

INTRODUCTION

I have seen a group of Christians today who have devoted themselves to understanding the works of erring outsiders. . . . Sometimes they start to go on about literature, sometimes about another of the sciences. . . . They cling to [these] things . . . which bring no reliable advantage. . . .

Whoever reads the sciences has done philosophy, and whoever does philosophy has come to know God the Mighty and Exalted to some extent.

— ‘ABDALLĀH IBN AL-FAḌL AL-ANṬĀKĪ

This book is about the Greek-into-Arabic translation program of an Arabic-speaking Christian who lived in northern Syria under Byzantine rule in the mid-eleventh century: ‘Abdallāh ibn al-Faḍl of Antioch. Ibn al-Faḍl was a theologian and deacon in the Byzantine Church. His ambitious translation program focused on Christian texts by ecclesiastical authors well known in the Byzantine world.

Ibn al-Faḍl’s translation program is part of a much larger story, the story of how ancient philosophy was cultivated, adapted, and reconceived in medieval Byzantine and Middle Eastern scholarly culture and religious education. The texts Ibn al-Faḍl translated are all what today we typically call religious texts: homilies on books from the Old and New Testaments, disquisitions on correct Christian doctrine, laudatory speeches honoring Christian saints, and guides to reforming the self in order to approach a Christian moral ideal and become more similar to God. Ibn al-Faḍl’s own account of his translation program frames it in opposition to ancient philosophy and indeed any teachings outside of Christianity.

And yet Ibn al-Faḍl’s own annotations on his translations regularly interpret these Christian texts through the lens of an ancient philosophical tradition of treatises, commentaries, education, speculation, and debate grounded in the works of Aristotle. A close examination of Ibn al-Faḍl’s annotations reveals the translator’s simultaneous engagement with ancient Greek and contemporary Byzantine and Arabic philosophy, science, and literary culture. The language of his translations, moreover, attests to his immersion in Arabic Aristotelian philosophical vocabulary. The picture of Ibn al-Faḍl that emerges is of a scholar who applied his own philosophical and philological education to the task of reading the classics of Byzantine Christianity.

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? How could Ibn al-Faḍl be at once so parochial in his religiosity, so committed to his faith tradition, so dead set against ancient, pagan philosophy, and at the same time so eager to discuss ancient philosophy in practice, and not just anywhere, but in the margins of the very texts whose Christian worth and validity he contrasted with philosophy's pagan vapidity and error? By watching Ibn al-Faḍl at work, we will see that he objected to philosophy when it was cultivated for its own sake but had no problem with it, indeed promoted it, when it was directed to a higher purpose, above all reading the Christian classics that he translated.

This book seeks to uncover how Ibn al-Faḍl mobilized his knowledge of ancient philosophy to explicate these Christian texts. His methods and aims tell us about how he, and other medieval scholars (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and other), understood the relationship between reason and revelation, between the system of formal knowledge they inherited from the late antique Alexandrian synthesis of ancient Greek thought and the living truth they inherited from the prophets and apostles of God. I argue that Ibn al-Faḍl's attitudes and approaches were coherent and emblematic of the scholarship of his age: universal in its ambitions, parochial in its articulation, cosmopolitan in its practice. This was a shared scholarly culture of robust intellectual curiosity *in the service of tradition* that had an enduring role in Eurasian intellectual history, for it forged a mode of critical inquiry driven by confessional concerns and universalizing ethical aspirations.¹

Throughout the eleventh century, Byzantium and the Middle East were hardly worlds apart, nor was their contact restricted to war and diplomacy. On the contrary, scholars, texts, and ideas circulated widely across their political boundaries, in both directions.² Antioch, where Ibn al-Faḍl lived and worked around the year 1050, was a critical meeting-point for this circulation.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Byzantine Empire expanded both militarily and economically, especially during the reigns of Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969), John I Tzimiskes (969–976), and Basil II (976–1025). In this era, territories in southern Italy, the Balkans, the Mediterranean islands, and northern Syria and Mesopotamia fell once again under Byzantine control (maps 1–2). Among the most celebrated Byzantine conquests was the ancient city of Antioch. Antioch would remain in Byzantine hands for over a century, from 969 to 1084.³

In their new eastern territories, Byzantine administrators encountered Byzantine Chalcedonian Christians but also Syrian and Armenian Miaphysite Chris-

1. For the close relationship between natural philosophy and improvement of the self in early modern Europe, see Jones, *Good Life*.

2. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (hereafter *GTAC*); Condylis-Bassoukos, *Stéphanitès*; Mavroudi, *Byzantine Book*; Mavroudi, "Greek Language"; Mavroudi, "Translations."

3. Ostrogorsky, *History*, ch. 4; Kazhdan, *History*, 2:1–5; Harvey, *Economic Expansion*.

tians (locals and new immigrants alike), Muslims, and others.⁴ Constantinople was transformed by the influx of peoples, wealth, and ideas. Prayers were said for the Fatimid caliph (with occasional interruptions) in Constantinople's mosque.⁵

When compared to the vast empire the Arab Muslim conquerors had amassed by the year 700, the Islamic world of the eleventh century was politically fragmented. Yet even as states splintered, Islamic religious and scholarly institutions transcending state boundaries flourished.⁶ Fatimid Cairo, a center of learning, was also the headquarters for missionary activity throughout the Islamic world aimed at convincing Muslims to recognize the legitimacy of the Ismaili Shiite imams (the Fatimid caliphs) and to accept Ismaili doctrines on law, the natural world, cosmology, and theology.⁷ At the same time, Sunni Muslim religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) were consolidating their authority across the Islamic world as legal and religious experts and arbiters of political legitimacy, which allowed them to develop symbiotic relationships with regional military leaders (emirs) like the Buyids, Mirdāsids, and Seljuks. Well-endowed Sunni educational institutions and their emblematic architectural setting, the *madrasa*, prestigious and entrenched in subsequent centuries, were taking shape in the tenth and eleventh centuries, drawing students and professors from across the Islamic world.⁸

In the mid-eleventh century, Byzantine relations with neighboring Muslim states—the Arab Mirdāsīd rulers of Aleppo (about 100 km east of Antioch) and the Fatimid caliphs based in Cairo and in control of Palestine and southern Syria—were generally peaceful and open to travel and trade.⁹ Nor was it unusual for merchants, scholars, and professionals to arrive at Antioch, Cairo, and Constantinople from at least as far as Baghdad, where the Persian Shiite dynasty of the Buyids ruled (as the nominal servants of the Sunni-aligned Abbasid caliphs) until 1055, when they were replaced by the Seljuk Turks.¹⁰

Non-Muslim scholars in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East were generally as active and mobile as their Muslim counterparts. Christian ecclesiastical institutions of various confessions flourished in Baghdad, northern Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt, although aberrant rulers disrupted this scholarly activity through their violent treatment of non-Muslims. These rare occasions temporarily replaced the peaceful circulation of scholars with their rapid flight: when the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim (r. 996–1021) enacted particularly harsh policies,

4. Dagron, "Minorités."

5. Reinert, "Muslim Presence," 135–40; *EP*, s.v. "Fāṭimids," 2:855.

6. Hodgson, *Venture*, 2:8–11, 17.

7. Halm, *Fatimids and Learning*.

8. Hodgson, *Venture*, 2:46–52. Later developments: Chamberlain, *Knowledge*.

9. *EP*, s.v. "Mirdās, Banū or Mirdāsids"; Hodgson, *Venture*, 2:21–28; *EP*, s.v. "Fāṭimids," 2:855; Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:42–59.

10. Hodgson, *Venture*, 2:42–46.

Christians fled Egypt; many Chalcedonians ended up in Antioch, such as the historian Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd al-Anṭākī (ca. 980–after 1033).¹¹

If we consider when and where Ibn al-Faḍl lived, then, it is not difficult to see how he came into contact with the wide range of perspectives, languages, and ideas that played a role in his thinking. In the eleventh century, they were all to be found in Antioch.

This book's investigation will proceed as follows. Part 1 will examine Ibn al-Faḍl's translation program in detail. First, we consider Ibn al-Faḍl's intellectual milieu and the multilingual city where he produced his translations (chapter 1). Next, we will seek to characterize his translation program (chapter 2): Which texts did he translate? The next step will be to consider the list of translated texts taken as a whole (chapter 3): What sort of texts were they? What was their resonance and relevance in the eleventh century? Who wanted to read such texts, and who wanted them to be read?

Building upon this foundation, part 2 will then investigate the role of philosophy and philosophical education in how Ibn al-Faḍl read and taught the texts he translated. We will begin by turning to a crucial witness for understanding why Ibn al-Faḍl translated these texts: Ibn al-Faḍl himself. In the manuscripts of a number of his translations, Ibn al-Faḍl's prefaces are preserved. These will allow Ibn al-Faḍl to tell us what motivated his work (chapter 4). We will then shift from Ibn al-Faḍl's stated purpose to consider how he used his own translations and meant them to be used, by closely analyzing a selection of his marginalia on these same translations (chapter 5).

In the subsequent chapters, Ibn al-Faḍl's translations and marginalia will allow us to investigate the intersections of his translation program with logic (chapter 6), physics (chapter 7), cosmology (chapter 8), and astronomy (chapter 9). The aim will be to glimpse the medieval world's interlocking philosophical and scientific disciplines through the lens of Ibn al-Faḍl's project to translate and teach the classics of Byzantine Christianity.

Ibn al-Faḍl was part of a vibrant intellectual community in Antioch. The Byzantine and Islamic educational traditions to which his translations attest were to have a long afterlife, and his translations themselves had an enduring place in Arabic-language Christian libraries. Through these translations, this book seeks to recover something of Ibn al-Faḍl's era, its multicultural roots, its creative adaptations of past and present, and its lasting legacy.

11. *EP*, s.v. "Fāṭimids"; Swanson, "Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd."