Fred Aprim

HUNAYN IBN ISHAQ

(AD 809 - 873 or 877)

It is written that it would be a rarity to find any Arabic translation of the most popular Greek medicine and philosophy publications without discovering that Syriac was the mean through which the translation took place. Most of the Greek work was translated to Syriac first and then from Syriac into Arabic language.

Hunayn bin (son of) Ishaq's (Iskhaq in Syriac / Isaac in English) outline of life and work are well known from his autobiography written in the form of letters to 'Ali bin Yahya. (Text from two manuscripts in the Aya Sofia Mosque at Istanbul, with translation by G. Bergestrasser, Leipzig, 1925) He was a native of Hira, near Baghdad, and the son of a Nestorian druggist (Pharmacist). He is endorsed by his name 'Abadi, which shows that he belonged to the subject people of Hira. Hunayn followed in the footsteps of other Nestorian physicians like Jirgis (Giwargis) bin Bakhtishu (ca. 771) the dean of the Jundi-Shapur hospital (south-western Persia). Jundi-Shapur was noted for its academy of Medicine and Philosophy founded about AD 555. Nothing is known though of the Bakhtishu who was the father of this Jirjis, but the name occurs several times in the course of the history of Baghdad.

In AD 765 the Caliph Al-Mansur, afflicted with a stomach disease which had baffled his physicians, summoned for Bakhtishu, who soon won the confidence of the caliph and became the court physician, though he retained his Nestorianism. Invited by the caliph to embrace Islam his retort was that he preferred the company of his fathers, be they in heaven or in hell. Bakhtishu

became in Baghdad the founder of a brilliant family which for (6) or (7) generations, covering a period of (2 1/2) centuries, exercised an almost continuous monopoly over the court medical practice. Jibril (Gabriel) bin Bakhtishu, in AD 801 became chief physician of the Baghdad hospital under the Caliph Al-Rashid and in AD 805 the caliph's private physician until his death in AD 829. The Bakhtishu family played an important part in the cultural education of the Arabs.

Hunayn in AD 857 as a youth began as a dispenser to Yahya (Youkhanna) Bin Massawayh, the great doctor and pupil of Gabriel bin Bakhtishu. Massawayh, is said, having been fed up with Hunayn's continuous questioning, have said to him:"What have the people of Al-Hira have to do with medicine?--go and change money in the bazaar." (read Ibn al-'Ibri, p. 250) The young Hunayn left the service of Masawayh in tears, but challanged himself to study Greek in "the land of the Greeks" where he stayed for (2) years and obtained a sound knowledge of the Greek language and familiarity with textual criticism such as had been developed in Alexandria. Later he settled for some time at Basra and attended the popular school of Al-Khalil bin Ahmad (Al-Faraheedi) and there he became fluent in Arabic before returning to Baghdad in AD 826. He was then introduced by Gabriel bin Bakhtishu (now physician-in-ordivary to caliph Al-Ma'mun) to Musa bin Shakir and his sons, known as "Sons of Musa", wealthy patrons of learning. Subsequently this caliph founded a library-academy which he called the "House of Wisdom" (Dar Al-Hikma) and appointed Hunayn as its superintendent. In this capacity Hunayn had charge of all the scientific translation work, in which he enjoyed the collaboration of his son Ishaq bin Hunayn and his nephew Hubaysh bin Al-Hasan, whom he trained. Hunayn's ability as a traslator may be attested by the report that when in the service of the sons of bin Shakir he and others received about 500 dinars (about £ 250) per month and that Al-Ma'mun paid him in gold the weight of the books he translated.

Al-Ma'mun died in AD 833 and was succeeded by Al-Mu'tasim, who found it difficult to control the populace of Baghdad and formed a guard of Turkish slave-soldiers. But this body-guard, holding a privileged position, soon became insubordinate and many complaints were made about their conduct. At last Al-Mu'tasim removed himself and his court to Samarra (north of Baghdad) in AD

836, and there the caliphs reigned until AD 892. These disorders affected scholarship adversely and the "House of Wisdom" fell into decay which was not checked during the brief reign of Wathiq (AD 842-847). The next Caliph was Al-Mutawakkil (847-861), although he was bigoted, fanatical, and sadistic, he was a generous patron of scientific research and is generally reckoned as having reopened the "House of Wisdom". It was during this Caliph's reign where Hunayn reached the summit of his glory not only as a translator but as a practitioner when he was appointed by the Caliph Al-Mutawakkil as his private physician. Al-Mutawakkil, however, once committed him to jail for a year for refusing the offer of rich rewards to concoct a poison for an enemy. When brought again before the caliph and threatened with death his reply was:

"I have skill only in what is beneficial, and have studied naught else".

Asked by the caliph, who then claimed that he was simply testing his physician's integrity, as to what prevented him from preparing the deadly poison, Hunayn replied:

"Two things: my religion and my profession. My religion decrees that we should do good even to our enemies, how much more to our friends. And my profession is instituted for the benefit of humanity and limited to their relief and cure. Besides, every physician is under oath never to give anyone a deadly medicine." (read Ibn al-'Ibri, pp251-252)

In AD 861 Al-Mutawakkil was murdered by his Turkish guards at his son's instigation. Hunayn enjoyed the favour of that son Al-Montasir (AD 861-862), and his successors Al-Mosta'in (AD 862-866), Al-Mo'tazz (AD 866-869), Al-Muhtadi (AD 869-870), and Al-Mu'tamid (AD 870-892), and was engaged in making a translation of Galen's De constitutione artis medicae at the time of his death, which took place in 873 according to the Fihrist, or 877 according to Ibn Abi Usaibi'a.

Of the numerous works ascribed to Hunayn, some should undoubtedly be credited to his two assistants, his son and nephew, and to other students of his school, such as 'Isa bin Yahya bin Ibrahim (Essa Youkhanna Oraham), and Musa (Moshe) bin Khalid. Almost all the leading scientists of the succeeding generation were pupils of Hunayn like Staphanos bin Basilos, who translated the Dioscorides into Syriac, and this Syriac version was then translated into Arabic by Hunayn

himself for the "Sons of Musa". In many cases Hunayn evidently did the initial translation from Greek into Syriac and his colleagues took the second step and translated from Syriac into Arabic.
Aristotle's Hermeneutica, for instance, was first done from Greek into Syriac by Hunayn, the father, and then from Syriac into Arabic by the son Ishaq, who was the better in Arabic and who became the greatest translator of Aristotle's works. Altogether Hunayn translated into Syriac (20) books of Galen, (2) for Gabriel Bakhtishu's son, (2) for Salmawaih bin Bunan, (1) for Gabriel Bakhtishu, and (1) for bin Massawayh, and also revised the (16) translations made by Sargis Al-ras'ayni of Ras Al-'ayn on the Khabur River, who translated the famous "Corpus Galena".

Rainer Degen, of Marburg wrote a paper on the oldest known Syriac Manuscript of the greatest Nestorian translator and physician Hunayn bin Ishaq, after his return from a trip to Paris in 1973, and Baghdad in 1974, where he attended the great festivals in commemoration of the 1100th year of the death of this great Nestorian. Anton Baumstark wrote so much about Hunayn in Aristoteles bei den Syrern vom V. - VIII. Jahrhundert. Syrische Texte. 1. Band: Syrisch-arabische Biographien des Aristoteles / Leipzig 1900, and classified him as "der gröBte aller syrischen Gelehrten des Mittelalters".
Degan writes; "Not a single paper about Ishaq's Syriac works was read in both Paris and Baghdad, where various aspects of Hunayn's life and work were treated by the learned speakers, the Syriac part of his works played only a minor role. (Read the presented papers in Baghdad under a volume entitled "Ephraim Hunayn Festival. Baghdad 4-7/2/1974, published by Al-Ma'arif Press, 1974)."
What would we expect from the authorities in Iraq? A government which has adopted the policy of Arabization in all aspects of the Christians' life, But to have the same happen in Paris is the part we find hard to believe!
Degen started in 1971 to collect all the available information about the remains of Syriac medical texts for the planned 'Corpus Medicorum Syriacorum,' and he got a microfilm from the Vatican Library in which he found that what the two S.E. & J.S. Assemani had written in "Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catologus, partis Iae t. 3, complectens, reliquos codices chaldaicos sive syriacos," Rome 1759, p. 409, Vatican Syriac 192, describing the

content of the work of Paul of Aegina's misleading titled "Syntagma medicum" was totally wrong. The book " Syntagma medicum" is not a translation from a Greek original, but the oldest Arabic manuscript of the famous "Book of Medical Questions for the Beginners" [widely known in Arabic as 'Kitab al-Masa'il al-Ttibbiyah'] by Hunayn bin Ishaq. This book was used in the 16th century as the best introductory work in medicine.

One of the oldest Syriac manuscripts is to be found in the Mingana Collection in the Selly Oak Colleges Library, Birmingham. Its number is Mingana Syriac 661. The Catalogue does not say from where Alphonse Mingana acquired the manuscript, but in a note on page XXI somebody, perhaps Dr. Gottschalk, mentioned after Mingana's death that "Dr. Mingana was also convinced that the Syriac MSS. Nos. 628-662 came from Mount Sinai." According to A. Mingana this manuscript is "written in an early East Syrian [Assyrian] hand bordering on a West Syrian [Assyrian] sirta of about AD 1100."

Degen asks: But, from where do we know that the text of the leaves is Hunayn's? Because Degen found the contents of that manuscripts in a similar Syriac manuscript in Mingana's Collection: Syriac 594 which is a modern copy of a likewise modern manuscript in Alqosh. When Degen got the microfilm of the Arabic manuscript Khudabakhah 2142/1 (preserved in the Oriental Public Library, Patna / India), he was able to identify the author of the Syriac work. The mentioned Arabic manuscript is the only one that preserved a once widespread and famous treatise -- the book of Nourishment (Kitab al-Aghdiya) -- of Hunayn bin Ishaq.

Some of Hunayn's Translations:

1. A selected series of the Treatises of Galen
- De sectis
- Ars medica
- De pulsibus ad tirones
- Ad Glauconem de medendi methodo
- De ossibus ad tirones
- De musculorum dissectione
- De nervorum dissectione
- De venarum arteriumque dissectione

- De elementis secundum Hippocratem
- De temperamentis
- De facultibus naturalibus
- De causis et symptomatibus
- De locis affectis
- De pulsibus (four treatises)
- De typis (febrium)
- De crisibus
- De diebus decretoriis
- Methodus medendi

2. Hippocrates and Dioscorides.
3. Plato's Republic (Siyasah).
4. Aristotle's Categories (Maqulas), Physics (Tabi'iyat) and Magna Moralia (Khulqiyat).
5. Seven books of Galen's anatomy, lost in the original Greek, have luckily been preserved in Arabic.
6. Arabic version of the Old Testament from the Greek Septuagint did not survive.
7. Many published works of R. Duval in Chemistry, like the two transcripts at the British Museum:
a. Wright. Catalogue, P. 1190 - 1191, MV
b. Coll' orient, 1593
represent basically translations of Hunayn's work with very minor reading differences.
8. In Chemistry again we have a book titled ['An Al-Asma'] meaning "About the Names", which did not reach the researchers but was used in "Dictionary of Ibn Bahlool" of the 10th century.
9. "Kitab Al-Ahjar" or the "Book of Stones".

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