



SYRIAC LANGUAGE III. SYRIAC TRANSLATORS AS THE MEDIUM FOR TRANSMISSION OF GREEK IDEAS TO SASANIAN IRAN

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iii. Syriac Translators as the Medium for Transmission of Greek Ideas to Sasanian Iran

In 2005, Sebastian Brock wrote: “From the second century AD until the ninth century, there was an impressive number of translations from Greek to Syriac” (Brock, p. 11). Syriac scholars were the intermediaries in the transmission of Greek philosophy and medicine to the Iranians (see [GREECE xv](#), [GREECE xvi](#)), and, between the seventh and ninth centuries, that heritage was transmitted through the Syriac language. In the early sixth century, Sergius of Reš'aina was probably the first to continue the tradition of writing commentaries on the treatises on logic in Aristotle's *Organon*. This work was continued by Athanasius of Balad and Jacob of Edessa. The latter, at the end of the seventh century, revised an old translation of Aristotle's *Categories*. Also,



in the seventh century, Athanasius of Balad revised Porphyry's *Isagoge*, which had been translated into Syriac in the sixth century. The high point in the history of translation from Greek to Syriac came in the seventh century, during which translations in all domains were revised, including the Bible, liturgy, poetry, homiletics, theology, law, and philosophy (Brock, p. 25). There is, however, little evidence for the translation of all this immense literature from Syriac into Middle Persian, save in such fields as philosophy, medicine, and those pertaining to the Christian faith, such as the Bible, liturgy, and theology. For these, fragments of Pahlavi translation are attested.

The Bible is represented by a partial Middle Persian translation of the Syriac psalter (see [PAHLAVI PSALTER](#)), dating from the sixth or seventh century AD, perhaps even from the fourth century, according to Oktor Skjaervø (p. 178), and containing most of Psalms 94-136. The Our Father, the prayer Christ taught his disciples (Luke 11:2-4; Matthew 6:9-13) was translated into Middle Persian and quoted in the *Škand gumānīg wizār*; Antonio Panaino's ample commentary elucidates the origins of this version (2000, pp. 1939-40). Therefore, there must have existed a Middle Persian version of the Gospels that was used by the Persian Church, in order to make the canonical texts available to Persian-speaking Christians. Mardān-Farroḡ, the theologian and author of the *Škand gumānīg wizār*, may well have used it too, since he knew many passages from the Gospels (and also from St. Paul), some of which he quoted verbatim. We may also mention the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, an element of the Syro-oriental liturgy that was translated into Sogdian (Sims-Williams). The Nestorian Christians, who had largely become bilingual, were well-acquainted with Mazdean doctrine, as can be seen from the [Acts of the Persian Martyrs](#), in particular the story of Mar Qardag (Walker; Gignoux, 2008). One, however, cannot be sure that there were any Syriac translations of Pahlavi religious texts, given the very late date at which the latter were composed.

Philosophy. H. Hugonnard-Roche summed up the importance of the translator Sergius of Reš'aina when he wrote: "Sergius appears as a symbolic figure of the dissemination of Greek knowledge in the East, insofar as he strove towards the assimilation of two bodies of work of primordial importance in this historic movement: the works of [Galen](#) and those of Aristotle" (*JA* 277, p. 16). This eminent translator, physician, and philosopher, studied in Alexandria, where he became acquainted with the texts of Neoplatonist philosophy; using this knowledge, he wrote a commentary on Aristotle's logic. It was in Egypt too, presumably, that he became acquainted with the medical works of Galen,



some thirty of whose treatises he translated into Syriac according to [Bar Hebraeus](#)'s account (thirty-seven according to the ninth-century physician and translator, Ḥonayn b. Eshāq, on whom, see Strohmaier; for Ḥonayn's list of translations, see Bergsträsser). Sergius, a recognized expert on Aristotle (whose work was also at the root of Galen's), wrote two commentaries on the *Categories*. Between the sixth and the ninth centuries, many translations of works on logic (the *Categories*, *Peri Hermeneias*, and the *Prior Analytics*) are attested.

Medicine. [Hippocrates](#)' medicine, adopted and expanded by Galen, came to the Iranians thanks to Syriac transmitters. Galen's works includes books on medicine, philosophy, ethics, mathematics, and pharmacology. Unfortunately, not all of these have survived, while some that exist are found only in Latin and Arabic versions. We know, at any rate, that Ḥobayš b. Ḥasan Demašqi, a nephew and student of Ḥonayn b. Eshāq, made an Arabic translation of Galen's treatise *That the habits of the soul follow the temperament of the body*, based on the Syriac version produced by Ḥonayn but without reference to the Greek text, for it was easier to translate from one Semitic language to another (Boudon, p. 1207). Hippocrates' treatise on the [humors](#) was, however, translated first into Syriac and then into Arabic by Ḥonayn b. Eshāq (Gignoux, 2005, p. 55). In the sixth century, Sergius of Reš'aina remained the most famous translator of Galen. As a physician himself, he was well qualified for the task. The treatises of Syriac medicine, reliant on Greek medicine, are loyal to the ancient idea that the medicine of the soul is closely linked to that of the body, which follows from the fact that the soul tied to the body constitutes the unity of the human person. So says Aḥūhdemmeḥ, one of the best representatives of Syriac medicine in the sixth century. It is presumably this unity that gives rise to the theory of the [microcosm](#), on which Aḥūhdemmeḥ wrote a treatise that appears to have been lost (Nau, p. 107). The theory is clearly adopted by [Zādspram](#) (Gignoux, 2001, chap. 3; see also GREECE xvi. GREEK IDEAS AND SCIENCES IN SASANIAN IRAN). Among the theories explaining man as being composed of a soul and a body, to which Zādspram devoted two chapters of his *Anthology*, and which are also to be found in *Dēnkarđ* III and in the *Bundahišn*, at least two demand further consideration: the theory of powers (Syriac: *ḥyl'*, Mid. Pers. *zōr*; Greek: *dunamis*) and that of the various organs whose functions are simultaneously bodily and psychic. According to Aḥūhdemmeḥ, the soul has two powers: the vital and the rational. The vital power has two operations: anger (Gk. *thumikon*; Syr. *ḥmt*) and desire (Gk. *epithumētikon*; Syr. *rgt*), which are at the center of two powers,



one good and the other evil. The rational power is subdivided into four: knowledge (Gk. *gnōsis*; Syr. *md'*; Mid. Pers. *dānišn*), reasoning (Gk. *logismos*; Syr. *ḥwšb'*; Mid. Pers. *čim-gōwāgīh?*), intelligence (Gk. *nous*; Syr. *hwn'*; Mid. Pers. *ōš?*), and thought (Gk. *ennoia*; Syr. *tr'yt'*; Mid. Pers. *menišn?*).

The Iranian equivalents do not appear to match with the Greek and Syriac, but it appears to the present author that the Mazdean theologian Mardān-Farroḵ has mixed the vital and rational powers in such a way that we can, on the basis of *Dēnkard* III:157 (Menasce, pp. 165-66), reconstruct the following eight powers:

(1) *dānišn* “knowledge”;

(2) *xēm ī dānišn ham-juxt*, a characteristic that accompanies knowledge, which might be reasoning;

(3) *tagīgīh* “courage”;

(4) the Mazdean author adds *bowandag-menišnīh* “perfect intention” (which does not appear to have a Syriac equivalent), which in Syriac corresponds to the good operation of anger (Aristotle’s Gk. *andreia*; Syr. *gnbrwt*);

(5) the antonym of the preceding in Middle Persian is *sustīh* “slackness” (Syr. *dḥlt'*) and *xēšmīh*, the malign operation of anger;

(6) *abāyišn* “desire, necessity,” corresponding to Syriac *rgt'*, which is opposed to the following;

(7) *spōzgārīh* “refusal, disobedience,” represented in Syriac by *šrywt'* “excess, intemperance”;

(8) *nigerīdārīh* “observation” is connected to the good operation of desire, and represents the Syriac *knykwt'* “moderation, prudence, modesty” (Gignoux, 2001, p. 28).

Aḥūhdemmeḥ also writes that intelligence lies between calm and agitation (whence Mid. Pers. *jumbišn* “motion, movement”) and that thought is between obedience and disobedience (corresponding to Mid. Pers. *spōzgārīh* “disobedience”). Aḥūhdemmeḥ and the Syriac authors who followed him and



probably inherited his theories explained that they held the “guiding members of the body” to be five: the brain, seat of the senses; the heart, seat of judgement; the stomach, seat of desire; the kidneys, seat of consupiscence; and the liver, seat of anger. Previously, the history of the martyr Mar Qardag had already indicated that the dominant members of the human body were the brain, the heart, and the liver. Zādspram, in his description of the development of the embryo, lists first the brain, then the heart and stomach, as the course taken by the vital soul (*gyān*), comparing these three principal organs to the three great sacred Fires (for which, see *ĀTAŠ*). The author seems to have confused the stomach with the liver, for he nonetheless notes its importance as the seat of the blood. The location of semen in the brain, whence it descends through the spinal column, is an obvious borrowing from the Greco-Syriac theory. Aristotle taught that the vital powers had their source in the heart alone, whereas for Galen, who carried on Hippocrates’ thought, they have three sources: the brain, the heart, and the liver. The Syriac authors thus transmitted the theory according to which the nerves and sensation originate in the brain, which is the reproductive organ, while the veins and digestion originate in the liver, which is the organ of the circulatory system, and the arteries originate in the heart, the organ of breathing.

Another obvious borrowing is the statement of the four forces that contribute to digestion (see Gignoux, 2001, p. 37), where the terms used in Middle Persian are precisely translated from the Syriac: the force that attracts [food]: Syr. *ntwp*’, Mid. Pers. *āhanjāg*; the retaining force: Syr. *’hwd*’, Mid. Pers. *gīrāg*; the dissolving or digesting force: Syr. *pšwr*’, Mid. Pers. *gugārāg*; and the expulsive force: Syr. *dḥwy*’, Mid. Pers. *spōzāg* (Zādspram, chap. 30:27-30; Mardān-Farroḡ, chap. 8:61; tr., pp. 96-97, 104, n. 61). The application of these four forces is not confined to the digestion (Zādspram, chap. 30:21) but serves all the members of the body (Budge, 1913, I, p. 110).

To these four forces there must be added a further three, namely those of generation, growth, and nourishment, which Simon of Taibutheh (fl. 7th cent.) lists, terming the first four “servants” and the latter three “the served,” as does Aḥūdemmeḥ.

The same theories are to be found in Job of Edessa (8th-9th cent.) and in the anonymous treatise on medical treatments published by E. A. Wallis Budge. Job is reported to have translated thirty-six works of Galen. He was one of the greatest physicians of his time, and a prolific writer. The original source is to be found in Galen’s *Peri kraseōn* (III:654; ed. Kühn, p. 654), where the four



forces listed above are enumerated, respectively: *'elktikē*, *kathektikē*, *alloiōtikē*, and *apokritikē*. This doctrine of the four forces also appears in an Arabic medical treatise on backgammon (Mid. Pers. *nard*), where the section of the board that comprises four parts is compared to the animal and vegetable powers that are the forces of attraction, retention, digestion, and expulsion (Panaino, 1999, p. 211).

The astronomical and astrological data form a very complex domain, for which the influence of Greece on Syriac scholars remains to be demonstrated (Panaino, 1992).

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