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# The *Nabatean Agriculture* by Ibn Waḥshiyya, a Pseudo-Translation by a Pseudo-Translator: The Topos of Translation in Occult Sciences

Isabel Toral

## Part One: Essay

The text introduced in this chapter, the *Kitāb al-Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* (*Book of the Nabatean Agriculture*) by Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Waḥshiyya (early tenth century AD), constitutes an exception in the structure of this volume. On the one hand, it shares with the other textual testimonies herein the quality of being a text that, in its original context, was regarded and presented as a translation; on the other, it has proven to be impossible to identify a single genuine source text for the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya*. This means that the preface, which claims that the text is a translation of an approximately 20,000-year-old original Babylonian source, is not reliable; we must therefore assume that there has been no actual linguistic-transfer operation that could be reconstructed and evaluated. From this perspective, the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* fits into the category of pseudo- or fictitious translations, and one might wonder whether such a testimony can be of any value in a volume studying the social and cultural history of the translation of *real* scientific texts.<sup>1</sup> However, I will argue in the following that the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* is very relevant to a better understanding of the function of translation and translated texts in the cultural system of ‘Abbāsīd and Buyīd Baghdad. To this end, I shall first introduce the concept of pseudo-translation as developed in translation studies; I shall then present the text by Ibn Waḥshiyya and sketch the current state of research into it and the complexities of its textual history. I shall further discuss the extent to which the concept of ‘pseudo-translation’ serves as an analytical tool in evaluating the relevance of *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* in the context of translation history. Finally, I shall translate and comment on the preface, which is one of the most significant peritextual passages in the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya*.

### Pseudo-translation and Translation Studies

The concept of pseudo-translation is closely connected with the translational theories developed by Gideon Toury<sup>2</sup> in the field of *descriptive translation studies*. Based on Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory,<sup>3</sup> this approach focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of translations and studies their function and connectedness within a given cultural system. Toury’s notion of translation is target-oriented, so

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<sup>1</sup> It does not come as a surprise therefore that the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* is not discussed in Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*.

<sup>2</sup> Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*; and id., ‘Enhancing Cultural Changes’.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Shuttleworth, ‘Polysystem Theory’.

he assumes that 'translations are facts of target cultures; on occasion facts of a special status, sometimes even constituting identifiable (sub)systems of their own, but of the target culture in any event'.<sup>4</sup> He also introduced the notion of 'assumed translations', and stated that any text regarded or presented as a translation in its original cultural context must be treated as such for translation studies.<sup>5</sup> Because they are oriented to a specific culture, pseudo-translations are the object of research in (descriptive) translation studies as much as genuine translations, the only difference being that, though regarded as translations, no genuine source text exists for them.<sup>6</sup>

Toury's focus on the presentation and framing of the translated text brings out the agency and intentionality of a pseudo-translation's author, and this dimension makes pseudo-translation particularly relevant for translation studies. What then are the textual strategies found in a text of this type intended to enhance its status as translation and so to persuade the reader of its authenticity? Toury mentions peritextual elements (e.g., title, the name of a foreign author, a preface claiming translation status) and internal textual strategies, since many of these pseudo-translated texts have been already produced as translations.<sup>7</sup> The latter are particularly significant for translation studies, since they reflect those elements commonly associated with translations in the target culture (e.g., foreign and exotic names, settings, situations, cultural terms and customs, text genres, even grammatical mistakes and stylistic peculiarities); pseudo-translations even tend to overdo and exaggerate these features to enhance their resemblance to genuine translations.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, by accommodating the text to pre-existing notions and expectations of translated texts, pseudo-translations reveal a great deal about actual translations and even throw their key features into greater relief. Furthermore, they bear out the status and role of genuine translations, which pseudo-translations only put to use.

The motives that lead to the composition of pseudo-translations are partly the same as those for translations: foremost are the introduction of innovations (cultures are commonly more permissive and open to novelties when these are imported from abroad, since non-domestic origin makes them look less menacing)<sup>9</sup> and representational objectives (both translations and pseudo-translations have always been crucial in the construction of cultural identities, for the self and for the other alike).<sup>10</sup> Other motives are specific to pseudo-translation: the urge to participate in the existing prestige of translations and the evasion of censorship by the transfer of authorial responsibility.

The theories of Gideon Toury are still our main reference in the study of pseudo-translation. They have the disadvantages however that they have been developed on the basis of modern literary texts, and that they imply that pseudo-translation and translations are mutually exclusive categories. Andrea Rizzi has

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<sup>4</sup> Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 45

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; cf. also Robinson, 'Pseudotranslation', and Gürçağlar, 'Pseudotranslation on the Margin of Fact and Fiction'.

<sup>7</sup> Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies*, 40–53.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 43; cf. also Toury, 'Enhancing Cultural Changes'.

<sup>10</sup> Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 69–75.

argued, in contrast, that it is particularly difficult to reach a clear demarcation between cases when the pseudo-translation is actually drawn from a group of texts and when the notion of translation in the target culture differs from our idea of fixed, one-to-one correspondence of texts.<sup>11</sup> As a case in point, she presents the *Historia Imperiale*, a text that claims to be a translation from Latin into vernacular Italian, authored by Mateo Maria Boiardo (1441–1494). In 1723, it was unveiled as being a patchwork conflation of diverse Latin historical texts and thus a ‘forgery’; it had nevertheless been regarded, used, and valued as an authentic ‘translation’ for several centuries. Rita Copeland has also studied many examples of medieval texts that lie in a grey zone between pseudo-translation and translation, sometimes mixing real and fictitious translations from diverse sources, and sometimes just imitating, importing, and translating a foreign literary model and genre.<sup>12</sup> In these cases, the transitions between literal translation (word for word), linguistic translation (between two languages), and cultural translation (between two cultures) are fluid. As we will see in what follows, the peculiar complexities of the multi-layered *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* suggest that this text fits rather into this hybrid model between pseudo-translation and translation.

### **The *Filāḥa al-Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* – a Pseudo-translation?**

According to the work’s preface, Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī ibn Qays al-Kasdānī al-Qussīnī, alias Ibn al-Waḥshiyya, claims to have rescued several books from oblivion and then translated from the ‘Chaldean language’ (supposedly an old variant of Syriac) into Arabic in 291/903–4, and to have dictated this translation to his pupil Abū Ṭālib Aḥmad b. Ḥusayn az-Zayyāt in 318/930.<sup>13</sup> These books allegedly belong to the heritage, neglected and dating back millennia, of the ‘Nabateans’ or *Nabaṭ*, a term then used in Arabic for the Aramean peasant population in Iraq.<sup>14</sup> The *Kitāb al-Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya*, a monumental book of 1,494 pages in the printed edition,<sup>15</sup> is presented as the translation of only one of these books, whose original author is given as a certain, otherwise unknown, Quthāmā, who based his work on that of a certain Saghrīth, in the edition of Yanshubād.<sup>16</sup> The period during which these authors are claimed to have lived is fantastically ancient: approximately 20,000 years before Ibn Waḥshiyya. The spurious attribution to these authors, and the very complex textual history of this multi-layered work gave rise to a scholarly debate that is also of interest because it

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<sup>11</sup> Rizzi, ‘When a Text Is Both a Pseudotranslation and a Translation’.

<sup>12</sup> Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*.

<sup>13</sup> Preface, section 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Nabaṭī* in Arabic meant at that time ‘ancient Syriac’, i.e., ‘Aramaic’ or ‘native Babylonian’, and had no connection to the Nabateans of Roman times.

<sup>15</sup> The only critical edition to date, that used here, is by Taufīq Fahd (Toufic Fahd). Almost forty-two manuscripts and many abridgements are extant. For a survey of the manuscripts, see the introduction in the edition, 9–19, and the corresponding section of the ‘*Filāḥa Project*’ website ([http://www.filaha.org/author\\_Ibn\\_wahshiyah.html](http://www.filaha.org/author_Ibn_wahshiyah.html), accessed 13 July 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Fahd edition, preface, section 14, and index. These names also appear in other texts attributed to Ibn Waḥshiyya, e.g., in the Alphabet booklet; see Toral-Niehoff and Sundermeyer, ‘Going Egyptian in Medieval Arabic Culture’, 251. According to Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 19–21, they are encoded names.

neatly demonstrates the ambivalent status of this text between translation and pseudo-translation.<sup>17</sup>

After it had been brought to attention of the scholarly world by Etienne Quatremère in 1835, the book enjoyed a short period of enthusiastic reception as genuine testimony of Babylonian agriculture,<sup>18</sup> but the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* was eventually completely rejected as a scandalous and useless ‘forgery’ of Islamic times by Alfred von Gutschmid in 1861 and Theodor Nöldeke in 1875.<sup>19</sup> They both pointed to its sources of more recent date, which included much Graeco-Roman material<sup>20</sup> conflated with what they believed to be ‘pagan’ magic and superstitions. This verdict overshadowed study of the text for a long time. Manfred Ullmann still discredited the work as a disgusting mixture of genuine ancient material and *purer Schwindel* (‘pure fake’) in 1972, although he admitted that it might contain some valuable late antique material.<sup>21</sup> This state of affairs changed significantly with the publication in 2010 of *The Last Pagans of Iraq* by Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, who studied the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* in detail and took the book seriously, namely for its evidence of late antique agricultural knowledge in Mesopotamia and of the survival of pagan beliefs and practices. Summarizing, he concluded that the work is a genuine translation by Ibn Waḥshiyya, a real person, of a late Syriac compendium put together by a certain Quthāmā in late antique Mesopotamia. Quthāmā had collected diverse oral and written sources, including several previous Syriac translations from Greek, current in late antiquity in the pagan community of northern Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

From the perspective of translation studies, this brief outline of the reception history of the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* in European research shows how it was first accepted as a highly valued genuine translation, then demoted to the status of a useless forgery and pseudo-translation, and then again elevated to the rank of a genuine translation of a pseudo-translation. This ambivalence neatly reflects the problems arising when we try to draw a sharp distinction between translation and pseudo-translation—as already indicated by Andrea Rizzi—particularly when we do so with texts that draw upon various sources and mix genuine and invented translations, a phenomenon that seems to be rather frequent in premodern times.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the status of the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* in its original context, i.e., in the system of scientific texts of its period, is a completely different issue. As mentioned, the book contains not only agricultural and botanical knowledge, but also numerous magical recipes, and frequent references to astral theology, astrology, and late Babylonian divinities and rituals; it even quotes pagan and pseudo-pagan invocations and hymns extensively, which makes the text a curious

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<sup>17</sup> Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 3–9.

<sup>18</sup> Particularly celebrated as such by Daniel A. Chwolson in *Über die Überreste altbabylonischer Literatur* (1859).

<sup>19</sup> Gutschmid, ‘Die nabatäische Landwirtschaft’; and Nöldeke, Theodor, ‘Noch Einiges über die „nabatäische Landwirtschaft“’.

<sup>20</sup> The diverse textual layers are reconstructed in Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 11–33.

<sup>21</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam*, 440–43.

<sup>22</sup> Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Rizzi, ‘When a Text Is Both a Pseudotranslation and a Translation’.

hybrid between scientific handbook and magical treatise.<sup>24</sup> This explains why the author Ibn Waḥshiyya was not only credited as a specialist in agronomy and Nabatean culture and religion, but also as a magician and alchemist:<sup>25</sup> books on astrology, magical alphabets,<sup>26</sup> and poisons<sup>27</sup> were attributed to him, and his work was quoted extensively in magical handbooks. The entry in the *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm suggests that Ibn Waḥshiyya was not considered an esteemed author overall, which hardly surprising, since this is a status that he shared with all authors in occult sciences, an area of knowledge of ambiguous cultural prestige. I have not however come across any commentary that indicates that he was perceived as a veritable forger, or that his works were considered as mere valueless fabrications or pseudo-translations. On the contrary, his *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* had a remarkable career as one of the most quoted books in the Arabic tradition, particularly in agronomic literature. The classic work in this genre, the renowned twelfth-century *Kitāb al-Filāḥa* by Ibn al-‘Awwām, quotes it extensively, indeed 540 times.<sup>28</sup> This indicates that the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* was regarded as a real translation, or at least as a valuable part of the corpus of Hermetic and pseudo-Hermetic texts and magic, where framing as translation was quite common.<sup>29</sup>

For this volume, it is important to emphasize that the preface of the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* is a unique and very valuable testimony for scientific translation in ‘Abbāsīd times in one of two ways: either as a uniquely extensive peritext to a genuine translation, and then as an authentic ego-document of a translator; or as a fictive and exaggerated preface to a pseudo-translation or an introduction to a hybrid text. In either case, the preface evinces a textual strategy that aims both to convince the reader of the authenticity of the translation, by drawing on existing notions of translation, and to enhance the status of Ibn Waḥshiyya as a competent translator, by meeting the reader’s expectations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For these references, see Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 109–310.

<sup>25</sup> The author appears in two sections of the *Fihrist* by Ibn al-Nadīm (ed. Flügel; 372, 423), once in the eighth *maqāla*, on magic, where we also find his book on agriculture, and then in the tenth *maqāla*, on alchemy.

<sup>26</sup> Toral-Niehoff and Sundermeyer, ‘Going Egyptian in Medieval Arabic Culture’.

<sup>27</sup> Levey, *Medieval Arabic Toxicology*.

<sup>28</sup> Butzer, ‘The Islamic Traditions of Agroecology’.

<sup>29</sup> For the many translations and pseudepigrapha to be found in Arabic magic, see Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam*, 359–426.

<sup>30</sup> Toral-Niehoff, ‘Warum geheimes Wissen’.

## Part Two: Text in Translation

Ibn-Waḥṣīya an-Nabaṭī, *al-Filāḥa an-nabaṭīya*, 5–10 (ed. Fahd); tr. Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 93–99, slightly adapted.<sup>31</sup>

### Preface

1. This is the Book of the Nabatean Agriculture, which was translated from the language of the Kasdānians<sup>32</sup> into Arabic by Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī ibn Qays al-Kasdānī al-Qussīnī,<sup>33</sup> who is known by the name of Ibn Waḥshīyya. (He translated it) in the year 291 according to the counting of the Arabs from the *hijra*. He dictated it to Abū Ṭālib Aḥmad ibn Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdalmalik az-Zayyāt in the year 318 according to the counting of the Arabs from the *hijra*. (Ibn Waḥshīyya) said to him<sup>34</sup>:
2. Know, my son, that I found this book among the other books of the Kasdānians which I have found, and its title in Arabic would be ‘The Book of Making the Soil Prosper and Keeping in Order the Crops, the Trees, and the Fruits and Repelling Calamities from Them’. I found the book too massive and too long, so it occurred to me to abbreviate it. Yet on second consideration, this was wrong, not right, as my original aim and objective was to bring the sciences of this nation—I mean the Nabateans and the Kasdānians from among them<sup>35</sup>—to the people, and to promulgate them so that they [my contemporaries] would know the measure of their [the Kasdānians’] understanding and the favours that God (He is Blessed and Exalted) has shown them, in that they could comprehend the useful and recondite sciences and discover what other nations were unable to.
3. In this way I have come to their book and (this) time, when memory of them has faded away, what they have told has been deleted, and what they taught has vanished, so that no more than a mention of them and of some of their sciences remains, just like fairy tales, and that even those who mention them have no (actual) knowledge of them.
4. When I realized this, I started looking for their books and I did find (some of them) among people who were the remnants of Kasdānians and (still) retained their religion, habits, and language. So, I found some books which they had in their possession, although they are extremely careful to hide them, to keep them concealed, and to deny them [to others], because they are afraid to divulge them.

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<sup>31</sup> The translator frequently placed in parentheses the Arabic word(s) that correspond to his version; these have been excised here, as the complete Arabic text is given in Part Three. The division of the preface into numbered sections is by the present author.

<sup>32</sup> The Arabic *Kasdāniyyīn* (cf. Hebrew *Kasdīm*) and *Kaldāniyyīn* (cf. Aramaic *Kaldanāyye*) are both variants of the ethnic term that has been translated in the Latin Bible as *Chaldaioi* (Chaldeans).

<sup>33</sup> Added in MSS Beyazit 4064 and Leiden, vocalized thus in Beyazit, and read *al-Ḳasītī* or *al-Ḳusaytī* according to M. Plessner; cf. however *Fihrist: min ahl Ḳussīn*, whence Hämeen-Anttila’s reading.

<sup>34</sup> The first part could be characterized as a ‘peritext to the peritext’, since it introduces the main part of the preface, which consists of Ibn Waḥshīyya’s allocution to his pupil and is kept in the first person singular.

<sup>35</sup> The connection between Kasdānians and Nabateans remains unclear. In general, the Kasdānians appear to be the forefathers of the Nabateans.

5. Before that, God (He is Exalted, Majestic, and Lofty) had provided me with a knowledge of their language—which is ancient Syriac—to an extent possessed by very few. That is because I am one of them, that is to say, of the progeny of them, and God (He is Exalted) has given me property and money (praise be to Him for that!) so that I was able to gain access to those of their books that I wanted, thanks to what I have just explained: that I am one of them, that I know their language, and that I have plenty of money. So, I made use of affability, generosity, and delicate tricks until I had access to all the books that I could.

6. The one who had these books in his possession thought that he needed me to understand the contents of these books. This is because all these people who are their descendants are like cows and donkeys, and they are unable to understand anything of the sciences of their forebears, except that the man with whom I found the collection of these books is distinguished from the others and is apart from the donkeyness of all the others. I rebuked him for his excessive eagerness to keep these books hidden and these sciences in secrecy and said: ‘You are exceedingly careful, in fact, to wipe out the name of your people into oblivion and to bury their merits. In your action you follow the example of those who have lived before you, but in doing so both you and they are unjust to those earlier scholars of yours, who are also my scholars and forebears as well. By this very action, you have obscured mention of our forebears and concealed their sciences and their merits from people. What if I translate these books, or some of them, into Arabic so that people can read them? They would then know the measure of our sciences and could make use of what our forebears have invented and that would become a sort of pride for us and an indication of our excellence.’

7. The man to whom I said all this found my words very repugnant and answered: ‘Abū Bakr, do you want to argue against the way of our elders and forebears and their admonitions to us to keep our religion and habits hidden!’ I replied to him: ‘Nay, it is you who are being unjust to our elders and your forebears. No indeed! They charged us to keep secret the religion and the use of *sharī‘a* [religious law], because they knew the opposition it would raise if it became known to others, and this is why they were on their guard with their religion. By my life, it is right to keep the religion secret, but it is different with the sciences, which are useful to people and which are now being forgotten! If others were to know them and know who invented them, these (forebears of ours) would regain prestige and honour in their minds! The sciences are one case and religion and *sharī‘a* another! These sciences do not come under the commission of secrecy!’

8. He answered me: ‘But what use would there be (from our point of view) to promulgate the rarities of (almost) forgotten sciences, even if they were of use to people? Go ahead and disseminate them among them; they will benefit from them, but you know how they think of our religion! Nay! It was well that our forebears concealed both *sharī‘a* and the sciences from them, as they [the others] deserve neither of them!’ I said to him: ‘Even if they really ordered the sciences to be concealed, I do disagree with both our forebears and yours. Nevertheless, I do share their opinion when it comes to concealing *sharī‘a*. If they did not order the concealing of the sciences, I agree with them, without any disagreement. Now listen to me! Can’t you see how exceedingly ignorant all people are in our present time and into what weakness and negligence these religious habits and *sharī‘as*,



which are now preponderant among them, have made them enter? They have become like dumb animals, and even worse than that, inferior to them in some matters! By God, it is my wish to defend them that brings me to promulgate some of our sciences to them, so that they might stop defaming the Nabateans and awaken from their sleep and be resurrected for a while from their death [of ignorance]: after all, everyone has been fashioned and made to be disposed to understand everything. There used to be among them [the ancient Nabateans], one after another, men of extreme acumen and lavish talent. Since they are like this, it is he who conceals the sciences from them [their descendants] and deviates their course from them, who treats them unjustly: they have this understanding and talent, but it is left unused, and they have become what they are because they have not been taught the sciences and their ways and manners and inventions. Now obey me, my dear man, and let me translate into Arabic my selection of these books! You are not a whit more eager to obey our forebears than I am, or more persistent in keeping concealed what has to be concealed. You should also listen to these sciences yourself, as you don't understand them because of your eagerness to obey your forebears, claiming that they have ordered them to be kept concealed. If you yourself had had the opportunity to peruse some of these books, that would have profited you considerably and been most useful to you. Think of what I am saying to you and you will realize that it is as I say, and your intellect will find it right.'

9. So, he obeyed me and let me see these books. I started reading them to him and he repeated what I had read to him and tried to comprehend it until one day he said to me: 'By God, Abū Bakr, you have revived me, may God reward you for my sake!' I answered him: 'What use does a man have of books that are hidden and unattainable to him, so that he cannot read them or learn from them? They are no more valuable to him than stones and mud bricks!' He approved of my words and followed my opinion. Then I started translating these books of the Nabateans one after another and I read them to him in Arabic, so that he gained more and more understanding and he was fascinated by them. Finally, he thanked me with all his heart and accepted my opinion concerning the matter (of promulgating the books). Yet this did not happen without me showering dirhams and dinars on him, so that he followed the joint lead of craving for money and accepting the argument, deeming worthy what he heard and finding the benefit within himself.

10. The first book which I translated into Arabic was *The Book of Dāwānāy the Babylonian Concerning the Secrets of the Sphere and the Decrees over Events, Proceeding from the Movements of the Stars*. This is an important and valuable book, very precious, but I could not translate it completely, so I translated only its beginning: I found out that it was about two thousand double-pages of material called *raqq* [parchment] of the same size as the largest sheets of paper that is nowadays used. It was written in a most beautiful hand, very correctly, clearly, and flawlessly. So, by God, my son, I was unable to make a complete translation of it only because of its length, for no other reason.

11. Together with it, I translated their book on the cycles, which is *The Great Book of Cycles*.

12. Then I translated this book and others after (I had translated) some other books. With 'this book' I mean *The Book of Nabatean Agriculture*. I gave a complete

and unabridged translation of it, because I liked it and I saw the great benefits in it and its usefulness in making the earth prosper, caring for trees, and making orchards and fields thrive, and also because of the discussions in it on the special properties of things, countries, and times, as well as on the proper times of labours during the seasons, on the differences of the natures of (different) climates, on their wondrous effects, the grafting of trees, on their planting and care, on repelling calamities from them, on making use of plants and herbs, on curing with them and keeping maladies away from the bodies of animals and repelling calamities from trees and plants with the help of each of the plants, and on some uncommon qualities that can be caused by combining different things that alone do not have the same effect, either similar or different (to the effects of the components). When I realized this, I made a complete translation of the book.

13. Now I have dictated this to my son [i.e., disciple] Abū Ṭālib Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdalmalik az-Zayyāt, and I have charged him not to withhold it from anyone who asks to see it, wishing to make use of it. It indeed is useful to everyone, of momentous benefit to them in their lives, but I have also charged him to keep other things concealed.

14. I found out that this *Book of Agriculture* is attributed to three ancient Kasdānian sages. They say that one of them began it, the second added other things to it, and the third made it complete. (The book) was written in ancient Syriac and it comprised some 1,500 double-pages. Concerning the one who began this it is said that he was a man who appeared in the seventh millennium of the 7,000 years of (the rule of) Saturn. That is the millennium in which Saturn was in partnership with the Moon. His name was Ṣaghrīth. The one who added other things to that was a man who appeared in the end of these millennia, and his name was Yanbūshād; and the third who made it complete was a man who appeared after 4,000 years had elapsed from the cycle of the Sun in this cycle, I mean the cycle that belonged to Saturn, i.e., the 1,000 years in which the two earlier men had appeared. I counted the interval between the two times and it came out to be 21,000 years. The name of this third man was Qūthāmā. He said that he appeared after 4,000 years had elapsed from the cycle of the Sun, which lasts for 7,000 years, so between them there was the period I have mentioned. Both of the two who added to what the first, Ṣaghrīth, had composed, added in their books something to every chapter that Ṣaghrīth had written, but they changed nothing from what he had said and written and spoken about the things that he mentioned, nor did they alter the order in which he presented his material. They merely added to everything that he had put down according to what they found out and invented after him. So, the beginning and preface of the book are by Ṣaghrīth.

### Commentary

Except for the first, introductory passage (section 1), which is written in the third person singular and is probably a later addition by Ibn az-Zayyāt, the structure of the preface has the form of a personal allocution by Ibn Waḥshiyya to his disciple, in which he mainly reports a dialogue he had with an unnamed person who had the books in his custody (6, 7, 8). The dialogue dramatizes the translator’s difficulties in acquiring his material and simultaneously functions as legitimation

and framing for the translation. The insertion of dialogues was a very frequent strategy in Arabic textual tradition and often served didactic purposes.<sup>36</sup> The preface is followed by the authentic or fabricated preface of the supposed original, a laudatory pagan hymn attributed to the wise Sagrīth.<sup>37</sup>

The information about technical details is frequently very precise. The text is particularly accurate when it comes to names (except that of the mysterious custodian of the legacy) and the exact dates of translation and dictation (1, 13). It also reports the details of the textual history of the original text and even gives precise names and dates of the lifetime of these foreign authors (14). However, since in order to express pre-Islamic chronology Ibn Waḥshiyya refers to complex astrological data that presuppose knowledge of astronomy, it remains unclear whether he expects the average reader to understand these technical minutiae or he is just suggesting or intending to say that they lived ‘very long ago’.<sup>38</sup> Ibn Waḥshiyya also enumerates meticulously the other works he translated and gives the reasons why he either translated them completely or abbreviated them (10, 11, 12, 13, 14). He even describes the physical shape of the books (how many folios, material) (10, 14). All this indicates a manuscript and bookish culture where these details were regarded as important and indicated authenticity.

On the other hand, the text remains vague when it comes to linguistic details: He relates that he ‘transported’ (*naqalahu*)<sup>39</sup> the text from the language of the Kasdāniyyīn into Arabic, but later he refers continuously to the *Nabaṭ* as the people whose legacy he wants to rescue, and explains that their language is *Suryāniyya al-qadīma* (‘ancient Syriac’) (1, 5); he is clearly referring to some variant of Aramaic (the Aramaic and pseudo-Aramaic onomastics in the main text confirm this impression).<sup>40</sup> This was probably not the kind of information in which the reader was supposed to be interested; alternatively, it may have been deemed sufficient to evoke an idea of ‘exotic people from the past related to the Nabaṭ’. A very important point is the equation of ‘translating into Arabic’ with ‘making public and accessible’, which is highly telling for the status of unquestioned scientific *lingua franca* that Arabic had attained in the tenth century: if one wanted to be read by ‘the people’, one had to write in Arabic, or have one’s work translated into it (6, 8).

The text further reflects the difficulties encountered when translating religious references from non-Islamic and/or heretical contexts, and indicates a milieu where people could not overtly manifest their beliefs but practised some sort of dissimulation, *taqiyya* (7). It also indicates a society obsessed with occult wisdom and esoterica, as was the case in tenth-century Baghdad.<sup>41</sup> Concealment, secrecy, and censorship are constant themes in the text. Given that the main text is replete with pagan reminiscences, it appears that enhancing its status as ‘translated’ was a good strategy for avoiding scandal and disclaiming responsibility. Furthermore, it reflects a common textual strategy in occult

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the exhaustive recent study on dialogues in Arabic literature by Regula Forster, *Wissensvermittlung im Gespräch*.

<sup>37</sup> In *al-Filāḥa an-nabaṭiyya*, 10–12 (ed. Fahd); Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 151–55.

<sup>38</sup> Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 99, n. 34, calculates a total of 18,000 years before the days of Ibn Waḥshiyya.

<sup>39</sup> *nql* is the commonly used root in the text denoting ‘to translate’.

<sup>40</sup> Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 19–21, regards the personal names as encoded.

<sup>41</sup> See Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, 20–25.

literature, the 'legend' of 'discovering' hidden books, which has its roots in Hellenistic models and aims to emphasize the antiquity of the mysterious wisdom unearthed.

Another recurrent theme is the usefulness of the knowledge contained in the book, which counterbalances the dangers of translating foreign and morally questionable knowledge (8 and passim). There is also an interesting passage in which Ibn Waḥshiyya argues in favour of translating science because of its utility, as opposed to translating religion, which might reflect contemporaneous debates. Agricultural knowledge and the introduction of new techniques were useful for society, and advantage ought to be taken of these resources independently of their origins (7). Religion, by contrast, is a matter of ethics and faith, and much more dangerous. This point fits also into the function of translation and pseudo-translation as a factor in and means of anchoring innovation, as emphasized by Toury.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the preface underlines the representational function of the text: it serves to 'save the honour' of the Nabateans, apparently a denigrated people, a motivation that has conferred Ibn Waḥshiyya the reputation of being a Nabatean 'Shu'ūbī'<sup>43</sup> or 'nationalist'.<sup>44</sup> The issue of representation and the construction of a 'Nabatean' identity are indeed central to the agenda of the *Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* and demonstrate the importance of translations in the development of identity discourses. The issue is also indicative however of how multicultural 'Abbāsid society in the tenth century was, with diverse groups competing to establish their places in the ranking of cultural authority; they did so by having recourse to real or pretended ancient wisdom, knowledge, and history, which would be put in circulation principally by means of translations and/or pseudo-translations.

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<sup>42</sup> Toury, 'Enhancing Cultural Changes'.

<sup>43</sup> Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 33–52. 'Nationalism' seems a somewhat unfortunate, anachronistic term; 'ethnic pride' or 'cultural identity discourse' might be more fitting.

## Part Three: Original Text

The following text is based on the standard edition published by Toufic Fahd in 1993, 5–10,1. For these passages, Fahd used four central manuscripts: Istanbul, Esad Efendi 2490, dated 1064/1654; Istanbul, Fatih 3613, dated 803/1401; Leiden, composite manuscript, dated 872/1467; and Istanbul Beyazıt, Umumi 19052, before the seventeenth century; in addition, he used various partial manuscripts, which he lists in the introduction to his edition.<sup>45</sup> In total, he used for the whole edition twenty-one manuscripts of the roughly forty manuscripts that are preserved.<sup>46</sup> The manuscript situation is complicated, and a new edition that includes a broader material basis is much needed.

In what follows I do not reproduce Fahd's critical apparatus. I have also removed significantly his punctuation and added helpful vocalization, some hamzas, and the section numbers to facilitate reference to the translation.

1. هذا الكتاب الفلاحة النبطية نقله من لسان الكسدانيين إلى العربية أبو بكر أحمد بن علي بن قيس الكسداني القسيني<sup>47</sup> المعروف بابن وحشية في سنة إحدى وتسعين ومائتين من تاريخ العرب من الهجرة، وأمله علي أبي طالب أحمد بن الحسين بن علي بن أحمد بن محمد بن عبد الملك الزيّات في سنة ثمانى عشرة وثلثمائة من تاريخ العرب من الهجرة. فقال له
2. " اعلم يا بُني أنني وجدتُ هذا الكتاب في جُملة ما وجدتُ من كُتب الكسدانيين مُترجمًا يتُرجمه معناها بالعربية "كتاب إفلاح الأرض وإصلاح الزرع والشجر والثمار ودفع الآفات عنها" فاستكبرته واستطلته وخطرَ ببالي اختصاره. ثم فكّرتُ فإذا ذلك خطأ غيرُ صوابٍ من أجل أن قصدي الأول وغرضي إنما هو إيصالُ علوم هؤلاء القوم أعني النبط الكسدانيين منهم إلى الناس وبتُّها فيهم ليعلموا مقدارَ عقولهم ونعم الله تبارك وتعالى عندهم في إدراك العلوم النافعة الغامضة واستنباط ما عجز عنه غيرهم من الأمم.
3. وذلك أنني وصلتُ إلى كُتبهم في زمان قد دَرَس فيه ذكْرهم ونُسخت فيه أخبارهم وعدم إعلامهم حتى لم يبقَ إلا ذكْرهم فقط وذكُر بعض علومهم ذكراً كالخُرافات بلا معرفة ممن يذكُرها بها.
4. فلما رأيتُ ذلك اجتهدتُ في طلب كتبهم فوجدتها عند قوم هم بقايا الكسدانيين وعلى دينهم وسُنَّتهم ولغتهم ووجدتُ ما وجدتُ عندهم من الكتب وهم في نهاية الكتمان والإخفاء والجحود لها والجَزع من إظهارها.
5. وكان الله تعالى عزَّ وجلَّ قد يُرزقني قبل ذلك من المعرفة بلُغتهم التي هي السُريانية القديمة ما لم أَره مع كثيرٍ أحد. وذلك أنني منهم أعني من نسل بعضهم ومكّني الله تعالى من المال والدنانير فله الحمد فوصلتُ إلى ما أحببتُ من كتبهم بهذه الوجوه التي عدتها من أنني منهم وأنني عارفٌ بلغتهم وأنني متمكّن

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Fahd, *al-Filāḥa an-nabaṭīya*, 9–30, where he describes the difficult manuscript situation and his governing principles in constituting the text.

<sup>46</sup> For a recent update, see the webpage on Ibn Waḥshīya of the Filāḥa Text project: [http://www.filaha.org/author\\_ibn\\_wahshiyah.html](http://www.filaha.org/author_ibn_wahshiyah.html) (accessed 13 July 2021).

<sup>47</sup> The edition by Fahd has قسيتي, corrected by Hämeen-Anttila (93). This is a reference to the town of Qussin; see n. 32.

المال. فاستعملتُ المداراة والبذل ولطيف الحيلة إلى أن وصلتُ إلى ما أمكن من كتبهم.

6. ونظر الذي هو في يده أنه محتاجٌ إليّ في فهم ما فيها إذ كانت الكافة من هؤلاء القوم الذين هم بقاياهم كالبيقر والحمير والعاجزين عن فهم شيء من علوم أسلافهم إلا أن الإنسان الذي وجدتُ هذه الكتب مجموعة عنده يتميز عن هذه الجملة وينفصل عن جمارية هذه الكافة. فلمثته على الإفراط في كتمان هذه الكتب وخبء هذه العلوم وقلتُ له " إنك تزيد من الإحتياط بفعل شيء هو دَرَس ذكر قومك وطمر محاسنهم. وهذا الذي تعلمه اقتديت فيه بمن مضى قبلك. وأنت والماضون مُخطئون في ذلك على من تقدّم من علمائكم الذين هم عُلمائي وأسلافي معكم. وهذا الفعل كان الطريق إلى اندراس ذكر أسلافنا وغيوبية علومهم عن الناس واختفاء محاسنهم عنهم. ولو نقلتُ هذه الكتب أو بعضها إلى العربية حتى ينظر الناس فيها عرفوا مقدار علومنا وانتفعوا بما وضع أسلافنا وصار في ذلك ضرب من الفخر لنا والتثنية على فضلنا."

7. فاستبشع الرجلُ الذي خاطبته بهذا ما كَلَمته به جدًّا وقال لي "يا بابر أتريد أن تخالف رسمَ شيوخنا وأسلافنا ووصاياهم إيانا بكتمان ديننا وسُنَّتنا؟" قلتُ له "إنك هو ذا تخطيء على شيوخنا أسلافك! لا، فهم وصّوا بكتمان الدين واستعمال الشريعة لما عملوا من مصادته لما ظهر في الناس واحتاطوا لدينهم بذلك. ولعمري إن كتماننا صوابٌ. فأما العلوم النافعة للناس الدارسة عنهم التي لو علموها وعرفوا من هم واضعوها لكبروا في نفوسهم وعظموا عندهم. فإن هذه العلوم غير جارية مجرى الدين والشريعة ولا داخله في الوصية بالكتمان."

8. قال: وأي فائدة في إظهار غريب علوم دارسة وإن كانت نافعة للناس فبئها فيهم فينتفعون بها وديننا عندهم بالصورة التي تعلم بل نعلم ما رأى أسلافنا من كتمان الدين والعلوم عنهم جميعاً إذ كانوا لا يستحقونها جميعاً." قلتُ له "فإنّي أخالف أسلافنا وأسلافك في كتمان العلوم وأوافقهم في كتمان الشريعة إن كانوا أمروا بكتمان العلوم وإن كانوا لم يأمرُوا بذلك فأنتي مُوافق لهم غير مخالف. يا هذا ألا ترى وتعلم في زمانك هذا ما عليه كافة الناس من فرط الجهل وما أدخلت هذه الأديان والشرائع الظاهرة فيهم عليهم من العياء والغفلة حتى صاروا كالبهائم أو شرّ منها أو دونها في بعض الأحوال؟ فوالله إن الغيرة على الناس تحملني على إظهار بعض علومنا لهم لعلهم أن ينتهوا عن ثلب النبط وينتبهوا من رقتهم ويعيشوا قليلاً من موتهم إذ كان كل الناس مهينين مشكلين لفهم كل شيء وكان فيهم الواحد بعد الآخر في نهاية الذكاء وجودة القريحة. فمثل هؤلاء من ظلمهم كتمانهم العلم وأزواه عنهم إذ كانوا مع تلك الأفهام التي فيهم والقرائح التي لهم مغفلين قد صاروا كذلك لعدم سماع العلوم ووجوه طرقها واستنباطها. فاطعني يا أيها الرجل ودعني أنقل إلى العربية بعض ما أرى نقله من هذه الكتب فليست بأحرص مني على طاعة أسلافنا ولا أشدّ مواظبة على كتمان ما ينبغي أن يُكتّم. وأيضاً فإنّ لك في سماع هذه العلوم التي لم تفهمها من شدة حرصك على طاعة أسلافك فيما تزعم عنهم أنهم أمروا بكتمانها. ولو قد نظرت في بعضها لكان لك في ذلك أعظم الفوائد وأجزل المنافع تنتفع بها. فأفكر فيما أقولُه لك فإنك تجده كما أقول ويراه عقلك صواباً."

9. فأطاعني وأمكنني من الكتب فجعلتُ أقرأها عليه فيستعيد ما أقرأه عليه ويتفهمه إلى أن قال لي في بعض الأيام "أحييتني والله

يابا بكر فجزاك الله عني خيراً . " قلت له "فما يصنع الإنسان بكتب مخبوءة مرفوعة عنده لا يقرأها ولا يتفهمها فهي كائنة عنده بمنزلة الحجارة والمدر. " فصدقني فيما قلته له واتبع قبول رأيي فيما رأيته. وابتدأت أنقل كتاباً بعد كتاب من كتب النبط وأقرأه عليه بالعربية فيزداد فهماً إلى فهمه ويُعجبه ذلك. فلم أزل به حتى شكرني أتم شكر وعرف صواب رأيي وصحته في ذلك. لكن لم يستول ذلك معه إلا ببذل الدراهم والدنانير له حتى انقاد لاجتماع الرغبة بالمال مع إلزام الحجة له واستحسان بما يسمع وموقع الفائدة له من نفسه .

10. فكان أول كتاب نقلته إلى العربية "كتاب دواناي البابلي في أسرار الفلك والأحكام على الحوادث من حركات النجوم". وهو كتاب عظيم المحل والقدر نفيس ولم يستول نقله كله بل نقلت منه صدراً لأتني وجدته في نحو ألفي ورقة من الورق المسمى الرق في مقادير أتم ما يكون من الكاغد الطلحي الموجود في زماننا هذا بأحسن خط وأصح وأقومه وأبينه. فعجزت والله يا بُني عن استتمام نقله لطوله فقط لا لغير ذلك.

11. ونقلت معه كتابهم في الأدوار وهو "الأدوار الكبير".

12. ونقلت هذا الكتاب مع غيره بعد عدة كتب أعني بهذا الكتاب "كتاب الفلاحة". ونقلته كله علي تمامه وكماله لاستحساني له وعظم ما رأيته من فائده وجميل موقعه في إفلاح الأرض وعلاج الشجر وزكاء الثمار وتجويدها وزكاء الزروع والكلام على خواص الأشياء وخواص البلدان والأزمنة ومواقع أفعال فصول الأزمنة واختلاف طباع الأهوية وعجيب أفعالها وتراكيب الشجر وغروسها وإفلاحها ودفع الآفات عنها واستخراج منافع المنابت والحشائش والمداواة بها ودفع العاهات عن أبدان الحيوانات ودفع آفات الشجر والمنابت بعضها ببعض وطرائف ما ركبوا من الأشياء حتى حدث عنها أشياء هي غيرها إما قريبة منها أو بعيدة. فلما رأيته ذلك فيه أكملت نقله.

13. وهانذا الآن قد أمليته على ابني أبي طالب أحمد بن الحسين بن علي بن أحمد بن محمد بن عبد الملك الزيات ووضيئه بأن لا يمنعه أحداً يلمسه طالباً للانتفاع به فإنه نافع لجميع الناس عظيم المنفعة لهم في معاشهم مع وصيتي له بكتمان أشياء آخر غيره .

14. ووجدت كتاب الفلاحة هذا منسوباً إلى ثلاثة من الحكماء الكسدانيين القدماء ذكروا أن أحدهم ابتدأه وأن الثاني أضاف إلى ذلك المبتدأ شيئاً آخر وأن الثالث تممه. وكان مكتوباً بالسريانية القديمة في نحو ألف وخمسة مائة ورقة. فأما الأول الذي ابتدأه فذكروا أنه رجل ظهر في الألف السابع من سبعة آلاف من سني زحل وهي الألف التي يشارك فيها زحل القمر كان اسمه ضغريث وأن الذي أضاف إليه شيئاً آخر رجل ظهر في آخر هذه آلاف كان اسمه ينتوشار وأن الثالث الذي تممه رجل ظهر بعد مضي أربعة آلاف سنة من دور الشمس في هذه الدورة أعني في الدورة التي كان لزحل فيها تلك الألف التي ظهر فيها الرجلان. فنظرث إلى ما بين الزمانيين فإذا هو إحدى وعشرون ألف سنة. وذلك إن اسم هذا الثالث كان قوثامى. وقال إنه ظهر بعد مضي أربعة آلاف من دور الشمس التي هي سبعة آلاف سنة فكان بينهما ما ذكرت لك من المدة. وكانت زيادة كل واحد من الاثنين على ما ألفه الأول الذي كان اسمه ضغريث زيادة في كل باب من الأبواب التي رسمها ضغريث في كتبهم لم يغيروا شيئاً من قوله ورسمه الذي رسمه وتكلم به على المعاني التي ذكرها وترتيبها الذي رتبها. وإنما زادوا على كل

شيء دونه بحسب استخراجهم واستنباطهم بعده . فصار صدر الكتاب  
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