

How Sasanian Science and Literature passed on to the Muslims. A Reassessment of Cultural Transfer by Translation in Late Antiquity

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Project Description

1. Starting Point

This project aims to challenge the paradigmatic notion “Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement.” This labeling is a byproduct of research conducted during the last two centuries on how the ancient Greek Classics passed on to Arabic in the early Islamic period. It suggests that translations were done mainly from Greek; and furthermore, the studies on which it is based emphasize the transmission of philosophy and natural sciences to the detriment of other fields, e.g. history, law, belles-lettres, particularly religious works.

The proposed project makes the case that the phenomenon of translation in early Islam can be appreciated better by considering the overall spectrum of translation in its late antique historical context, namely, the Roman east and the Sasanian Empire. The record of the passage of Greek-Hellenistic science to Syriac and then to Arabic delineates the Western chapter of this phenomenon and has received a formidable amount of philological investigation. It is thus the still unwritten ‘Oriental’ chapter of this tremendous moment in the history of cultural transfer that will be our primary concern here: the position of Middle Persian in the spreading of Greek, Indian and Iranian scientific, literary and religious writings.

Contrary to common opinion, our working hypothesis is that translation was a firmly grounded, officially supported and flourishing discipline in Sasanian society, given the multicultural, multilingual, and multireligious nature of the empire. As an accredited intellectual institution, translation practice continued steadily from the early Sasanian era to the early Islamic times. Change of political rulers was not concomitant with change of ancient institutions. Albeit a temporary slowdown due to the turmoil caused by the wars of Islamic conquests, traditions of scientific inquiry and exchange of ideas persisted for the most part unbroken. New in this socio-cultural matrix was the arrival of Arabic as a recipient player. The growing of Arabic to a universal language and the *lingua scientia* of the newly established expansive Islamic Empire eventually led to the reorientation in the field of the ongoing translations; Arabic became a unifying medium for a range of literary languages.

To substantiate this hypothesis, the project will be pursued in two steps. First, it will compile an annotated inventory of Middle Persian literature that was produced by means of translation, in order to document the heretofore neglected vitality in the acquisition of foreign knowledge and its dissemination in Sasanian society. Subsequently, it will investigate the complex motives at work which furthered the choice of texts from this inventory for translation into Arabic, depicting how and which segments of the Sasanian accumulated learning passed on to the Muslims.

2.1 State of the art and preliminary work

2.1.1 State of the art

Study of the unprecedented and impressive ‘Translation Movement’ from Greek into Arabic in early Islamic centuries has received over two hundred years of fruitful academic attention, the results of which have been masterfully synthesized by Dimitri Gutas. As a scholar such as Gutas decides to write about the history of Greek literature in Arabic, he can “gratefully dispense with the who, the what, and the when of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement and concentrate on the how and why” (1998, p. xiii). In contrast, when an Iranist interested in surveying the record of the parallel and equally impressive translations from Middle Persian (hereafter: MP) into Arabic wants to do the same, he has still to start with the questions of who, what, and when. This lack of enthusiasm has

been compounded with critical voices who try to reduce or even deny the role of pre-Islamic Iran in the spread of ancient science.

Aside from the urgent need to ameliorate this uneven treatment, a study of Sasanian literature in Arabic could be of direct interest to and full of surprises also for a Grecian. Addressing the role of Persian in propagating Greek science in Late Antiquity, Paul Kunitzsch (1970, 130) wrote: “It would be particularly desirable if, in the future, research would pay more attention to this hitherto overly neglected part of the translation literature; one can certainly count on useful results.” Kunitzsch went on to write that we know little about Sasanian Iran, although at an early stage of development in Islamic culture – the most fundamental influences and impulses came from Persia. Therefore, he says, “we should look for concrete evidence as to whether and how far the Persian element was involved in the transfer of Greek knowledge to the Arabs.” (1975, 273-74)

Kunitzsch’s keen observation, which did not receive the attention it deserves, is not the only one of its kind. Already in 1922 Carlo Nallino showed that indeed a number of Greek texts had been translated into MP, traces of which still remain in Arabic. He introduced three cases of Greek scientific writing which had passed on to the Muslims via MP translations, namely: Cassianus Basso’s *Geoponica* (an encyclopedia on agriculture), Vettius Valens’ *Anthologiae* (on astrology), and the *Paranatellonta* of the Babylonian astrologer Teucer (Nallino 1922, 345). Nallino also noted that under Husraw I (r. 531-579 CE), philosophical writings of Aristotle and some Platonic dialogues had been translated into MP (Nallino 1922, 345, 359). Likewise, Julius Ruska (1926) emphasized the significant position of Persia in the transmission of ancient and Hellenistic sciences to the Arabs. He pointed out that the ninth-century astronomers and astrologers in Baghdad were mostly Iranians, who were well-versed in Greek science and shared their expertise with the Muslims. In particular, “given the ever-increasing evidence, probably no one can doubt any more about the origin of the ‘Arab’ alchemy from northern and eastern Persia” (Ruska 1926, 171). Around the same time as Ruska, Hans Schaeder (1928, 808) independently made comparable observations. Kunitzsch, followed by David Pingree, demonstrated that some astrological works ascribed to Hermes circulated in MP (Kunitzsch 1968, 1970, 1981). After studying some astrological doctrines in Arabic Hermetica, Charles Burnett noted that “we have reasonable evidence that at least part of the Arabic Hermetica derived from Persian and ultimately Indian sources”.¹ Pingree dedicated a substantial portion of his academic career to the study of MP astronomy and astrology. He tried to identify what was new in them, and followed their further development in the Arabo-Islamic and Mediaeval Latin literatures. Some of Pingree’s ideas were seen by commentators to be “too bold”, for example, his idea that the *Pentabiblos* of Dorotheus reached the Arabs not by passing through Syriac, but rather via a Middle Persian intermediary made under the Sasanians (Cottrell and Ross 2019). A review of learned debates on Pingree’s proposals was done by Antonio Panaino (2009), who himself has been influential in broadening our understanding of foreign sciences in Sasanian Persia. He explains that many Greek astrological texts have survived only in fragments, while their full versions exist in Arabic, which are based on Pahlavi translations. “This circumstance has given the MP medium a remarkable importance,” he says (Panaino 2009, 85-86). In this context, it is worth also to recall Franz Rosenthal’s following remark:

The ‘Abbāsids came from the Persian East. This fact, in conjunction with the increased cultural confidence of the eastern half of the Empire in the face of Greek influences, explains why translations from the Persian and from some Indian scientific material are among the earliest known to us. Even the Muslims’ first acquaintance with Aristotle was attributable to the interest of the Sassanians of the sixth century in Greek learning. (1975, 4)

¹ Burnett 1986, 86–87; and see Bladel 2009, 183f., for further comments.

It was Harold Bailey who put the existence of Greek sciences in Persia on a more solid basis. He showed that the canon of Greek sciences studied in Late Antiquity was well-known in Persia. This included medicine, astronomy (astrology), logic, dialectics, and geometry, as well as Aristotle's *On Coming to Be and Passing Away* (*De generatione et corruptione*) and other works, and Ptolemy's *Almagest* (1971, 86-90, etc.). More recently, on the basis of the same Zoroastrian sources, Götz König (2018, 8-37) documented in detail the remaining traces of Greek philosophy in the *Dēnkard*, authored in the ninth century.

The above-mentioned savants are singularly interested in the diffusion of Greek science and philosophy and do not really go beyond signaling the utility of MP for the transmission history of Greek literature. For the history of translations from MP into Arabic, we are well served by a number of scholars whose contributions are essential to the present project. The most conspicuous among these contributors is Aḥmad Tafazzulī with his *Tārīkh-i adabiyāt-i īrān pīsh az islām* (1997). From the rich literature of MP, the Zoroastrian and Manichaean priests transmitted chiefly their religious texts, so much so that for a fuller treatment of the Sasanian MP literature, Tafazzulī was forced to resort to the Arabic-Islamic literature (Rezania 2021b). Consequently, a substantial part of his work is concerned with the Arabic translations made from Persian sources. However, given the vast span of time and the grand variety of fields covered by the book, Tafazzulī often cannot move beyond brief mentioning of titles and contents. Nonetheless, his hints are useful as a guideline. Fortunately, the specialized and more focused works of Muḥammad Muḥammadī will be of immense value for exhaustive study of some sections of the relevant literature, above all his (Persian) *Adab va akhlāq dar īrān-i pīsh az islām* (1973); his (Arabic), *al-Tarjama wa-l-naql 'an al-fārisiyya* (1964); and *al-Mutarjimūn wa-l-naqla 'an al-fārisiyya* (1964). Muḥammadī is among the very rare authors whose entire scholarly output is devoted to the study of culture in the vital period from Iran to Islam, the two or three centuries which have been negatively called "centuries of silence" in Persian historiography (Zarrīnkūb 1951). Another helpful work is 'Īsā 'Ākūb's book (1989), which studies the effect of MP wisdom literature on Arabic literature in the early 'Abbāsīd period.

Needless to say, despite of all such encouraging synoptic overviews and specialized studies, circulation of foreign knowledge in MP and thence into Arabic has so far been analyzed only in a rudimentary manner.² Scholarly input such as the works of Tafazzulī, Muḥammadī, and Gutas show once again that it is impossible to gain a greater appreciation of the Sasanian intellectual history without taking the wealth of Arabic literature into account. Arabic proves to be as indispensable a source for the study of the MP literature as it has been for the Greek.

What is missing in these studies is the awareness that translation was pervasive in Sasanian society and permeated diverse languages and culture zones. Our preliminary survey indicates that throughout the Sasanian era, interest in foreign science, intellectual and technical innovations grew on a continuous basis, reaching its peak at the time of King Husraw I, a lover of wisdom and science. The search for medical, philosophical and scientific knowledge was supported politically by the Sasanian kings as part of their imperial ideology and endorsed religiously by the Zoroastrian priestly authority eager to enhance its influence hand in hand with those in power. Religion and politics forged a unity that would last to the very end of the dynasty's demise. A joint mass propaganda machine promulgated the idea that science with all its achievements had originally grown in Persia and spread from there to the rest of the world due to natural and human disasters, Alexander the Great being the anti-hero in this is said to have expropriated the Persian written heritage to distribute in Greece and Egypt, so that seeking and recovering it was a national-religious desideratum (Gutas 1998, 40-45). We often read about the Persian kings commissioning delegations to Greece, India, Egypt or even China in quest of books as well as invitation of renowned sages and

² Grignaschi 1966, 1973, 1978; Zakeri 1994, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2014; and Gutas 1998.

master physicians to the royal court (Gignoux 2007, 87-97). An unrestrained acquisition of foreign learning, especially Greek and Indian, seems to have been on top of the imperial agenda.

The intrinsic value in upholding and popularizing an Iran-centric position with respect to the genesis of science, that all science was initially issued from Iran, is the spreading of an open and positive attitude towards foreign knowledge. Obtaining the wisdom of other peoples through the medium of translation of major scientific works, which naturally envisages erudition in respective languages and training of translators, is thus not only needed but a praiseworthy enterprise: it regains and brings the lost native heritage back home (Gutas 1998, 34-40). In consequence to this line of thinking, fostering an environment that upholds the highest value for science, a veritable type of “state-sponsored” translation work, sanctioned by political and religious authorities, was inaugurated. Yet the motivating force behind this development still needs to be investigated further.

2.1.1.1 The Multilingual Nature of Sasanian Empire

Exploring the written literature produced by means of translation under the Sasanians, it must be taken into consideration that theirs was an empire; they dominated a vast multicultural territory comprising dozens of ethnic groups, religions, and languages. In such hybrid and heterogeneous conditions translation for transmission of knowledge, for interreligious relations and conflicts, or for integration strategies was imperative to the survival of the empire. One may recall that several of the scanty samples of the Sasanian inscriptions are bi- and some even trilingual (in MP, Parthian and Greek). In the Esther story of the Bible it is stated that when the Achaemenid Queen Vashti refuses to carry on the order of the king, which was a serious violation of the courtly rules, a court of the aristocrats is called for and reaches a decision: “I therefore beg to advise His Majesty to take the following steps: First, her disrespect should be recorded in black and white in the official annals of each province; second, she shall not have access any more to His Majesty” (Radday 1990, 297). As a result, the scribes and dragomans are set in motion and the new royal decree, translated into 127 languages (of the Empire’s provinces), is dispatched to the ends of the empire from India to Ethiopia (Radday 1990, 298).

Literary, religious, and non-fiction scientific writings in the local languages and translations from one language to another were more often than not encouraged and under the patronage of the kings. In order to determine the parameters of translation activity under the Sasanians, the work of all social groups which actively participated in this long term cultural transfer and amalgamation process need to be delved into. We, thus, take translations done in any language current in the Sasanian Empire into purview and evaluate them in order to gain a realistic appraisal of the colorful intellectual life of the period. To be included in a general survey of translation are, for example:

- The Manichaeans: famed for translating their doctrinal texts and commentaries to various languages, provided a multilingual religious field including Aramaic, Greek, Coptic, Syriac, MP, Parthian, Sogdian, Old Turkish and Chinese (see Morano 2014). Mānī’s Syriac *The Book of the Giants*, for example, was translated into MP and from there into Arabic later (Henning 1943, 55; Schwartz 2002, 231);
- The Armenians: e.g. to satisfy the demand of the king of kings for textual evidence of their ancient Iranian nobility, the Armenian nobles supplied the *History of the Armenians* of Agatangelos, which was promptly translated at court into MP (Payne 2015, 155);
- The Christians of the East-Syrian Church: translated many books from Syriac into MP and vice versa; e.g. Ma’nā of Rēw-Ardašīr in Persis translated the Greek commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and a number of Persian books into Syriac; and Catholicos Aqāq/Acacius (d. 495/6) translated an account of Christian beliefs into MP for the Sasanian King Kawād I, to help him understand Christianity (McLeod 2009, 8);

- The Jews of Babylonia: e.g. *Talmud Bavli*, which contains many Iranian features, is composed in Hebrew and Aramaic in Persian-Sasanian-Zoroastrian cultural milieu; showing also that the Babylonian rabbis had access to Platonic corpus and other Greek texts (Boyarin 2009, 134);
- The Buddhists of north east Iran: e.g. in Khotan of the 5th-7th centuries local scholars were actively engaged in making translations of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Khotanese; here Indian medical texts were studied and rendered with enthusiasm into the local languages of Khotan and Kuci. (Bailey 1962, 32-33).

The late antique Sasanian court was obviously a multiethnic, multilingual and multireligious, intellectually open court that prided itself on its cosmopolitanism, hosting Roman philosophers, Indian sages, and Jewish and Christian religious professionals from within and outside of the empire (cf. Payne 2015, 156). Here Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Buddhism, among others, formed zones of élite culture. Ādurfarnbay, son of Farroxxād, the great Zoroastrian theologian of the Abbasid era, explicitly cites the gathering of all sciences from different regions, India, Greece and elsewhere, as Šābūhr I's most outstanding religious (!) activity (Dk. 4.19).

2.1.1.2 The Role of MP and Syriac in Cultural Transfer in Late Antiquity

The reception and assimilation of Greek science and literature in Persia goes along with that of the Indian, among others. For example, Oliver Kahl (2015, 18-20, 86-129) showed that one 'Abdallāh b. 'Alī translated the famous *Carakasamhitā*, the oldest Indian medical Compendium of Caraka, from MP into Arabic for the Barmakids. Moreover, Mankah, an Indian physician living and working in Baghdad, translated both Cāṇakya's *Kitāb al-Sumūm* ('Book on Poisons') and *Suśrutasamhitā*, the medical Compendium of Suśruta, into MP for Yaḥyā b. Khālid (d. 190/806) and this was soon afterwards translated by al-'Abbās b. Sa'īd al-Jawharī from MP into Arabic for the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (Kahl 2015, 14-18, 72-86). David Pingree (1987, 859) noticed that Persian astronomers under Husraw I compared the values of the Indian *Zīg ī Arkand* (Sanskrit *ahargaṇa*) with the data provided by Ptolemy's *Syntaxis* and found it to be more precise and reliable in some respects (see also Panaino 2007). Edward Kennedy (1958, 246-62) had already shown that the *Zīg ī Arkand*, which was converted from MP into Arabic by one 'Alī b. Ziyād al-Tamīmī (Ibn al-Nadīm 1971, 305), and of which only some fragments have survived, shows the influence of *Khaṇḍakhādya* of Brahmagupta (written 665). The Great *Bundahišn* for instance reveals the familiarity with Indian scientific literature which had reached Iran under the Sasanians; the contents of chapter II on astronomy manifest an acquaintance with Greek and Indian principles. Sasanian reliance on foreign sciences, in particular astronomy and astrology, was to the point that Pingree assumed their almost complete lack of originality (1963, 229). In any event, the mixture of Greek and Indian material and creative use of it is characteristic of the Sasanian sciences.

Another neglected factor in the plethora of intellectual life and cultural multiplicity of Sasanian society is the role of Syriac. Towards the end of the second century, the Syriac language and culture began to flourish in Edessa, Nisibis, Arbela and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the later Sasanian capital. By the end of the fourth century, as Epiphanius the bishop of Salamis in Cyprus (4th c.) tells us, most Persians were using the Syrian letters besides the Persian (Epiphanius 2013, 240). Many Iranians used Syriac as the medium of their intercultural communication, to the extent that Syriac was counted as one of the languages of Persia (Ibn al-Nadīm 1971, 15). For the Iranians under the Sasanians, Syriac played a similar role as Aramaic had done under the Achaemenians and Arabic did under the Muslims. Metzger (1977, 276) pointed out that the Christians of Persia at first wrote and translated some of their books into MP, but soon Syriac regained its status as the literary and liturgical language of the church and it appears that Christians were accustomed to read the Scriptures in Syriac. Some works written in MP were translated into Syriac, and their originals were then

for the most part lost (only a fragmentary translation of the Psalms has remained in MP) (Sims-Williams 1991, 334-35; Gignoux 2015). According to Sebastian Brock (1982, 18), the doyen of Syriac studies, quite a number of extant Syriac hagiographical, legal and literary texts are in fact translations from lost MP originals. These include the Acts of Mar Abā and of Mar Grigor in Bedjan's *Histoire*. Mar Abā the Great, the Iranian Zoroastrian convert to Nestorian Christianity and the honored head of the Christians in Iran (Patriarch of Orient from 536 till he died in 552), learnt Greek, Syriac and was a "grand connaisseur des écrits perses" (Pigulevskaya 1963, 327). He translated and commented upon the whole of the Old Testament from Greek into Syriac. His person unified the erudition of the Byzantine, Syria and Persia. The Acts of these Syriac church fathers contain a large number of MP words and show characteristics of translation.³ A follower of Mar Abā, Abraham of Kaškar (middle of the sixth century) distinguished himself in philosophy and for his ascetic virtues and "he wrote a treatise on the monastic life, which was translated into MP by his disciple Job the Monk."⁴ John the Monk also translated the books of Abraham of Nathpar into MP (late sixth-early seventh c.; wrote primarily on ascetic and spiritual life); one exists in an Arabic translation.⁵

In the early sixth century in Upper Mesopotamia, Sergius of Reš 'Aynā (d. 536), an eminent translator, physician, and philosopher, translated some thirty-six medical treatises of Galen into Syriac, and wrote commentaries on the treatises on logic in Aristotle's *Organon* (Hugonnard-Roche 1989, 502-28). He could have been at the Sasanian court. The Byzantine historian Agathias mentions a certain Sergius, his friend and interpreter at the king's court, who "procured for him" material from the "Persian Royal Annals" (Russell 2012, 342-43). Bar Hebraeus suggests Sergius' ties with the school of Gondēshāpūr (Bar Hebraeus 56), an ancient center of his Nestorian compatriots. Sergius could well have been in contact with the Greek philosophers who, after the closing of the Academy in Athens by the order of the Emperor Justinian in 529, took refuge in Iran to the court of Husraw I. This point is important for the history of translation under the Sasanians and will be explored further in this study.

The long list of Iranian-Christian scholars translating and writing secular and religious texts in Syriac and MP is topped by the famous philosopher and commentator of Aristotle Paul the Persian (d. late sixth c.), whose commentary on Aristotle's Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας in MP was later translated into Syriac by Severus Sēboxt (d. 666) bishop of Qennesrīn (cf. Gutas 1983; Teixidor 2003). The Jacobite Periodeutes in Persia Budh (d. 575) translated the *Kalīla wa-Dimna* from MP into Syriac (Bickell 1876, xii-xiii), and the 'Book of Greek Questions' perhaps a part of Aristotelian philosophy from Greek into Syriac under the unknown title of *Aleph Migin* (Duval 1907, 250). Severus Sēboxt, who like Mar Abā was conversant in Persian, Greek and Syriac, was devoted to philosophical and mathematical as well as theological studies (Wright 1894, 137-38; Baumstark 1922, 246-47). According to the eleventh-century historiographer Elias of Nisibis (1909, 99) a certain Simeon Barqāya made a translation of Eusebius' Greek *Chronicle* into Syriac at Karkā d-Beit Šlok during the reign of Husraw II (r. 590-628). It is interesting to note that Eusebius' work, a repository of the kind of ancient historical knowledge that was so highly valued in Iranian political culture, was translated into Syriac but not MP (Payne 2015, 148). A Syriac version of it must have been deemed sufficient for Iranian readers. However, a formal disputation, a synod on a modest scale, was organized under the auspices of the court of Husraw II, when it felt obliged to intervene in Christian controversies among the fathers of the Miaphysite and Dyophysite Christology with regard to the nature of

³ Wright 1894, 116-18; Czeglédy 1954, 66; Pigulevskaya 1963, 327-36; and Metzger 1977, 274-77.

⁴ Wright 1894, 118-19. Duval (1907, 212) maintains that the correct name of this disciple is John the Monk.

⁵ Cf. Duval 1907, 224, which provides no further information. We shall look for the whereabouts of this Arabic text. For now, see Chahine 2004.

Christ in 612. According to the *History of George the Priest*, which was composed by the contemporary Babay the Great, the king of kings invited representatives of the sects to present their competing doctrines in writing, in translation from Syriac into MP (Payne 2015, 187).

Not long after 615, the Zoroastrian lawyer Farroxmard ī Wahrāmān assembled a number of previously determined legal cases and composed them in the form of a Law-Book with the title *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān* ('*The Book of a Thousand Judgments*') in MP based on a dozen older MP sources which he cites by name. This is the only independent collection of Sasanian civil laws that has survived until today. Soon after its completion, in the early Umayyad period (and according to the Pseudo-al-Jāhiz' *Kitāb al-'Ibar* not later), the Archbishop Jesubōxt (Īšō' bōxt) of Persis recast this Sasanian law book for use by Christians in MP, using Syriac or Pahlavi script. Around the year 800, this Christianized MP text was translated into Syriac on the recommendation of the Nestorian patriarch of Persis Timothy I, who lived in Baghdad from 782/3 to 823. Whereas Jesubōxt's MP has not survived, its Syriac version is available today (Sachau 1914: xv and 289; Macuch 2019, 74). Moreover, almost simultaneously another Persian, Šim'on, metropolitan bishop of Rēw-Ardašīr (seventh - eighth c.), wrote a law book in Persian outlining family and hereditary law in question and answer form. This was translated into Syriac by an anonymous monk from Qatar. The Persian original is lost, but again the influential Syriac version survived (Brock 1999-2000, 85-96). With Timothy I and Šim'on we have already landed in Baghdad, where the craft of paper making was introduced, which made writing material widely available and cheaper than before, accelerated the translation, writing, and dissemination of information (cf. Bloom 2001).

Manichean studies have shown that Mani wrote the majority of his books in Syriac. His only known MP book was the *Šābūhragān*, in which he epitomized his teachings for the Sasanian King Šābūhr I. For him and his followers, Syriac was not a liturgical language. His disciples translated all of his writings into MP and Parthian, the two tongues of the empire, during Mani's lifetime and shortly after his death. These translations, along with other Manichaean writings, were taken to Central Asia and subsequently translated into Sogdian, Old Turkic and Chinese (cf. Morano 2014, 85). The inventory of Syriac translators and translated books into and from MP is indeed abundant and stands in dire need to be studied ensemble.

2.1.2 Preliminary work

Already in his Ph.D. project, the applicant began his studies by focusing on the passage from Sasanian to Islam and the transfer of Iranian culture to the Islamic world. He addresses the emergence of the Zurwān myth in the Sasanian period, its shift to a marginal cosmogony in the early Islamic times and its dwindling in the following period (Rezania 2010, 105-48, 169-240). In his article "*Dēnkard* against its Islamic Discourse," he studies the genesis of the most exhaustive Zoroastrian compilation in the context of Abbasid literature, in which the *Dēnkard* was born (Rezania 2017). In a recent article, he examines the architectural aspect of cultural transfer from Sasanians to Abbasids by comparing their first capitals, Ardašīr-xwarrah and Baghdad, within respective architectural and religious contexts, showing their undeniable similarities and arguing that the Abbasid round capital followed the architectural principles of its Sasanian forerunner (Rezania 2021a). Moreover, he has dedicated a publication to the transmission of religious and not strictly religious literature from Sasanian Iran to Islam, where he argues that Muslim scholars were much more engaged in this process than Zoroastrian theologians (Rezania 2021b).

From the beginning of his career, the planned research associate (RA) has been working on the historical development and continued existence of the older Iranian cultural traditions, such as the *futuwwa* organizations as well as the moral and pedagogical contents of MP mirrors for princes in the Islamic literature. Even his *Sāsānid Soldiers in the Early Muslim Society* (Zakeri 1995) is a well-

received contribution to the study of the transfer of moral and ethical traditions, which were highly valued by the Iranian nobility (*āzādān/ dihqānān*) and survived in the so-called Muslim chivalry. His two-volume *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb* (Zakeri 2007), the result of a project supported by the DFG, has broken new ground in research in this field. This work introduces for the first time one of the main and until then unknown transmitters of ancient Persian literary heritage to Muslims. As can be seen from his attached bibliography, he has so far published dozens of original works on subjects related to Translation and Translators from MP into Arabic, for example his “Alī ibn ‘Ubaida ar-Raiḥānī: A forgotten belletrist (*adīb*) and Pahlavi translator” (Zakeri 1994) shows that the famous *Ādāb al-falāsifa* (‘Aphorisms of the Philosophers’) is wrongly attributed to the eminent translator Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 260/873), since it contains specimens of translations from the MP by ‘Alī b. ‘Ubayda al-Rayḥānī (d. ca 219/834). In his “Ādāb al-falāsifa: The Persian content of an Arabic collection of aphorisms” (Zakeri 2004), he follows the same line of argumentation and by unraveling new evidence firmly establishes the literary history of this celebrated book and its authorship. He returns to the same text again with his “Before Aristotle became Aristotle. Pseudo-Aristotelian aphorisms in *Ādāb al-falāsifa*” (Zakeri 2008a), where he discusses the Persian background of the aphorisms attributed to Aristotle. His engagement with this fascinating book still continues as is evident from his recent article on “Aphorisms Engraved on Philosophers’ Signet-rings in Ps-Ḥunayn b. Ishāq’s *Ādāb al-falāsifa*” (Zakeri 2020). In “Some early Persian apophthegmata (*tawqī‘āt*) in Arabic transmission” (Zakeri 2002), he traces the survival of a number of MP proverbial and wisdom sentences in their original language as preserved in Arabic texts. His “Das Pahlavi Buch *Kārwand* und seine Rolle bei der Entstehung der arabischen Rhetorik” (Zakeri 2004) is a leap into showing that the translation of the MP book *Kārwand* played a major role in the emergence of Arabic rhetoric. More notably perhaps, in his “Qawādiyān (Kawādiyān), Balkhī-Istakhrī Atlas and its Middle Persian ancestry” (Zakeri 2007), he presents the contents of a MP text in Arabic translation which very likely laid the foundation for the so-called Balkhī-Istakhrī Atlas of Islam. In his “Translations from Persian (Pahlavi) into Arabic in Early Abbasid Period” (Zakeri 2007), he offers a concise overview of the MP translations into Arabic. His next excursion was into “Al-Ṭabarī on Sāsānian history: A study in sources” (Zakeri 2008b), where he introduces books of history which were made available to al-Ṭabarī by translation from the MP. Moreover, he has discussed “Aristotle’s Meteorology and its reception in the Persian world” (Zakeri 2008c), as well as the widespread impact of MP wisdom literature in his “‘Mirrors for Princes’ as sources of Ibn Khaldūn’s Political Theory” (Zakeri 2009). Zakeri’s latest research findings relate to the prolific author Ibn al-Marzbān about whom he has published several articles including “Muḥammad b. Khalaf b. al-Marzbān (d. 309/921) and his role in translations from the Middle Persian” (Zakeri 2014), showing that he had translated more than 50 MP books into Arabic, one of them known as *Shāhī* or *Shāhīnī*, a book on the qualifications required to be chamberlain and the rules and regulations the employees of that office had to follow (Zakeri 2016).

Our former research papers concentrate on selected analytical details in the process of cultural transfer by translation. They provide a solid basis for attempting a synthesis of a more comprehensive picture of this process in Late Antiquity.

2.2 Project-related publications

2.2.1 Articles published by outlets with scientific quality assurance, book publications, and works accepted for publication but not yet published.

Rezania, K. *Die zoroastrische Zeitvorstellung: Eine Untersuchung über Zeit- und Ewigkeitskonzepte und die Frage des Zurvanismus*. GOF III / NF 2 7. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2010.

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3 Objectives and work programme

3.1 Anticipated total duration of the project

36 months

3.2 Objectives

This project is conceived as a study of translation, its subject matters and agents in late antique West Asia from the third to the tenth century. So far studies of this branch of literature in this geographical zone and time period have been limited to individual authors, works or regions; but this project intends to engage translation into and from MP in full and as a continuum. The study will pursue a two-fold objective: firstly to detail the full scope of foreign sciences in Sasanian Persia in conjunction with an annotated account of translations into MP (persons, institutions, interest groups, etc.); and secondly to study the transference of the indigenous and acquired knowledge via MP into Arabic (what was translated and what was omitted; contents, acceptance, rejection, impact, etc.). Our main goal is to offer a reappraisal of the history of translation into Arabic.

Although the role of Pre-Islamic Persian science appeared for the first time in its entire relevance in Franz Boll’s masterpiece, *Sphaera*, at the beginning of the 20th century (Boll, 1903), there are still some critical voices that from time to time question that relevance. This polarization of opinions is caused in the main by the lack of sufficient original sources. Seldom has the source material been so thin - yet still just eloquent enough; by identifying all the translated works and bringing together tidbits of early and reliable information ferreted out from a variety of widely dispersed works, the project is designed to create an inventory of the translated works, many of which are unknown even to specialists. Besides helping to put the translation activity under the Sasanians on a solid foundation, this serves two major objectives: providing reliable, critically sorted references and making them accessible to a more generally interested but not Arabist or Iranist reader. It is only in the face of overwhelming evidence, even if statistical, that one could hope the controversies over the existence of pre-Islamic Persian science and translation will be ultimately resolved.

The study shall make a significant contribution to fathoming the transmission and fruition of Greek and Indian learning first in Persia and then in the Islamic world. It will explore the impact of translation on the evolution of natural philosophy, metaphysics, and the political and religious doctrines of the Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian theologians, and to a certain extent also on the intellectual life of Islam in its formative period. It should render sources accessible to scholars in the field of intellectual history on concepts and practices of Syriac-Persian, Persian-Arabic translators and thinkers, many of whom are scarcely known, and should help to situate these contributors in the

learned context of their times. Finally, it should help to bring about a clearer appreciation of the scientific-philosophical tradition in Persia which was updated by the Muslims and passed on in its new metamorphosis to Christian Europe.

The following are a few research-related questions used as a guideline:

- **What was translated** from Greek, Sanskrit, Syriac, and other languages into MP, and thence into Arabic? Which traditional strands of literature in Persian sources can be identified in Arabic literature? Is there any pattern to notice in the translated works into and from MP?
- **Who were the patrons?** Which individuals or institutions decided that certain texts should be made accessible in their own language? In pre-Islamic times translations were carried on, it seems, within a centralized program sponsored by the state and religion, whereas in Islam that was not normally the case, despite a few caliphs who became quite famous for their support.
- **Which criteria** ruled the choice of MP texts for translation into Arabic? What were the declared goals? Did a national sentiment play a role in this process? Were translators concerned, for example, with saving the waning ancient tradition of Iran in the garb of a now dominant Arabic language as it is often suggested? Were translations made for the propagation of rival ideologies? How did translators handle the morally or politically doubtful passages not palpable to Islam? Is it true, for example, that Ibn al-Muqaffa' translated the *Kalīla wa-Dimna* in order to spread Manichaeism, as al-Bīrūnī claims?
- **What role** did translation play pragmatically in Sasanian and Muslim **education**? How were they conveyed, by whom and by which means? Can translation business be localized? Which places became important centers for transfer of ideas? To which people is it attributed; how is it institutionally anchored?
- Persian and Indian thought had a **formative influence** on Islamic intellectual life. To what extent and by which means can this influence be compared with that of the Graeco-Roman?
- What **religious legitimacy** do these translations have? Scholars active within diverse religious communities resorted to translating philosophical texts, in particular logic, for the purpose of acquiring exegetical dexterity in defending and strengthening their doctrinal positions (Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Jews, Christians). The extent to which the conquered peoples transferred religious traditions from their own intellectual environment to the new cultural circles is significant; they had only to translate their inherited religious sense into Islamic idiom. Religion and ideology advanced translations of various kinds.

Fields to which the project helps alleviate research deficits:

- A considerable section of the translation activity and transmission of **cultural wisdom** is examined. This is a major contribution to the era of transition from Sasanian Iran to Islam, which has been little researched so far, and whose thin source base is known.
- The literary history of Persian translations is outlined especially for the pre-Islamic and early Islamic times. In the later phase of this period the transition from MP to New Persian language took place. Moreover, the zenith of Arabic translation movement coincides also with the rise of a new interest for Zoroastrian religious and literary writings, and, in fact, the greater part of the existing MP literature comes from this period. How does the translation as a **vehicle of cultural transfer** fit into these developments?
- While the **political-religious dimension** of rule has always been at the center of interest in research, this is the first time that the scientific-literary side of domination will be examined as the basis for political and religious action.

- **Direct comparison** of a few Arabic translations with MP originals⁶ is expected to provide insights on translation techniques and conceptual history easing the way for tracing the translated texts in the extant Arabic literature.

3.3 Work programme including proposed research methods

3.3.1 Research methods

This is a history of translation into and from MP. Unlike many historians who approach the Sasanian and the early Islamic Iran as distinct periods, we do not regard the emergence of Islam and the fall of the Sasanian Empire as a caesura in the history of West Asia. Following Garth Fowden's (2014, 49-81) concept of "first millennium" and Thomas Bauer's periodization (2018, esp. 139-41), we consider the first three centuries of Islam (seventh to tenth century) in which Sasanian culture continued, as part of the Late Antiquity in West Asia. Our investigation offers yet another confirmation for this periodization. This is an area poorly researched, mainly because practicing translators have left no descriptive records of their craft. While negotiating with MP translations, we are hampered by near total lack of original texts and of translations. Practically no translations into MP have survived, and only a few translators are known by name alone. This is so much so that we can rarely make linguistic or literary comparisons, or substantiate the principles followed by translators. Without taking recourse to Arabic and Syriac and to some extent Latin sources we would be in near total darkness. Even here every piece of useful information must be extracted by piecemeal work from a host of discrete sources and pieced together for evaluation, a time consuming effort although often with surprising outcome. Given the scope and nature of the material basis of the project, at each turn we resort to method or methods most appropriate for our work. The situation becomes slightly better in the area of MP into Arabic, where a few Pahlavi texts are available of which Arabic translations exist. These remains offer sustainable grounds for comparison and signal valuable insight into translation practices. In addition, they are a gold mine for extracting MP technical terms and the equivalents used for them in Arabic. Textual comparison would enable us to better trace the conceptual history of many Persian-Arabic maxims: [e.g.: MP *dād* => Arabic *'adāla* (justice); *frahang* => *adab* (refined culture; education); *rāstīh* => *ṣidq* (veracity); *handarz* => *wa'z* (admonition); *dānāg* => *'ālim* (knowing, wise); *xrad* => *al-ḥikma* (wisdom, sophia) and *dānišn* => *'ilm* (knowledge, scientia), and so forth.

The recorded details about the translators from MP into Arabic are meager and imbalanced; a few are relatively well known; many remain bare names as of now. So far, we have identified fifteen persons for the Umayyad period, who will definitely bridge the artificially created gap in the translation movement between the Sasanians and the Abbasids. The assembled bio-bibliographical notices about these and another forty or so translators of the Abbasid period will be subjected to a prosopographical study in accordance to our Five Ws plan: who, what, where, when, and why. Along the way, some modern theoretical postulations in the field will be subjected to critical scrutiny, for example, the concept of "Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement," or the firmly-entrenched suggestion that translation started primarily with the coming to power of the Abbasids who used it as an imperial policy to strengthen their rule.

For the most part the project follows the traditional perspective on transfer process of historical translation studies. Here translation is seen still as the transfer of texts from one language into another; translation as communication between national languages and national literatures, as a means of transcultural exchange, restricted to written source materials and textual documents. This study brings into interactive focus, the diverse areas of history, of comparative literary history

⁶ This includes for example the MP *Ayādgār ī Wuzurg-mihr* vs. its Arabic translation transmitted by Miskawayh in his *Jāwīdān-xrad* (see Shaked 2013; Rezania 2021b) and *Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ēw* vs. al-Tha'ālibī's *Ghurar akhbār mulūk al-furs* (see Azarnouche 2013).

and literary criticism, of linguistics, of bio-bibliography and of prosopography. Furthermore, a polyglot, multidisciplinary approach on translation is pursued which benefits from disciplines and perspectives in Iranian, Arabic-Islamic and Syriac studies. MP, Arabic and Syriac philology guide the research on the micro level. On the macro level, the results will be contextualized in the discourse of Sasanian Empire and the early Islamic history.

3.3.2 Sources

A magnificent source of information for the study of translation in general is the tenth-century history of Arabic literature entitled *al-Fihrist* ('The Catalogue'), written by the Baghdad bookseller and copyist Muḥammad b. Ishāq al-Nadīm (d. 380/990). Writing his *al-Fihrist* in 377/987, Ibn al-Nadīm gave a list of translators and their renderings from MP into Arabic as well as the titles of a large number of translated books whose translators were unknown to him. He listed some twenty translators and over one hundred mostly anonymous Persian-Arabic titles on history, fables, and morals (Inostranzev 1918). Ibn al-Nadīm's inventory is, however, far from being complete, and his assembled data is not always accurate. Adding to his inventory the names of MP translators and works found in Syriac and classical Arabic and New Persian sources (e.g. al-Jāhīz, Ibn Qutayba, al-Mas'ūdī, Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, Miskawayh, etc.), his list will easily be more than double in each case. The groundwork done for this project has already produced about three hundred titles of translated works into and from MP, in the transfer of which at least some fifty translators participated. Both these numbers are expected to increase as the present research goes forth. A few of the translators-authors such as Paul the Persian, Mar Abā the Great, Ibn al-Muqaffa', Abān al-Lāḥiqī, or Sahl b. Hārūn are known to some extent to modern readers, but the majority remains obscure.

The Sasanian intellectual and moral-practical patrimony passed on to the Muslims in a variety of forms and left deep impact on the flourishing Islamic intellectual life and culture: samples of this literature surviving in Arabic with which the project will be working include:

- Manuals of government (Āyīn-nāmas, Tāj-nāmas, 'Ahd-nāmas, Waṣīyyat-nāmas);
- Handarz- and Pand-nāmas (advice and admonitions; ageless practical wisdom);
- Gāh-nāmas ('Books of Rankings'), and Xwadāy-nāmas ('The Book of Kings'), which later on in the shape of Firdawsī's Shāh-nāma came to constitute the Iranian national epic, a Fürstenspiegel par excellence;
- Fables in the genre of Kalīla wa-Dimna (considered rather as a technical or scientific treatise than just a book of fables), and Marzbān-nāma, which are recognized among the best mirror for princes in world literature (teach the basic principles of good government), and in the form of entertaining tales of the Hazār Afsāna and Sindbād-nāma, etc. many of which are better known under the Thousand and One Nights;
- Bilawhar wa-Budhāsf, (i.e. Barlaam and Josaphat based on the legendary life of Buddha); Alexander Romance; Sirr al-asrār (i.e. Secretum Secretorum);
- Numerous Ādāb al-falāsifa, or collections of wise sayings attributed to philosophers and sages of the past (e.g. Jāwīdān-khirad, 'Perennial Wisdom', Ṣiwān al-ḥikma, 'Depository of Wisdom', Mukhtār al-ḥikam, 'Digest of Wisdom').

A convenient resource for our work is found in the digitized, searchable corpora of Arabic and Persian texts from the period, most prominently al-Maktaba al-Shāmīla and Maktaba-yi Nūr. These have immense potential use as a starting point, though they remain inevitably partial and need be cross-referenced with critical editions.

3.3.3 Work Program:

The project has two phases: collecting-analysis and synthesis. The tasks in each phase and the time plan to accomplish them are illustrated in the attached Gantt chart (see the Appendix I) and elaborated briefly as follows.

Phase 1, Collecting-Analysis: Though this project is dependent on a large body of related work, it has perforce to define and map its own field. The material basis for reconstructing the literary-scientific underpinnings of this period is scanty and diffuse. This study of translation into and from MP is based, therefore, on an exhaustive examination and interrogation of texts written in MP, Syriac, Arabic, Latin, and New Persian, as well as secondary literature. The pertinent secondary literature is extensive and has been already assembled, so that an evaluation of it shall not take more than three months. The RA is planning to examine a number of heretofore unedited manuscripts kept at different libraries in Iran and Turkey (see the Appendix II), expecting to supplement the dearth corpora at our disposal. This archival research and data collecting will take up to four months. Tackling the primary sources will be the next step, for which six months are foreseen. This time frame may seem too ambitious or optimistic given the extreme diffusion of base resources; however, much of it has been examined over the years in connection with our previous projects and preliminary work. The student assistant (SA) will assist the RA in bibliographical management, search, archiving and maintaining the bibliographical database. The PI has already produced a bibliographical database for MP philology comprising over 1300 entries. The RA lists a similar long bibliography of Arabic sources which the SA will enter in the same bibliographical database. In this process, which covers the first two years of the project, the SA will acquaint himself/herself with sources of late antique Iran in MP, Syriac and Arabic. By doing so, s/he will gain an in-depth knowledge in primary and secondary sources in this field.

Phase 2, Synthesis: By collating the newly gained testimonies with the details collected from the old, the project shall proceed with its objective by assessing and synthesizing the assembled data. PI and RA envisage closer cooperation at this stage; for the project presupposes a steady dialogue between three competences in MP, Syriac and Arabic literature. The work schedule for this phase is anticipated based on the tentative contents of the monograph to be prepared (for a provisory plan see the Appendix III). Part I attempts to answer the question of how the acquisition and reception of foreign science and literature in Sasanian Persia worked; highlighting what was there in MP for the Muslims to receive. This is a kind of literature that is notoriously difficult to interpret and, in consequence, hardly accessible to and often avoided by even the most devoted scholars in Arabic studies. It is this rich though still insufficiently studied literature that needs to be made easily accessible. Part II maps the passage of this literature into the early Islamic period. At first, the agents of this cultural transfer, the translators, will be identified for the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. In a later step, the fruits of the translation practice, the translated works, will be investigated. The subject matter of translated works is heterogeneous and expands from literary translations to non-fictional texts in the fields of history and philosophy, but also from medicine to jurisprudence, as well as the social sciences, sports and economics. Chapters will be assigned to each subject if the available material, which will be translated wherever needed, makes a meaningful analysis and assessment possible. In a final revision, the RA will prepare the monograph for publication. According to our estimation, it will comprise a volume of some 500 pages. The SA will aid in preliminary proofreading as well as providing indices for the monograph. Beside this monograph, the PI and RA will co-author an article on Sasanian MP literature. In contrast to the available depictions of the MP literature, which concentrate solely on Pahlavi texts and tacitly project the Pahlavi literature of the Islamic period on the Sasanian era, the article will reflect on the Sasanian MP literature in light of their Arabic translations in the Islamic period.

Workshop: To share and discuss our findings in the phase of analysis with international colleagues, we plan to organize a two-day project-specific workshop bringing together some ten scholars to Bochum (For a list of potential guests we have already approached see 8.6 below). The exchange of ideas with other scholars at the beginning of the phase of synthesis will help us to refine our methodology if needed. With its long standing experience in organizing workshops and conferences, the event management of the Center for Religious Studies will assist us in this matter. The SA will assume the organizational tasks and communication with the guests. We will publish the proceedings in an edited volume, or preferably in a special issue of a relevant journal. The SA will assist us in the preparation of the publication as well.

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