



Research Article

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Translation in the Umayyad Era: Individual Experiences Shaping the Movement

Yazid Abdulrahman Al Ismail

Department of English Language & Translation,
College of Arabic Language & Social Studies,
Qassim University, Buraydah,
Qassim, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper explores the early translation movement in the Arabic-speaking world and the reasons why efforts to translate texts from non-Arabic languages into Arabic during the Umayyad period have largely been overlooked. The current study micro-historically highlights the translation efforts made before, during, and after the Umayyad period (661-750), concluding that Umayyad translation scholars have been overlooked in favor of later Abbasid scholars due to political considerations. Finally, recommendations are made as to future research built upon the current paper to further explore individual historical experiences.

Keywords: Translation movement, Umayyad, Arabic, Khalid Ibn Yazid, Alchemy, Abbasid, Abdulmalik, Mathematics, Astronomy, Astrology

1. Introduction

Translation in the Arab-speaking Islamic world has been essential as a way to facilitate communication with non-Arab-speaking peoples for centuries—even predating the advent of Islam—for the purposes of trade, diplomacy, and later, to spread Islam. Arabic was the primary language spoken in the Arabian Peninsula upon the arrival of Islam, but the majority of the population in the neighboring Levant spoke Syriac, the vast majority of Egyptians spoke Coptic, the inhabitants of North Africa spoke Berber, the majority of those in modern-day Iran spoke Persian (Farsi), and the people of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) spoke a plethora of languages, including Latin, Greek, Persian, and in the case of the Arab Lakhmids, Arabic. After the spread of Islam and the conquests of the Levant in 640, Egypt in 646, and Iraq in 654, Arabic became the main spoken language in those regions, although minority languages continued to be spoken, and in places where large Christian communities continued to exist, such as Egypt and Syria, native languages were still used in liturgical contexts, which ensured a need for translation.

Although it is commonly assumed that the translation movement began when Bayt Alhikmah, “The House of Wisdom,” was established in Baghdad in 803 during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), this paper argues that the origins of the translation movement can be traced back to the Umayyads (661-750); but that in later periods the translations efforts of the Abbasids overshadowed those of the

Umayyads. I suggest several reasons for this overshadowing, including the external factor of political considerations. By highlighting the translation efforts made by scholars in the Umayyad period, and the influence they had on scholarship in later periods, I seek to redress this imbalance. Finally, recommendations are proposed as to future research built upon the current paper.

2. Literature Review

Although the translation movement during the Umayyad Caliphate is the subject of this paper, in order to put the movement in its proper historical context, the study must begin with the better documented Abbasid era translation movement. After examining the Abbasid era translation movement, the study turns to the literature that examined the Umayyads' contributions to the translation movement.

Gutas (1998) explored social, political, and ideological factors in early Abbasid society that contributed to the translation movement and discussed the social groups that supported and benefited from the translation movement. Gutas primarily focused on the development of the movement during the Abbasid period by focusing on Graeco-Arabic non-literary scientific books in numerous fields, such as medicine, physics, astronomy, geometry, and mathematics, among other disciplines.

Al-Manna' & Al-Manna' (2008) chronologically examined the translation movement in the Arab world, from the pre-Islamic era until the 20th century, in the introduction of their book. In this historical review, one page is dedicated to the translation movement during the Abbasid era, but nothing is written about translation during the Umayyad period. This neglect is a point of support in my argument that studies on the Abbasid era translation movement have overshadowed those on the translation movement in earlier periods.

Vagelpohl (2010) discussed the concept of translation from the perspective of scholars in the Abbasid era. His study was based on contemporary texts and modern translations of medieval texts, as it dedicated an entire section to concepts of translation in the eyes of medieval scholars and translators. Some of the scholars Vagelpohl included were Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, who was known in Latin as "Joannitius" (d. 873), as well as Ibn Assamh, Ibn Suwar, Al-Sairfy, Al-Jahiz, and Ibn Bishr. An interesting and useful part of Vagelpohl's work is the debates on translation he included—which were originally written by Abu Hayyan Al-Tawhidi (d. 1023)—between scholars and translators of the Abbasid era, including Abu Bishr Matta Ibn Yunus (d. 940) and Abu Said Al-Sairfy (d. 979). An important philosophical concept that developed among these medieval scholars was that any content could be expressed in any language because translation is a transparent process. In his conclusion, the author maintained that practitioners of translation in the Abbasid era had a common understanding that translation was sufficient to convey messages across linguistic barriers.

Al-Hassan (2012) analyzed the historical details that highlight the development and emergence of Islamic scholarship prior to the Abbasid era. As part of his exploration of the civilization and culture of the Umayyad era, Al-Hassan shed light on the personality of Prince Khalid Ibn Yazid¹ (668-704), who became known for his works on alchemy, philosophy, and poetry (Linden, 2003). Al-Hassan argued that Western historians consider the works of Khalid Ibn Yazid as "legendary or fabricated" (Al-Hassan 2012, p.1), which has led to spirited debates in academia about their role in medieval Islamic scholarship, particularly in regards to translation. Al-Hassan divided his article into several sections, including thorough discussions of events that took place before, during, and after the Umayyad period, such as the existence of learning centers throughout the country, the emergence of cultural and scientific movements, and the Arabization of government sectors. Based

¹ "Khalid (Khalid ibn Yazid) of Damascus was among the earliest Muslim scholars to take a serious interest in alchemy. Under his direction, Arabic translations of Greek and Coptic treatises were completed. He is also said to have personally studied alchemy under the tutelage of the Christian scholar Morienus." (Linden, 2003, p. 71)

on other scholars' research, Al-Hassan concluded that the works of Khalid were genuine and his endeavors as a scientist and translator were notable.

Baker (1998) briefly but evenhandedly discussed the Arabic translation tradition in the Islamic world before the revelation of Islam until the end of the Ottoman Empire. She pointed out that because the records were limited in the years before Islam, collecting information about the pre-Islamic period has been problematic. However, Baker pays attention to the Umayyad period within the framework of the Arabic translation tradition.

Because this study was one of the first projects on Arabic translation history that focused on individual historical experiences, and due to the fact that little has been written about translation during the Umayyad period, Baker's work is especially important. More scholarly contributions by other historians, philologists, and archaeologists on this period would help fill historical gaps in the history of translation in the Arab/Islamic world.

3. Discussion

This section reviews and discusses the history of translation tradition during the pre/early Islamic periods and afterwards.

3.1 *Translation in the pre-Islamic period*

Even before the revelation of Islam, translation was essential for Arab-speaking people to ease communication and trade with neighboring non-Arab peoples. Alhuwairy (1986) explained that in the mid-eleventh century BC, Sheba Arabs in Yemen were the first Arabic-speaking people to travel by sea to the eastern coast of Africa in order to develop trade links. The Sheba intermarried with Africans and established trade networks with various East African kingdoms and states that lasted until the early seventh century of the common era.

In the early years of Islam, the emperor of Ethiopia, Ashama ibn Abjar, known in Arabic as Al-Najashi, gave refuge to a group of Muslims who, in response to a command by the Prophet Muhammad, escaped from torture by the city of Mecca's non-Muslim leaders. There are several historical references to conversations between Arab Muslims and the emperor. For instance, according to Al-Thahaby (1981), a historical script details the conversations of Muslims with Al-Najashi concerning the story of Jesus Christ in the Quran. Al-Thahaby included the entire dialogue, which raises the following questions: Was the emperor familiar with Arabic, the group's language, or were there interpreters? Was there a person among the group who spoke the language of the emperor? How did they communicate with each other? These questions and others constitute an understudied area of research.

3.2 *The period of the Prophet and His companions (571–661)*

Ashour (1986) argued that the emergence of the translation movement dates to the period of the Prophet Muhammad. Ashour highlighted that before that time, the Arabic language was, for the most part, unwritten, and there was no Arabic language scholarship. The Lakhmid king Imru al-Qays I al-Bad (ruled 295–328), who went by the epithet "King of All Arabs," was memorialized with an inscription on his tomb that was written in Arabic using the Nabatean alphabet; it is the only known Arabic inscription that used the Nabatean alphabet (Bellamy, 1985). Although Imru al-Qays I's tomb inscription may indicate a nascent or proto-translation movement in Arabia, and the above example of the Sheba is another case, the true movement began when literacy of the written language spread with the new faith. As noted above, Muhammad urged his followers to learn foreign languages such as Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, Coptic, and Greek to communicate with foreigners and conduct non-Arabic political correspondence with neighboring powers. Zaid Ibn Thabit, for instance, was one of the prophet's interpreters and writers, and in that capacity, he learned several languages, such as

Syriac and Persian.

During the era of The Rightly-Guided Caliphs (Al-Khulafa-ur-Rashidun), from 632 to 661, translation activities were mainly restricted to political correspondence. This period was mostly marked by battles and conquests that spread Islam to Iraq, Syria, Persia, Egypt, Cyprus, North Africa, and Jerusalem. It was also marked by revolutions against certain political figures throughout the Islamic empire (Kamara and McEwan, 2001). As the Arabs sought to establish Islam over a wider geographic area, they came to rule over a diverse variety of non-Arabic speaking peoples, and because the Arabs themselves were only just beginning to develop their culture on Islamic identity, translation was yet to play a significant role. Its use would have been largely restricted to political interactions between the Arabic-speaking Islamic armies and their Roman, Persian, and Coptic opponents. Thus, it can be said that there was little attention paid to translation during this period, either directly or indirectly (Ibn Al-Nadim, 1997).

3.3 The Umayyad period (661–750)

According to Baker (1998), the Umayyad period is regarded as a key era in Arab history. In the early phase of the period, Greek was the most widely used language in the Levant, serving as the *lingua franca* of trade, and “the Umayyad central administration in Damascus followed Byzantine practices and Greek was the language of administration” (Gutas, 1998, p. 17). Arabic was later established as the *lingua franca* of the Umayyad domains when Abdulmalik Ibn Marwan (the fifth Umayyad Caliph, 685–705) recognized it as the administrative language of the empire. According to Al-Hassan (2012), Abdulmalik led the first movement of Arabizing administration records (*diwans*), and without this scholarly initiative, the translation movement that followed, including that of Bayt Alhykmah in Baghdad, could not have taken place. Al-Hassan stated that “this Arabization of the administration by the Umayyads was a crucial step towards making Arabic the language of culture throughout the whole empire” (p.19).

Moreover, according to Ibn Al-Nadim (1997), there were cultural and civilizational developments and advances that had already been introduced through Greek, Syriac, and Persian as a result of this pioneering movement toward translation.; Masarjis Building new cities (such as Al-Qayrawan in North Africa, Al-Ramla in Palestine, and Wasit in Iraq) and irrigation canals, minting coins, studying astrology, and developing a weapons industry are noteworthy examples of the developments borrowed from Greece and Persia through manuals on those subjects that were translated into Arabic in the Umayyad era.

Alchemy and medical works also played an active role in the Umayyad era translation movement. When the Umayyads moved the seat of the caliphate to Damascus, they relied on local Muslim physicians who studied medicine in centers such as Alexandria, Antioch, and Jundishapur, and they certainly had diverse linguistic backgrounds. The existence of such important centers within the empire, where Arabic became the official language, reasonably suggests that medical works and scripts were translated into Arabic. Alrayes highlighted the historic achievement of Abdulmalik in supporting translation activities, stressing that the Abbasids merely continued the work of their predecessors (2002, p. 284).

Umar Ibn Abdulaziz, the eighth caliph of the Umayyad empire (717–720), took a significant interest in translation, as he commissioned scholars to translate several medical books into Arabic, including one by Ahren Ibn Aayan (Ibn Jaljal, 1985, p.61). Moreover, Bsoul (2016) stated:

Umar ibn Abdulaziz ordered those medical texts to be translated into Arabic, Masarjis and Yahya ibn Surafun translated Yuhana sal Kunas. Among the most famous doctors of this era were Ibn Atal and Abu al-Hakam al Dimashqi, both of whom were physicians to Caliph Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan. (p. 32)

Ibn Al-Nadim (1997) and Arjomand (1994) listed several Umayyad scholars and scientists, some of whom continued their work into the early Abbasid period, contributing to translation activities in both eras. Khalid Ibn Yazid, who was recognized as a poet, scholar, scientist, and translator, was the

grandson of the first Umayyad ruler (661–680). Ibn Khallikan (1994) described Khalid Ibn Yazid as one of the Quraysh tribe's great scholars. Khalid learned science and was known for his passion for alchemy and medicine, contributing significantly to the translation of non-Arabic works into Arabic, including books on alchemy, medicine, and astrology from Greek and Coptic into Arabic (Ibn Al-Nadim, 1997, p. 511). Al-Jahiz (d. 868) (1975) also highlights that Khalid was an articulate character and unprecedentedly a knowledgeable and wise prince.

Ibn Al-Nadim (1997) stated that Khalid was known as a wise person during the Umayyad era due to his passion for the sciences, and he was quite open to learning ideas from non-Arabs and non-Muslims. For instance, he invited Byzantine Greek philosophers to learn Arabic with the idea that doing so would help transfer knowledge from Greek, Latin, and other languages into Arabic, which would ultimately benefit the Muslim community.

Stavenhagen (1974) noted that a scholarly debate took place between Khalid and the Byzantine monk Morienus, who lived as a recluse in Jerusalem's mountains. According to Ghalib, who was the bondsman of Yazid Ibn Muawuyyia, Khalid sought out Morienus to learn alchemy. This scientific dialogue includes a student-to-teacher conversation on mineral formation. Khalid worked hard to enumerate and categorize the scientific disciplines in Arabic and this knowledge, combined with his knowledge of non-Arabic languages, gave him the ability to translate Greek books on medicine and alchemy into Arabic. Khalid's translated books were subsequently translated into Latin, so his name and that of Morienus are well-known in the field of alchemy (p. 3). Stavenhagen argued that Khalid turned to the arts as a consequence of losing the caliphate. He further underlined what later biographers reported on Khalid's efforts in this field, stating that "Khalid was the first to commission translations into Arabic of Greek works on science and medicine. He was also praised as having written much alchemical verse himself" (p. 62).

Abdullah Ibn Al-Muqaffa' was a significant scholar-translator like Khalid before him, but he worked under the Umayyads and Abbasids. Born in 720, Abdullah lived most of his life under Umayyad rule, working as a civil servant as a secretary. His translation of *Kalila Wa Dimna* from Persian is regarded as one of the most important literary works in Arabic (Arjomand, 1994). In this respect, Wacks (2003) highlighted the following:

Kalila gained popularity for its narrative content: once presented to an Arabic audience in sufficiently elegant prose, Kalila came to a success based on appreciation for its narrative content. The elegance of Ibn al-Muqaffa's prose legitimized the secular tale for literary Arabic audiences. The work was such a success in al-Andalus, that when Alfonso X (1252-1284) undertook his massive project of translating scientific works from Arabic to Castilian, he included Kalila as the only representative of prose narrative, and in 1251 gave Castilian readers *Calila e Dimna*. In this way, the first major work of literary prose narrative in classical Arabic also became the first of its genre in Castilian (p. 181).

There were several other significant figures during that period—including Ali Ibn Ziyad al-Tamimi; Jurjis, the father of Bukhtishu II; Masawayh; Theophilus al-Rahawi and Al-Bitriq—who contributed in medicine, engineering, and astrology, among other academic fields. Jurjis, for instance, was "a scientific writer and was the director of the hospital in Jundishapur, which supplied physicians to courts in Iraq, Syria, and Persia. Due to his medical renown, he was called to Baghdad in 765 CE to treat the Caliph al-Mansur" (Al-Hassan, p. 3, 2012)

3.4 The Abbasid period (750–1258)

The translation movement went through different phases during the Abbasid era when it received significant attention and sponsorship from the Abbasid family. The renewed attention represented a major shift in how translation was viewed by the ruling government, which ultimately determined the subject matter of what was being translated and how many documents were translated into Arabic. Ameen (N.D.) pointed out a notable difference between the Umayyad and Abbasid periods with regard to translation. He noted that in the Umayyad period, translation was based on individual

efforts and was restricted to works on medicine and alchemy, while in the Abbasid period, major government resources were devoted to sponsoring translation, and it was regarded as a collective effort.

Rajab (2011) underscored several factors that contributed substantially to the development of the translation movement in the Abbasid era. He listed general factors such as the fact that the proselytization of Islam played a major role in translation and the fact that translation was useful in expanding the worldview of the community of believers by bringing them knowledge of great pre-Islamic cultures, such as the Greeks' and Persians'. However, other factors contributed to the development of the translation movement, including the following:

- The Abbasid vision of linking knowledge (logic, medicine, engineering, architecture, etc.) with political authority to compete with and surpass neighboring nations, such as the Greeks and Persians (Cahen, 1977, p. 105).
- Making Baghdad the new capital of the Islamic empire during the Abbasid period was not a mere geographical change, but also a comprehensive change in the policies of the ruling class, from a homogenous Arabian/Arabized society to a multinational civilizational country (Marhaba, 1988, pp. 207–208).
- In the Abbasid period, the country was open to communication with foreign intellectuals, necessitating greater attention to translation (Marhaba, 1988, p. 207).
- In the Abbasid era, trade played a significant role in the development of the translation movement in the country (Rajab, 2011, p. 4).

Alsaywouti (1990) stressed the importance of Almansour, the second Abbasid caliph (754–775), whose passion for translation was influenced by his interest in philosophy and astronomy. Alandalusy (1985, pp. 131–132) touched upon this aspect of Almansour's life, mentioning that during his reign, an Indian man brought him a book of mathematics written by the ancient Indian astronomer Brahmagupta. Brahmagupta's book discussed his two treatises, *Brahma-sputa Siddhanta* ("The Correctly Established Doctrine of Brahma") and *Karanakhandakhadyaka* ("An astronomical treatise in Sanskrit"). Almansour commissioned the translation of the book, which was published under the title *Al-Sind Hind* ("Zij al-Sindhind").²

Almahdy, the fourth Abbasid caliph, was interested in logic, so after several debates with the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I, he ordered the translation of Aristotle's works. During the reign of the Abbasid caliphs, Harun Al-Rasheed (786–809) and Al-Ma'amoun (813–833), the House of Wisdom³ was established in response to calls to Arabize the sciences from other languages such as Persian, Greek, and Syriac.

Several key translators helped transfer knowledge into Arabic at that time, such as Bakhtshooa Gondishapoori, who translated medicine from Persian and Greek and wrote the book *Attathkerah* ("The Sermon") (Ibn Al-Nadim, 1997, p. 427); Alhajjaj Ibn Mutar, who translated Euclid's book of mathematics;⁴ and Gabriel Ibn Bakhtshooa, who was a skilled physician and translator. Bakhtshooa is also notable for suggesting to Caliph Al-Rasheed that he initiates a cultural/scientific/academic expedition to Greece to acquire scientific documents for the purpose of translation (Ibn Al-Nadim, 1997, p. 385). Another important person was Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, who was a famous translator during the reign of Al-Ma'amoun (813–833) and, because of his knowledge of Greek, Syriac, and Persian,

² *Zij al-Sindhind* is an astronomy guidebook, that contains tables for calculating celestial locations to determine (Plofker, 2007)

³ *The House of Wisdom*, also known as *Bayt Alhykmah*, is a term that alludes to a significant Abbasid intellectual center and academy in Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age. One of the academy's key divisions was a center that was dedicated to the translation of sciences and arts into Arabic (Gutas, 1998).

⁴ Euclid of Alexandria was a Greek mathematician who was recognized as the "Father of Geometry." He lived at Alexandria during Ptolemy I's rule (323–283 BCE). His *Elements* was the major textbook used to teach mathematics worldwide (Bruno & Baker, 1999).

became the chief of translators at The House of Wisdom (Hatta, 1980, p. 127). One of Hunayn's great achievements was his translation of Galenus's⁵ Greek language medical texts into Arabic (Ibn Al-Nadim, 1997, p. 39). Also, there were a number of translators who graduated from his school, such as his nephew Habash Ibn Hasan, who translated a number of Galenus's works as well as Pedanius Dioscorides's book, which was a Greek language book about herbal medications (Mathahar, 1969, p. 358/ Marhaba, 1988, p. 227).

Table 1 is an overview of the translation movement in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. However, the question remains: why would such differences drive translation scholars and historians to pay less attention to the Umayyad period while placing significant stress on the Abbasid?

Table 1: Umayyad Vs. Abbasid Translational Aspect Comparison

Aspect	Umayyad	Abbasid
Number of translators	Individuals	Institution—"The House of Wisdom"
Ethnicity of key translators	Arab	Mostly non-Arab
Knowledge transferred	Alchemy/medicine	Alchemy/medicine/engineering/logic/astronomy
Years of power	661-750	750-1258
Other aspects	Political power was mainly focused on conquests and internal revolutions (Alsallaby, 2005)	Political power was mainly focused on taking a new civilizational path for the empire by attempting to establish the caliphate as a functional religious and political system that served believers of all languages and ethnicities. Wars were more defensive against the Byzantine Empire, Western Crusaders, Mongols, and other Muslims, such as the Seljuk Turks (Alsallaby, 2005)

According to the Arabic Translation and Intercultural Dialogue Association, there are several publications about the translation tradition in the Arab/Islamic world, but they all focus on the movement that took place in the Abbasid era. They include the following:

- Al-Thubayan, Ahmad (1993) *Hunayn Ibn Ishaq: Historical and Linguistic Study*. Riyadh: King Fahad National Library.
- Murad, Musa (1973) *Translation Movement in Abbasid Era*. Beirut: Marafram Press.
- Ataallah, K. (1989) *Bayt Alhykmah in the Abbasid Era*. Cairo: Dar Alfeker.
- Alnajjar, Amer (1993) *The Abbasid Movement of Translation and its Key Characters*. Cairo: Dar Almaaref.

There are no Arabic/English books that examine the translation movement in the Umayyad era, even though the Umayyad period is an essential part of the Arabic tradition, according to Baker (1998).

4. Conclusion

To sum up, it seems clear that the transfer of political power from the Umayyads to the Abbasids played a significant role in mitigating the Umayyad involvement in translation. However, one can ponder the following questions: is this mitigation of Umayyad translation work due to the Umayyads' pro-Arab worldview that rose to the point of being chauvinistic, while the Abbasids were more

⁵ Galen of Pergamum (129–216), the physician to Emperor Marcus Aurelius, was a scientist, philosopher, medical practitioner and historian whose influence on following eras equalled Aristotle's (Galen, 2016).

heavily influenced by Persian culture and took a more cosmopolitan worldview? Did the Abbasids see the Umayyads as backwards and, therefore, much of their intellectual work as unworthy? Did they feel threatened politically by Umayyad cultural works? In this regard, Alsallaby (2005, p. 430) pointed out that when the Abbasid family overthrew the Umayyads, they killed members of the Umayyad family to guarantee that no rivals would compete for power. The assassination of the Umayyads also served to diminish the cultural impact that they would have on the Abbasid caliphate in a number of disciplines, including translation.

It may be that the academic disciplines in which translation was concerned in the Umayyad period (alchemy and medicine) were a factor that contributed to the low number of translation research projects conducted in this field today, as they may be seen as outdated topics or subject matter that does not fit contemporary translation trends. In addition, the nature of participation (individual translators in the Umayyad era and a collective approach in the Abbasid era) in translation played a significant role in the under-reporting of the existence of the movement. Under Hunayn's leadership, several translators worked under the name of the House of Wisdom, whereas there was no equivalent institution fostering the work of Khalid Ibn Yazid and Abdullah Ibn Almqafaa', for instance.

Lastly, this paper has chronologically traced the Arabic translation movements in four key periods and has highlighted the primary factors that are to some extent responsible for the dominance of the Abbasid translation movement over other periods, particularly the Umayyad era. Thus, the result was that the history of translation in the Umayyad period is not widely known, meriting further attention from Arabic translation historians and scholars. As this period is not marked by translation institutions such as The House of Wisdom, it can be an open area for researchers to conduct micro-historical studies on individuals such as Marwan Ibn Alhakam, Abdulmalik Ibn Marwan, and Khalid Ibn Yazid, so as to establish their contributions to the field. Thus "individual experiences and the voices lost in the past can become apparent at the center of the stage" (Adamo, 2006, p. 85).

5. Future Research

This study opens the horizons for researchers to conduct micro-historical studies on individuals and their translation experiences in the Umayyad period so as to rediscover the history of translation in that era. This study also leads the researcher to propose future hypotheses, such as that there was a non-physical institution of translation run by Khalid Ibn Yazid during the Umayyad times.

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