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# Sergius of Reš 'Ayna's Syriac Translations of Galen: Their Scope, Motivation, and Influence\*

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When analysing the transmission of Galen from Greek into Syriac, it is useful to distinguish between three phases, or golden ages, in the history of the sciences in Syriac. The first pertains to that of Sergius of Reš 'Ayna, who, early in the sixth century, initiated the first systematic program of scientific translations from Greek into an oriental language. The second coincides with the early Abbasid period, especially with the efforts of Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq and his followers in the ninth century. The third occurred, between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, as part of the so-called Syriac Renaissance. The historical and socio-linguistic context of each phase is distinct, leading to contrasting treatments of Galen and his works.

In this paper, I will concentrate on Sergius, who merits our attention on account of a number of inaccuracies and, to be frank, injustices that have emerged in previous scholarly treatments of his accomplishments.<sup>1</sup> I intend to demonstrate that the scope of Sergius's translation project, in respect of Galen, was much more ambitious than previously assumed. Furthermore, I will argue that Sergius was motivated by his dissatisfaction with what he perceived to be flaws in the Alexandrian approach. I will also suggest that Sergius's influence among later Syriac scholarship was greater than hitherto appreciated.

Despite his often withering assessment of Sergius,<sup>2</sup> Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq's "Epistle" remains our most important witness to the extent of Sergius's Syriac translations of Galen.<sup>3</sup> According to Ḥunayn, Sergius translated the following thirty-two works either completely or partly:<sup>4</sup>

## \* Art of Medicine

**On the Elements according to Hippocrates**

## \* On Mixtures

**On the Natural Faculties**

**On Bones for Beginners**

**On the Anatomy of Veins and Arteries**

**On the Anatomy of Nerves**

On the Utility of the Parts

On the Properties of Foodstuffs

On Foods Productive of Good and Bad

Humours

Differences of Diseases (twice)

Causes of Diseases (twice)

Differences of Symptoms (twice)

\* Causes of Symptoms (twice)

**On the differences of Fevers**

\* **On Affected Parts** (twice)

**Differences of Pulses** (only Book 1)

**Diagnosis by Pulses** (only Book 1)

**Causes of Pulses** (only Book 1)

**Prognosis by Pulses**

**On Crises**

**On Critical Days**

\* **On the Therapeutic Method** (1–6 when poor; 7–14 when better)

**Therapeutics to Glaucon**

On the Powers and Mixtures of Simple Drugs (supposedly only 6–8; but see below)

\* On the Composition of Drugs according to Places

\* On the Composition of Drugs according to Kind

\* On Easily-Procured Remedies

On Hippocrates' 'Prognostic'

**On the Dissection of Muscles (for Beginners)**

On Bloodletting against Erasistratus  
On the Diseases of the Eyes<sup>5</sup>

Those titles in bold comprise, again according to Hunayn, the so-called “Alexandrian canon,” that is a group of Galenic texts selected to serve as the medical curriculum in late-antique Alexandria, certainly by the beginning of the sixth century.<sup>6</sup> Regarding this canon, Elinor Lieber states:

This would appear to be one of the earliest textual indications of that vocational bias in the teaching of medical theory . . . which was to become increasingly manifest in the mediaeval Islamic world. From this time on, even “philosophers” would study medicine according to a programme designed primarily for the medical practitioner.<sup>7</sup>

This vocational approach, with its emphasis on practice rather than theory, is central to our present discussion.<sup>8</sup>

As things stand, there are two widely held and related assumptions, regarding Sergius's translations of Galen, that I believe need to be questioned—the first relates to the scope of Sergius's translations, while the second relates to his overall aim. It is assumed that Sergius created a Syriac version of the Alexandrian canon, but excluded two works: “On Sects for Beginners” and “On the Preservation of Health.”<sup>9</sup> Regarding the second of these assumptions, it is now clear that Hunayn, despite being our most important source, is not so reliable regarding the texts translated by Sergius. To be fair, Hunayn is himself the first to admit this—after all, the full title of his “Epistle” does include the words “to his knowledge” (see note 3), which is an admission that his account may not be complete.

This has recently been demonstrated in respect of Sergius's translation of “On the Powers and Mixtures of Simple Drugs.” According to Hunayn, *وقد كان ترجم الجزء الثاني من هذا الكتاب سرجس* “And Sergius translated the second section from this book.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Hunayn only knew of Sergius's translation of books 6–11 of Galen's main pharmacological work. In a joint article with Sebastian Brock, I recently argued that it is very unlikely that Sergius did not translate books 1–5; indeed, I was convinced that Sergius did translate all eleven books.<sup>11</sup> This argument was advanced on the basis of Sergius's very emphatic assertion, in his introduction to book 6, that the

only correct approach to medicine involves mastering both its theoretical and practical aspects. In this introduction, addressed to his fellow translator Theodore, Sergius thus described the one who only masters either theory or practice:<sup>12</sup>

אל כל אדם וסגורא דה סלמא טלסונוס חלסעד וקטב  
 קטבא אהיל לר אונסוס, למס וסגורא זילמ י קא  
 לחלסד אס סגורא אנוס לחלסד אס סקו סגורא  
 סונוס לחכוסו סלמא וקטב חקו דה סלסונוס  
 וסגורא לחכוסו סלסונוס אנוס וס, לחכוסו  
 “But in the case of whosoever is familiar with only one of these, it occurred to me many times that I should liken him to one who wants to walk with one of his feet, or to labour with one of his hands, or to work with one of the parts of the body which are not able, without the mutual participation of the others, to carry out some action or other to completion.”

For Sergius, therefore, it was necessary first to master the theoretical, described as *סלסונוס* “those rules that are general,” before moving on to the practical, described as *סלסונוס סלסונוס* “specific (or particular) knowledge” or knowledge that is *סלסונוס סלסונוס* “in detail”:

זילמ חקו דה סלסונוס וסלסונוס  
 וסלסונוס, למס וקטב סקו דה סלסונוס וסלסונוס  
 סלסונוס וסלסונוס וסלסונוס חקו דה סלסונוס  
 לחכוסו סלסונוס וסלסונוס . . . אנוס סלסונוס  
 וסלסונוס אנוס לחכוסו סלסונוס וסלסונוס  
 למס סלסונוס למס סלסונוס חקו דה סלסונוס וסלסונוס  
 סלסונוס וסלסונוס וסלסונוס אנוס סלסונוס  
 סלסונוס וסלסונוס וסלסונוס וסלסונוס חקו דה סלסונוס  
 סלסונוס וסלסונוס

“For truly the art of the rules is not able to perfect a person who is learning without instruction on individual details. Nor again can instruction on details train a student without knowledge on general matters . . . Now, therefore, if a person is going to be with an exact knowledge of the matters, for him it is by all means a necessary thing that he should know the general rules, those things that are designated as pertaining to the art of all the parts of the art, and that he should also be trained carefully and instructed in the specific knowledge







way into the so-called "Syriac Book of Medicines,"<sup>27</sup> a medical compendium that should probably be counted among the products of the Syriac Renaissance.<sup>28</sup> The first part of the "Syriac Book of Medicines" contains numerous excerpts from the works of Galen, many of which were identified and analysed in a series of articles published in the 1920s and 1940s by Schleifer.<sup>29</sup> The above table indicates with \* those Galenic books that are quoted in the "Syriac Book of Medicines." Although the use of Galen's works in the "Syriac Book of Medicines" merits its own thorough analysis, two tentative conclusions can be immediately made. First, the scope of quoted works exceeds that of the Alexandrian curriculum (hence the four titles marked with \* but not in bold). Second, all of the quoted works were translated by Sergius, including "On Easily-Procured Remedies" which was not translated by Hunayn.<sup>30</sup> This raises the possibility that it was Sergius's translations that were utilised in the Syriac Renaissance, at the time when the "Syriac Book of Medicines" was compiled.

## Notes

\* This paper was originally read at the "Medical Translators at Work: Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin Translations in Dialogue" conference, organised by M. Martelli, O. Overwien, and C. Savino at the Humboldt University, Berlin (March 2014). I am grateful to the organisers for their invitation to speak at this gathering, and also to the other participants, particularly Robert Hawley and Grigory Kessel, for their helpful and encouraging remarks.

1. For my critique of previous scholarship on Sergius and the sixth-century translations, see Bhayro forthcoming a. For my attempt to redress the general problematic approach to the study of the Syriac sciences, see Bhayro forthcoming b. See also Bhayro and Hawley 2014.

2. See Bhayro 2005: 152–57.

3. Full title: رسالة حنين بن اسحق الى علي بن يحيى في ذكر ما ترجم من كتب جالينوس بعلمه وبعض ما لم يترجم "The Epistle of Hunayn Ibn Ishāq to 'Ali Ibn Yaḥya concerning those of Galen's books that have been translated, to his knowledge, and some of those that are not translated." The classic edition is Bergsträsser 1925; a new edition will appear shortly—Lamoreaux forthcoming.

4. The following can be gleaned either from Bergsträsser 1925 (and Lamoreaux forthcoming) or from Degen 1981. See also Muraviev 2014: 266–71.

5. Hunayn also mentions two works that are probably pseudo-Galenic but were translated by Sergius, namely "Compendium on the Pulse" and "Commentary on Hippocrates' 'On the Development of the Child'," see Degen 1981: 156 and 159; see also Bhayro forthcoming c.

6. See Lieber 1981: 171–75.

7. Lieber 1981: 174.

8. See also the remarks in Nutton 1984: 3–4.

9. So Lieber 1981: 174; see also Nutton 2008: 362 and 384–85, who adds "Synopsis on the Pulse" to the list of excluded texts.

10. Bergsträsser 1925: ٣٠ (Arabic text) and 24 (German translation).

11. See Bhayro and Brock 2012–2013.

12. For the full text, with English translation, of Sergius's introduction to book 6 of Galen's "On the Powers and Mixtures of Simple Drugs," see Bhayro and Brock 2012–2013: 38–40, from which the following excerpts are taken.

13. Bhayro and Brock 2012–2013: 40.

14. See Kessel 2016. For the Syriac Galen Palimpsest, see Bhayro and Brock 2012–2013; Bhayro et al. 2012; Bhayro et al. 2013a; Bhayro et al. 2013b; Hawley 2014.

15. See Bos and Langermann 2009.

16. Compare Degen 1981: 150.

17. See the discussion in Lieber 1981: 175.

18. The text is from Birmingham Mingana 606, fol. 52r, a scan of which was kindly sent to me by Daniel King. An English translation was previously published in Brock 1997: 202; a French translation was published in Hugonnard-Roche 2004: 167.

19. Or "in order to turn towards its essence and to give heed to its substance."

20. See Birmingham Mingana 606, fol. 52r-v; Brock 1997: 202–3; Hugonnard-Roche 2004: 168.

21. Or "cause, necessity, argument, subject."

22. See also Brock 1997: 204.

23. Text from BL Add. 14,661, fol. 5r–5v; previously edited in Merx 1885: 259.

24. Text from BL Add. 14,661, fol. 2r; previously edited in Merx 1885: 246.

25. Interestingly, this appears to contrast with Sergius's treatment of other authors. In a recent paper, John Wilkins and I highlighted how, in his translation of Galen's "On the Properties of Foodstuffs," Sergius apparently feels at liberty to change a quotation from Mnesitheus in order to make it more sensible; see Wilkins and Bhayro 2013.

26. See Nutton 1984: 13.

27. Budge 1913.

28. For which, see Teule 2010. The term is useful, but it does raise further questions.

29. For a discussion of this phenomenon, and a full list of Schleifer's articles, see Bhayro 2013.

30. This latter point requires further investigation, as the majority of quotations from "On Easily-Procured Remedies" may also derive from "On the Composition of Drugs according to Places," which Hunayn did translate; see Degen 1981: 147–50.

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