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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

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his strong allegiance to the literalist doctrine: given that for him the only legitimate sense of the Qurʾān is the apparent one, and given that in the Qurʾān Adam and various prophets are described as having committed sins or unbelief, Ibn Ḥazm had a hard time in seeking to salvage their reputation.

M.M. Bar-Asher, “Avis musulmans sur la question de la traduction du Coran” (pp. 297-327) is an interesting survey of the opinions of jurists and theologians on whether or not it is possible to translate the Qurʾān into languages other than Arabic. The common basis for all the positions is obviously the tenet of the *ī ḡāz al-Qurʾān*, roughly speaking, the “incomparability of the Coran”, but the interpretations vary. Some followers of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 787) think that whoever reads the Qurʾān not in Arabic is not reading the Qurʾān itself but another book, and a not sacred one at that. This is also the opinion of Ibn Ḥazm. On the other hand, Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) takes into account the possibility of translating the Qurʾān into other languages for the purposes of the propagation of the faith, still emphasizing the difficulties of such an enterprise because of the dogma of the incomparability mentioned above. Among contemporary Muslim scholars, attention is paid to the position of Rašīd Rīḏā (d. 1935), the author of a *fatwā* against the translation of the Qurʾān. However, translations proved to be indispensable. Bar-Asher pays attention also to the translations made by non-Muslims, both in ancient and modern times. It is instructive to learn that translations were made of the Qurʾān into Syriac and Byzantine Greek; however, the translations of the Qurʾān into Latin, from the Middle Ages onwards (Robert of Ketton in the 12th century, Mark of Toledo in the 13th century, Ludovico Marracci in the 17th century) are not mentioned.

O. Mir-Kasimov, “The Word of Descent and the Word of Ascent in the Spectrum of the Sacred Texts in Islam” (pp. 329-72) begins with the observation that the codification and canonisation of the Qurʾān did not happen at a given point in the history of Islam, rather it was a gradual process. Compared with the process of codification of the Qurʾān, that of the corpus of the *ḥadīths* was much more flexible and hesitant. Other kinds of inspired discourse surfaced in the messianic currents of Islam, generated by the idea of a continuous guidance divinely granted to the Muslim community, until the end of human history: the *šīʿī* collections of *ḥadīths* provide a good example of this belief, since they include the words of the *šīʿī* Imāms, which represent post-Muḥammadan revelations. As an example of the “spiritual” interpretation of the Scripture (*taʾwīl*), Mir-Kasimov presents the Persian work *Ġāwidān-nāma-yi kabīr* (*The Great Book of Eternity*) by Faḍlallāh Astarābādī (d. 1394), who expresses the idea that at the end of history a Saviour will bring not a new prophetic book, but the archetype and source of all prophetic books of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. R. Brunner, “Quelques débats récents autour du hadith en Islam sunnite” (pp. 373-432) explores the problem, raised by some contemporary bizarre *fatwās*, of the *ḥadīths* as sources for jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. A very instructive survey follows of the opinions of Muslim reformist thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries (especially in India and Egypt) about whether or not the *ḥadīths* are reliable sources for lawgivers.

As the two editors say in their presentation, “Tout au long de l’histoire de l’islam, le Coran demeure une source inépuisable de controverses” (p. 8). This rich volume helps us to understand why. One of the additional, yet not minor among its merits consists in that each chapter contains a specialized bibliography: a great help to the reader.

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Jim Al-Khalili, *La casa della saggezza. L’epoca d’oro della scienza araba*, trad. di Andrea Migliori, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2013 (Saggi Scienze), 341 pp.

Several educational books on the transfer of learning have been published in English or French during the last decades, and some of them have been also translated into other languages. One of the first examples of this literary genre was the book by Scott L. Montgomery, *Science in Translation. Movements of Knowledge through Cultures and Time*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago - London 2000. The conversations held by Ahmed Djebbar with the historian of science Jean Rosmorduc, published under the title *Une histoire de la science arabe* (Seuil, Paris 2011) have been translated into Italian as *Storia della scienza araba. Il patrimonio intellettuale dell’Islam* (Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2002). The book published by John Freely under the captivating title *Aladdin’s Lamp*, Knopf, New York 2009, has been translated into German as *Platon*

in Bagdad. *Wie das Wissen der Antike zurück nach Europa kam*, J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, Stuttgart 2012. The titles of two recent English books are evocative of the most famed icon of the so-called translation movement, the *House of Wisdom* (*bayt al-ḥikma*) established by the 'Abbāsids in Baghdad: Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom. How the Arabs transformed Western Civilization*, Bloomsbury Press, New York 2009, and Jim al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom. How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance*, The Penguin Press, London 2011. This book has been recently translated into Italian; notwithstanding the Italian title, *La casa della saggezza* reviewed here is the translation not of this book, but of another one by the same author: *Pathfinders. The Golden Age of Arabic Science*, Allen Lane (an imprint of Penguin Books), London 2010. Subdivided into sixteen short chapters whose titles will suffice to give an example of the intended audience (e.g., "Sognando Aristotele", or "L'alchimista solitario", or again "Il principe e il povero"), this book contains also short essential endnotes to each chapter, a Glossary of Scientists, and an index of names.

Born in Iraq and now teaching theoretical physics at the University of Surrey, Jim al-Khalili has hosted several BBC productions about science and is a frequent commentator in other British media. This book addresses a general public; a very readable text both in its original version and in the Italian translation, it is not reviewed here with the expectations of a scholarly work. However, even taking into account the literary genre, some remarks will not be totally out of place. A first impression of oddity is produced by the fact that the narrative of how Greek science passed to the Arabic-speaking cultivated readership is framed within the modern idea of science, something which results in a decontextualized account of what medieval science was, and how it was connected with the general assumptions about the nature and order of the visible universe and its supra-sensible principles. On a more specific count, al-Khalili avoids taking a stand on the question of the real role of the *bayt al-ḥikma*, the caliphal library of the age of translations. It is often, and I think correctly, believed that this institution had a role in the translation movement from Greek into Arabic: this view was advocated by Youssef Éché, *Les bibliothèques arabes publiques et sémi-publiques en Mésopotamie, en Syrie et en Égypte au Moyen Âge*, Institut Français de Damas, Damas 1967, a seminal work in the field and a survey of the sources that still counts as a starting point for further study of the libraries in the Islamic medieval world. The importance of the *bayt al-ḥikma* in the Graeco-Arabic transmission of scientific learning has been challenged by Dimitri Gutas in his *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsī Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*, Routledge, London 1998. I have already expressed on this same journal my views on the issue at hand, and will not demand too much of the reader's patience, if not to recall that Gutas' opinion that the *bayt al-ḥikma* played little or no role in the translation has met with wide approval in contemporary scholarship. But the same had happened, before the spread of Gutas' *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, to the opposite view that the *bayt al-ḥikma* was the core of scientific activities in 9th century Baghdad: for instance, in the aforementioned book by Scott L. Montgomery its role is accounted for as follows: "Following the establishment of the *Bayt al-ḥikma* in Baghdad (...) with its staff of physician-librarians, and whose founding was related to the import of doctors from Jundishapur to serve the caliph, the word *ḥakīm* came also to mean 'medical practitioner'" (p. 129). As an example of the contemporary spread of the opinion of Gutas that I have just summarized, in the chapter dedicated to the sciences of the *New Cambridge History of Islam*, Sonia Brentjes and Robert G. Morrison claim that, although the *bayt al-ḥikma* is often considered as a scientific academy and a centre of the translation movement, "the data about this institution as reported in Arabic historical sources (...) and later books does not, however, support such an interpretation. These sources, enriched by poetry, suggest that the *Bayt al-Hikma* was a library where rare books on history, poetry and strange alphabets were collected and which was established when al Mansur structured the administration of his court and empire along the lines of Sasanian tradition" ("The Sciences in Islamic Societies", in R. Irwin [ed.], *The New Cambridge History of Islam, IV. Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2011, pp. 564-639, esp. p. 569).

One may side with one or the other account, and I think I have presented some textual evidence that the *bayt al-ḥikma* did indeed play a role in the transmission of scientific learning to the Arabs; but it is a pity that the debate opened by Gutas is totally ignored in the book under review here.

MDB