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Cover
Mathâd, Kitâbkhânâ-i Āstîn-i Quds-i Râdawî 300, f. 1v; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

In 1994, Paul Lettinck wrote that the Physics of Aristotle “has influenced philosophy and science right up to the seventeenth century” and we could add that some of its concepts are still matter of scholarly discussion. And it strongly influenced Arabic, Jewish and Latin philosophy in the Middle Ages. For his research on its reception in the medieval Arabic world Lettinck relied on the Leiden manuscript Or. 583 (Warner) that had been edited by ʿAbdurrahman Badawī.

The indefatigable Badawī who worked amid hardship and isolation made available to the Arabic reader this manuscript containing the translation by Isḥāq ibn Ḥunayn (between 870-900) and all the incorporated commentaries, but he could not avoid a number of errors. He discussed whether or not that Yahyā who is mentioned only by this name as the author of some commentaries was the Christian Greek Johannes Philoponus known in Arabic as Yahyā al-Naḥwī, John the Grammarian, and he rejected the view. But as G. Endress has rightly proven, this Yahyā is actually John the Grammarian and he is the author of the fragmented commentaries ascribed to him, although they are often not literal. Lettinck translated Philoponus’ extant commentaries on Physics 5–8 into English and his translation is a complement to Philoponus’ original Greek commentaries since they are preserved for Books 1–4, and only few of them for the latter.

The error is easily understandable because the four major commentators belong to the Baghdad school of Aristotelian philosophers, so that the Leiden manuscript Or. 583 is an exceptional piece of evidence for their activity and the importance of Aristotle in Baghdad in the 10th and 11th centuries.

Given the import of the Arabic translation of the Physics, there was need for a critical edition that took into account the various stages and the Greek background of the Arabic text. The Greek tradition had been studied long time ago, and Herman Diels should be especially mentioned, but Pieter S. Hasper offers an updated study of 74 pages which considers new Greek manuscripts (pp. CXIII–CLXXXVII), showing how necessary was his new research.

Rüdiger Arnzen points to the “threefold aim” of his book: a) A critical edition of the “Linguistic Text” of the Arabic translation as opposed to the “Conceptual Text”, b) A comparison of this reconstructed text with the extant Greek copies, obtaining possible clues for reconstructing the Greek text, and c) A contribution to Graeco-Arabic lexicography (p. XXIII).

3 ʿAl-Ṭabīʿa (above, n. 2), p. 22.
The author, and editor, gives us a magisterial description of the manuscript Leiden Or. 583, its history and prehistory (pp. XXXVII-LXXV) and of the manuscript Escorial 896, that contains some passages of Books IV and V of the Physics. He informs us that “the Greek exemplar from which Ishāq ibn Hunayn prepared his Arabic translation of Aristotle’s Physics antedates all extant Greek manuscripts” (p. C). According to Pieter S. Hasper, the oldest one is Vind. Phil. gr. 100, 9th century (p. CXVI), and we know that the Vienna manuscript was probably written around the middle of that century. Ishāq ibn Hunayn had died in 910.

Arnzen enquires about the Greek manuscripts that Ishāq ibn Hunayn could have had at his disposal and he observes four coinciding omissions by homeoteleuton in Ishāq’s translation and the Greek text. The coincidence enables him to conclude that “the overwhelming part of Ishāq’s translation can be assigned beyond doubt to one of the known branches of the Greek manuscripts (branch alpha)” (pp. CXI - CXII). This conclusion marks the place where Hasper begins his research on the Greek manuscripts of Aristotle’s Physics. Hasper admits that the manuscript tradition is “quite complicated” but he proves that the common origin of E Paris gr. 1853 and Ypsilon the “exemplar” of the Arabic translation is undeniable. Auguste Mansion had found that Michael Scot’s translation of Aristotle’s Arabic Physics, which is contained in his translation of Averroes’ Long Commentary on it, is closely related to E Paris gr. 1853 and Arnzen agrees with him (p. CCIII).

The author considers the Latin reception of Ishāq ibn Hunayn’s text to be more important “for the critical edition” (p. CC), than the indirect Arabic transmission that he has also studied (pp. CLXXXVIII-CC). There are three Latin translations, by Gerard of Cremona (d. 1187), Michael Scot (d. ca. 1235) and by an unknown translator, respectively. Horst Schmieja deserves merit for discovering this third translation. Arnzen collated three manuscripts of Gerard of Cremona’s never printed translation of Book VIII for this chapter, compares them and draws a “tentative stemma” from Ishāq ibn Hunayn’s Arabic translation down to the anonymous Latin translator (around 1250?), and the stemma is very convincing (p. CCXXX).

The critical edition (pp. 1-120) is supported by three apparatuses, and Arnzen indicates that he preferred “clarity and legibility over economy” (p. CCXLII). The first refers basically to the preserved Greek manuscripts and to Ypsilon, the Greek text reconstructed by Arnzen on the basis of the Arabic manuscript. The reconstruction of the Greek text is of great usefulness for better understanding of the original Physics as well as for a new critical edition. I would even say that this apparatus is the key to Arnzen’s vault.

The second apparatus deals with the Arabic testimonies, of which the Leiden manuscript is the only one for Book VIII. Arnzen has reconstructed it as Phi, admitting its shortcomings. The Leiden manuscript abounds in glosses and marginal scholia, and it is plagued with difficulties. On folio 205r6, بوار “perdition, ruin” lacks the diacritical dot.
“no perdition” is translation of ἀθάνατον (Phys. 250 b 13), but Badawī suggested لا يزال and Arnzen prefers لا بواد.

In this apparatus Arnzen gives also the rationale for choosing the word, or phrase, indicating the sources in parenthesis, so that the reader can effectively solve his doubts. For instance, Phys. 250 b 15 – the agreement of the Greek manuscripts -- reads that there is motion, but Leiden Or. 583 misses “there is”. Badawi inserted موجودة in angled brackets, and so does Arnzen (p. 2, line 1), but the latter explains why: He points to the Greek consensus and to the Latin translations writing the equivalent word and sigla between parentheses.

The third apparatus gathers all glosses and scholia, and most of them are very difficult to read. Arnzen has been able to decipher them and identify the texts in the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Philoponus or Ibn al-Ṭayyib.

The main purpose of the work is to supply the editor of Aristotle’s Physics with a new, precious tool and it shows clearly that Arnzen has fully succeeded in achieving his purpose. Secondly, he has shed light on the importance of the Latin translation for Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages.

As for the Islamic side, Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn wanted to satisfy the need of his contemporaries for knowing Aristotle’s doctrines, and the Arabic translation fulfilled it for a long time, in a direct or indirect way. Whether contemporary Arab scholars benefited or not from Badawi’s edition or they will do so from Arnzen’s critical edition is a question to be answered yet.

Rüdiger Arnzen has completed his work with two impressive glossaries, Greek-Arabic and Arabic-Greek; Greek words are in original characters while Arabic terms are always transliterated. The high proficiency acquired throughout lifelong working on the Greek Arabic Lexicon “GALex” is reflected as an accomplished lexicon.

Josep Puig Montada