

Abstract

Pseudo-Aristotelian politics and theology: from Rome to Qom

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Some historians still see the self-exile of a group of Athenian Platonists to Iran c. 530 as emblematic of Antiquity's end. Yet in Justinian's Christian empire Aristotle not only went on being studied, and even translated into Syriac; he was also reinvented to meet the needs of a society left cold by his *Politics* but fascinated by his relationship with Alexander. Hence the invention, in Greek, of a correspondence between the sage and the autocrat, long lost but translated into Arabic under the Caliph Hisham (724-43), though with a much stronger Iranian tinge than can have been present in the Greek original. This was Aristotle's debut in the Islamic world; and in the Arabic *Letters* we also find the germ of the *Sirr al-asrar*, a mirror for Muslim princes that became mediaeval Europe's most popular book, the *Secretum secretorum*.

Besides his politics, the authentic Aristotle's theology was also found wanting. His logic might help Christian or Muslim controversialists score points, but his metaphysics remained as puzzling as ever. The first Arab philosopher, al-Kindi (d.c. 866), got round this by commissioning translations from Plotinus and Proclus and editing them into a metaphysics handbook he circulated under an eminently commercial title, *Theology of Aristotle*. Addressed as it was to a son of the Caliph Mu'tasim, the *Theology's* scripture-compatible Platonism and creator God was deemed suitable reading for a Muslim ruler, at least privately.

While the *Theology's* Proclus-extracts, done into Latin in the later twelfth century as the *Liber de causis*, became one of scholasticism's textbooks, the Arabic Plotinus attracted the attention of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi, thanks to whose 'illuminationist' philosophy the *Theology* is still read in the schools of Qom. Suhrawardi also contributed to the Iranization of Islam by making the legendary ruler Kay Khosraw into a sage who had taught the same philosophy of light as Plotinus/Aristotle. The intellectual revival in seventeenth-century Isfahan, which besides crystallizing a modern Iranian identity also fertilized universalist currents of thought at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), drew abundantly on Suhrawardi but also on pseudo-Aristotle, both the *Sirr* and the *Theology*.

As, in a sense, intruders into both the Iranian and the Greek cultural spheres, the Turks were well placed to bring about a synthesis of elements in both traditions conducive to a universalist viewpoint. Mehmet II's library contained manuscripts of both the *Sirr* and Suhrawardi (not to mention Thomas Aquinas), while the best surviving copy of the *Theology* was produced at Edirne in 1459. In the same milieu, what remained of the Platonist Gemistos Plethon's collection of *Magical oracles transmitted by the Magi of Zoroaster* – after the Greek Patriarch had burned it – was translated into Arabic. Mehmet relished playing Alexander to George Trapezuntios's Aristotle; this Cretan convert to Rome notoriously proposed that Mehmet assume universal rule over Christians as well as Muslims.