

Art History
Classics
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Exercise III:

How does this example of the modern organization of knowledge compare with that of Ibn al-Nadim? Compare and contrast.

Statements about Influence:

Alvarus, Bishop of Cordoba (854)
Our Christian young men, with their elegant airs and fluent speech, are showy in their dress and carriage, and are famed for the learning of the gentiles; intoxicated with Arab eloquence they greedily handle, eagerly devour and zealously discuss the books of the Chaldeans [Arabs] and make them

known by praising them with every flourish of rhetoric, knowing nothing of the beauty of the Church's literature, and looking with contempt on the streams of the Church that flow forth from Paradise; alas! the Christians are so ignorant of their own law, the Latins pay so little attention to their own language, that in the whole of the Christian flock there is hardly one man in a thousand who can write a letter to inquire after a friend's health intelligibly, while you may find countless rabble of all kinds of them who can learnedly roll out the gradiloquent periods of the Chaldean tongue [Arabic]. They can even make poems, every line ending with the same letter, which display high flights of beauty and more skill in handling meter than the gentiles themselves possess.

al-Kindī (d. 873)

Yūn•n and Qa,†•n are brothers.

We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. For the seeker of truth, nothing takes precedence over the truth, and there is no disparagement of the truth, nor belittling either of him who speaks it or of him who conveys it. [The status of] no one is diminished by the truth; rather does the truth enoble all.

fiAbd All•h b. Abī Zayd al-Qayraw•nī (d. 386/998)

God have mercy on the Umayyad dynasty! There was never a caliph among them who instituted a heretical innovation in Islam. Most of their governors and administrators of their provinces were Arabs. But when the caliphate passed from them and devolved upon the Abbasid dynasty, their state was based upon the Persians, who held positions of leadership while the hearts of most of the leaders among them were filled with unbelief and hate for the Arabs and for the Islamic state. They introduced within Islam currents that would permit the destruction of Islam. Had it not been for the fact that God Almighty had promised His Prophet that his religion and its adherents would be victorious on the Day of Judgment, they would have abolished Islam. They did, however, make breaches in its walls and damage its pillars, but God will fulfill His promise, God willing!

The first current which they introduced was to export in Islamic lands the books of the Greeks which were then translated into Arabic and circulated widely among the Muslims. The reason of their being exported from the land of the Byzantines to the Islamic territories was Ya.y• b. Kh•lid b. Barmak.

Abū Safīd b. Dūst (d. 431/1040)

You who seek religion, avoid the paths of error,
Lest your religion be snatched from you unawares.
Shifiism is destruction, Mufitazilism is innovation,
Polytheism is infidelity, and philosophy is a lie.

Exercise IV: Answer the following in writing, or discuss.

Evaluate any of the statements above, considering the following questions. Does the author approve or disapprove of borrowing from other cultures? If the answer is somewhere in between these two poles, how does he differentiate between acceptable borrowing and unacceptable borrowing? Why is borrowing acceptable or unacceptable? how do the statements compare? What else do they tell us?

On Books and Writing:

Nattahah, whose name is Ahmad ibn Isma`il, whose patronymic is Abu `Ali, a complete account of whom will be given later, wrote the following passage describing books:

"A book is a companion who does not interrupt you in the middle of your work, nor call you away when you are busy, nor demand that you treat him with courtesy. A book is a comrade who does not praise you excessively, a friend who does not tempt you, a companion who does not find you boring, and an advisor who does not make excessive demands."
(F 13)

Exercise V. Write your own description of books.

The Script of the Chinese.

Chinese writing resembles engraving. Even a clever and skilfull scribe tires in writing it. It is said that only someone with a light hand can write more than two or three pages of it in a single day. In it, they write the books of their religions and sciences on fans, and I have seen a number of them. Most of them are dualists and Samniyah, and I will present a complete account of them later. The Chinese have a type of writing called aggregate script. It is that for every word composed of three letters or more there is a single character, and for every extensive speech is a combination of letters that expresses many meanings. When they want to write what is normally written in one hundred pages, they write it in one page in this script.

Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi said: A man from China sought me out, and resided with me for about a year, during which he learned Arabic, both to speak it and write it, in the time of five months, so that he became eloquent, skilled, and quick of hand. When he determined to leave to return to his land, he told me, a month before his departure, "I am planning to leave. I would like for you to dictate to me the sixteen books of Galen, so that I might write them." I told him, "You have too little time. Your remaining stay will not be enough to copy even a small part of them." The young man said, "I ask you to devote yourself to me for the entire time of my stay and to dictate to me as fast as you can, for I will stay ahead of you in writing." I approached some of my students, asking them to join us in

this endeavor. We would dictate to him as fast as we could, and he would stay ahead of us. We only believed him when the time came for comparison, and he read out all that he had written. I asked him about this, and he answered, "We have a form of writing known as Aggregate Script, and this is what you have seen. When we want to write a great deal in a short time, we write it in this script. Then, if we wish, we transcribe it in the ordinary and full script. He claimed that someone who is intelligent and a quick study cannot learn that script in less than twenty years. ... (F 18-19)

Exercise VI.

What do we learn from this passage about:

1) Chinese writing?

2) How works were copied in this period?

3) The history of relations between China and the Islamic world?

Remarks on Types of Paper

It is said that the first one to write was Adam, on clay. Then for a period of time, the subsequent peoples wrote on copper and stone so that it would last. This was before the Flood. They also would write on wood and the leaves of trees for immediate needs, and they would also write for longevity on the *tuz* bark which is used to cover archers' bows. We have discussed this matter exhaustively in the chapter on philosophy.

Laten on, hides were tanned, and people wrote on them. The Egyptians wrote on Egyptian paper, made from the papyrus reed. It is said that the first one to make [this type of paper] was Joseph the prophet, peace be upon him. The Greeks write on white silk, parchment, and other materials, and on Egyptian scrolls and on *fuljan*, which is the skin of wild asses. The Persians used to write on the hides of water buffaloes, cows, and sheep. The Arabs used to write

on the shoulder blades of camels, on *likhaf*, which are thin white stones, and on usb or the stems of palm leaves. The Chinese write on Chinese paper, which is made of hemp, and it is the dominant crop of that country. The Indians write on copper, stone, and white silk.

Khurasani paper is made of flax. Some say that it was invented during the reign of the Umayyads, others say in the Abbasid era. Some say that its manufacture is ancient, and others say that it is a recent invention. Others say that Chinese craftsmen first made it in Khurasan after the fashion of Chinese paper. Its types are Sulaymani, Talhi, Nuhi, Fir`awni, Ja`fari, and Tahiri. The people in Baghdad spent years writing only on washed-off parchment, because the government registers were plundered at the time of Muhammad ibn Zubaydah, and they were written on hides. The people would erase them and write on them. (F 18-19)

What Caused the Books of Philosophy and the Other Ancient Sciences Became Numerous in This Land.

One of the Causes of This Phenomenon:

Al-Ma'mun saw in a dream a man of fair complexion, white tinged with red, with a wide forehead and joined eyebrows, bald pate, sparkling ashhal eyes, and agreeable features, sitting by the side of his bed. Al-Ma'mun said: "It was as if I, in front of him, were filled with awe of him. I asked, 'Who are you?' He said, 'I am Aristotle.' I was glad at this, and said, 'Oh wise one, may I ask you something.' He replied, 'Ask away.' I asked, 'What is Good.?' He answered, 'What is good according to reason.' I asked, 'And then what?' He replied, 'What is good according to revelation.' I asked, 'And then what?' He replied, 'What is good in the view of the overwhelming majority.' I asked, 'And then what?' He replied, 'There isn't any then after that.'"

...

This dream was one of the most certain causes of the importation of books.

Al-Ma'mun had kept up a correspondence with the Byzantine Emperor. When al-Ma'mun become more powerful than the Byzantine Emperor, he wrote to him asking that he permit be sent to him whatever al-Ma'mun wished of the books on the ancient sciences stored and preserved in the land of the Greeks. He granted this request of his, after at first refusing. Al-Ma'mun sent out a group of scholars on that mission, including al-Hajjaj ibn Matar, Ibn al-Bitriq, Salma, the director of the House of Knowledge, and others, and they took what they found and chose. When they had delivered them to al-Ma'mun, he ordered that they be translated, so they were translated. It has also been said that Yuhanna ibn Masawayh was among those scholars who were sent to the land of the Greeks.