of facing a foreign text that there is something worthwhile to be understood and translated in it. The second move of the translator is aggressive, incursive, and extractive in trying to comprehend, understand, appropriate, and translate the source text into a new language and context. The third move is incorporative. “The import, of meaning and of form, the embodiment, is not made in or into vacuum. The native semantic field is already extant and crowded. There are innumerable shadings of assimilation and placement of the newly acquired.” Finally, there is the enactment of reciprocity to restore balance and dignity to original text/culture by illuminating, detailing, and enhancing it.¹⁶

Much of these theoretical concerns summons questions about the nature of the ‘Abbāsid translation movement, itself a multilayered process of negotiation between ‘Abbāsid learned elites and other (ancient and otherwise) cultures to define self and to reconstruct meaning. The sociopolitical as well as ideological priorities of the ‘Abbāsid society determined not only the type of works selected for translation but also the ways in which categories were defined, texts were rendered into Arabic, and how much elements of the other cultures were allowed to enter ‘Abbāsid society. The translators (both the individual translator and the translating culture) interrogated the source text and its cultural assumptions and reconstructed a new text and meaning in harmony with their own cultures. It seemed quite natural to Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq (d. 873) to do away with the integrity of Galen’s *On the Sects* by dismissing the main conceptual contribution of its author. Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq asserted that although Galen noted three schools (sects) in medicine, he preferred to omit the number of schools because Galen was mistaken. According to Ḥunayn, there were more than three schools

¹⁵ For recent theories of translation see Steiner, *After Babel*; Venuti, *Translator’s Invisibility*; Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For medieval theory and practice of translation see Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Steiner, *After Babel*, pp. 312ff.

since each school that Galen discussed included subschools.¹⁷ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq also mentions how he collated, as he was used to doing, various manuscripts of Galen's book *On the Sects* to produce "a single correct copy" as the basis for translation.¹⁸ On another occasion, he again describes the way he dealt with some portions of Galen's *On Medical Names*. He acknowledges that he omitted a passage quoted from Aristophanes because he could not understand it and that it was similar to what Galen had said elsewhere anyway.¹⁹

In this sense, the translation movement is not a historical exception. It resonates with other comparable examples in world-historical context, in particular the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese from the second century onward²⁰ and Greek and Arabic texts into Hebrew and Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²¹ In both cases the translated texts and their contents and meanings underwent significant changes. From a traditional perspective, one could explain the reasons for translation and translational discretions by pointing out the lack of comparable vocabulary in the target language, the desire not to offend readers, the attempt to make texts understandable to readers in the target language, and simply the influence of the source culture on the translating culture. However, what initially seems a commonsense way of translating (either word for word or sense for sense) appears upon a deeper look to be a disquieting political dynamic that enables the translators to assert their identities vis-à-vis the source culture and demonstrate the literary capability of the target language by transform-

¹⁷ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Risālat Ḥunayn*, pp. 3–4. "And I have made exception and said 'different in kind' [as opposed to 'three sects different in kind'] because within each one of these three sects there also are other sects different in kind." His treatise is full of such examples of discretion, addition, and omission he made as the context necessitated.

¹⁸ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Risālat Ḥunayn*, p. 5. For the translation of the relevant passage see Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, trans. Emile and Jenny Marmorstein (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 20.

¹⁹ Rosenthal, *Classical*, p. 19.

²⁰ When the early Chinese Han translators rendered Buddhist concepts into Chinese, they often relied on Taoist terminology. See Martha P. Y. Cheung, *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, vol. 1 (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2006).

²¹ The Syriac translators of late antiquity added parallel commentaries in their renderings of Greek philosophical works and inserted a layer of their own Neoplatonic ideas into the texts while Toledan translators avoided any reference that they considered unorthodox. See Myriam Salam-Carr, "The Dissemination of Knowledge," in *Translators through History*, ed. Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995), p. 114. The Toledan Jewish translator Judah al-Ḥarīzī (d. 1235) translated al-Ḥarīrī's (d. 1122) *Maqāmāt* but then composed his own *Maqāmāt* in Hebrew on the model of al-Ḥarīrī's. See Rina Drory, "Al-Ḥarīzī's *Maqāmāt*: A Tricultural Literary Product," in *The Medieval Translator*, vol. 4, ed. Roger Ellis and Ruth Evans (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), p. 66ff.

ing meaning and subjugating the content in the source language to new demands. Parallels between the ‘Abbāsid translation movement and other examples are especially striking in how cultural assumptions and commitments conditioned the ways in which foreign texts were rendered into the native language and contents were made to comply with the demands of new contexts.²² In the case of the Castilian king Alfonso X (r. 1252–1284), for instance, one could see how cultural assumptions informed his intellectual strategies. In an attempt to justify his interests in astrology, old lore, and occult sciences, according to Montero, he contended that the pursuit of knowledge in the history of humanity would ultimately lead to Christian truths because Christianity had already been prefigured and encoded in the scholarly achievements of the past. Christianity validated and renewed these scholarly achievements.²³

The ‘Abbāsid translators and their patrons certainly saw a quality and value in ancient knowledge, and by working on it anew with great care and vigor they revitalized and dignified it. Yet, in the process, as Adamson argues in the context of translating Plotinus into Arabic, they introduced purposeful and systematic changes to texts and meaning.²⁴ They interrogated their texts to reconstruct new meanings and contested, relocated, or dislocated content to make it understandable in new contexts and relevant to the political and cultural discourses that shaped the way in which ancient knowledge was appropriated and legitimized. Looking at the translation movement from this perspective renders inadequate the customary essentialist theories advocating “influence” or “imitation” within the framework of exchange between superior Hellenistic cultures and an inferior Islamic culture²⁵ and chal-

²² For an insightful theoretical discussion of translation in medieval Europe, see Copeland, *Rhetoric*. For examples of hermeneutic concerns and the modes of appropriation, see especially chapters 4–6.

²³ Ana M. Montero, “A Possible Connection between the Philosophy of the Castilian King Alfonso X and the *Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaḡẓān* by Ibn Ṭufayl,” *Al-Masāq, Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 18 (2006): 1–26. Alfonso’s views in his *Setenario* and *General Estoria* about the history of religions and humans’ progressive understanding of the metaphysical truths echoed, adapted to, and reproduced the familiar Andalusian model/genre in a way that is relevant to the sociocultural circumstances of the second half of the thirteenth-century Castile. Following Hughes’s theory Montero argues that Alfonso’s account and Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaḡẓān* belong to the same model, which she identifies as the Islamicate genre of the initiatory tale.

²⁴ Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the Theology of Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2002), pp. 1, 3, 13–14, 111.

²⁵ For a critique of such views, see A. I. Sabra, “Situating Arabic Science: Locality versus Essence,” *Isis* 87 (1996): 645–670.

lenges the more recent theories that focus on the agency of the caliphate alone.

THEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL PRECOMMITMENTS

Especially in matters of beliefs and culture, the translator's mediation and discretion became more nuanced to the degree that the voice of the receiving culture tamed or domesticated the original text and its content in question. The following anecdote illustrates this point.²⁶ During the peak of the translation movement under al-Ma'mūn, al-Jāhīz relates a discussion in one of the courtly gatherings of the caliph that sheds light on the agency of the 'Abbāsids in resituating ancient sciences in a new context:

Once Sahl ibn Hārūn said this in the presence of al-Ma'mūn, "From among the classes of science there are some that Muslims do not have to embark on studying (*yarghabūna fīhī*). One could neglect some [fields of] science, 'ilm, in the same manner one could turn away from the lawfully permitted, *al ḥalāl*." Al-Ma'mūn said, [It is possible, however, that] "people may call something science, 'ilm, even though it is not science [at all]. If this is what you mean, the solution is found in what I have said. [But] if you have meant [to avoid] a science whose depth is unfathomable nor measurable or whose ultimate objective not attainable or whose categories not discernable, or whose conclusion not ascertainable, then you have a point. If that is the case, then you embark [on studying] what is the most important and [then] the more important and the necessary before the complementary."²⁷

Both Sahl ibn Hārūn, who was the director of al-Ma'mūn's library, the House of Wisdom, and the caliph projected consciously or unconsciously their own priorities and expectations into the translated culture. They positioned 'Abbāsīd culture from the vantage point of power prerogative to evaluate what was being studied, received, and translated for its conformity to the requirements, needs, and expectations of the 'Abbāsīd society with all its attendant social, intellectual, and sec-

²⁶ Gutas, *Greek*, pp. 136–150, offers a convincing explanation of various translation techniques and the sociohistorical reasons for their emergence and development. However, he does so mostly within the framework of the stylistic quality of translations and within the debate of *ad verbum/ad sensum*, leaving the implications of the "interpretive" translation virtually unaddressed.

²⁷ Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabayn*, 1:557.

tarian diversity. In a way the position of the ‘Abbāsids vis-à-vis ancient sciences was a political confrontation between the source culture and the target culture, helping the ‘Abbāsīd-Islamic culture to define, reposition, and deploy its own assumptions to absorb and remold ancient sciences and cultural traditions.

Translations required the subversion of the source text’s discursive integrity and shifted the axis of arguments in them, especially in matters related to fundamental ideological assumptions, such as the unity of God and creation ex nihilo. In an early Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the translator crossed out Zeus from the translation and inserted God (Allah) for Apollo.²⁸ Similarly, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq replaced Greek deities with the one God.²⁹ His son, Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn (d. 910–911), used multiple Islamic renditions of “God” and “the One” in the context of causation instead of “Demiurge” in the Arabic translation of Proclus (412–485).³⁰ In the translation of Themistius’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn rendered the First Intellect as God (Allah): “It has become clear from all of this that God (Allah) is the first cause (*mabda’ al-awwal*) and that He knows Himself and all the things for which He is the initiator.”³¹ No doubt that such critical interventions aimed at shifting or displacing the source text’s content according to the expectations of its new context for the purpose of not only ensuring compatibility with the target culture but also asserting (subtly or explicitly) the superiority of the target culture and its right to use discretions in rendering the content of the translated text.

As Gentzler notes, translation can be viewed as a creative act, participating in the creation of knowledge and, by extension, of power.³² Perhaps one of the best manifestations of discursive originality inspired by the opportunity presented in translation is al-Kindī’s efforts, which

²⁸ Aristoteles, *al-Khiṭaba: Al-Tarjuma al-‘Arabiyya al-Qadīma*, ed. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawī (Beirut and Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam and Wakālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1979), pp. 160–161 (1398B in the manuscript).

²⁹ See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (G. Strohmaier), New Edition, Electronic version (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958–2004).

³⁰ Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn, *Hujaj Proclus fi Qidam al-‘Ālam* in ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, ed. *Al-Aflātūniyya al-Muhdatha ‘inda al-‘Arab* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1977), p. 37. Demiurge is translated as *al-khāliq ta‘ālā* (the creator almighty), Allah, *al-bārī* (the Maker), etc.

³¹ “Min Sharḥ Thamasthus li Harf al-Lām.” (Themistius) Translation is by Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn in Badawī, *Arisṭū ‘inda al-‘Arab: Dirāsa wa Nuṣuṣ ghayr Manshūra* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1978), p. 21. For additional examples and a more detailed discussion of the translation of names of Greek deities into Arabic see John Walbridge, “Explaining Away the Greek Gods in Islam,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 3 (1998): 389ff.

³² Gentzler, “Translation,” p. 216.

represent a serious attempt to accommodate philosophical inquiry and logic within Muslim religious sensibilities and theological debates (*kalām*) by, among other things, steering the philosophical discourse away from the polytheism of the Greeks.³³ Though al-Kindī did not know Greek or Syriac and therefore relied on the Arabic translation of the Aristotelian texts during the translation movement, he helped with the refining of translations and establishing of the vocabulary and discourse of philosophical inquiry in Arabic. In his *On the First Philosophy*, written for the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim, al-Kindī defends philosophy as a way of proving the One Truth against its detractors and encourages the caliph to support it. He launches a sharp criticism against the adversaries of philosophy, whom he accuses of being false, pretentious, and ignorant.³⁴ Al-Kindī was perhaps a Mu‘tazilite rationalist, and therefore well prepared for a rational discussion, but at the same time, if that was the case, a defender of the unity of God in a Mu‘tazilite fashion.³⁵ Al-Kindī’s theological concerns are apparent in his philosophical positions. According to al-Kindī, the ultimate goal of philosophical inquiry is—similar to the prophets and their messages—nothing but approximating the truth, the One Truth, and defending the faith regardless of where the truth comes from, who conveys it, and who speaks it. He avoids establishing a causal relation between the First Cause/God (who is eternal and has no cause) and his creation (which was created *ex nihilo* and is finite) and thus emphasizes the separation of God from the universe, contrary to the Neo-Platonic emanation theory.³⁶ Al-Kindī’s reading of philosophical texts shows his struggle to formulate new categories, which he accomplished, in part, by assuming that

³³ For an in-depth study of the theological concerns of al-Kindī and his circle see Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus*, pp. 111ff., 179ff.

³⁴ For another instance of relying on Neo-Platonic ideas for polemical and systematizing purposes see Gutas, *Greek*, p. 145ff.; James E. Montgomery, “Al-Gāhiz and Hellenizing Philosophy,” in *The Libraries of the Neoplatonists. Proceedings of the Meeting of the European Science Foundation Network “Late Antiquity and Arabic Thought: Patterns in the Constitution of European Culture,” Strasbourg, March 12–14, 2004*, ed. Cristina D’Ancona Costa. *Philosophia Antiqua*, vol. 107 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), where he clarifies, in the specific instance of al-Jāhiz’s treatise, *Kitāb at-Tarbī‘ wa al-Tadwīr*, the process by which both Hellenic philosophy and Hellenizing philosophy were situated within Islamic worldviews.

³⁵ Adamson, *Arabic Plotinus*, 182ff.

³⁶ Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, *Fi al-Falsafa al-Ūlā* in Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Hādī Abū Ridāh, *Rasā’il al-Kindī al-Falsafiyya* (Cairo, 1950), 1:97–98. For the English Translation and study of the epistle see Alfred L. Ivry, *Al-Kindī’s Metaphysics: A Translation of Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī’s On First Philosophy, Fi al-Falsafa al-Ūlā* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1974), pp. 55–56.

meaning is independent from text and discourse and by remolding or altering philosophical assumptions in metaphysics to accommodate his core convictions.³⁷

Al-Kindī's views parallel al-Jāhīz's position on translation in a number of points, which reflects loyalty to the core elements of Islamic religious discourses. Al-Jāhīz too would like the translator to know and value Islamic worldviews:

This is only about translating books of geometry, astrology, mathematics, and philology. What happens, were these books the books of religion and [books] containing information about God, the sublime, the almighty concerning what may or may not be postulated with regard to Him so that he [the translator] is able to discuss the correction of meanings in the attributes [of God] in a manner tied to [the subject of] the unity of God? How does he discuss the ways of handing down information and the possibility that handing down information bears multiple ways, [at the same time] clarifying what might be permissible for God and what might not be permissible and what might be and might not be permissible for human being so that he [the translator] knows the place of the universals and the place of the particulars.

Al-Jāhīz then discusses the importance of being grounded in scriptural and theological problems, proficient in matters attributable to customs or rational judgment, and erudite in rhetorical devices, because this allows the translator to create a meaningful text compatible with and enhancing the target culture. Al-Jāhīz is interested in translation that is capable of understanding and articulating the broad discourses of 'Abbāsīd society. "Whenever the translator is unaware of this [aspect of translation], he will commit errors in the interpretation of religious texts. And error in matters of religion is more detrimental than error in mathematics, craftsmanship, philosophy, chemistry, and some of the livelihoods by which mankind earns its sustenance."³⁸ The concerns of al-Jāhīz for maintaining and furthering theological orthodoxy were echoed, for instance, by Ibn al-Maṭrān, a translator in the ninth century. He asks his readers to be selective in their acceptance of what the ancients claim on issues of culture and belief: "If the reader finds a remark in classical work beginning with the words 'Galen (or Plato,

³⁷ Gutas, *Greek*, p. 149, notes that al-Kindī belonged to a circle that favored interpretive translation with little concern for philological exactitude.

³⁸ Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, vol. 1, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1996), pp. 77–79.

Aristotle, etc.) says,' and it turns out to be strictly scientific discussion of the subject under investigation, he should study it carefully and try to understand it. If, on the other hand, it concerns questions of belief and opinion, he must take no further notice of it, since such remarks were made only in order to win people over the ideas expressed in them or because they concern old, deeply rooted views."³⁹

Al-Jāhiz seems to have been aware that translation is not an uncritical transfer from monolithic language A to monolithic language B, but rather it is a creation of new meaning by transforming the source text through interfering with it.⁴⁰ Al-Jāhiz does that not by dismissing the achievements of the ancients, but rather by criticizing the early Arabic translations for not reflecting the original quality of the source texts: "The books of India have been transferred (*nuqilat*),⁴¹ and the Greek philosophies have been translated (*turjimat*),⁴² and the literature of the Persians have been converted (*huwwilat*).⁴³ [As a result,] some of these [works] have increased in excellence and some have lost a portion [of their original quality]." He criticizes the translators of Aristotle and Plato for not having a high level of professional command of the subject matter and of language to negotiate meaning between source and target languages. For him a good translation requires that the translator excels in both languages and be on equal footing with the author of the text being translated so that the specificities of arguments and the subtleties of definitions are conveyed accurately and powerfully. The translator can hardly accomplish this task unless he or she is certain of the meanings, other possibilities of meaning, and the manner in which meanings are constructed and conveyed. "Since when have Ibn al-Bitrīq (may God have mercy on his soul), Ibn Na'ima, Ibn Qurra, Ibn Fihri, Theophilus, Ibn Wāhili, or Ibn al-Muqaffa' been comparable to Aristotle? And since when has Khālid been equal to Plato?"⁴⁴ Clearly, there is an issue of fidelity here, but fidelity to whom and to what?

Al-Jāhiz's view contrasts what Ibn al-Muqaffa' had thought concerning the ancients. Ibn al-Muqaffa' regards the deeds and knowledge

³⁹ Ibn Maṭrān, *Bustān al-Atibbā'*, manuscript of the Army Medical Library, Cleveland, Ohio, in Rosenthal, *Classical*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ For the issue of meaning and translation see Gentzler, "Translation," p. 217.

⁴¹ The semiotic chain of the word includes to move, remove, displace, transfer, transport, transplant, shift, relocate, convey, render, deliver.

⁴² To translate, interpret, treat, expound.

⁴³ To change, turn, deviate, transform, depart, intervene, interfere, convert, transfer.

⁴⁴ Al-Jāhiz, *Kiṭāb al-Ḥayawān*, 1:75–76. The pages that deal with translations are pp. 74–80.

of the ancients to be superior to anything the moderns could claim. He advises the moderns to follow the ancients as closely as possible, even if that is beyond their power.⁴⁵ Whereas Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ advocates fidelity to the ancients and encourages imitation in the hope of approximating their glory, al-Jāhiz aspires to matching and surpassing them. Al-Jāhiz is not concerned with either word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation—that was the concern of Hunayn and other translators, who discussed it in their writings.⁴⁶ Al-Jāhiz hints at the more serious issues of meaning and discourse, and therefore the extent of self-awareness. Because of the concern with representation and containment of ancient cultures and knowledge, the abilities of the translator acquire a paramount importance. He asks the translator to be cognizant of the discourses, codes, and semiotic fields embedded in the language. Only with appropriate preparation—namely, being fully conversant in both languages and in content matter and being aware of the cultural assumptions in both languages—can the translator hope to match the greatness of the Greeks and others with the greatness of Arabic and Islamic correspondence.⁴⁷ While many translators assumed meaning to be more than the totality of the signifier and the signified and to be external to the text and ultimately to the discourse itself,⁴⁸ al-Jāhiz saw meaning as embedded in the language and discourse. He sees the translator not as a simple scribe but effectively as an author who is able to use the resources of Arabic language to the fullest extent possible to replace the discursive and literary quality of the source text with another equally as or even more potent than the original for the benefit of the target culture.⁴⁹ Thus, the idea that true knowledge necessarily

⁴⁵ See ‘Abdallah ibn al-Muqaffa‘, *Al-ādāb al-Kabīr*, in Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī, *Rasā’il al-Bulaghā’* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1913), pp. 55–56 (under the title *al-Durra al-Yatīmiyya*).

⁴⁶ One of the best examples of translation techniques based on the idea of meaning being external to the text is al-Ṣafadī’s discussion of *ad verbum* and *ad sensum* in *al-Ghayth al-Mujassam*. See the translation of the relevant passages in Rosenthal, *Classical*, pp. 17–18. Gutas notes that content and the use for which the text was consulted was the primary concern of Hunayn. Gutas, *Greek*, p. 140.

⁴⁷ One of the illustrative examples of this sense of competition comes across in al-Jāhiz’s views on the Byzantines. He wonders how this great culture capable of producing such a remarkable scholarship, art, and architecture can still pursue trinity. Quoted by Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī, *Sharḥ Risālat al-Ḥūr al-Īn*. Rosenthal, *Classical*, pp. 44–45.

⁴⁸ Moshe ibn Ezra, *al-Muḥadara wa al-Mudhākara*: “If you wish to translate anything from Arabic into Hebrew, adhere to the intended meaning and do not translate word for word, since not all languages are alike.” Rosenthal, *Classical*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ See Copeland, “The Fortunes of Non Verbum Pro Verbo,” p. 18 on Cicero’s views on translation from Greek.

conformed or at least could not contradict principal theological doctrines and that the 'Abbāsīd society had the prerogative to reposition and relocate the ancient intellectual heritage encouraged, if not facilitated, the circulation of legends about the foundation and the preservation of Ur-knowledge from destruction by either flood or fire and about the location and discovery of the prophetic wisdom attributed to monotheist sages and prophets, including Hermes.

ANTEDILUVIAN WISDOM AND THE IMAGES OF HERMES

Legends involving ancient and antediluvian figures who came to be identified in 'Abbāsīd times with Hermes had circulated in the cultures of southwest Asia, including Mesopotamian, Greek, and Jewish traditions. In view of this fact, it is not surprising to see that the 'Abbāsīd learned elite also gravitated toward these legends. As early as the middle of the eighth century, 'Abbāsīd scholars believed there were links between sciences and antediluvian wisdom. We have an early testimony to this belief by the Persian court astrologer Abū Sahl ibn Nawbakht (d. 786), working under the caliph al-Manṣūr.⁵⁰ To justify the study and support of sciences of the antiquity, Ibn Nawbakht refers to the historical and mythical Persian past in his *Kitāb al-Nahmuṭān* in a discussion that deals with the origins, development, and preservation of sciences. The portion of his discussion of interest here is as follows:

The classes of sciences, the kinds of books, the aspects of questions, and the foundations from which things indicated by the stars [such as] things which had existed before the appearance of their [material] causes and [before] people knew of them are derived increased, as Babylonians described in their books and the Egyptians learned from them, and the Indians practiced in their regions. [In this, they] followed the example of the earliest people before they committed sinful transgressions and fell into the depths of ignorance until their minds became confused and their dreams abandoned them.⁵¹

⁵⁰ His father Nawbakht (d. 777) too was the court astrologer of al-Manṣūr. Ibn Nawbakht took his father's position and continued to serve the caliph al-Manṣūr and his sons. It is important to note that Nawbakht's family served the 'Abbāsīd caliphs for a number of generations as court astrologers and advisors.

⁵¹ Muḥammad ibn Ishāq al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flügel (Leipzig, 1871; repr., Beirut: Maktabat Khayyāt, n.d.), p. 238.

According to Ibn Nawbakht, the foundational knowledge originated with “the earliest people,” *awā’il al-khalq*, who taught and inspired not only the Babylonians but also the Egyptians and the Indians. In the remainder of his discussion, he explains that this foundational knowledge was forgotten for a while until it was rediscovered and expanded upon during the time of Jam ibn Awanjhān⁵² and succeeding Persian rulers until the conquest of Alexander. Ibn Nawbakht had a dim view of Alexander. According to Ibn Nawbakht, Alexander conquered Persia, destroyed libraries, scattered scholars, translated what he needed into Greek, and burned the remaining books and razed monuments. Of the original works of science, only small fragments and shreds remained scattered in Persia, India, China, and Egypt, which were eventually gathered together and put in proper order by Chosroes I Anūshirwān (531–579).⁵³

His antagonistic view of Alexander notwithstanding,⁵⁴ Ibn Nawbakht’s reference to “the earliest people” and to Jam ibn Awanjhān helps us understand better his views on the origins of sciences.⁵⁵ A brief genealogical exercise will clarify that Ibn Nawbakht indeed meant antediluvian figures when he referred to the earliest people. Of course, medieval sources are not consistent on the genealogy of Adam, no doubt partly because of the diversity of views in older traditions (biblical and Persian) in the region. Because the working assumption of ‘Abbāsīd scholars was that contradictory genealogies were supposed to describe one family tree, not unrelated lineages, and that differences were mistakes that needed to be ironed out, these scholars tried to cull various genealogies together to arrive at a conflict-free family tree for

⁵² Dodge notes that he was “Jamshīd ibn Ṭahmūraṣ ibn Hushang (Awijhan),” Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, vol. 2, trans. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970): p. 572, n. 5.

⁵³ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, p. 238 (Flügel).

⁵⁴ Ibn Nawbakht seems to be among the few who had a negative image of Alexander. In other sources, he appears as a great conqueror, sage, and even a prophetic figure (the Qur’anic *dhū al-qarnayn*, he of the two horns). See Richard Stoneman, “Alexander the Great in the Arabic Tradition,” in *The Ancient Novel and Beyond*, Stelios Panayotakis et al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003).

⁵⁵ Gutas, Bladel, and Saliba have pointed out the significance of Ibn Nawbakht’s role in the transmission of ancient sciences into the ‘Abbāsīd world, but they took no note of the fact that Ibn Nawbakht did refer to the earliest people in connection with ancient sciences. Gutas, *Greek*, p. 38ff.; Saliba, *Islamic*, p. 31ff.; Kevin van Bladel, *Hermes Arabicus* (unpublished PhD diss., Yale University, 2004), p. 36ff. (It is forthcoming as *The Arabic Hermes*.)

Adam.⁵⁶ Thus, Jam ibn Awajjhān appears in Ibn Nawbakht's account as the son of Awajjhān, who is none other than Hermes or Abanjhan, the grandson of Adam, according to Abū Ma'shar (787–886), as we will discuss shortly. Independently we come across Jam, in historiographical sources, as an early figure appearing both before and after the Flood. Al-Dīnawarī (d. 895 or 896), whose knowledge of Persian sources is well known, maintains that Jam was in the fourth generation after Noah, putting him after the Flood.⁵⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, on the other hand, considers Jam an antediluvian figure, the brother of Ṭahmūrath ibn Awajjhān, who ruled after Hoshank. The latter was, according to al-Ṭabarī, a contemporary of—and for some scholars even identical with—the biblical Mahalalel ibn Cainan, the grandfather of Enoch.⁵⁸ Given his background, Ibn Nawbakht too might have considered Jam a figure living after the Flood. But in this case as well, Jam being so close in time to the Flood, the concept of the “earliest people” in Ibn Nawbakht's mental map cannot refer to people living later than the Flood. Whatever other conclusions one may draw from Ibn Nawbakht's appropriation of sciences as Persian, by “the earliest people” he no doubt meant the generations of Adam's family before the Flood. He thus traced back the sciences to prophetic wisdom originating before the Flood.

There must have been an appealing ongoing discussion in the first decades of the eighth century about antediluvian knowledge to prompt Ibn Nawbakht to engage it and offer views that complemented it. Indeed, the reference of one of the most prominent transmitters of biblical material into Islamic scholarship, Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 728), to the biblical prophet Enoch, whose reputation as a source of wisdom and scholarship had already been well established in Jewish tradition, as being identical with the Qur'anic figure of Idrīs suggests that the process of trying to make sense of ancient history was already underway. Ibn Munabbih claimed that Idrīs lived before the Flood and was given a thirty-page script.⁵⁹ The early ninth century 'Abbāsīd reli-

⁵⁶ 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khaldūn thus attributes these contradictions to mistranslation and faulty transliteration of the original word in one's own language. 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar wa Diwān al-Mubtada' wa al-Khabar fī Ayyām al-'Arab wa al-'Ajam wa al-Barbar wa man 'Āsarahum min Dhī al-Sultān al-Akbar* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1984), 2:7.

⁵⁷ Aḥmad ibn Dāwūd al-Dīnawarī, *Al-Akhhār al-Ṭiwāl*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Āmir, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, 1960), pp. 1–2.

⁵⁸ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 1, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 325–327, 341–342, 344–345, 348ff.

⁵⁹ See *Wahb ibn Munabbih*, vol. 1, [Hrsg. von] Raif Georges Khoury (Wiesbaden, O. Harrassowitz, 1972), pp. 216–217, 230, 294, 315. As early as the eighth century, Idrīs was

gious and secular literature documents the spread of the idea that Enoch and Idrīs were identical figures.⁶⁰ The Idrīs/Enoch figure would shortly emerge as the antediluvian source of wisdom, Hermes, after a curious transformation of his identity over the course of several decades.

What appears to be an early translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* into Arabic renders Hermes as one of the Greek deities in compliance with the source text.⁶¹ However, already concurrently or even earlier, Ibn Nawbakht has Hermes as an ancient sage. According to him, Hermes was one of the few sages who took part in the expansion and refinement of the foundational human knowledge.⁶² Ibn Nawbakht drew on ancient Persian mythology to describe Hermes and the spread of knowledge out of Persia. He apparently knew Dorotheus Sidonius's *Carmen Astrologicum*, in which Hermes figures as the son of the king of Egypt, and is praised in three natures (Trismegistus).⁶³ By the early ninth century, Hermes became well known among 'Abbāsīd literati as one of the ancient patron saints of sciences. Suffice it here to note a few examples. The famous court astrologer under al-Rashīd and Nawbakht's younger colleague, commonly known in the Christian West as Mes-sala or Messahalla, the Jewish physician Māshā'allāh (d. 815), referred

thought to be alive, taken to heaven like Enoch in at least part of the Judaic tradition. For the early image of Idrīs among Muslims, see Mujāhid ibn Jabr, *Tafsīr*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Abū Nīl (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-Islamī, 1979), p. 387. For the origins of the name Idrīs see Philip S. Alexander, "The Jewish Tradition in Early Islam: The Case of Enoch/Idrīs," in *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts in Memory of Norman Calder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Y. Erder, "The Origin of the Name Idrīs in the Qur'ān: A Study of the Influence of Qumran Literature on Early Islam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49 (1990): 339–350.

⁶⁰ Ibn Sa'd (d. 845) identifies Idrīs with Enoch as the first prophet sent after Adam. Muḥammad ibn Sa'd, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 6:54. By the time of the exegete and historian al-Ṭabarī in the tenth century (d. 923), the belief in Idrīs as the antediluvian fountain of prophetic wisdom became well established. In his *History of Prophets and Kings*, al-Ṭabarī reiterates the opinion that Idrīs was given a thirty-page script and notes that some scholars had even maintained that Idrīs was a universal prophet sent to all humankind and was given knowledge in full. See al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī*, 1:344.

⁶¹ Aristoteles, *al-Khiṭāba*, p. 171 (ms. p. 1401a). According to Badawī, the text, whose translator is unknown, must date to the late eighth or early ninth century.

⁶² Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, p. 239 (Flügel). Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 2:572–574 (Dodge). For a short but remarkably lucid survey of Hermes in medieval Islam see Francis E. Peters, "Hermes and Harran: The Roots of Arabic-Islamic Occultism," in *Intellectual Studies on Islam: Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson, Professor of Persian Studies*, Princeton University (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990), p. 185ff. For a detailed discussion of Persian Hermetica and its transmission to Arabic see Bladel, *Hermes*, p. 27ff.

⁶³ See Dorotheus Sidonius, *Carmen Astrologicum*, ed. David Pingree (Leipzig: BSB B. G. Teubner, 1976), pp. 161 and 224. For a discussion of Ibn Nawbakht and the Hermes legend, see Bladel, *Hermes*, p. 140ff.

to Hermes in his *On Conjunctions*.⁶⁴ The contemporary colleague of Māshā'allāh, the mathematician and astronomer Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Fazārī (d. 796 or 806), also seems to have used books partly geographical in content that were attributed to Hermes and credited him with the geographical division of the inhabited world into seven climes.⁶⁵ By the second decade of the ninth century, Hermes must have been a better known figure as his name seems to have been invoked at the dinner table of the caliph al-Ma'mūn. Hermes appears in the story casually along with other figures from Greek, Arabic, and Islamic history, which suggests, if the report is authentic, that both the mixed audience and the caliph had already been familiar with the name. In this anecdote the primary attribute of Hermes was astrological knowledge.⁶⁶ Around the same time, *The Book of Balīnās*, attributed to Apollonius of Tyana, refers to Hermes in his capacity as an ancient sage possessing the secrets of creation.⁶⁷ The caliph al-Mu'taṣim (r. 833–842) appears to have ordered the translation of the *Thesaurus Alexandri*, a work on elixirs and amulets attributed to Hermes, into Arabic.⁶⁸ The enigmatic sage of Ibn Nawbakht half a century later became the father of astrology, thus the possessor of occult knowledge, which the 'Abbāsids found fascinating and actively pursued since the beginning of their reign. The fact that Hermes was praised by individuals as distinct as a court secretary and astrologer (Ibn Nawbakht) and a jurist and judge (Yaḥyā ibn Aktham [d. 856]) shows the extent of his fame among scholars of both secular and religious sciences.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *On Conjunctions, Religions, and Peoples*. We know the work from its abridgement by Ibn Hibinta, a Christian astrologer from Baghdad in the ninth century. See E. S. Kennedy and David Pingree, *The Astrological History of Māshā'allāh* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 1 (p. f214v, line 13), translation p. 39. Bladel, *Hermes*, pp. 18, 44.

⁶⁵ David Pingree, "The Fragments of the Works of al-Fazārī," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29 (1970): 115–116; Bladel, *Hermes*, pp. 34, 45.

⁶⁶ Aḥmad ibn Abī Ṭāhir al-Kātib Ṭayfūr, *Baghdād fī Tārīkh al-Khilāfa al-'Abbāsiyya*, (Cairo: s.n., 1968), p. 36.

⁶⁷ *Kitāb Sīr al-Khalīqa wa Ṣan'at al-Ṭabī'a*, *Book of the Secret of Creation and the Art of Nature*, also known as the *Kitāb Balīnās al-Hakīm fī al-'Ilal*, *The Book of Balīnās the Wise on the Causes*. It was penned by an author in the early ninth century during the reign of al-Ma'mūn. See Paul Kraus, *Jābir ibn Hayyān: Contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam: Jābir et la science Grecque* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986), 2:270ff., 275–280. It was translated into Latin in 1140 as *Tabula Smaragdina*. See Julius Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Hermetischen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1926). Although we cannot elaborate on it in this article, a mention must be made in this context to the occultist aspects of early Shī'ism and its role in the transmission of occult sciences into the Muslim milieu and Arabic.

⁶⁸ See Stoneman, "Alexander the Great," pp. 15–16.

⁶⁹ In addition, later Islamic philosophical, scientific, exegetical, and Sufi literature often refers to Hermes as the prophet of wisdom and sciences. Seyyed Hossein Nasr even

The groundbreaking transformation of Hermes' identity from an ancient sage to the antediluvian prophet appears to have been completed in the early ninth century. The earliest reference in Islamic history that identifies Idrīs with Hermes comes from al-Jāhīz (d. December 868 or January 869), a polymath well connected to the 'Abbāsid court of al-Ma'mūn and his successors.⁷⁰ Al-Jāhīz mentions Hermes twice in his *Book of Squaring and Rounding* (*Kitāb al-Tarbī' wa al-Tadwīr*). On one occasion, Hermes comes up in connection with the knowledge of the nature of celestial beings,⁷¹ corroborating the previous conclusion that Hermes was first known among Muslims as an ancient sage. On a second occasion, Hermes is identified with Idrīs. Al-Jāhīz asks his interlocutor if he knows whether Hermes was identical with the Qur'anic Idrīs.⁷² His question, rhetorical or not, establishes that the identification of Hermes with Idrīs had been a subject of discussion among intellectuals before al-Jāhīz wrote his treatise between 842 and 845.⁷³ The identification of Hermes with Idrīs was a significant development that transformed not only the Muslim image of Idrīs but also perhaps the Hebrew image of Enoch. The complex and still unknown trajectory of the identification of Enoch with Idrīs in the eighth century and of both with Hermes by the early ninth century⁷⁴ gives credence to the argument that Enoch's fame as Hermes certainly spread and was popu-

tends to see the belief in Hermes, the antediluvian prophet, a key underlying philosophy in much of the Islamic thought. Unfortunately Nasr's assertions, as far as the ninth century is concerned, are vague and difficult to substantiate by evidence. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Harmas va Navishtahā-yi Harmasī dar Jihān-i Islām," *Majalla-yi Dānishgāda-yi Adabiyāt* 2 (1341 [1923 c.e. sic]): 1ff.; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 60–63, 101; Also his *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 13, 38–39, 75–76, and other places.

⁷⁰ The question of who invented the identification of Hermes with Enoch/Idrīs is important. Although the Sabians of Harran seem to be a possible source, the question requires further research. F. E. Peters, "Hermes and Harran," p. 190. Philip S. Alexander, "The Jewish Tradition in Early Islam," pp. 17ff., 24ff.

⁷¹ Al-Jāhīz, *Le Kitāb at-tarbī' wa-t-tadwīr de Gāhīz*, ed. and trans. Francesco Gabrieli (Damascus: Institut de Français de Damas, 1955), p. 45 (par. 83).

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 26 (par. 40).

⁷³ The dates of the treatise are established by Montgomery, "Al-Gāhīz and Hellenizing Philosophy," p. 443ff.

⁷⁴ For a history of the identification of Idrīs with Hermes see Alexander, "Jewish Tradition in Early Islam," p. 11ff. He sees the identification process as happening among the Sabians of Harran in the following manner: Enoch = Hermes, Enoch = Idrīs, therefore Idrīs = Hermes. For the image of Hermes/Idrīs in medieval Islamic tradition see Pierre Lory, "Hermès/Idrīs: prophète et sage dans la tradition islamique," in *Presence d'Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988), p. 100ff.

larized during the early 'Abbāsīd period, for Enoch had been only occasionally associated with Hermes earlier in the Jewish traditions.⁷⁵

Al-Jāhīz's incidental reference to Hermes/Idrīs is echoed in other references from the same period. The most complete account of Hermes as the antediluvian sage of science and wisdom appears in the explanation of Al-Jāhīz's contemporary, the famous Abū Ma'shar (787–886), known in the Latin West as Abulmasar, who elaborated the legend of the Three Hermes in Islamic history. "The Hermeses are three. The first one of them was before the Flood. The meaning of Hermes is a title like saying Caesar or Chosroes. The Persians named him in their biographies Abanjhan.⁷⁶ He is the one whose wisdom the Harranians claim [to have followed].⁷⁷ The Persians mention that his grandfather was Jayūmarth, who is Adam. And the Hebrews mention that he is Enoch [Akhnūkh], and in Arabic he is Idrīs." Abū Ma'shar further claimed that Hermes "was the first to speak of celestial things, such as the movements of the stars, and his grandfather Adam taught him the hours of the night and day. He was the first to build temples and glorify God in them and to study and speak of medicine.⁷⁸ He wrote for the people of his time rhythmic odes and famous poems about terrestrial and celestial subjects."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ See John Scarborough, "Hermetic and Related Texts in Classical Antiquity," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (London: Associated University Presses, 1988), p. 23. David Pingree, *The Thousands of Abū Ma'shar* (London: Warburg Institute, 1968), p. 14. Alexander, "Jewish Tradition," p. 25.

⁷⁶ Sources offer varying spellings of this name. See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, p. 7, n. 17, and p. 105, n. 4 (Flügel).

⁷⁷ For Harran and the Sabeans see David Pingree, "The Šābī'ans of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9 (2002): 25–26. M. Plessner, "Hermes Trismegistos and Arab Science," *Studia Islamica* 2 [1954].

⁷⁸ The author of *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm* mentions that Egyptian Copts claimed that the first Hermes was the builder of the cities along the Nile. He credits the Copts with the ability to decipher ancient Egyptian script. See pseudo al-Majrītī, *Das Ziel des Weisen (Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm wa Aḥaqq al-Natījātayn bi al-Taqdīm)*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1933), pp. 310–311. According to Abū Ma'shar, the second Hermes lived in Babylon after the Flood, bringing Sabeanism to Mesopotamia, and, finally, the third Hermes lived in Egypt. Michael Cook makes a convincing case that Egyptian scholars became aware of Hermes as an Egyptian sage after the ninth century through information from the Islamic east. See Michael Cook, "Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt," *Studia Islamica* 57 (1983): 78ff.

⁷⁹ For the Arabic text see Sulaymān ibn Ḥassān ibn Juljul, *Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭībā wa al-Ḥukamā*, ed. Fu'ād Sayyid (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1955), pp. 5–6. For various translations of the Arabic text see Pingree, *Thousands*, pp. 14–15; Plessner, "Hermes Trismegistos," pp. 50–51; Bladel, *Hermes*, pp. 134–135. The legend of the three Hermeses dates before Abū Ma'shar. The younger contemporary of Abū Ma'shar the Greek George Synkellos cites an earlier authority, pseudo Manetho's *Book of Sothis*, concerning Hermes in which three Hermeses are identified. See Bladel, *Hermes*, p. 145ff.

Thus, already in the vocabulary of learned elite since the middle of the eighth century Hermes became the antediluvian prophet Idrīs, the recipient of a revealed script, the common source of wisdom, and the inventor and protector of crafts and sciences, secular and religious. Fitting the image of paradigmatic Hermes, he became the mediator, the conduit, the filter through which ancient sciences were received. As the antediluvian prophetic source of sciences, occult knowledge, and divine wisdom, Hermes would make it easier for even the skeptics to, if not embrace, at least engage the secular sources of knowledge within the broad precepts of *'ilm* at par with biblical and other material, *isrā'iliyyāt*, flooding scholarship at the time. It seems possible therefore that the idea of the transmission of sciences from the antediluvian prophetic wisdom originated since the reign of al-Manṣūr and disseminated more widely by 'Abbāsīd scholars during the reign of al-Rashīd onward.⁸⁰ As Stetkevych masterfully demonstrated with regard to the Arabian myth,⁸¹ the "mythic debris" that attributed science, wisdom, and knowledge to prophetic figures surfaced and resurfaced in the literary and religious traditions and symbolic structures of the early Islamic Middle East. Legends became a part of the consciousness of the 'Abbāsīd learned elite, who were operating in the physical, religious, and intellectual geography of the Hellenistic world, as seen in the search for ancient monotheistic scriptures and relics.

MONOTHEISTIC SCRIPTURES AND RELICS

The medieval sources tell us that the caliph al-Wāthiq (r. 842–847) commissioned Sallām the interpreter to go to China and look for the Qur'anic wall of iron and brass thought to have been erected by Dhū al-Qarnayn, identified with Alexander the Great, against Gog and Magog.⁸² On another occasion the same caliph seems to have

⁸⁰ Pingree traces back this view only to the reign of al-Rashīd among scholars of Persian and Harranian origins. See Pingree, *Thousands*, p. 11.

⁸¹ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 10.

⁸² See Shihāb al-Dīn Abī 'Abdallāh Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1984), 3:199; C. E. Bosworth, *The Arabs, Byzantium and Iran: Studies in Early Islamic History and Culture* (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashate-Variorum, 1996), pp. xiii, 22–23; and C. E. Wilson, "The Wall of Alexander against Gog and Magog, and the Expedition Sent out to Find It by the Khalif Wāthiq in 842 A.D.," *Hirth Anniversary Volume* (=Asia Major, introductory volume), ed. B. Schindler (London: Robsthain and Co, 1922). Also, Stoneman, "Alexander the Great," pp. 15–16.

dispatched the famous scientist al-Khawārizmī to Anatolia to ascertain if the cave of seven sleepers was indeed authentic.⁸³ How can we make sense of such reports without dismissing them? In both incidents the caliph commissions figures known for their scholarly work in the translation movement to verify what looks to us legendary material.⁸⁴ Without intending to be reductionist, I would argue that the interest in ancient knowledge derived motivation from and would make sense within the discourse of prophetic history in the early ninth century. The Qur'anic exegesis from the early Islamic period confirms a scholarly interest in ancient knowledge. As a form of revelation, Qur'anic verses inform the believers of the existence of previous revelations and scriptures (*suḥuf*, *zūbur*, and *kutub*), which contained, like the Qur'an itself, not only laws for various communities but also the essence of the divine message⁸⁵ and occult knowledge, which, according to the Qur'anic text, is written down, exalted, purified, protected, and given to few.⁸⁶ Qur'anic references to ancient divine scriptures found attentive ears in the context of existing religious and intellectual traditions in the Near East among inquiring Arab Muslims and bilingual Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian converts who quickly established links between Qur'anic statements and pre-Islamic lettered traditions.⁸⁷

As early as the eighth century, when exegetes pondered the nature and whereabouts of ancient knowledge, monotheistic scripts emerged as a major source of divine wisdom. For instance, Ibn Sa'd (d. 845) reports that Wahb ibn Munabbih claimed that he had "read ninety-two books, all of which [were] sent down from heaven. Seventy two of which [were] in the churches and in the hands of the people, and twenty [were] only known to few."⁸⁸ Ibn Munabbih's boastful remark about his personal familiarity with ancient scriptures notwithstanding, being the same person who identified Enoch with Idrīs shows how exegetical opinions were mixed and mixable with the body of

⁸³ See Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Rāzī, *al-Taḥf al-Kabīr aw Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), 21:96.

⁸⁴ Of course the report could be spurious, but we have similar other examples from the early 'Abbāsīd history that corroborate the interest in ancient and prophetic relics and legacies.

⁸⁵ The Qur'an, 20:133, 87: 18–19. Translations are taken from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955).

⁸⁶ The Qur'an, 54: 52, 80: 13–16, 74: 52.

⁸⁷ See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, p. 22 (Flügel).

⁸⁸ Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, 5:543.

knowledge later to be attributed to Hermes.⁸⁹ It seems that this type of knowledge received attention in the ‘Abbāsīd court, as well. The bibliophile Ibn al-Nadīm relates in his *al-Fihrist* that he had read an ancient manuscript that seemed to be from the treasury of al-Ma’mūn and listed the names and numbers of scriptures (*suḥuf*) and the revealed books (*al-kutub al-munazzala*). According to Ibn al-Nadīm, who said that he quoted the relevant sections of the manuscript in his work, most of the proto-Sunnīs, *al-Hashwiyya* and common people, ‘Awām, trusted its content.⁹⁰

The exegesis of chapter 18 (“The Cave”) in the Qur’an takes the discussion of ancient wisdom even further to accommodate a broader meaning of knowledge. The Qur’anic narrative has Moses seek, find, and accompany a saintly figure (popularly known as Khidr), who is endowed with the knowledge of the occult. In their quest, Moses finds the sage’s conduct to be contrary to common sense (he causes a ship to sink, murders an individual without an apparent provocation, and repairs a wall that is about to collapse), which prompts Moses to object and the sage to explain his actions. The last point in the narrative, which involves the sage repairing a wall belonging to two orphans so that it would stand erect until the two boys come of age and discover a treasure buried under it, sparked an exegetical discussion.⁹¹ In the course of elaborating on the details of the story, al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 826) cites the opinion of his colleagues that the treasure hidden under the falling wall in the verse had to do with knowledge, ‘ilm, preserved in books and scriptures. In another opinion, the treasure was described as the knowledge of scriptures, which suggests a body of knowledge with a hermeneutical quality explaining the meaning of the revealed text.⁹² By the time of al-Ṭabarī, who also cites the opinions of previous scholars concerning “treasured scripts containing knowledge” (*ṣuḥuf fiḥa ‘ilm madfūna*), we notice not only a continuing interest in treasured knowledge but also in the convergence of multiple mythical and religious

⁸⁹ For al-Ṭabarī the Qur’anic references to ancient scriptures, *al-suḥuf al-ūlā*, thus simply mean the revelations given to Idrīs. Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, 1:344.

⁹⁰ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, pp. 21–22ff. (Flügel).

⁹¹ The Qur’an, 18: 60–85.

⁹² ‘Abd al-Razzāq ibn Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān li al-Imām ‘Abd al-Razzāq ibn Hammām al-Ṣan‘ānī*, vol. 2, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad (Riyad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1989), p. 407. The Qur’an, Kahf, 18: 82.

traditions to inspire a description such as “golden tablet with script on it” as the treasure under the wall.⁹³

Even a seemingly unlikely source, apocalyptic prophecies, had something to contribute to the search for ancient knowledge, which appears as a subject of discovery and recovery in prophecies. According to a prophecy, when Tustar (Shustar in contemporary Iran) was conquered, some of the soldiers discovered a manuscript next to a dead person lying on a bed in the treasury of the Sasanid commander al-Hurmuzān. Guessing it to be the book of Daniel, they took it to the second caliph, ‘Umar (r. 634–644). The manuscript then was forwarded to Ka‘b al-Aḥbār (d. after 652), who translated it into Arabic. The report concludes that the manuscript contained predictions about forthcoming apocalyptic turmoil.⁹⁴ In this case the manuscript turned out to be an apocalyptic text, but the prophecy still serves a useful purpose by reminding us how the interest in ancient knowledge motivated the production and dissemination of prophecies of this sort.⁹⁵

There must have been a relevant and appealing debate encouraging the producers and the transmitters of messianic prophecies to associate the Muslim messianic figure, al-Mahdī, and his mission with ancient knowledge. First of all, the title al-Mahdī seems to have been associated with meanings that reflected the notion of search and discovery of knowledge, relics, and scriptures. A number of prophecies suggest that the title al-Mahdī means the quest for hidden knowledge. Al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 826) transmitted a prophecy on the authority of Ka‘b al-Aḥbār that the Mahdī is named so “because he guides to a hidden truth.” This hidden truth, according to al-Ṣan‘ānī’s report, is none other than the Torah and the Gospel, which the Mahdī will excavate from a location in Antioch.⁹⁶ The Mahdī will lead his people to the authentic versions of existing scriptures and discover sacred relics, as illustrated in a number of prophecies in *Kitāb al-Fitan* of Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād (d. 844) that predict the discovery of divine scriptures and some of the most widely

⁹³ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur‘ān*, vol. 16, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1954), pp. 5–6. He attributes this view to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

⁹⁴ Nu‘aym ibn Ḥammād al-Khuzā‘ī, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), pp. 18–19. For reports of this sort see Nu‘aym, *Fitan*, pp. 18–19, 63–64, 68, 113–114.

⁹⁵ It might be useful to compare the views about ancient sciences to that of the status of conquered lands and peoples.

⁹⁶ Al-Ṣan‘ānī, *al-Muṣannaḥ*, 11:372. The report is also mentioned with a different chain of transmission in Nu‘aym, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, p. 220 and a similar prophecy, p. 221.

revered relics, including the ark of the covenant, the table of Solomon, the staff of Moses, the garment of Adam, and the ornament of Jerusalem.⁹⁷ In the early ‘Abbāsīd period, the belief concerning the unearthing of the monotheistic older scriptures and relics to find a permanent solution to historical disagreements among monotheistic faiths and to uncover hidden knowledge and the mysteries of existence functioned as a channel to justify the translations. Whether or not these ideas and expectations were intended to bear on the translation movement, by inquiring about and granting legitimacy to older traditions, they projected the intellectual landscape of the late antique world as a possible field to cultivate knowledge.

AL-MA’MŪN AND THE TREASURED KNOWLEDGE

The actions of one of the most active supporters of the translation movement, the caliph al-Ma’mūn,⁹⁸ fall within the presented concerns and lend support to the argument that the ideological and intellectual priorities and demands of target language and culture affected and even shaped how the translations were carried out.⁹⁹ As has been suggested in the previous pages, ‘Abbāsīd literati expected ancient knowledge to have survived in manuscripts, relics, scripts, and magical tablets that lay buried in ancient ruins, hidden in temples and monasteries, tucked away in libraries, or preserved in palaces until they would be discovered by and revealed to the deserving seeker.¹⁰⁰ The most popular reason in

⁹⁷ Nu‘aym, *al-Fitan*, pp. 295, 223. *Abdallāh ibn Lahī’a (97–174/715–790) Juge et grand maître de L’École Égyptienne: Avec édition critique de l’unique rouleau de papyrus arabe conservé à Heidelberg*, ed. and trans. Raif G. Khoury (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), pp. 302–303. The location of treasures varies in prophecies: Antioch, Damascus, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome are all possible locations. For similar prophecies see Nu‘aym, *al-Fitan*, pp. 216, 220, 246; al-Ṣan‘ānī, *al-Muṣannaf*, 11:388.

⁹⁸ For the caliph’s scholarly patronage and interests, see Michael Cooperson, *The Makers of Islam: Al-Ma’mūn* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), p. 81ff.

⁹⁹ In his lament of al-Amīn (r. 809–813) Khuzayma ibn al-Ḥasan praises al-Ma’mūn, perhaps shortly after 813, as “the inheritor of the ancients’ knowledge and understanding.” Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, 31:221; Abū Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn A’tam al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, vol. 8, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mu’īd Khān et al. (Hyderabad: Osmania Oriental Publications Bureau, 1968–1975), p. 309.

¹⁰⁰ For some examples, see Jamāl al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Yūsuf ibn al-Qifṭī, *Ikhbār al-‘Ulamā’ bi Akhbār al-Ḥukamā’*, ed. J. Lippert (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 29–30. In the introduction of the *Secrets of Creation* the author tells his readers that he found the manuscript containing the secrets of creation through search within self and by pursuing specific signs and symbols that led him to an underground treasure where his perfect nature showed him the way to a man

medieval sources for why al-Ma'mūn was interested in ancient sciences was his dream about Aristotle, of which we have two versions. According to the narrative, al-Ma'mūn, motivated by what he had seen in his dream, wrote to the Byzantine emperor and requested his permission to obtain manuscripts containing ancient sciences, *al-'ul ūm al-qadīma*, kept in Byzantine libraries.¹⁰¹ Having obtained permission, al-Ma'mūn dispatched a group of scholars who selected and eventually brought a number of manuscripts to Baghdad, where they were translated into Arabic on al-Ma'mūn's orders.¹⁰²

As a historical fact the dream narrative seems to date, as Gutas argues, from different periods, and even in the case of one report (from Ibn Nubāta), which seems to date to al-Ma'mūn's time, it may not have had any relation to the translation movement.¹⁰³ Without repeating the modern arguments here,¹⁰⁴ one would add from the perspective of this study that there seems to be only a slight chance that the inventors of the report were not aware of the translation activities and of the implication of the dream for the caliph's role in them. The report probably hoped not only to identify the foundations of legitimate knowledge, but also to endow the caliph with a higher spiritual rank at which divine sanction justified his action. The report acknowledges dreams as a source of knowledge.¹⁰⁵ Therefore the dream is intended to function as both the vehicle to carry a message and the message itself—a form of revelation¹⁰⁶ in which the caliph appears as the deserving seeker who was given revelation while unconscious and privileged with

sitting on a golden throne holding a tablet of green emerald. Next to the throne lay a book containing the *Secrets of Creation*. For the translation of the introduction, see Rosenthal, *Classical*, pp. 246–247.

¹⁰¹ Compare al-Ma'mūn's dream to that of Han emperor Ming-Ti (57/58–75/76), who saw a flying golden man in his dream. His advisors interpreted that figure to be the vision of Buddha. The narrative goes on to tell us that the emperor commissioned envoys to go and bring Buddhist text from India to translate them into Chinese. For the dream, see Keneth Che'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 29ff.

¹⁰² Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, p. 243 (Flugel).

¹⁰³ Gutas, *Greek*, pp. 97, 101–102.

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed examination of the dream, see Gutas, *Greek*, p. 97ff. Also see Cooper-son, *Al-Ma'mūn*, pp. 105–106.

¹⁰⁵ For an analogous incident reflecting al-Ma'mūn's premonition power, see Aḥmad ibn Alī al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād aw Madīnat al-Salām*, vol. 10, ed. Muḥammad Amīn al-Khānjī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1931), p. 188.

¹⁰⁶ It is useful to remember that Muḥammad himself received revelation sometimes in his dream and that the Qur'an offers numerous dream narratives such as the stories of Abraham and Joseph.

divine providence to have extraordinary insight. On a discursive level, given the dialogue between al-Ma'mūn and Aristotle¹⁰⁷ in the dream, the whole episode falls squarely into the broader notion of dialogue between the master and the pupil in the exposition of knowledge, as exemplified in particular in the dream myth of Poimandres appearing to his dreamer to “hand down” the knowledge of existing things and the true knowledge of God and the encounter of Moses with the prophetic figure of Khidr, who reveals to Moses the wisdom of hidden knowledge. In many early Islamic texts, including the Qur'an and early Islamic dream literature, groundbreaking dreams had long been associated with figures of high religious, social, or political stature conveying revolutionary messages to their people.¹⁰⁸

The dream may not explain al-Ma'mūn's support of the translation activities, but it does shed light on the expectations and mentality of 'Abbāsīd literati and the cultural context in which translations were made. The mentality presented in the dream narrative is reflected in another story, which seems to have originated at the court of al-Ma'mūn to justify his support of the translation activities. In Miskawayh's (d. 1030) *al-Ḥikma al-Khālida*, al-Ma'mūn's name appears in a fascinating story concerning the recovery of an ancient manuscript.¹⁰⁹ According to the narrative, the manuscript was written in ancient script, based on ancient wisdom, and kept in a little box of black glass under the floor of a palace courtyard in al-Madā'in (Ctesiphon). The story credits a sage named Dhūbān, who was sent to al-Ma'mūn by the king of Kābūlistān when al-Ma'mūn was pronounced caliph, and al-Ma'mūn with unearthing or unveiling a portion of the *sophia perennis* attributed to the antediluvian king Hoshank and titled the *Book of Eternal Knowledge (Jāvidān Khirad)*. The story ends with the note that the 'Abbāsīd courtier al-Ḥasan ibn Sahl (d. 850 or 851) translated a portion of this manuscript into Arabic.¹¹⁰ The story, actual or

¹⁰⁷ Aristotle would shortly emerge as more than a philosopher. He became a monotheist sage and even a prophet.

¹⁰⁸ Artemidorus had maintained that cosmic dreams could only be seen by kings, magistrates, or at least, the members of nobility, not by ordinary people. See Scarborough, “Hermetic,” p. 27. We know that portions of the *Oneirocritica* were translated by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, pp. 255, 316 (Flügel).

¹⁰⁹ Al-Jāhīz appears as the transmitter of the report on the authority of al-Ḥasan ibn Sahl via al-Wāqīdī (d. 823), which makes the story more difficult to rule out as a later fantasy.

¹¹⁰ Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Miskawayh, *al-Ḥikma al-Khālida (Jāvidān Khirad)*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1925), pp. 19–21. See also Pingree, *Thousands*, p. 1.

fictional, of the recovery of a manuscript containing antediluvian wisdom links al-Ma'mūn's name not only to the collection of manuscripts but also to Hermetic mediation by which the caliph, the sage, and the translator collaboratively expose a hidden thing and mediate between divine wisdom and the people at large. A valuable hidden source of knowledge finally finds its deserving seeker. This anecdote is only one of the numerous narratives describing al-Ma'mūn's role in the search for ancient manuscripts.¹¹¹

Whether or not such an event happened is only of secondary importance; what is relevant here is the articulation of the cultural and ideological expectations according to which ancient knowledge was sought and processed. Approaching the subject from the perspective of self-definition, cultural and ideological expectations may shed a new light on one of the most remarkable actions of al-Ma'mūn, which appears to be related to his broader interest in ancient knowledge—namely, his excavation of the pyramids in Egypt, which he conducted at the beginning of 832 when he came to Egypt to pacify the Bashmūric uprising there.¹¹² The caliph stayed for several weeks in Egypt, and during this time he ordered that the pyramid of Cheops be opened up to find out what it housed. After arduous excavation through the narrow passageways and chambers, al-Ma'mūn apparently succeeded in reaching the gallery and the burial chamber, but to his disappointment he found only decayed remains. At that point the caliph apparently ordered the project halted.¹¹³ However, before going back to Damascus to ready his troops for the ongoing offensive against Byzantium, he commissioned someone to translate the writings on the pyramids for him. The translator was an Egyptian sage named Ayyūb ibn Maslama. According to al-Idrīsī, he was “an old man who had been recommended to him by the other sages of Egypt because he could decipher hieroglyphs

¹¹¹ For various examples see Muḥammad 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Himyarī, *Rawḍ al-Mi'tār fī Khabar al-Aqṭār*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, n.d.), p. 16ff.; Eric Graefe, “Das Pyramidenkapitel in al-Maqrizī's 'Khiṭaṭ,’” *Leipziger Semitischen Studien* 5 (1968): 8ff.

¹¹² For the most up to date examination of this episode of al-Ma'mūn's biography see Michael Cooperson, “Al-Ma'mūn, the Pyramids, and the Hieroglyphs,” in John Nawas, ed. *'Abbāsīd Studies II. Occasional Papers of the School of 'Abbasid Studies Leuven, 28 June 1 July, 2004*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta Series 177* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009 [forthcoming]), pp. 165–190. Cooperson convincingly argues for the plausibility of al-Ma'mūn's excavation of the pyramid. See especially pp. 167–177.

¹¹³ See Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Idrīsī, *Anwār 'Ulwiyy al-Ajrām fī Kashf 'an Asrār al-Ahrām (Das Pyramidenbuch des Abu Ga'far al-Idrīsī [st. 649/1251])*, eingeleitet und kritisch herausgegeben von Ulrich Haarmann (Beirut: Franz Steiner, 1991), pp. 34–35; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, 5:402.

(*al-aqlām al-birbāwiyya*)." Al-Idrīsī further notes that "he translated for al-Ma'mūn what was written on the Pyramids, the two obelisks of Heliopolis, a stela found in a village stable near Memphis, another stela from Memphis itself, [as well as writings found] in Bū Sīr and Sammānūd. Everything he translated is in a book called al-Ṭilasmāt al-Kāhiniya (Priestly Talismans). . . ." ¹¹⁴

Although we do not have any information on whether al-Ma'mūn had an opportunity to read the translations, we do have some clues as to why he might have wanted to excavate the pyramids in the first place. Some medieval sources claim that al-Ma'mūn intended to demolish them out of religious zeal, or to take on an ancient challenge that no one could demolish them, or to recover a precious treasure buried in them. ¹¹⁵ We should dismiss such claims as they are inconsistent with what al-Ma'mūn apparently did. Clearly, the caliph intended something else, as can be inferred from his eagerness to get the hieroglyphs translated into Arabic. Ultimately what al-Ma'mūn was looking for had to do with the circulating opinions about the pyramids and about the nature and meaning of ancient knowledge among the 'Abbāsīd learned elite. Van Reeth has already argued that al-Ma'mūn was looking for the legacy of Adam to his son Seth, ¹¹⁶ as well as the knowledge of the mystery of creation ¹¹⁷ in the pyramids, where, according to legend, Adam and his five sons laid buried. Al-Ma'mūn could have been conceivably informed by the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch, Dionysius of Tell Mahre (d. 845), about the legend. ¹¹⁸ Plessner has suggested that al-Ma'mūn was perhaps looking, among other things, for the tablet of Hermes, whose existence the caliph might have learned of from the

¹¹⁴ Al-Idrīsī, *Anwār*, pp. 60–61. Translation is from Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mūn, the Pyramids," p. 180. For issues about the authenticity of this report and related historiographical discussion see the same article.

¹¹⁵ See Al-Ḥimyarī, *Rawḍ al-Mi'tār*, pp. 16–17; Graefe, "Das Pyramidenkapitel," pp. 8–9, 36. For other material see Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mūn, the Pyramids," pp. 185–186.

¹¹⁶ Seth was identified with Agathadaimon. See Alexander Fodor, "The Origins of the Arabic Legends of the Pyramids," *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* 23 (1970): p. 335. Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ikḥbār al-'Ulamā'*, p. 2. Graefe, "Das Pyramidenkapitel," pp. 18, 42.

¹¹⁷ The author of the celebrated *Ghāyat al-Hakīm* notes the connection between Hermes and the key to the secrets of creation. See Pseudo al-Majrīṭī, *Ghāyat al-Hakīm*, pp. 187–188.

¹¹⁸ J. M. F. van Reeth, "Caliph al-Ma'mūn and the Treasure of the Pyramids," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 25 (1994): 221–223, 229–230, 234. The legend clearly overlaps with the tales of Enoch and the Persian Hoshank. Dionysius of Tell Mahre would have been familiar with a sixth-century Syriac text, *Me'arat Gazze*, that described the *Cave of Treasures*. The cave was identified with the pyramid of Cheops.

Greek translation of a Babylonian legend.¹¹⁹ Most recently Cooperson argued for a connection between the expedition and the translation movement underway in Baghdad and concluded that the caliph, being interested in knowledge in general and the meaning of the hieroglyphs in this particular case, might have been looking for libraries housing texts from pagan times.¹²⁰

That the caliph was looking for ancient knowledge and texts seems a thoroughly plausible explanation, though the nature of al-Ma'mūn's search does not appear to be an open-ended, sober, and rationalist quest for libraries of pagan past as Cooperson argues. Contextual evidence concerning what the pyramids might have meant for the contemporaries of the caliph justifies the suggestion that the caliph considered the pyramids a station in his search for prophetic wisdom that included, to use contemporary parlance, secular and religious knowledge. To frame al-Ma'mūn's search better and delineate a possible motivation for him within the ongoing discussion, we need to take into account how the early 'Abbāsīd learned elite imagined the pyramids. By the time of al-Ma'mūn, the pyramids were already imagined to have been built by antediluvian or prophetic figures shortly after the Flood to preserve knowledge both within the walls of the pyramids and in the symbolic language of the hieroglyphic script. As a number of scholars have shown, legends of this sort were quite widespread at the time.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Plessner, "Hermes," pp. 48–49, 55. For the Arabic tradition of the Emerald Tablet and associated literature, see Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina*; David Pingree, "The Sābi'ans of Ḥarrān," p. 25. That al-Ma'mūn found the tablet of Hermes containing his *Risālat al-Sirr*, which was associated with *Book of the Secret of Creation and the Art of Nature*, on a gold tablet in the tomb of the Egyptian princess of Akhmim (Panopolis) is a later report generated, as Cooperson concluded, perhaps by al-Ma'mūn's excavation itself. Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mūn, the Pyramids," pp. 186–187, 188ff.

¹²⁰ Cooperson, "Al-Ma'mūn, the Pyramids," pp. 184–185.

¹²¹ 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam 214/829, *Futūḥ Miṣr wa Akhbārīha*, ed. Muḥammad al-Hujayrī (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), p. 110, notes that no one in Egypt among the knowledgeable knew anything certain about the pyramids. His remark suggests the lack of definite knowledge but not of legends and stories, which he probably did not share enthusiastically. For circulating legends about the pyramids see Fodor, "Origins," pp. 335–363. Graefe, "Das Pyramidenkapitel," pp. 8–9. van Reeth, "Caliph al-Ma'mūn." In a legend the king Sūrīd, an antediluvian king of Egypt, appears as the builder of the pyramids. According to the legend, the king saw in a dream one hundred years before the Flood that Egypt would be devastated by a catastrophic natural calamity. Acting upon his dream, the king ordered the construction of the pyramids to protect and preserve the sciences until new generations would come to Egypt and discover the remains. See Fodor, "Origins," pp. 346–352. However, the legend of Sūrīd dates later than the third/ninth century and seems to be modeled on the Hermes legend as Cook argues. See Cook, "Pharaonic History," p. 8off.

Ibn Nawbakht's discussion makes clear that the 'Abbāsids were aware of the connection between the pyramids and ancient knowledge at least by the second half of the eighth century. Ibn Nawbakht maintained that the mythic king of Persian antiquity, al-Ḍaḥḥāk ibn Qay, who came after Jam ibn Awanjhān, built a city named after Jupiter, because he ruled under the sign of that planet. In this city he constructed twelve palaces, which he named after the twelve signs of the zodiac, with twelve libraries, which were staffed with a number of scholars, including Hermes, who "went to the land of Egypt, where he ruled over the inhabitants, making the land prosperous, improving the conditions of the people, and manifesting his wisdom among them."¹²² Al-Ma'mūn's contemporary Abū Ma'shar, going even further, considered the pyramids to be structures built to house and preserve the antediluvian sacred knowledge attributed to Hermes. According to him, Hermes

was the first to warn of the coming of the Flood and thought that a heavenly catastrophe of water and fire will strike the earth. He resided in Upper Egypt, which he chose [for himself], and built there the pyramids and the cities of clay. [When] he feared the loss of knowledge [*ilm*] in the Flood he built the temples (*barābī*), which is a mountain known as *Barbā* in Akhmīm. He chiseled it out and copied on it in carving the entirety of arts and their uses and depicted all the instruments of the artists and showed in illustration the characteristics of the sciences out of his desire to preserve sciences eternally for those after him and out of fear that its image would vanish from the world.¹²³

Apparently, the fame of the pyramids as antediluvian structures became increasingly widespread among learned elite that Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 1229) would later exclaim that he had inquired about the pyramids among Egyptian scholars but found no one who knew anything about them except the claim that they had been built before the Flood.¹²⁴

One has no reason to suspect that al-Ma'mūn's knowledge of the pyramids was dramatically different from that of his contemporaries. Such a quest, as al-Idrīsī (d. 1251) noted, "to expose the secrets that the pyramids concealed from the people and to learn their true

¹²² Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, p. 239 (Flugel). Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 2:572–574 (Dodge).

¹²³ Ibn Juljul, *Ṭabaqāt*, pp. 5–6; Pingree, *Thousands*, p. 15; Plessner, "Hermes," pp. 50–51.

¹²⁴ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, 5:401, 402.

meaning”¹²⁵ would fit the self-perception and image of the caliph, who claimed the ambitious titles of the leader of guidance and God’s caliph. If we operate on the assumption that al-Ma’mūn knew the circulating prophecies and legends about prophetic and antediluvian knowledge, his support of the translation movement would not only enhance his claim to an expanded religio-political authority fully deployed to create a tightly centralized empire but also synchronize with his puritanical view of faith.¹²⁶

CONCLUSION

It is true that not all early scientific endeavors had to be justified by the search for antediluvian wisdom, nor were sciences always seen as identical to prophetic wisdom and revelation. In Baghdad, multiple currents of thought certainly existed that led to various understandings of the meaning and purpose of science. Especially those who had hands-on experience with the sciences knew that scientific work contained religious and secular knowledge from diverse cultures and languages.¹²⁷ This article does not dispute that fact; rather it attempts to illustrate the ways in which this diverse body of knowledge became acceptable to ‘Abbāsīd learned elite and points out some of the ideological and cultural assumptions and preconditions that shaped the image and function of ancient sciences within the framework of ‘Abbāsīd political and social life. It seems necessary to look at the translation movement not just as a one-dimensional linguistic and technical question, but rather a discourse that on the one hand reflects the development of self-consciousness among ‘Abbāsīd ruling and learned elites and on the

¹²⁵ Al-Idrīsī, *Anwār*, pp. 60–61.

¹²⁶ For al-Ma’mūn’s religio-political ambitions see Tayeb el-Hibri, “The Reign of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Ma’mūn (811–833): The Quest for Power and the Crisis of Legitimacy” (unpublished PhD diss., Columbia University, 1994), chap. 2; Michael D. Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma’mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 2; Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 92ff. Hayrettin Yücesoy, *Messianic Beliefs*, chaps. 4–6.

¹²⁷ The spectrum of secular sciences in the early ‘Abbāsīd period is perhaps best illustrated in the *Book of Treasures*, which documents the available sciences for learning and instruction in the early ninth-century ‘Abbāsīd Baghdad. A. Mingana, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical and Natural Sciences as Taught in Baghdad About A.D. 817 or Book of Treasures by Job of Edessa* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1935). Also See, Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, 2:276ff.

other hand reveals attempts at positioning self vis-à-vis others, devising strategies to legitimize political and cultural power, and creating categories and texts to contain, absorb, and represent ancient cultures from the vantage point of particular 'Abbāsīd and Muslim worldviews and sensibilities.

We have already pointed out the translation movement as an act of conquest in which the translator/receiving culture collects, surveys, classifies, and categorizes the source text to manage and control its content according to the demands of a new context. Translation helped 'Abbāsīd elites imagine a historical past that had seemed chaotic and extraneous as a fixed, coherent, and relevant heritage whose multiple aspects could be situated at various points of distance from the 'Abbāsīd ideological and cultural epicenter. By recognizing its value nonetheless, 'Abbāsīd literati made past human knowledge a fundamental part of a master narrative that recast human history from the perspective of biblical monotheism, but culminating in the message of the last prophet and his community as the legitimate and necessary instruments of the final unfolding of the divine drama. In a sense, part of this complex mental and cultural process was, for the benefit of all, an attempt to dissipate the confusion emanating from the Towers of Babel and achieve unmediated encounter with both Ur-knowledge and *Ur sprache*.¹²⁸ One may not go as far as arguing that the 'Abbāsīd translators translated themselves into the thought of other languages,¹²⁹ but the point is that we can no longer look at the translations as a mechanical transfer of meaning from one language to another without reference to epistemological categories and discourses that shaped them.

¹²⁸ For theoretical and theological issues involving language and translation in the context of the Babel myth see Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," in *Difference in Translation*, ed. and trans. Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165–248.

¹²⁹ See Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (Bristol, U.K.: Multilingual Matters, 2001), p. 155.

