Dag Hasse

GREEK THOUGHT, MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN INTERESTS

Cultural Transfer in the Middle Ages

The Arabic to Latin translation movement in Spain is one of the founding myths of European culture. It occupies an honourable but perhaps somewhat too elevated a place in the history of the Old World: as initiator of the 12th century renaissance, as the real starting-point for the rise of the natural sciences in the West, as the sign of a new medieval culture of intellectuals, and as the beginning of the prolonged dominance of the Aristotelian world view in the Occident or, otherwise expressed, of the long Middle Ages which were only to end with the decline of feudal agricultural society. And yet the occurrence itself is more often described than explained, more often referred to than understood. One reads about the routes knowledge is said to have taken, from Athens by way of Alexandria and Baghdad to Toledo, and hears about such great translators as Gerhard of Cremona, but little about causes and motivations. This is not surprising; in fact it constitutes the character of what is for us today a mythical process.

Historical research is not yet able to prescribe to modern writers with complete confidence how this wave of translations should be put into perspective. In recent decades Spanish and English researchers, such as Francisco Hernández and Charles Burnett, have led the way in assembling from the sources fresh details about the lives and work of the translators. The difficulties of such research become apparent if one considers, for instance, how many people in medieval Castile were called Johannes and might be the translator Johannes Hispanus. The availability of sources relating to the general intellectual environment is similarly unfavourable since disappointingly little contemporary documentation has survived that makes any mention of the translations, thereby providing us with an external view of the phenomenon.

PRECURSORS

Faced with such difficulties, questions about the reason for and motivation underlying this movement must be posed intelligently and employ the right methodology. A confident demonstration of such questioning is provided by the work of Dimitri Gutas, a Greek-American Arabist, in his book *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*. This is concerned with an earlier Islamic wave of translation, an illustrious precursor of the Spanish movement. If this book is read as a source of stimulation regarding methods for use in both medievalist and Arabist research, it provides an impulse for renewed investigation into the motivation for the translations into Spanish.

Between the 8th and 10th centuries A.D., a large number of Greek texts relating to science and philosophy were translated into Arabic in Baghdad, the metropolis (founded in 762) of the still relatively young Islamic Abbasid Empire. One of the strengths of Gutas' book is that this process, which extended over two centuries and was supported and financed by the elite of the Empire, is treated primarily as a social phenomenon, as a movement deliberately implemented by the chief administrators of the realm and highly dependent on the specific structure of Baghdad society. Gutas describes how the Abbasids came to power by overthrowing the previous dynasty and were primarily concerned with justifying and consolidating their rule, for which they used translations as an ideological instrument. These translations served as a weapon in the struggle against opponents within their own Persian camp, among Christian subjects, and among Islamic theologians. According to the propaganda, the new dynasty was the sole true successor to all previous empires and all traditional forms of scholarship – particularly Greek scholarship.

At the same time a perceptible demand for Greek scholarship developed in various circles and levels of Baghdad society – among scribes in the administration and merchants as well as among scholars. To gain access to books about astrology, mathematics, or medicine, people were prepared to spend a lot of money. Consequently the sponsors of translations included not only the ruling families, but also affluent officers and private scholars. The translation movement thus appears as a complex social process, with the far-reaching consequence that for centuries the study of classical sciences became an essential and sometimes even dominant component within Muslim intellectual culture.

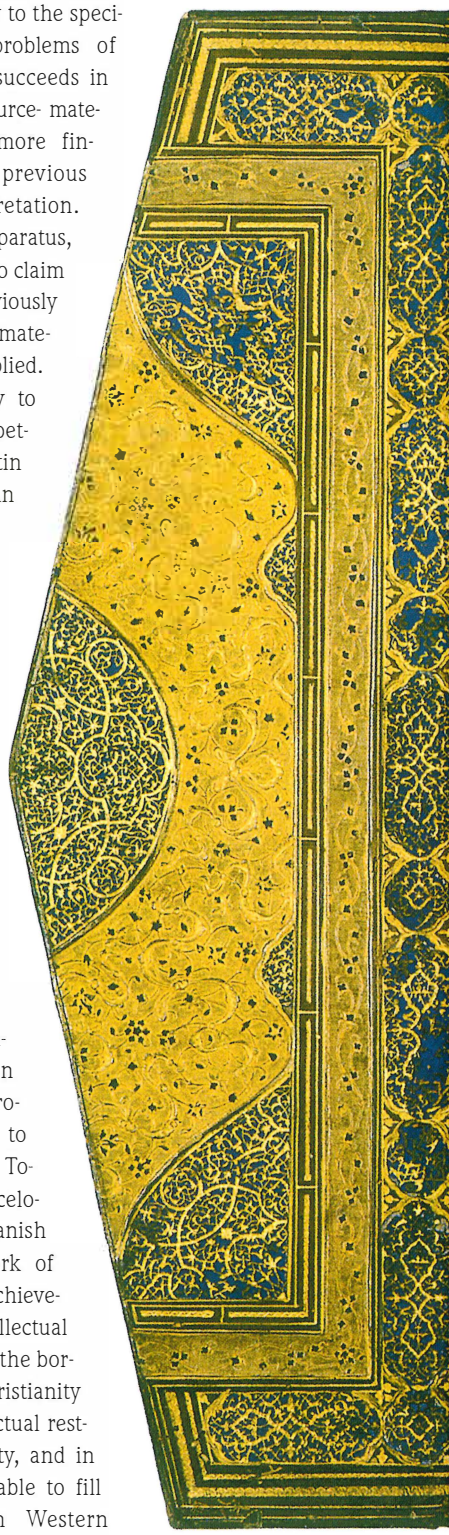
Greek Thought, Arabic Culture is not written with the West in mind, but it can nevertheless be read as a contribution towards the historiography of European

medieval culture – not just because the Arab world, alongside Rome and Greece, is one of the immediate and as it were classical cultural sources of the Occident, but also, and primarily, because of the book's methodology. That may not be apparent at first sight since Gutas expressly refuses to provide theoreti-

Farhad Moshiri: Stereo Bag Round Table. Photo: Stefan Weidner From the exhibition Far Near Distance. *Contemporary Positions of Iranian Artists. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 20 March – 9 May 2004.*

cal underpinning for his analysis of the translation movement. Existing theories of cultural encounter and translation are set aside in his introduction, but they make a brief appearance at the end of the book in the form of a terminological argument in favour of using 'creation' instead of 'appropriation'. Gutas maintains that the handing down of Greek knowledge to Arabic culture should be comprehended as a creation by the Baghdad political élite rather than the appropriation of something from outside.

Despite this sparing footnote, Gutas' methodological standpoint is clearly unwavering. The translations are not described as being either the outcome of curiosity on the part of a number of intellectuals or as an element in the autonomous development of Arab sciences. They are also not explained in terms of the history of classes or institutions, and certainly not deterministically. The driving forces in Gutas' history are the political and ideological interests of specific social groups and their absolutely rational actions. In the case of translations from Greek to Arabic this approach, coupled with great sensitivity to the specifically orientalist problems of the subject-matter, succeeds in deriving from the source- material incomparably more findings than all previous attempts at interpretation. The methodical apparatus, which in itself lays no claim to originality, is obviously appropriate for the material to which it is applied. Would it also apply to cultural meetings between Arabic and Latin during the European Middle Ages?



Binding: leather filigree with stamped and gilded decoration, 42.7 x 30.0 cm. The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, QUR 729. Reproduction from the catalogue of the exhibition Hunt for Paradise. *Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1501 – 1576. Museo Poldi Pezzoli and Palazzo Reale, Milan, 23 Feb. – 28 Jun. 2004.*

SPAIN

Consistent classification of translations in Spain in terms of ideology and social history (as opposed to later work under Friedrich II of Hohenstaufen) has not been attempted to date, probably mainly because the plausibility of the traditional explanation can hardly be improved on. According to this, translations in Toledo, Pamplona, Barcelona, and other Spanish cities were the work of individualists, the achievement of a few intellectual pioneers drawn into the borderland between Christianity and Islam by intellectual restlessness and curiosity, and in the hope of being able to fill enormous gaps in Western

scholarly writing, particularly the natural sciences, with the help of works in Arabic: Adelard of Bath and Robert of Ketton from England, Hermann of Carinthia from Dalmatia, and two Italians, Plato of Tivoli and Gerhard of Cremona.

It is probable that this picture is too idealistic; that it puts too much faith in the influence of purely intellectual factors. This is especially true of Toledo, where by far the most 12th century translations were done. Gerhard of Cremona alone translated around seventy works from Arabic into Latin, and his Spanish colleague Dominicus Gundissalinus half a dozen. These

include works of encyclopaedic dimensions. Merely copying them could take an entire year even if several copyists were set to work – the time required for the translation itself would have been far longer.

The translators were dependent on assistance from Jewish and Mozarabic scholars, in other words Arabised Christians. They needed money to pay for language teachers, parchment and copyists, and they had to be released from their everyday obligations. Both Gerhard of Cremona and Dominicus Gundissalinus belonged to the small international circle of the clergy of Toledo Cathedral, who were trained in Latin and oriented towards Cluny in France: Gerhard was a deacon and teacher, and Dominicus held the higher position of archdeacon.

Since the Christian reconquest of Toledo in 1085 the cathedral had been the centre of power in the city, and its sphere of influence extended far beyond the archbishopric over the entire Iberian peninsula. The translations were not a private venture; they involved the church.

But what were the political interests of the Archbishop of Toledo? It has been assumed (by Richard Lemay, for example) that the Archbishop saw the translations as a welcome weapon in the struggle against the Islamic enemy, as intellectual ammunition for the refutation of 'false doctrines'. However, in the 12th century the Archbishop's real enemies were not the Muslim armies in the south, but the Archbishops of Braga and Santiago de Compostela, who were bitter opponents of Toledo's pre-eminence as the spiritual and intellectual metropolis of the Iberian peninsula. In the 1150s and 1160s, as the translation movement was taking off in Toledo, the Archbishop achieved a series of spectacular political successes.

The remains of the right arm of Toledo's first Bishop, Eugenius, who was martyred in the first century A.D., were conveyed to the Spanish city from St. Denis near Paris. Probably not everyone in the cathedral chapter was convinced of the authenticity of this relic, since no first century Bishops were known and the first holder of that office named Eugenius lived in the seventh century. It was, however, certainly a highly symbolic act. The intention was that Toledo should once again assume the status it had enjoyed under the Empire of the Western Goths in late antiquity, a position St. Denis now claimed in France: that of the kingdom's political, spiritual, and intellectual centre.

Another success along the same lines was the burial of the bodies of two kings – Alfons VII and Sancho III of Castile – in the cathedral, bringing Toledo considerably closer to its objective of becoming Spain's Pantheon. It was during these years that reconstruction of the cathedral, completed only centuries later, was initiated.

TOLEDO'S SKILL

The translators Gerhard of Cremona and Dominicus Gundissalinus belonged to Toledo's cathedral chapter and thus to the political elite which strove actively, and not without success, for dominance over all of Spain's Christians. Gundissalinus was the more self-assured intellect, occupying a higher position and the author of his own works. The time has come to appreciate him not just as a writer of philosophy and theology but also as the archbishopric's chief ideologist. He translated Arabic works on spiritual doctrine and wrote his own compendium on that theme '...so that believers who toil so enthusiastically on behalf of their souls should grasp not only through belief but also with their reason what they should think about the soul'. Here, deploying new means derived from translations, claim is laid to a monopoly of declarations relating to the Church's innermost realm: the Christian soul.

That this soul requires guidance was absolutely beyond doubt for Gundissalinus, since the times were past when human beings were still educated and wise. 'Fortunate were those earlier times which brought forth so many wise men who, like stars, brought light to the darkness of the world. They left to us the many sciences they established as beacons to light the ignorance of our minds.' The churchmen of Toledo are presented as the true heirs of this wisdom. It is they who are making the sciences accessible once again to souls immersed in earthly affairs 'so that men may at least get a general taste of the wisdom which they, intoxicated by worldly vanity, wretchedly despise'.

Gundissalinus's programme is completely Christianised; it has none of the free-thinking intellectualism which people have attempted to attribute to the Spanish translators. In the 'hidden places of the Arab and Greek languages' Gundissalinus found a source which made possible the impressive multiplication of what was in Arabised Spain a shrunken body of Latin, and thus authoritative, texts – a source which had the advantage of flowing powerfully in Toledo and only weakly in Braga and Santiago. Presented propagandistically, and certainly not always appropriately, as Christian wisdom, these texts sent an unmistakeable signal to Christian subjects, hostile bishops, Spanish princes, and the Pope: the true spiritual leaders on the Iberian peninsula are the clerics of Toledo.

Dag Hasse teaches at the University of Würzburg. He specialises in the history of medieval Latin and Arabic philosophy.