

## **Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in the East: The Syriac and Arabic Translation and Commentary Tradition**

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*Leiden: Brill, 2008. 347 pages.*

The Late Antique Aristotelian tradition inherited by the world of early Islam in the Near East considered the *Rhetoric* an integral part of one's training in logic and reasoning. Thus far, however, there has been little academic interest in it, apart from Deborah Black's ground-breaking monograph published some two decades ago and the recent edition in Maroun Aouad's translation and study of Ibn Rushd's commentary on it. Vagelpohl's revised Cambridge dissertation is a careful historical and linguistic study of its translation and naturalization in Syriac (less so) and Arabic learned culture in the Near East. As such, he considers the text a case study that raises wider questions about the whole process of the translation movement that, after a relative absence of interest, is again inspiring a new vogue of academic literature.

Since translation is a process of cultural exchange, it is important to pay attention to details and formulations. The choice of the *Rhetoric* requires some justification, as Vagelpohl admits, for two reasons: (a) the Aristotelian

text was not that significant in antiquity; more practical manuals were more widely used and taught, and (b) the Arabic tradition distinguished between two traditions of rhetoric, an indigenous genre of *balaghah* (and *bayan*) that drew upon classics of the Arabic language and was essential for training preachers and functionaries, and a more philosophical and Hellenizing *khitabah* represented by the Aristotelian text and its commentary, such as the one by Ibn Rushd. Clearly the former tradition dominated, for even a cursory examination of the manuscript traditions and texts in libraries attests to this imbalance. However, Vagelpohl argues that the challenges posed by the text reveal strategies and approaches used by the translators to deal with the cultural exchange that may assist our understanding of the wider translation movement.

The study is divided into four chapters. The first analyzes the translation movement as a whole and locates the *Rhetoric* within this context. The author argues for a contextualized approach in opposition to a narrow philological isolationism. While positivism has been the order of the day, stressing the need for historical transmission and consistently wishing to find the missing links between the Aristotelian text and its translation, Vagelpohl suggests that an element of the oral should not be overlooked. The wider history and sociology of the transmission of knowledge in early and classical Islam suggests that oral transmission occurred alongside the written and cannot be discounted as a serious mode of dissemination (as Schoeler has shown in a work that Vagelpohl translated from German). The rest of the chapter summarizes the state of research on the translation movement drawing upon Rosenthal, Gutas, and Endress, especially on the Kindi-circle and that of Hunayn ibn Ishaq.

The next chapter examines the actual translation with a consideration of the Syriac tradition. The Paris *unicum* has been edited twice by Badawi and Lyons, and Vagelpohl weighs up the relative merits of the editions. The discussion of the Syriac tradition is significant, due to Lyons' hunch that there must have been a Syriac intermediary, an assumption often made for many of Aristotle's translated works. But while the Arabic and Syriac Aristotelian traditions were linked and the translators often knew both languages, they were formed and perpetuated in pedagogical contexts that were quite distinct. As usual, we are left with a situation in which there is little historical evidence to make firm conclusions.

The third chapter, the longest and most substantial philological examination, compares the Arabic and Greek texts and raises issues. Around one-sixth of the text is sampled using the translation theory of Basim Hatim and Ian Mason. Vagelpohl concludes that the translation must be a fairly early

one. The difficulties of the Greek and the literary context from which it arose constituted obstacles. The translator struggled with the text and produced something with a significant terminological variation. Assessing the internal terminological evidence in its context, he concludes that it must have been produced in the Kindi-circle, in which the language was often preliminary and terms were not as fixed as in the latter translations of Hunayn. This would tally with the assumption that the earliest texts produced in the translation movement were eminently practical elements of logic and argument and some preliminary metaphysics. Given the place of the *Rhetoric* in the *organon*, this clearly makes sense.

The final chapter, which is far too brief, analyzes the legacy – both East and West – of the translation. The author recognizes the importance; after all, the translation itself is only a step in cultural transmission. The three great philosophers of the classical period all engaged with the text in different ways. For al-Farabi, it was an inspiration for his own thinking on rhetoric and its logical function. Ibn Sina wrote two relevant works: the short sections of *Al-Hikmah al-'Arudiyah* functions somewhat like a manual of rhetoric and focuses upon the practical elements, while his own work on the rhetoric in *Al-Shifa'* is a more extensive and complete contemplation of the Aristotelian text, often responding to the long commentary of Ibn al-Tayyib, one of the Baghdadi Christian Peripatetics he often criticized.

While some other authors wrote small epitomes, the most significant contribution that signalled (as it did for his whole corpus) a return to Aristotle was Ibn Rushd's *Middle Commentary*, so magisterially analyzed and translated by Aouad. It is also a controversial text, given the attempts by Butterworth and other Straussians to relate Ibn Rushd's understanding of rhetoric to political philosophy. The Latin afterlife of the influence of his commentary assured continued interest in the *Rhetoric*, although it died out in the Muslim world (as did formal interest in the works of Aristotle) after the thirteenth century. It would have been interesting for Vagelpohl to discuss the influence of the *Rhetoric* on *balaghah* and other genres of writing and disciplines of the madrasah, since the middle period's approach led to a more holistic vision of intellectual inquiry. But that in itself might merit a monograph on its own. The conclusion follows, appended with a good, extensive glossary of relevant Greek-Arabic and Arabic-Greek terms that acts as a wonderful complement to the argument.

The author concludes with an important insight: What the Greek-into-Arabic tradition often sees as mistakes in translation and transcription are, in fact, attempts by the translator to find a cultural fit. Any translation is a new literary text and needs to be taken seriously on its own merits. This is pre-

cisely why the Arabic Aristotle is relevant to understanding classical philosophy in Islam, as opposed to the Greek. Overall the text is well produced, although inevitably there are a number of small typographical errors. Vagelpohl has given us an excellent text that contributes to our understanding of the translation movement, even if the title does not entirely indicate it.

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