

A.M. Roberts, *Reason and Revelation In Byzantine Antioch. The Christian Translation Program of Abdallah ibn al-Fadl*, University of California Press, Oakland 2020 (Berkeley Series in Postclassical Islamic Scholarship), 2 maps, XV+357 pp.

This book is about the Greek-into-Arabic translation program of an Arab Christian who lived in northern Syria under Byzantine rule in the mid 11th century: ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Faḍl of Antioch. Ibn al-Faḍl was a theologian and deacon in the Byzantine Church, and his ambitious translation program focused on Christian texts by ecclesiastical authors well known in the Byzantine world. Ibn al-Faḍl’s translations are part of a much larger story, the story of how ancient philosophy was cultivated, adapted, and reconceived in medieval Byzantine and Middle Eastern scholarly culture and religious education. The texts Ibn al-Faḍl translated are all what today we typically call religious texts: homilies on books from the Old and New Testaments, disquisitions on orthodox Christian doctrine, laudatory speeches honoring Christian saints, and guides to reforming the self in order to approach a Christian moral ideal. Ibn al-Faḍl’s own account of his translation program frames it in opposition to ancient philosophy and indeed any teachings outside Christianity. Nevertheless, Ibn al-Faḍl’s annotations on his translations regularly interpret these Christian texts through the lens of an ancient philosophical tradition of treatises, commentaries, education, speculation, and debate grounded in the works of Aristotle.

The first part of the book examines Ibn al-Faḍl’s translation program in detail. First, the Author considers Ibn al-Faḍl’s intellectual milieu and the multilingual city where he carried out his translations (Ch. 1, “A Scholar and His City”, pp. 5-32). Subsequently, he describes his translation program (Ch. 2, *A Translation Program*, pp. 33-82); next, he considers the list of translated texts taken as a whole (Ch. 3 “A Byzantine Ecclesiastical Curriculum”, pp. 83-119). Building upon this foundation, in the second part of the work, Roberts investigates the role of philosophy and philosophical education in how Ibn al-Faḍl read and taught the texts he translated. We will begin by turning to a crucial witness for understanding why Ibn al-Faḍl translated these texts: Ibn al-Faḍl himself. In the manuscripts of a number of his translations, Ibn al-Faḍl’s prefaces are preserved. These will allow Ibn al-Faḍl to tell us what motivated his work (Ch. 4, “Purpose in the Prefaces”, pp. 123-50). The Author then shift from Ibn al-Faḍl’s stated purpose to consider how he used his own translations and meant them to be used, by closely analyzing a selection of his marginalia on them (Ch. 5, “Education in the Margins”, pp. 151-80). In the subsequent chapters, Ibn al-Faḍl’s translations and marginalia allows Roberts to investigate the intersections of his translation program with “Logic” (Ch. 6, pp. 181-200), “Physics” (Ch. 7, pp. 201-31), “Cosmology” (Ch. 8, pp. 232-51), and “Astronomy” (Ch. 9, pp. 252-87). The volume contains a Bibliography (pp.), a General Index (pp. 325-44), an Arabic Index (pp. 345-50), a Greek Index (pp. 351-54), and a Index of Manuscripts (pp. 355-6).

Ibn al-Faḍl creates a new technical vocabulary for an Arab-Christian audience. As the Author states (p. 99), “This is a phenomenon familiar to Graeco-Arabists, for it was a major part of the task undertaken by translators of ‘secular’ philosophy, medicine, and other technical subjects from Greek into Arabic in the eighth to 10th century, and this fact has been noted and appropriately highlighted

as an important aspect of translators' intellectual contributions. We thus see Ibn al-Faḍl here engaging in a practice of translation shared with translators in Baghdad like Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (808–873). Ibn al-Faḍl's translations and retranslations were meant to capture the philosophical ideas undergirding and driving the texts of a Byzantine ecclesiastical curriculum being taught from Mount Athos to Constantinople to Antioch".

To conclude, I would like to add some minor remarks:

- The Author informs us (p. 84) that "many, many Greek manuscripts have been lost or destroyed over the centuries, so even the extant Greek manuscripts are only a small fraction of all the Greek manuscripts ever produced". Given the audience to which the book is addressed, this seems like a rather pleonastic remark. More in general, the book provides basic information about well-known authors and characters, which are sometimes quite naïve (for example [p. 52]: "John of Damascus (ca. 650–ca. 750) was a monk at the Monastery of Mar Saba outside of Jerusalem").

- According to the Author (n. 22, p. 10), who quotes an old article by Samir Khalil Samir, the originary meaning of "Yūnān" would be "Ionia". And yet, things are more complex. I would like to refer to reader to the analysis I have presented in my M. Di Branco, *Storie arabe di Greci e di Romani*, PLUS, Pisa 2009 (Le Vie del Sapere, Studi 1), part. pp. 37-40.

- The definition of Plato as an "orator" and his assimilation to Lysias (p. 91) seems a bit disturbing.

- The Author makes extensive use of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; on the contrary, he completely ignores the *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques* edited by Richard Goulet (CNRS Édition, I-VII, Supplément, Paris 1989-2018, now available online URL <<https://www.brepols.net/products/IS-9782503585734-1>, last consulted on 2022-10-30>) which constitutes a fundamental tool for the study of ancient philosophy.

- On some key issues, the Author seems to depend excessively on a single indirect source, strictly in English (e.g. he relies on E. Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, Berkeley & London 2006 [Transformation of the Classical Heritage] regarding the history of the last phase of the Athenian Neoplatonic school [p. 183], or, as for the Ancient Atomism [pp. 214-17], he relies on the article by S. Berryman, "Ancient Atomism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2022 Edition, Edward N. Zalta - Uri Nodelman [eds.], URL <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/atomism-ancient/>>, last consulted on 2022-10-30).

- The Author defines Proclus as a "diadochos of the Athenian Academy" (p. 241) without mentioning that this title does not imply the erroneous reconstruction of an uninterrupted continuity of the great philosophical schools of Athens from Hellenism to Late Antiquity. In fact, two important essays by John P. Lynch and John Gucker (J.P. Lynch, *Aristotle's School. A Study of a Greek Educational Institution*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1972, and J. Gucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1978) made clear that the Athenian Neoplatonic school has nothing to do with the Platonic Academy.

These remarks do not affect the importance of Roberts' book, which deserves a place of absolute prominence in the field of Graeco-Arabic studies.

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