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GAPS IN THE TRANSLATORS' KNOWLEDGE

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SUMMARY

*GAPS IN THE TRANSLATORS' KNOWLEDGE*

*The editor of an Arabic translation from the Greek sometimes encounters difficulties when the original is no longer extant and the translator has failed to understand certain passages fully. This is the case with geographical or astronomical terms in Galen's commentary on Hippocrates' *Airs, waters and places*. Here the astronomer Ptolemy is explained as being "the king of Egypt", and the translator himself is to be blamed for the faux pas, not a later copyist.*

As a Graeco-Arabic philologist who is sometimes concerned with passages that nobody has dealt with before one sometimes runs into unexpected difficulties, and our dear colleague Klaus-Dietrich Fischer to whom I dedicate the following observations may have had similar experience in his pioneering work on Ancient veterinary medicine. When working on the edition of Galen's commentary on Hippocrates' *Airs, waters, places*, which is to-day extant only in an Arabic translation made by Ḥubaysh b. al-Ḥasan al-Dimashqī<sup>1</sup> on the basis of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq's (808–873)<sup>2</sup> preceding Syriac version<sup>3</sup>, I came upon a turn of phrase which defied at first all efforts to understand it or to find out a possible mistake committed either in the medium

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of the Greek, of the Syriac or of the Arabic textual tradition that would offer an insight into the underlying Greek. In order to show his knowledge of geography, Galen describes the coastal regions around the Mediterranean. In the East the translation has a “Greater Syria” (*al-Shām al-kabīra*) and beside this a “Date Syria” (*al-Shām al-tamrīya*), thus the Arabic expressions in the unique manuscript Cairo, *Ṭal‘at, ṭibb* 550<sup>4</sup>. The “Greater Syria” is probably the same as ἡ Κοιλὴ Συρία (Syria Coele), which the translator could not render by a verbatim translation that may not have been understandable to his readers. But what about the other Syria? A “Date Syria” did not exist, neither in Greek nor in Syriac nor in Arabic. It took a very long time until I got the inspiration. In 194 AD Septimius Severus had divided the region into two provinces, “Syria Coele” and “Syria Phoenice” (Συρία Φοινίκη). The old Phoenicians meant nothing to our translator, but he knew instead the φοῖνιξ, the date palm.

Star lore found in *De aere, aquis, locis* gave Galen the opportunity to demonstrate something of his astronomical erudition. Among some other names of famous astronomers he was acquainted with we read “Ptolemy, King of Egypt” (*Baṭlamīyūs maliku Miṣra*)<sup>5</sup>. Gerald J. Toomer was quick about denouncing this as “an interpolation in the Arabic tradition”<sup>6</sup>; more guardedly judged V. A. Bronshtën who thought that only the “King of Egypt” was the addition of a Greek copyist working one century or more after Ptolemy<sup>7</sup>. Many Arabic authors shared the opinion that the great astronomer of the second century AD was a member of the Ptolemean dynasty which had ended already with the death of Cleopatra in 31 BC<sup>8</sup>, and this despite the objections by better-informed Muslim historians who also acknowledge that the error is shared by many contemporaries<sup>9</sup>. Thus we cannot avoid the assumption that Ḥunayn and Ḥubaysh too belonged to the many, and the editor has to resist, in this case, the temptation to change or to delete anything in the text of the translation, which is

for him the “original” that he has to reconstruct, and to place what he knows better in the notes or a commentary.

The astronomical knowledge of our translators did not exceed the limits of the most common Arabic star lore. Sirius was correctly rendered as *al-Shi'rā*, and the Pleiads as the female figure of the *Thurayyā*, but the slightly less prominent Arcturus beneath Bootes was not given as *al-Simāk al-rāmiḥ*, as Ḥunayn's son Iṣḥāq rightly wrote in his translation of the star catalogue in Ptolemy's *Almagest*<sup>10</sup>. Ḥubaysh remains inconsistent here. In a first part of the text he translates the Arcturus as *ḥāfiḥ al-farqadayn* (“the keeper of the two calves”), then he forgets that it is a single star and writes *al-kawākib allatī tud'ā bi-l-yūnānīya Arqtūrus wa-bi-l-'arabīya ḥāfiḥ al-farqadayn* (“the stars which are called in Greek Arcturus and in Arabic ‘the keeper of the two calves’”), a bit further on he restricts himself to the mere transcription, and a bit further again he writes only his translation as *ḥāfiḥ al-farqadayn* (“the keeper of the two calves”) and still two lines later *al-kaukab alladhī yud'ā ḥāfiḥ al-farqadayn* (“the star which is called the keeper of the two calves”)<sup>11</sup>. The calves are  $\beta\gamma$  ursae minoris, they usually replace in the rest of the text the Greek constellations of the two bears in order to indicate the northward direction. In a second part of the text he changes his terminology and writes twice *Arqtūrus wa-huwa ḥāfiḥ al-dubb* (“Arcturus, who is the keeper of the bear”), after that twice only the transcription of Arcturus and finally only *ḥāfiḥ al-dubb* (“the keeper of the bear”)<sup>12</sup>.

Galen's commentary on *De aere, aquis, locis* contains also many appellations of towns and islands, and here it is interesting to see how far the geographical horizon of the translator extends, i. e. to see where he is able to replace the Greek name by an existing Arabic one and where he restricts himself to a mere transcription of an item he does not know. Those he is familiar with are naturally located nearer to his native Iraq, as e. g. Palestine, Damascus, Emesa and even

Aswan, the antique Syene<sup>13</sup>. The Greek world, on the other hand, is terra incognita. Cnidus, Crete and Rhodes are qualified as “towns”<sup>14</sup>. The Cyclades were also unknown to him as he understands them in a first instance as *jazīrat Qūqlādis* (“the island *Qūqlādis*”) in the singular, but in a second as *jazā`ir Quqlādis* (“the islands *Qūqlādis*”) in the plural<sup>15</sup>. The land of Attica appears with a false ending as *ard Aṭṭiqiya*<sup>16</sup> and likewise Athens as *Athīnus*<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, one is sometimes amazed at recognizing very precise explanations added for the benefit of the reader. The dream book of Artemidorus was translated according to the bibliographers by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, but Manfred Ullmann has raised strong objections against this ascription based on the difference of style in Ḥunayn’s genuine texts and in the dream book<sup>18</sup>. But there remains always the possibility that Ḥunayn was, indeed, responsible for the text in its Syriac version and that somebody else, not necessarily a member of his team, produced on this basis the Arabic translation<sup>19</sup>. Artemidorus mentions the name of Agamemnon, where the translator adds the following learned note: “This was the eminent king who assumed the leadership in the war that took place between the Greeks<sup>20</sup> and the barbarians”<sup>21</sup>. The translator, be it Ḥunayn or somebody else, must have had a thorough insight into the content of the Homeric epic. Against this background it seems strange that the monstrous Scylla appears in the Arabic translation of the dream book rather harmless as “the bitch of the sea” (*al-kalba al-bahrīya*)<sup>22</sup>. Did the translator not remember her gruesome description in the verses XII 85–100? In an article I had devoted to the appearance of the pagan gods in the Arabic Artemidorus I characterized this kind of translation as “ein wenig rationalistisch”<sup>23</sup>, but Klaus-Dietrich Fischer in a letter from Oct. 10, 2003 reminded me about the article “skylax” in Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*<sup>24</sup>, whereby I came to the conclusion that the translator probably had understood the name *scylla* as that of a young animal in ordinary Greek speech

like *skylax*, and that in the Homeric context it was a kind of euphemism for which the “bitch of the sea” would be an appropriate equivalent, as its voice is described moreover as coming from a newborn dog. The fact remains that we have to take into consideration the limited scale of the general education of the medical translators in ninth century Baghdad, but this in contrast to a sometimes one-sided expertise in the Homeric epics<sup>25</sup>.

A peculiar problem the translator had to confront was the detailed explanation of the great difference between Europe and Asia. Whereas, according to the Hippocratic author, the inhabitants of Asia enjoy a temperate climate which makes them peaceful and of polite manners, the weather conditions in Europe are rough what renders the people there ill-tempered and aggressive. But in ninth century Baghdad the geographical horizon had widened up to the confines of India and China. Here the translator has found an ingenious device to adapt the old statements about Asia and Europe to contemporary knowledge. He puts the word *jund* (“province”) before them<sup>26</sup>. By pure coincidence there existed in the administration of the Byzantine Empire two provinces, one named “Europe” stretching westward from Constantinople into the old territory of Thracia and one province “Asia” occupying a middle part of Asia Minor with Pergamum as its centre; and these areas covered more or less what the Hippocratic author had in mind when speaking about Europe and Asia.

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  5. Sezgin, Galen's Commentary, p. 93, line 5.
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  12. Ibid, pp. 78,11; 87,8. 20. 21; 91,9.
  13. Ibid, pp. 98,15. 16; 103,4.
  14. Ibid, pp. 68,2 and 68,4; cf. the translation of a commentary on the Hippocratic Oath, where we read “the town of Rhodes ... the town of Cnidus ... the town of Cos” (Ibn abī Uṣaybi'a, 'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā', Müller A, editor, Cairo 1882, vol. 1, p. 24,22–23).
  15. Sezgin F (ed.), Galen's Commentary (see above note 4), pp. 98,12 and 144,7.
  16. Ibid, pp. 8,12 and 144,7.

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17. *ibid*, p. 113,6.
18. War Ḥunain der Übersetzer von Artemidors Traumbuch? *Die Welt des Islams* n.s. 1971;13: 204–211.
19. Cf. the fate of Ḥunayn's Syriac version of Dioscurides' "Materia medica" which was still in the 12<sup>th</sup> century regarded as a suitable basis for a renewed Arabic translation, see Ullmann M, Untersuchungen zur arabischen Überlieferung der Materia medica des Dioskurides. Mit Beiträgen von Rainer Degen. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz; 2009. pp. 339–355.
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22. Ed. Fahd, pp. 321,12 and 322,1; cf. Pack RA (ed.), n. 21, p. 178,9.
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