

# Homer: An Arabic portrait<sup>1</sup>

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*Homer is rightfully seen as the first teacher of Hellenism, the poet who educated the Greek, who in turn educated Europe. But, as is well known, Europe doesn't have a monopoly on Greek heritage. It was also present in the Islamic tradition, where it manifested itself differently. Apart from philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine and pharmacology, Greek poetry, even if usually not translated, was also widely read among the Arab-Islamic intellectual elite. The author analyses the extent to which Homer's works circulated, how well known were his poetics, and the influence his verses exerted during the heyday of Classical Arab-Islamic civilization.*

**Keywords:** Homer; translation movement; Al-Biruni; arabic poetry; Al-Farabi; Averroes

## INTRODUCTION

The Greek and Arab epic tradition have much in common. Themes of tribal enmity, invasions and plunder, abduction of women, revenge, heroism, chivalry and love feature prominently in both traditions. While the Greeks have Hercules, Perseus, Theseus, Odysseus, Jason or Achilles, the Arabs have 'Antar bin Šaddād (the "Arab Achilles"), Sayf bin Dī Yazan, Az-Zīr Sālim and many others. When it comes to the actual performance of poetry, similarities between the two traditions are even greater. Homeric *aoidos* playing his lyre has a direct counterpart in Arab *rawin* playing his rababa. The Arab wandering poet often shares the fate of his Greek colleague (Imru' al-Qays, Ṭarafa and Al-A'šā, and Abū Nuwās and Al-Mutanabbī are the most famous examples). Greek tyrants who were famous for hosting poets like Ibycus, Anacreon, Simonides, Bacchylides or Pindar, while expelling others like Alcaeus, have a royal counterpart in An-Nu'mān bin al-Munḍir, the ruler of Hira. Even Homer, according to the tradition, frequented such courts. Also, the venue for presenting the songs is very similar. While in ancient

<sup>1</sup> Rad predstavlja prvi od tri dijela autorova izlaganja na Homerskoj akademiji na Hiju 2015.

Greece there were Pan-Hellenic festivals dedicated to reciting poetry, pre-Islamic Arabs had the 'Uqāz souq, where the best poets were rewarded by having their poems hanged on the walls of the Kaaba (the so called *Mu'allaqāt*).

The main aim of the first part of this study is to determine whether or not the Arabs translated the Homeric epics and subsequently read them. Before we delve into this question, we must address the broader issue of whether or not the Arabs translated foreign poetry at all. Poetry is deeply rooted in Arab tradition. In the late pre-Islamic (Jāhiliyya) period, poetry served to forge a specific Arab identity.<sup>2</sup> It is reported that 'Umar bin al-Ḥaṭṭāb said *Poetry is the register of the Arabs (Aš-ši'r dīwān al-'Arab)*. What about the poetic heritage of all those nations who, in the first half of the seventh century, found themselves suddenly united within the Arab-Islamic oikumene – the Greeks, the Syrians, the Persians? All three possessed a centuries-old poetic tradition, respectively, which the Arabs were aware of and was available to them. So, what about translating it into Arabic? A nation with such a refined taste in all things poetic surely needed to become acquainted with other traditions, if for no other reason but to demonstrate its own superiority. Why is it, then, that of all major aspects of Greek wisdom which were passed to the Arabs, poetry was the only one conspicuously left untranslated? And more importantly, if not translated, was it read in the original? What did the medieval Arabs know about Greek poetry, the poets, the way the poems were transmitted through centuries? How did Arabic poetry influence Greek education and life in general if we take into account the quintessential role Arabic poetry played in Arab (and subsequently Islamic) *adab* (education) as a model?

## HOMER AND THE TRANSLATION MOVEMENT

The great Egyptian Hellenist Ahmed Etman (1945-2013) wrote about the Arab reception of Homer in his article *Homer in the Arab World*.<sup>3</sup> In his article the Arab perception of Homer as both the father of Greek poetry and the educator of the Greek people whose verses contain elements of divine wisdom is demonstrated. In addition, the motives which dissuaded the medieval Arabs from translating Greek poetry and the major differences between Greek and Arab concept of myth are discussed. In the second part of the article, the author briefly presents the first modern translation of the Iliad by Sulaymān al-Bustānī (Cairo, 1904) and discusses the influence Homer exerted on modern Arabic literature (it should be noted that Etman is also the author of a book on the classical sources of Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's drama). Homer's distinctive Arabic rendition compared to those of the Byzantines and the Italian humanists is the topic of the article *On Seeing the Poet: Arabic, Italian and Byzantine Portraits of Homer* by Barbara Graziosi. Moreover, the article *The Transmission of the Neoplatonists' Homer to the Latin Middle Ages* by

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<sup>2</sup> The pre-Islamic poetry era can be defined as the 150 to 200 years preceding the Islamic revelation (410 - 460 AD), which is the time period mentioned by Al-Ġāhiz, I, 74.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Etman also lead the Iliad translation project (Cairo, 2004) and supplemented the translation with his own extensive study of both Homer and the Homeric question, and the Iliad and its impact on world literature. The Odyssey translation project has unfortunately been put on hold due to the professor's tragic death.

Robert Lambertson introduced Homer the Philosopher whom the Arabs (who through their study of Plato and Aristotle were familiar with Homer the Poet) received via the Neoplatonists.

Hārūn ar-Rašīd's (763–809) son Al-Ma'mūn (786-833), established the Bayt al-Ḥikma in Baghdad<sup>4</sup> after purportedly seeing Aristotle in a dream. Within the Abbasid patronage system, Arab translators worked on translating classical Greek works of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, pharmacology and botany, but neglected to do the same with Greek poetry (epic, lyric or dramatic). There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, Greek poetry is steeped in a polytheistic worldview, reflecting the central role the Gods played in the everyday life of the Greeks, which did not suit the taste of a devout Muslim or Christian.

The second reason, derived from the first, is the almost complete absence of gods in the Arab poetic tradition. The pre-Islamic Arab poetic tradition almost never deals with the gods and their interactions with the humans - while it is possible to reconstruct the Greek cosmology using Hesiod's *Theogony* in minute detail, the pre-Islamic Arab poetry tells us disappointingly little regarding the pre-Islamic Arab pantheon. Moreover, the religious affiliations of most pre-Islamic poets (based on their poetry) remain unclear - whether they were polytheists, hanifists (monotheists without the Revelation), Jews, or Christians. On the other hand, Gods are a *sine qua non* in Greek poetry (especially epic) - the Iliad and the Odyssey are the perfect example of this synthesis between the human and the divine, the main characters of these epics being divine or semi-divine (heroes are usually the sons of gods and goddesses). In the Homeric corpus, human and divine actions are inter-woven both in the Trojan war and in the return of Odysseus, and one cannot tell whether the humans are more similar to the gods or the gods behave like the humans. The parallelism between the Earthly and Heavenly battles is obvious, as the divine struggle takes place both in the Iliad (one party supporting the Achaeans - Poseidon, Hera, Athena; the other supporting the Trojans - Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite) and the Odyssey (some gods aiding Odysseus on his return home, Poseidon preventing him). How can the constant victories and setbacks of both the Achaeans and the Trojans and the wanderings of Odysseus be understood if we take the actions of the Olympians out of the picture? This concept of divine intervention, as was poignantly observed by Ahmed Etman, is fundamentally alien to the pre-Islamic Arab poetic world-view.<sup>5</sup> The gods, with all their virtues and flaws, are an integral part of the epic narration and the main condition for understanding the work of art in its entirety. This was something the Arabs could not understand, not only because many translators were Christian and the majority of the society Muslim, but also because they were lacking similar traditions during the pre-Islamic era.

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4 It is more likely that the dream was the consequence, not the cause of the establishment of the Bayt al-Ḥikma and the entire Translation Movement. Al-Ma'mūn most likely used the authority of the Philosopher to silence the opposition movement, while later chroniclers like Yaḥyá bin 'Adī used the story to emphasize the primacy of Aristotel. On the Ideological Dimensions of Al-Ma'mūn's dream see Gutas 1998, 97-104

5 Etman 2011, 71-72

The third reason is the lack in the Arab poetic tradition of epic poetry in the form of a lengthy narrative poem cantered around a specific heroic episode. The Arabs, both in the Pre-Islamic period as well as during the Islamic period, never composed an epic poem the size of the Iliad or the Odyssey. Ibn Rušd (1126-1198) touches upon the lack of lengthy Arab epic poems which have the beginning, the middle and the end and relate stories about states and kingdoms (*al-aš'ār al-qīṣāṣiyya*), while commenting on Aristotle's *Poetics*:

*And the like of these is very rare in the Arabic language ... and he [Aristotle] mentioned glorious names in this category of poets and praised highly Homer.*<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the most important reason why the Arabs eschewed translating Greek poetry is the fact that the Arabs felt that poetry cannot be translated because any translation is unfaithful to the poem's original meaning and destroys its poetic structure. This will be discussed in greater details in subsequent paragraphs.

Al-Ġāhiz (776-868/9) in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (*The Book of Animals*) reaffirms this: *Only Arabs and those who speak Arabic have a correct understanding of poetry. Poems are not suited for translation and should not be translated. When they are translated, their poetic structure is broken, the meter is no longer kept, the poetic beauty disappears, and nothing worthy of admiration remains.*<sup>7</sup>

One translation of Homer's works, albeit into Syrian, was made during this golden era of the Abbasid Caliphate. Theophilus of Edessa (695–785) translated the Iliad into Syriac for the caliph Al-Mahdī. Bar Hebraeus (1226–1286) wrote extensively about this translation in his book *History* (*Tārīḥ muḥtaṣar ad-duwal*).

*And he translated the two books of the poet Homer (wa-naqala kitābay Ūmīrūs aš-šā'ir) about the conquest of the city Ilion (madīnat Īlyūn) in the ancient time from Greek into Syriac to the utmost degree of eloquence.*<sup>8</sup>

We do not know which “two books of the poet Homer” exactly the author means – two books of the Iliad (A and B) or the Iliad and the Odyssey. The first possibility seems more likely. Though the Iliad does not deal with the conquest of Ilion, it is hard to believe that he would miss mentioning the topic of the Odyssey in this description, no matter how lapidary it might be. For centuries, the Iliad had a higher status than the Odyssey, and was used more frequently for teaching. This is corroborated by numerous Syriac short quotes and paraphrases of the Iliad, while those of the Odyssey (with one exception) do not exist.<sup>9</sup> It is more likely that Bar Hebraeus

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn Rušd, *aš-Ši'r*, 154

<sup>7</sup> Al-Ġāhiz, I, 74-75

<sup>8</sup> Ibn al-'Ibrī, 220

<sup>9</sup> Conrad 1999, 94

simply was not familiar with the contents of Iliad completely and assumed, judging by its name, that it is a story about the entire or at least the major part of the war.

Moreover, Ḥunayn bin Iṣḥāq (809–873), the protagonist of the Translation movement is connected to Homer. We find his story in the work by the 13th century Syrian physician Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a under the title ‘*Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’*’ (*The most useful Information regarding the Classes of Physicians*), a massive work about the history of medicine organized as biographies of notable physicians (Greek and Arab). The story is told by Ḥunayn’s friend Yūsuf bin Ibrāhīm. Ḥunayn was a Nestorian Christian born in the Lakhmid capital Hira and fluent in both Syriac and Arabic. He moved to Baghdad to study with the greatest physician of his day - Yūhannā bin Māsawayhi, a native of Hira’s rival Jundishapur, but asked too many questions which irritated his teacher, and was soon expelled. Despite this, Ḥunayn did not lose hope – he left Baghdad for two years without letting anyone know where he was going or why.<sup>10</sup> Now, the story about Ḥunayn acquires a new dimension.

*Hārūn ar-Rašīd had a Byzantine Greek slave girl (ḡāriya rūmiyya) named Ḥiršā whom he held in high esteem and who served him as a keeper of the storehouse. She had a sister (or maybe it was her niece) who would occasionally bring ar-Rašīd a garment or some other thing Ḥiršā had in her care. One day ar-Rašīd missed her, but when he asked where she was, Ḥiršā informed him that she had married her to a relative of hers. Al-Rašīd became very angry and said: “How dare you marry, without my permission, a relative of yours whom you should first have bought from me, since she is my property?” He then ordered Sallām al-Abraš to investigate who had married her and to punish him. Sallām made the necessary inquiries, discovered who the man is, seized him and did not finish with him until he had him castrated. His castration took place while the slave girl was already pregnant. She gave birth when ar-Rašīd set out for Tus and died shortly afterwards. Ḥiršā adopted the boy, raised him in the Greek way of life (addabathu bi-ādāb ar-Rūm) and instructed him in reading Greek books (qirā’at kutubihim). He mastered the Greek language (al-lisān al-yūnānī) to such perfection that he became the foremost authority on it (kānat lahu fihi ri’āsa). He was Iṣḥāq, also known as Ibn al-Ḥaṣī [son of the castrate]. We used to meet quite frequently at assemblies of men of culture (maḡālis ahl al-adab).*

*When he once fell ill, I paid him a visit. While I was at his house, at one point I observed a man with luxuriant hair, part of which hid his face from my sight.<sup>11</sup> Going back and forth, he was reciting Greek poems by Homer (yataraddadu yunšidu ši’ran bi-r-rūmiyya li-Ūmīrūs), king of the Greek poets (ra’īs šu’arā’ ar-Rūm), and the timbre of his voice resembled that of Ḥunayn, whom I had not seen for more than two years. I said to Iṣḥāq bin al-Ḥaṣī: “This is Ḥunayn.” He denied it, but this denial resembled an admission. So, I addressed Ḥunayn, and he answered me, saying: “Yūhannā bin Māsawayhi said that it is impossible for an ‘Abādī [Ḥunayn’s clan] dissolved of obligations with the Christian faith to learn medicine.” Ḥunayn told me that he had agreed to study*

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, I, 185

<sup>11</sup> Arabs usually identified this hairstyle with Byzantine fashion.

*medicine until he had mastered the Greek language to such perfection that nobody in his time could compete with him.*<sup>12</sup>

To sum up, two years later his friend Yūsuf bin Ibrāhīm found himself called to the bed of a patient whose mother was of Greek ancestry. There he noticed a strange man reciting Homer in the original Greek. The stranger was Ḥunayn, who returned to Baghdad having mastered Homeric Greek to such a degree that he was able to recite the Homeric poems in the original. There is more to the story than what meets the eye. It implies that the members of the Baghdadi elite like (be it Syriac Christians or Arab Muslims like Yūsuf bin Ibrāhīm) not only knew Greek, but were familiar with Homeric poems and could recognize them upon hearing and attribute them correctly. Barbara Graziosi wonders as to why Ḥunayn, who certainly had knowledge of Greek language, literature and even certain aspects of “Homeric question”, did not translate Homer into Arabic.<sup>13</sup> If we take a look at his voluminous translation opus, we see that almost all are translations of Galen’s medical works, some fragments of Hippocrates, the *Septuagint*, Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Categories*, *Physics* and *Magna moralia*.<sup>14</sup> He probably did not have much interest in translating a work of literature (among his translations are not Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*) or simply did not have the time. Also, as it was already mentioned, he belonged to a culture which mostly did not translate poetry.

Whether the Arabs produced or not an integral version of the Homeric corpus during the era of the Translation movement is probably destined to remain a mystery, but they were well aware of his position in Greek *paideia*.

## HOMER THROUGH ARAB EYES

When it comes to how the Arabs pictured Homer, we find the most vivid description in the famous gnomological work by an eleventh-century Damascus-born Egyptian scholar Al-Mubaššir bin Fātik *Muḥtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsīn al-kalim* (*Choice of Wise Sayings and Fine Statements*). In this book, the basic biographic information about every author is listed and followed by delving into proverbs. The chapter dedicated to Homer (*Ādāb Ūmīrūs aš-Šā’ir*) starts with a biographical sketch:

*He was the oldest poet of the Greeks (aqdam šu’arā’ al-Yūnāniyīn), and the Greeks held him in the highest regard (arfa’ūhu manzilatan ‘indahum). He lived roughly five hundred and sixty years after Moses, peace be upon him. He produced many words of wisdom (ḥikam) and beautiful and dignified poems (qaṣā’id ḥasana ḡalīla). All their [Greek] poets who came after him imitated him: they took and learnt from him. He was their model (al-quḍwa ‘indahum).*<sup>15</sup>

Next, we find a vivid description of his physical appearance:

*He was of moderate stature, beautiful appearance and of brown complexion; he had a large head,*

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a, I, 185

<sup>13</sup> Graziosi 2015, 32

<sup>14</sup> O’Leary 1949, 116

<sup>15</sup> Al-Mabaššir bin Fātik, 29-30

narrow between his shoulders. He walked swiftly, and often looked around. On his face there were scars from smallpox. He joked a lot, but was also fond of insulting those who preceded him, and was funny. He frequented chieftains (*mudāḥilan li-r-ru'asā*). He died at the age of one hundred and eight years.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, a humorous dialogue similar to Plautus' comedies is inserted into the text.

Once he was captured, and the divider (*al-muqassim*) took him away to sell him. One of the people wanting to buy him asked him: "Where are you from?" He replied: "I am from my father and my mother." He then asked him: "Do you think that I should buy you?" He [Homer] replied: "You have not bought me yet. Have you made me your financial advisor (*mušīr*)?" The man bought him. Another one wanting to buy him asked him: "What are you good for?" He replied: "For freedom". He was a slave for a while, after which he was freed. He lived a long life.<sup>17</sup>

All Arab authors agree on one thing – Homer was the first and the greatest Greek poet. He is sometimes even compared to Imru' al-Qays (6<sup>th</sup> century), the first (and for many) the greatest Arab poet. In a way, he is the Greek Imru' al-Qays, while Imru' al-Qays is the Arab Homer.

Al-Bīrūnī (973-1048) mentions in his *Al-Āṭār al-bāqīya 'an al-qurūn al-ḥāliya* (*The Remaining Signs of Past Centuries*) that Homer is the first poet among the Greeks as Imru' al-Qays is among the Arabs.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from Al-Mubaššir bin Fātik, who places Homer 560 years after Moses, medieval Arabs generally had only vague ideas regarding the chronological order of Greek poets (only from Hellenistic times onwards the chronology becomes more accurate). Homer was thus sometimes mistaken for a Hellenistic poet, as Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a places him between Hippocrates and Galen.<sup>19</sup> Six centuries separating the two physicians testify as to how uncertain the chronology was. It also displays the limitations of the philological analysis of Greek texts if they could not distinguish Homeric Greek from Hellenistic koine or Galen's Atticism.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF HOMERIC POETRY

Abū Sulaymān al-Mantiqī as-Siğistānī (912-985) wrote *Muntaḥab Šiwān al-Ḥikma* (*Selections from the Depository of Wisdom*), a collection of proverbs from Greek (more than 130 authors) and Arab poets and philosophers. The inimitable nature and almost divine status are also attributed to his poetry. He comments in his book:<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 30

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 30

<sup>18</sup> Al-Bīrūnī, *Al-Āṭār al-bāqīya*, 86

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, I, 36

<sup>20</sup> *Šiwān al-Ḥikma* (*The Depository of Wisdom*), a work connected by title with the name of a little-known author Abū Sulaymān al-Mantiqī as-Siğistānī. Unfortunately it did not survive in its original form, but rather in two different forms – anonymously edited *Selections (Muntaḥab)* from *Šiwān al-Ḥikma* and *Synopsis (Muḥtaṣar)*

*He was placed by Plato and Aristotle, and others who follow their path, in the highest rank. Aristotle always had a collection of his poetry by his side. His poetry was quoted as evidence by his contemporaries and those who came after him because all agreed on his mastery of knowledge, solidity of wisdom, quality of opinion, and richness of diction.*<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the quality of his poetry As-Siġistānī mentions an episode in which

*Diogenes Laertius was once asked who is the greatest Greek poet, and he simply replied: “Every poet thinks of himself as the greatest but all agree on Homer”.*<sup>22</sup>

When addressing the issue of translating Homer, As-Siġistānī echoes Al-Ġāhiz:

*It is well known that that poetry loses the greater part of its splendour in translation and corruption consumes its ideas by way of changing the artistic form.*<sup>23</sup>

But he also reports that Stephanos [son of Basilios] translated part of his poetry from Greek into Arabic.<sup>24</sup> Needless to say, we know nothing of this translation. Furthermore, he presents a series of “Homeric Quotations” which are actually written by Menander (the so-called Menander’s *gnomai* in one verse), although some are written by Hesiod, lyric poets, tragedians or comedians.<sup>25</sup> Since they do not belong to the Homeric corpus, they are not the subject of this study. Due to the universal value of his poetry, Homer was placed among the protagonists of Arabic wisdom literature, leading the Greek cavalcade together with Socrates the hermit, followed by Solon the wise, Alexander the Great, Ptolemy, Hippocrates, Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus, Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, and Plato and Aristotle, all of them hand in hand with the wise Luqmān. Moreover, As-Siġistānī makes him the loftiest in comprehending the Divine and places Homer on the path of true monotheism (*tawḥīd*), basing this claim on a single verse - B 204 (οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη· εἷς κοίρανος ἔστω, εἷς βασιλεὺς).

*There is no good in the rule of many (lā ḥayra fī kaṭrat ar-ru’asā’).*

*This is enough for one who contemplates the splendour of these words and their dignified ideas which everyone speaking about tawḥīd – among the philosophers and theologians who came after*

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of *Šiwān al-Ḥikma*, edited by Zayn ad-Dīn ‘Umar bin Sahlān as-Sāwī (Kraemer 1986, 119-120). The author of *Šiwān al-Ḥikma* (As-Siġistānī), a student of Ḥunayn’s student Yaḥyá bin ‘Adī, mostly used sources written by Ḥunayn bin Ishaq and his school, even declaring that many sayings attributed to Homer (in reality belonging to Menander) were translated by Stephanos, son of Basilios, a student of Ḥunayn. *Šiwān al-Ḥikma* remained a standard reference work on anything Greek, be it poetry or philosophy, and Aš-Šahrastānī quotes it verbatim on many occasions in *Al-Milal wa-n-Niḥal*.

21 As-Siġistānī, 192

22 Ibid, 193

23 Ibid, 193

24 Ibid, 193

25 To these “quotations” Jörg Krämer devoted his article *Arabische Homerverse* (Krämer 1956, 302-316) where he traced the source of each one of them.

*him – took as a model and a tenet.*<sup>26</sup>

Homer was thus a true monotheist and his poetry guides the humanity ever since in understanding the indivisible oneness of God.

However, because of their studying of Plato and especially Aristotle (*Poetics* and *Rhetoric*), the Arabs knew what Homer implied by writing about the Greeks, and were also aware of his wisdom, eloquence, and poetic mastery.

Ibn Rušd mentioned briefly Homer when commenting on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*:

*He was the master of sublime grace among the Greeks (rabb an-ni'ma al-'azīma 'ind al-Yūnāniyīn), who magnified him to the point they considered him a divine human (rağul ilāhī) and a first teacher of all Greeks (al-mu'allim al-awwal li-ğamī' al-Yūnāniyīn).*<sup>27</sup>

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), familiar with both Greek and Persian poetry, maintains in his *Muqaddima*:

*It is well known that poetry is not restricted to the Arabic language. It exist in all languages (Arabic and non-Arabic). There were poets among the Persians and also among the Greeks. For example, Aristotle mentioned in his Logic the poet Homer and praised him.*<sup>28</sup>

Aš-Šahrastānī (1086–1153) quotes *Muntaḥab Šiwān al-Ḥikma* almost verbatim in his *Al-milal wa-n-niḥal (Religions and Sects)*.<sup>29</sup> But he goes even further by stating that B 204 can also be thought of referring to the Divine thus creating an “Islamic” Homer who so early on clearly professed the oneness of God:

*This is a short saying but with noble ideas, because the rule of many causes the annulment of the wisdom of rule. This is quoted also with regard to tawḥīd in the sense that a multitude of gods is a transgression which by perversion muddles the divine truth.*<sup>30</sup>

## ARABIC POETRY MEETS GREEK

Before analysing the major differences between Greek and Arabic poetry, a word or two needs to be said about the translation movement with regard to translating poetry. The translation movement itself did not start with al-Ma'mūn. Its groundwork was already laid out during the Umayyad era (661-750). The Umayyad caliphs, descendants of a clan which even during the pre-Islamic period had extensive contacts with Syria, modelled their Damascene court on

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 193

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Rušd, al-Ḥiṭāba, 102

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Ḥaldūn, III, 359

<sup>29</sup> Aš-Šahrastānī, 428-429

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 429

Byzantine imperial traditions and saw themselves as the heirs to the glories of Hellenism. In architecture, Qusayr Amra, the magnificent Umayyad desert castle near Al-Azraq, suffices to demonstrate the vibrancy of Syrian Hellenism under the new Umayyad overlords. The Greeks competed with the Persian civilization - another civilization from which the nascent Arabo-Islamic civilization borrowed many elements. In fact, the philhellenic translation movement was born out of a struggle with the philo-Persian camp, represented by intellectuals such as Ibn al-Muqaffa' (724-759), whose prominent role ensured the domination of the philo-Persian camp until the establishment of the Bayt al-Ḥikma.<sup>31</sup> It is no coincidence that the translation movement started around the same time as the Shu'ubiyya movement reached its peak.<sup>32</sup> It is necessary to clarify that the Bayt al-Ḥikma cannot be considered a scientific institution in the modern sense of the word. This institution, modelled on Sasanid court library, was in fact a highly institutionalized library. It was not the place where translators worked or where Greek manuscripts were kept (Ḥunayn had to go all the way to Constantinople in search of some Greek manuscripts); it would be even more absurd to call it an eighth-century "academy" or the place where scientists held their assemblies (*mağālis*).<sup>33</sup> It was a well-organized library where later translators and scholars could consult the works of Ḥunayn and his school.

Arabs always believed that what separates them from other nations is their unsurpassed ability to express themselves poetically. They were well aware that neighbouring nations were heirs to perennial civilizations, but one field in which they knew that no other nation can ever compete with them was poetry. Islam only helped to reinforce Arab ideas of linguistic superiority because who can argue with God who revealed his final Revelation in Arabic?

The idea is put forward by Al-Ġāhiz (*Only Arabs and those who speak Arabic have a correct understanding of poetry*) and is further stressed by Abū Ḥayyān At-Tawḥīdī (923-1023), the author of *Al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* (*Enjoyment and conviviality*). Out of desire to prove that every nation on Earth has certain merits, specific to that particular nation and not so clearly displayed among sister nations, he states that *The Persians possess politics and literature, statutes and fees, the Byzantines science and wisdom, the Indians thinking and reflection, magic and perseverance, the Turks courage and boldness, the Blacks patience, diligence and joy*.<sup>34</sup> The Arabs, on the other hand *possess rhetoric and eloquence*.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Fārābī (874-950), being familiar with both Greek and Persian, and Arabic poetry,

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31 Dimitri Gutas doubts that Bayt al-Ḥikma can be considered a philhellenic institution, since in the only two references to translation activities the translations are from Persian into Arabic (Gutas 1998, 57).

32 The term *shu'ubiyya* is derived from the Arabic word *shu'ūb* (peoples) which appears in the surah Al-Ḥujurāt (13<sup>th</sup> ayah) where it emphasizes the equality of all peoples in Islam, denying the superiority of Arabs over other peoples. Historically, the term refers to a movement which during the Abbasid period (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries) produced a series of works glorifying Persian civilization and its written culture and claiming Persian civilizational superiority over the conquering Arabs. The movement helped protect the Persian cultural identity and preserve the Persian language, but also provoked a vehement Arab response represented by intellectuals like Ibn Qutayba.

33 Gutas 1998, 59

34 At-Tawḥīdī, I, 72

35 Ibid, I, 72

was aware of certain fundamental differences between the two. Greek and Arabic prosody are fundamentally different. This certainly makes the translation difficult. What separates Arabic poetry from Persian and Greek is, in Al-Fārābī's view, the fact that the Arabs are concerned with verse endings (rhyme), while the Persians and Greeks are not. To these differences he dedicated his two treatises - *Risāla fī Qawānīn Šinā'at aš-Ši'r* (*Epistle on the Canons of Poetry*) and *Ġawāmi' aš-Ši'r* (*Treatise on Poetry*).

In *Ġawāmi' aš-Ši'r* he states that:

*The Arabs are more concerned with rhyme (nihāyāt al-abyāt) in poetry than any other nation whose poetry we have known. So, their poems improve and become more complete by the use of specific words - familiar or unfamiliar; by having the meanings of words imitate the theme of the statement; by having rhythm (iqā'); by being divided into metrical units (ağzā'), each of which is rhythmical, with a fixed number of prosodic units (asbāb and awtād); by having a fixed metrical arrangement (wazn) with one part identical to another. In this way the parts become similar when uttered; by having words in each meter of fixed arrangement; by having fixed rhymes by using the same letters or letters which are similar when uttered; by having words imitate the theme of the statement; and also by being melodic (mulaḥḥana).*

*Some nations treat the tune (nağam) with which they melodify (yulaḥḥinūna) poetry as part of poetry in the same way that they treat the letters (ḥurūf) part of it: so that a statement without its tune loses its meter (wazn) as it would lose it had it lost some of its letters. Other nations do not treat the tune in the same way as they treat the words of a statement but treat the statement as if it consists only of its letters - as is the case with the poetry of the Arabs.*

*If this poetry is melodified (luḥḥinat), the rhythm of the melody might clash (ḥālafa) with the rhythm of the statement, while this clash disappears when the rhythm of the statement melodises itself. Those [the Arabs] who treat the tune as they treat letters of a statement [do it] for fear that the meter of the statement would be lost if it is set to melodised. The public and many of the poets consider that a statement is poetry when it is metrical and divided into metrical units which are uttered at equal intervals. They do not care as to whether the statement consists in what imitates the object or not; neither do they care about the words (alfāz) as long as those words are eloquent in the language of that statement (faṣīḥa fī dālīka al-lisān). Instead they prefer what is familiar and easy (mašhūran sahlān). Many of them have conditioned that the endings of metrical units (nihāyāt ağzā'ihā) should be similar, either by using the same letters, or by using letters which are uttered at equal intervals.<sup>36</sup>*

*What is evident is that that Homer (Ūmīrūs), the poet of the Greeks, does not keep the endings of metrical units rhymed. A statement which imitates the theme without being metrically rhythmic still is not considered poetry but is said to be poetical statement. Should it be arranged in meter*

<sup>36</sup> Arabic prosody uses the "letter", i.e. a consonant (*ḥarf*) as the irreducible minimum, as opposed to the syllable, contrary to Greek prosody, which was firmly based on the syllable system. The letters (*ḥurūf*) are divided into two categories - *sākin* (resting, i.e. not followed by a vowel) and *mutaḥarrīk* (moving, i.e. followed by a short vowel). Units larger than letters are known as *uṣūl* (singular *aṣl*). These are of two kinds - *sabab* and *watad*.

(wuzina) and divided into feet (qussima aǧzā'), it becomes poetry. The basis and substance of poetry among the Ancients is it being a statement which consists of that which imitates the theme, and being divided into metrical units which are uttered at equal intervals. Everything else is not necessary for the basis of its substance, but are things which improve poetry. The most important of these things are the imitation (muḥākāh) and the science of things ('ilm al-ašyā') by which the imitation [is achieved], while the least important is the meter (wazn).<sup>37</sup>

So, Al-Fārābī wonders if the elements of imagination were present in a statement but it was not built on specific meter and rhyme, could it be called poetry. He himself answers in the negative - it cannot be considered poetry, but rather a poetic statement (qawl šī'rī). For him, Homer, whose verses don't rhyme, is not a poet in this narrow sense of the word. He makes a comparison between Greek and Arab poetry. Both poetic traditions are built on units - in Arabic, there are prosodic units (asbāb or awtād)<sup>38</sup> and in Greek feet (maqāṭi' or arǧul). While the Homeric verse (dactylic hexameter) is quantitative and based on the alteration of long and short syllables, the Arabic one is based on the alteration of vocalized and quiescent consonants.

With regard to poetic genres, Al-Fārābī states that poetry can be divided by meter or by theme. Here the difference becomes evident. Arabic (and Persian under the influence of Arabic) poetry is divided according to theme - i.e. panegyric (madīḥ), elegiac (riṭā'), satirical (hiǧā'), moral (ḥikam) or boastful (faḥr), while the Greek poetry is divided according to meter (more precisely, a specific meter is assigned to each genre). In *Risāla fī Qawānīn Šinā'at aš-Ši'r* he lists thirteen genres of Greek poetry according to metre – *tragedy, dithyramb, comedy, iambus, drama, ainos* (a genre of poetry in which proverbs that give pleasure are mentioned; they give pleasure due to either their exceeding excellence, or because they are remarkable and striking), *diagramma* (a genre of poetry used by lawmakers in which they described the horrors that await the souls of undisciplined men), *satire, poemata* (a genre of poetry that consists of descriptions of both good and bad poetry, each kind representing matters both the beautiful and good, ugly and bad), *epic, rhetoric, amphi geneleos* (a genre of poetry invented by scientists who used it to describe the natural sciences) and *acoustic* (a genre of poetry intended for the instruction of students of the Art of Music).<sup>39</sup>

Before listing the thirteen genres, Al-Fārābī states that he is following a classification used by the Philosopher in his discourses on the Art of Poetry [Aristotle's *Poetics*], but Aristotle himself never used this particular classification. However, after listing them, he adds that he based the list on *what came to us by those familiar with their poetry and what we have found in the discourses attributed to the philosopher Aristotle in the Art of Poetry, to Themistius, and to*

37 Al-Fārābī, *Ġawāmi' aš-Ši'r*, 171-173

38 *sabab* (plural *asbāb*) in Arabic prosody is a phonetic construction of two consonants – 1. first one vocalized, second one quiescent, 2. both vocalized, while *watad* (plural *awtād*) is a phonetic construction of three consonants – 1. first one vocalized, second one vocalized, third one quiescent, 2. first one vocalized, second one quiescent, third one vocalized. A combination of *watad* (which usually does not change within the verse) and one of the two *sababs* constitutes a “pillar” – rukn (plural *arkān*), i.e. a foot, and eight “pillars” make up a verse (Zwartjes 1997, 127-128).

39 Al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī Qawānīn Šinā'at aš-Ši'r*, 269-270

other Ancient writers, as well as the Commentators (*mufassirūn*) on their books.<sup>40</sup> This also means that his exact sources remain unknown, but once again demonstrates that the Arabs were from the beginning of their cultural renaissance well versed in all things Greek, including “Homer, the poet of the Greeks”.

## GREEK MYTHOLOGY PUTS ON A NEW ROBE

I will discuss the reception of Greek polytheistic worldview in the Arab-Islamic civilization universe in the following passages. How could one reconcile strict Islamic monotheism with the polytheistic worldview of Greek poetry? Andalusī poet and philologist Ḥāzīm al-Qarṭāḡanī (1211-1284) in his book *Minhāḡ al-bulaḡā’ wa-sirāḡ al-udabā’* (*The methodology of the eloquent ones and the lamp of the literati*) reiterates al-Fārābī in that *Every genre of Greek poetry is connected to a certain particular metre*. In addition, he lists three other observations regarding Greek poetry:

1. Greek poetry is based on myths (*asaṭīr*) and fables (*ḥurāfāt*) which imagine the existence of things not existing in reality;
2. Greek poetry also rests on fables (*ḥurāfāt*) revolving around real things, in a way similar to the *Fables of Kalila and Dimna* or the fable written by An-Nābiḡa about a snake and her master;
3. They [the Greeks] have a special poetic technique by which they relate the passing of time and its vicissitudes, turns of fortune, the way human conditions change and what they turn into.<sup>41</sup>

Al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), the father of Arab “comparative mythology” tried to approach it *sine ira et studio*. This Khwarezmian polymath can certainly be considered a predecessor of Campbell, Frazer, Eliade or Dumézil, while his scientific methodology sometimes puts even modern scholars to shame.

In 1017, as Mahmud of Ghazna took Rey on one of his countless military exploits into Persia, the city’s scholars, including Al-Bīrūnī, were taken to Mahmud’s court in Ghazna, while he himself was made court astrologer.<sup>42</sup> As the great conqueror used to put his faith in the stars before major battles, Al-Bīrūnī accompanied Mahmud on his invasions into India, and lived there for a few years. Driven by his curiosity and a deep sense of ethics, he mastered Sanskrit because he wanted to read the major works of Hindu literature by himself. The result of his study was a monumental *Taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind min maqūla maqbūla fī al-‘aql aw marḡūla* (*Verifying All That the Indians Recount, the Reasonable and the Unreasonable*) - an encyclopaedic work in 80 chapters finished sometime around 1030, in which he explored nearly every aspect of Indian life, including geology, geography, history and laws, astronomy and mathematics, religion and

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40 Ibid, 270

41 Ḥāzīm al-Qarṭāḡanī, 68

42 Kamiar 2009, 167-168

philosophy, festivals, manners and customs. He quotes extensively key Hindu texts like the Four Vedas, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Upanishads or the Puranas, as well as Indian scientific works by Aryabhata and Brahmagupta. His interest in all aspects of Indian civilization led him to start collecting Hindu books in order to translate into Arabic and showcase not only Indian discoveries in mathematics, science, medicine or astronomy, but also to try to better understand the difficult and often bloody history of Hindu-Muslim relations in the Subcontinent. Throughout the work he tries to keep the utmost level of objectivity, even at times acknowledging that the underlying reason why many Hindus hate Muslims lies in the destruction and the loss of life caused by nearly four centuries of Muslim invasions into India. His aim was to understand the Hindu culture from within, letting the written evidence speak for itself. He opens the *Tahqīq* with:

*The book is a simple historic record (kitāb ḥikāya). I shall bring forward the theories of the Hindus (kalām al-Hind) exactly as they are, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them.*<sup>43</sup>

His knowledge about the Greek and Indian mythology enabled him to draw comparisons between the two. Rather than placing value on the two peoples' mythological stories, he presents the Greek/Hindu worldview as basically monotheistic, or at least reads it "through the eyes of a monotheist". Hindu gods (*devas*) are thus seen as angels (*malā'ika*), while the Brahman, defined as the "first father" (*al-ab al-awwal*), represents the Universal principle of the Universe, i. e. the God. Drawing comparison with the Greeks, he arrives at a conclusion:

*If you compare these [Hindu] traditions (aqāwīl) with those of the Greeks with regard to their own religion, the strangeness will cease to exist. We have already mentioned that they [the Greeks] called the angels gods (āliha).*<sup>44</sup>

In Book 8, after retelling the stories regarding Zeus's birth on Cretan Mount Dicta where *his mother concealed him from his father Kronos, so that he would not devour him as he had devoured others*, the abduction of Europa (who bears him only Minos and Rhadamanthus), and Zeus's death on Crete where *he was buried at the time of Samson the Israelite, being 780 years of age*, Al-Bīrūnī returns to the topic of the divine:<sup>45</sup>

*Regarding that which has no connection with humanity regarding Zeus, the Greeks say that he is Jupiter, the son of Saturn, for Saturn alone, according to the philosophers of the Academy (aṣḥāb al-mizalla), as Galen said in the Book of Deduction (Kitāb al-burhān), is eternal, not having been*

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43 Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 5

44 *Ibid*, 72

45 Inserted are the stories of Cecrops (the source of all the vices among the Athenians) and the birth of Alexander (whose father is Nectanebus, king of Egypt, who after having fled before Artaxerxes the Black, was hiding in the capital of Macedonia and, engaging in astrology and soothsaying, tricked Olympias, the wife of King Philip).

born. This is sufficiently proven by Aratus<sup>46</sup> book *Phenomena* (Aḏ-Ẓāhirāt), for he begins with the praise of Zeus: “We, the mankind, do not relinquish him, nor can we do without him; He filled the roads and the meeting-places of men and is mild towards them; He produces for them what they like, and incites them to work; He reminds them of the necessities of life and indicates to them the times favourable for digging and ploughing for a proper growth; He has raised the signs and stars in the celestial sphere; Therefore, we supplicate him first and last.” After this, he praises the spiritual beings (ar-Rūḥāniyyūn; i. e. the Muses). If you compare the two, [you will find that] these are the descriptions of Brahman.<sup>47</sup>

As it was already mentioned, a single verse from the Iliad (B 204), taken out of its original context, was used to prove Homer’s monotheism. Al-Bīrūnī also finds the most poetic description of Zeus in Homer’s words:

*The author of the commentary on the Phaenomena of Aratus claims that he diverged from [the custom of] the poets in beginning with the gods; he was determined to speak of the celestial sphere. Furthermore he, like Galen, reflected on the origin of Asclepius, and said: “We would like to know which Zeus Aratus meant, the mystical (ar-ramzī) or the physical one (aṭ-ṭabī‘ī). For the poet Crates called the celestial sphere Zeus, and likewise Homer said:*<sup>48</sup>

*‘As pieces of snow are cut off from Zeus.’<sup>49</sup>*

*Aratus calls the ether and the air Zeus in the passage: “The roads and the meeting-places are full of him, and we all need to inhale him.” Therefore, he claims that the philosophers of the Stoa (aṣḥāb al-uṣṭuwān) see in Zeus the spirit (ar-rūḥ) which is dispersed in the matter (al-hayūlī), and similar to our souls, i.e. the nature which rules every natural body. And ascribes to him mildness, since he is the cause of the good (‘illat al-ḥayrāt); therefore, he is right in claiming that he has not only created men, but also the gods.<sup>50</sup>*

Al-Bīrūnī mentions Homer on two other occasions. In Book 3, while discussing the Vedic system of five great elements (pañca mahābhūta – space, air, fire, water, earth) and their qualities: *I do not know what they [the Hindus] mean by bringing sound into relation with space. Perhaps they mean something similar to what Homer, the poet of the Greeks, said: “Those endowed with the seven melodies speak and answer each other in a pleasant voice.” Therefore, he meant the seven planets, as another poet said: “There are seven spheres endowed with different melodies, eternally moving, glorifying the Creator, for it is he who holds them and embraces them unto the farthest end of the starless sphere.”<sup>51</sup> Such a verse is nowhere to be found in the Homeric*

46 Aratus (c. 315–c. 245 BC) was a Greek didactic poet. His only completely extant work is the *Phaenomena*, a didactic poem in hexameters whose immediate popularity spurred many commentaries. One verse from the famous opening invocation to Zeus is quoted in the New Testament (Acts 17:28). An Arabic translation of the *Phaenomena* was commissioned by the caliph Al-Ma’mūn (Dolan 2017, 48)

47 Al-Bīrūnī, Taḥqīq, 74

48 Ibid, 74-75

49 The verse is „ὥς δ’ ὅτε ταρφείαι νιφάδες Διὸς ἐκποτέονται“ (Γ 357).

50 Al-Bīrūnī, Taḥqīq, 75

51 Ibid, 32

corpus – actually, Pythagoras connected the celestial spheres and musical tones.<sup>52</sup>

Homer is mentioned once more in Book 21, in which Al-Bīrūnī presents the Vedic system of seven upper and seven lower planetary systems: *After the earths come the heavens, consisting of seven levels, one above the other. They are called lokas, which means “gathering-place” (maḡma/mahfil). Similarly, the Greeks thought of heavens as gathering-places. John Grammaticus said in his refutation of Proclus: “Some philosophers saw the sphere called γαλαξίας, i.e. ‘milk’, by which they mean the Milky Way, as a ‘dwelling-place’ (manzil/mustaqarr) for rational souls. The poet Homer said: ‘You have made the pure heaven an eternal dwelling-place for the gods. The winds do not shake it, the rains do not wet it, and the snows do not destroy it. For in it there is radiant clearness without clouds covering it.*”<sup>53</sup><sup>54</sup>

Another very important issue must be raised – the moral dimension of Greek poetry. Ibn Rušd, commenting on Plato’s *Republic*,<sup>55</sup> follows Plato’s criticism directed towards poets who imitate i.e. describe improper subjects:

*ought to imitate from the time of their youth what is appropriate to them, and they ought to try to be like men of courage, sobriety, nobility of mind and similar qualities. But as regards imitations of men possessed of baseness and vice, it is not proper for them to have anything to do with them. For if imitations from the time of youth continue for a long time, they turn into a trait of character and [a second] nature, alike in body and soul.*

*Therefore he said: it is not proper that the most worthy of men should imitate the actions of women crying out in their labour, nor of women having intercourse with their husbands or quarrelling with them, because they fancy themselves fit for rulership, nor of women [indulging] in mourning, lamentation and ululation. Nor are they allowed to try to be like maidservants and slaves, or to imitate drunkards or madmen. And not this alone; we will also not let them imitate the crafts of tanner or cobbler or other (like) occupations. For just as they are not allowed to engage in these occupations, so also they are not allowed to imitate them.*

*Even more strange than this would it be were they allowed to imitate the neighing of horses, the braying of asses, the lapping of rivers, the murmuring of the sea or the roar of thunder, for all this resembles mere insanity. I said: poems should be eliminated which follow the Arab custom of describing these matters and of imitating things akin to them.*<sup>56</sup>

What he meant by “the Arab custom” is further explained in his Commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*:

*Arabic poetry is mostly immersed in the insatiable (nahim) and the repulsive (karīh). The class*

52 Lamberton 1989, 238

53 The verses are „ὄθι φασὶ θεῶν ἔδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεὶ / ἔμμεναι. οὐτ’ ἀνέμοισι τινάσσεται οὔτε ποτ’ ὄμβρω / δεύεται οὔτε χιῶν ἐπιπίλναται, ἀλλὰ μάλ’ αἴθρη / πέπταται ἀνέφελος, λευκὴ δ’ ἐπιδέδρομεν αἴγλη“ (ζ 42-45).

54 Al-Bīrūnī, Tahqīq, 32

55 The Arabic original is lost but the work is preserved in Hebrew translation of Samuel b. Yehuda and was in turn translated into English by E. I. J. Rosenthal, whose translation is reproduced here.

56 Ibn Rušd, Commentary on Republic, 132-133

which they call *nasīb*<sup>57</sup> is an incitement to depravity, and should be avoided by children, who are brought up by their poetry in what incites them to courage (*šağā'a*) and nobility (*karam*), alas the Arabs don't incite by their poetry to anything save these two virtues, and not by way of inciting to them, but by way of pride (*fahr*).<sup>58</sup>

Arabic poetry is empty of panegyrics for noble deeds and disparagement of shortcomings which the Noble book [i. e. the Noble Qur'an] reproached.<sup>59</sup>

Greek poetry, on the other hand is directed towards inciting to virtue and repelling depravity, or to which benefits in acquiring good manners or knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

But even the Greek poetry is a source of danger - even the gods (Al-Birūnī's angels) behave in ways not to be emulated by the young ones, like Zeus who married certain women one after the other, and cohabited with others, raping them while not marrying them.<sup>61</sup>

No doubt, poetry, be it Greek and Indian or Arabic, should be handled with care.

## ACHILLES TAKES AN ARAB SHIELD

During the Middle Ages, the story of the Siege and the Fall of Troy and the dispersal of Trojan survivors following the siege of the city by the Achaeans served as the secular parallel to the Genesis creation narrative. Various dynasties or even entire nations claimed (and even went to extraordinary lengths to genealogically prove) Trojan origin, merely following a well-established Roman tradition which saw in Aeneas their ancestor. Virgil's *Aeneid* was, in an era when the European West almost forgot the Greek language, the most influential secular text, and countless medieval chroniclers adapted the story into vernacular poetry. These texts proved themselves immensely popular and circulated widely throughout Europe. *Le Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *De bello Troiano* by Joseph of Exeter, *Historiae destructionis Troiae* by Guido delle Colonne, *Il filostrato* by Boccaccio, or *Troilus and Criseyde* by Geoffrey Chaucer are the most famous examples.

In the Arab world we can also find several versions of the Trojan legend, but mostly in prose. These stories were not taken from the Iliad, but possibly from a number of Medieval European legends or (more probably) from some short Hellenistic novel in Syriac translation. For example, there is a late 13th - early 14th century anthology of military exploits *Raqā'iq al-ḥilal fī daqā'iq al-ḥiyal* (*Cloaks of Fine Fabric in Subtle Ruses*). This collection of short stories, mostly dealing with funny ruses, with angels and jinn, prophets, kings and caliphs, their viziers and governors, judges and mystics includes a version of Achilles' wrath and the killing of Hector.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> *Nasīb* is a nostalgic opening of a *qasida* in which the poet reflects on the passing of time. A common theme is the poet's pursuit of his beloved's caravan, but by the time he reaches their camp-site, usually situated among ruins, the caravan has already moved on.

<sup>58</sup> Ibn Rušd, *aš-Ši'r*, 67

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 123

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 67-68

<sup>61</sup> Al-Birūnī, *Taḥqīq*, 73

<sup>62</sup> The manuscript I consulted is kept in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits,

The story is presented in the sixth chapter - *The ruses of caliphs, kings and sultans (Fī ḥiyāl al-ḥalāfa wa-l-mulūk wa-s-salāṭīn)*:

*It is said that the King of the Greeks (malik ar-Rūm) launched an invasion of Ifriqiyya<sup>63</sup>, but the population received the news of this, so he laid a siege of their city for a long time to no avail. They fought him on the city doors. Among the citizens there was a man called Aqṭar (Hector) who possessed utmost daring and courage. Anyone who tried to fight him was invariably killed. The news of this reached the King of the Greeks.*

*He also had a commander named Arsilāus (Achilles), unsurpassed for his bravery throughout the world. The King burst in anger, after which he [Arsilāus] refused to take any part in the war. The King had asked him to, but he did not obey him. The King then said: "Spread the rumour that our enemy Aqṭar has captured Arsilāus' brother."*

*When Arsilāus heard the news he was deeply distressed. He looked everywhere for his brother, but could not find him. Then he asked for his weapons and went out against Aqṭar. He fought him, took him prisoner, and brought him before the king of the Greeks, who put Aqṭar to death. The people of Ifriqiya and all their supporters were terror-stricken. The King of the Greeks, with Arsilāus, marched on the city, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy and conquering the region.<sup>64</sup>*

Of course, differences between this story and the original epic are enormous. Hector does not kill Achilles' brother – in this version this is only a rumour concocted by Agamemnon (nameless in the story) in order to bring the resentful warrior back to the fray. Also, Achilles does not kill Hector, but merely captures him, and it is Agamemnon who orders his execution. It would almost seem as if Agamemnon, not Achilles, is the real protagonist of the story.

## CONCLUSION

The medieval Arabs did not translate Greek poetry, not even the poems written by Homer. Even if we take into consideration the scattered pieces of information mentioning specific translation projects (Stephanos, son of Basilios) this accounts for next to nothing. Such translations (if they indeed existed) circulated among a very narrow circle of Baghdadi intellectuals and never found their way to the general public. When it comes to Homer and the so-called "Homeric question", the Arabs had only a vague idea about his life or the relative chronology of Greek poetry in general, sometimes mistaking him for a Hellenistic poet. They certainly did agree on one point. Through their study of Plato's *Republic*, and Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* they were well aware of what Homer meant for the Greeks – the blind poet was the very foundation of Hellenic *paideia*. Not only this, some Muslim Arabs recognised in his works the kernel *Arabe 3548*. The manuscript was written in 1061 AH (1651 CE), and can be accessed at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11003019c>

<sup>63</sup> Etman mentions a copy of this manuscript kept in Istanbul but misinterprets its setting - Ifriqiyya as Africa (Etman 2011, 75). It is more likely that it refers to Phrygia, not the Arab province, but the Roman province of Africa. He traces the source of the story to a Medieval European legend, but the differences between the story and Dictys the Cretan or Dares the Phrygian are considerable, and the Arab version is significantly shorter. It is next to impossible to trace the original.

<sup>64</sup> Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, *Arabe 3548*, fol. 80.

of Divine truth. Certain verses (albeit taken out of context) seemed to prove his monotheism – *A multitude of lords is not a good thing, but one lord let there be* (B 204) apparently stood for one God, not one supreme commander in the Achaean camp. Some, like Al-Bīrūnī knew Greek and probably had access to the epics because they used their verbatim quotations. How the Homeric epics influenced Arabic literature will be the topic of my next study.

With all the information presented here one thing becomes clear. Hellenism, that pinnacle of human creativity, is not a monopoly of the West. It had not lain dormant until Florentine Humanism awoke it from slumber. It was preserved in Baghdad and other major centres of Islamic civilization where Homer was a household name. As Dio Chrysostom said:

*Ὁμηρος δὲ καὶ πρῶτος καὶ μέσος καὶ ὕστατος, παντὶ παιδὶ καὶ ἀνδρὶ καὶ γέροντι τοσοῦτον ἀφ' αὐτοῦ διδοὺς ὅσον ἕκαστος δύναται λαβεῖν.*

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## SAŽETAK

Iako grčka poezija uglavnom nije bila prevođena tijekom tzv. Velikog prevoditeljskog pokreta, neki grčki pjesnici su ostavili duboki trag na klasičnu arapsko-islamsku civilizaciju. Rad objašnjava zašto su arapski prevoditelji odbijali prevoditi stranu poeziju (grčku i perzijsku), ali i dokazuje da su mnogi učenjaci dobro poznavali tekst Homerovih spjevova, kao i njihovu umjetničku te, preko Platonove *Države* te Aristotelove *Poetike* i *Retorike*, moralno-didaktičku vrijednost. Neki među njima, poput Birunija, pokušali su pomiriti Homerov svjetonazor s islamskim monoteizmom, dok su drugi u njegovim riječima prepoznali neiskvareni iskonski monoteizam. Naposljetku, iako sam Homer nije bio prevođen, brojne "pučke" prerade, kako helenističke tako i srednjovjekovne europske, mogle su poslužiti kao predložak za popularne obrade homerskih legendi.

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