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Science Expanding Amid Political Challenges: Translation Activities During the al-Mutawakkil ‘Alā’llāh Period (232–247 H/847–861 CE)

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Abstract: Translation activities in the Islamic world began during the Umayyad period (41–132 H/661–750 CE) and peaked during the Abbasid era (132–656 H/750–1258 CE), spanning nearly three and a half centuries. Scholars often highlight Caliph al-Ma’mun (d. 218/833) as the most influential patron of these activities. During the reign of Caliph al-Ma’mun, translations into Arabic increased significantly, and texts in fields such as mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and astrology flourished. These activities continued to expand in scope and influence in the following decades. However, existing studies have largely overlooked the translation efforts during the reign of Caliph Mutawakkil ‘Alā’llāh (d. 247/861), despite the significant contributions of figures such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 260/873), Ishāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 298/910), Ḥubaysh (d. 9th century), Yuḥannā b. Māsawayh (d. 243/857), al-Kindī (d. 256/870), and the Banū Mūsā brothers (d. 9th century). This study examines the individuals engaged in translation activities during al-Mutawakkil’s reign, highlighting their roles within the Abbasid court and intellectual networks. By reassessing the role of al-Mutawakkil’s era in the broader translation movement, this research aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of its significance within the history of science and translation in Islamic civilization.



Academic Editors: James Wilson,
Eric Böhme, Alejandro Peláez Martín
and Marco Demichelis

Received: 24 February 2025

Revised: 16 March 2025

Accepted: 24 March 2025

Published: 27 March 2025

Citation: Şenel, Samet. 2025. Science Expanding Amid Political Challenges: Translation Activities During the al-Mutawakkil ‘Alā’llāh Period (232–247 H/847–861 CE). *Religions* 16: 430. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040430>

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Keywords: history of science; history of medicine; translation activities; Umayyads; Abbasids

1. Introduction: Historical Context Before the Caliph al-Mutawakkil ‘Alā’llāh

One of the most significant factors influencing the intellectual and scientific development of Muslims in early Islamic history was the activity of translation.¹ The foundations of this activity were laid during the Umayyad period. Therefore, the translation efforts of the Umayyad period need to be analyzed from two perspectives: first, the translation activities within the court and its surroundings, and second, those outside the court. The translation activities within the Umayyad court began with the dynasty’s founder, Mu’āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680). He benefited from oral translations provided by his slaves, who interpreted non-Arabic texts from his library to inform him about the histories of past kings. Moreover, he initiated and oversaw the written translation of works on subjects such as alchemy and astronomy into Arabic (Şenel 2021, pp. 45–51; 2022, pp. 42–43). This interest was amplified during the reigns of his son Yazīd (d. 64/683) and his grandson Khālid b. Yazīd (d. 85/704). Khālid not only educated himself by studying classical texts but also sponsored the translation of Greek texts into Arabic (Şenel 2021, pp. 75–85; 2022, pp. 45–46, 51–55). When the caliphate transitioned from the Sufyānī to the Marwānī branch of the Umayyad dynasty, the Marwānid caliphs maintained Mu’āwiya’s interest in

past events and political structures. To this end, they commissioned translating works written in Pahlavi and Greek into Arabic. Furthermore, due to their fascination with hunting and the splendor of daily life, the translation of Aristotle's works also began during this period (Saliba 2004; Şenel 2022).

During the Umayyad period, Syriac scholars actively led translation activities outside the court. Severe Sebokh (d. 666–7) and his students at the School of Kinnesrin translated Greek texts—particularly Aristotle's works on logic—into Syriac. These scholars sustained translation efforts until the end of the Umayyad era, continuing Sebokh's intellectual legacy. Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), another prominent figure and a student of Sebokh, highlights the interaction between Muslims and Syriac scholars (Rudolph 2017).² Jacob's canonical responses reveal that Syriac clerics, although reluctant, accepted requests from Muslims to provide instruction. Jacob justified these interactions, arguing that necessity permitted them and that such exchanges often benefited both parties. Although the specific content of this education remains unclear, sources indicate that it likely included introductory materials from the Alexandrian curriculum (Hugonnard-Roche 2007, pp. 279–91). Through these educational exchanges, Muslims studied foundational works in philosophy, such as the first three texts of Aristotle's *Organon* and astronomical texts by Ptolemy and Theon, and medical knowledge from the Hippocratic–Galenic tradition, enriched by Indian and Persian influences (Şenel 2022). In the later years of the Umayyad period, Syriac scholars further expanded their efforts to include translations of astronomical and medical texts into Arabic. Sahda al-Karkhī (d. first half of the 8th century) and Ibn Sahda al-Karkhī (d. first half of the 8th century) notably translated Galen's works into Arabic, while other scholars rendered astronomical texts from Sanskrit, contributing to the broader dissemination of scientific knowledge (Şenel 2022, p. 67; Lamoreaux and Kessel 2016, p. 142).³

After the Abbasids came to power, not only scholars working directly within the Umayyad court, such as scribes and physicians, but also those from outside the court, including independent scholars and intellectuals active among the general populace, began to gravitate toward the new caliphal court. This convergence became particularly significant during the reign of al-Mansur (136–158 H/754–775 CE) when translators facilitated the rendering of Greek and Sanskrit texts into Arabic (Sidoli 2023, pp. 43–44). During the reign of al-Mahdi, a Syriac scholar translated Aristotle's work on logic from Greek into Arabic at the caliph's request (Watt 2004, p. 17). Al-Mahdi (d. 169/785) designated his son al-Hadi (d. 170/786) as his successor, but al-Hadi's brief rule witnessed no significant translation efforts.

When Harun al-Rashid (d. 193/809) ascended to the caliphate after al-Hadi, he cultivated intellectual exchanges and the dissemination of knowledge by convening scholars in his court for discussions. However, it was his vizier, Yahya b. Khalid (d. 190/805) of the Barmakids family, who significantly expanded translation activities. Yahya established the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) as a center for scholarly endeavors and translation. The Bayt al-Hikma provided a dedicated space for translators to work and facilitated the translation of Sanskrit texts into Arabic. Yahya also actively sponsored the translation of Greek works on astronomy, astrology, and mathematics into Arabic (Şenel 2022, pp. 106–18). Unfortunately, the fall of the Barmakids family led to the direct control of the Bayt al-Hikma by Harun al-Rashid, and after the death of al-Ma'mun, the Bayt al-Hikma gradually disappeared from the historical stage (Şenel 2022, pp. 116–18).⁴ The initiatives spearheaded by Yahya b. Khalid and his successors not only elevated translation activities to new heights but also encouraged the active involvement of various patrons. Courtiers, commanders, viziers, governors, and wealthy families became the main sponsors of translation efforts, providing resources and commissioning works. This patronage marked a crucial phase in

the Abbasid translation activities, embedding it firmly within the intellectual and cultural framework of the period (Gutas 1999, pp. 121–50).

After the death of Harun al-Rashid, his son al-Amin (d. 198/813) ascended to the caliphate. However, translation activities weakened somewhat during al-Amin's reign. With the accession of al-Ma'mun as caliph, these activities resumed, driven by specific groups and individuals. During this period, the translation of Greek works into Arabic gained prominence, reflecting a dominant trend in the intellectual endeavors of the time. Under al-Ma'mun's leadership, translation activities continued to expand and flourish. Notably, in the final years of his reign, Hunayn b. Ishāq translated three or four Greek texts into either Arabic or Syriac.

The reigns of al-Mu'tasim (d. 227/842) and al-Wathiq (d. 232/847), which marked the beginning of the Sāmarrā period, witnessed a peak in translation activities. Despite this peak, historical sources rarely highlight the contributions of these two caliphs to the translation activities. This raises a significant question: Why did these two figures remain largely unacknowledged, even though their reigns coincided with what is often regarded as the golden age of translation efforts? The first caliph of Sāmarrā, al-Mu'tasim, did not stand out as a prominent figure due to his illiteracy. Nevertheless, he contributed significantly to transmitting ancient sciences into the Islamic world. He tasked Yuhannā b. Māsawayh, al-Kindī, and their team with translating Greek manuscripts from Anatolia into Arabic. These efforts positioned him as the initiator of what is often regarded as the most remarkable period of translation activities. Despite this, al-Mu'tasim did not actively oversee the process. Instead, he delegated the task to his vizier, Ibn al-Zayyat (d. 233/847), who directed translation activities during al-Mu'tasim's (Şenel and Öztürk 2021) and al-Wathiq's reigns. Al-Wathiq, on the other hand, ruled for only about four years, which limited his role and influence in the field of translation activities.

The reign of al-Mutawakkil (232–247/847–861), however, maintained the translation activities inherited from his predecessors. The intellectual and scientific networks established during the reigns of al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim remained active, and many of the patrons who had begun their sponsorship under these earlier caliphs continued their involvement in translation efforts. Rather than expanding state-funded translation programs as al-Ma'mun had done, al-Mutawakkil maintained existing institutions while relying on both state patronage and influential figures such as the Banū Mūsā brothers, al-Kindī and al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān, to support translation activities. While al-Mutawakkil did not entirely disengage from intellectual endeavors, his patronage was more selective, primarily supporting medical translations rather than philosophical or theological works.⁵

A key development during his reign was the abolition of the Mihna, which had previously enforced Mu'tazilite theological doctrines. This decision marked a major ideological shift, favoring a more orthodox Sunni position over the rationalist tendencies of earlier Abbasid rulers. While some scholars argue that this shift weakened philosophical inquiry and limited intellectual discourse, others suggest that it redirected scholarly focus toward more practical disciplines such as medicine and astronomy (Bsoul 2019; Abdulla 2021).

Despite the political and ideological transformations of his reign, translation activities did not come to a halt. While independent patrons played an increasing role, al-Mutawakkil's court continued to function as an intellectual hub, particularly in medical translations. Al-Mutawakkil's reliance on scholars like Hunayn b. Ishāq, a key figure in medical translations, exemplifies this transition. While he retained Christian scholars at court and encouraged medical translations, he did not extend the same level of support to philosophical and logical translations that had flourished under previous caliphs. However, independent patrons such as the Banū Mūsā brothers and scholars like al-Kindī

continued to support translations and retranslations in philosophy and logic, ensuring the transmission of Hellenistic knowledge into Arabic intellectual circles.

This study reassesses al-Mutawakkil's role in Abbasid translation activities, arguing that his reign should not be seen as a decline but as a period in which patronage networks adapted to shifting political and intellectual landscapes. To achieve this, this article first explores the political factors that shaped the caliph's intellectual policies, followed by an analysis of the translator and patron networks of his time. Finally, it assesses whether al-Mutawakkil's reign contributed to the continuation of the Abbasid translation movement, albeit through different mechanisms than his predecessors.

2. Political Instability and Suppressed Debates: The Impact of al-Mutawakkil's Political Activities on Translation Efforts

When Caliph al-Wathiq-Billah passed away without appointing an heir, the Abbasid state first witnessed a gathering of state officials to select the new caliph. With the support of Wasīf and other Turkish commanders, Ja'far, the brother of al-Wathiq-Billah, was ultimately declared caliph under the title of al-Mutawakkil 'Alā'llāh on 24 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 232 AH (11 August 847 CE) (Ya'qūbī 1964, vol. 3, pp. 217–25; 2019, pp. 112–13). As his first act as caliph, he dismissed and executed his vizier, Ibn al-Zayyat, using a torture device allegedly designed by the vizier himself (Ya'qūbī 1964, vol. 3, p. 217). Ibn al-Zayyat had notoriously persecuted hadith scholars during the Mihna, a caliphal policy enforcing the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the Qur'an's createdness. Despite his controversial role, he actively supported translation efforts, bringing together renowned Syriac translators such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, Salmawayh b. Banān (d. 225/840), Dāwud b. Sarābiyun (d. [?]), Yuḥannā b. Māsawayh, and Bukhtīshū b. Jibrīl (d. 256/870), who contributed significantly to the translation of key works into Arabic (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d.).

One of the most significant political issues during the reign of al-Mutawakkil was the Mihna. This policy, which began during the reign of al-Ma'mun, continued under al-Mu'tasim-Billah and persisted into the reign of al-Wathiq-Billah, albeit with some relaxation following his death (Genç and Kartaloğlu 2022). The Mihna officially ended in 234 AH (849 CE) when al-Mutawakkil issued a decree banning discussions on the createdness of the Qur'an (khalq al-Qur'an). However, the complete abolition of the Mihna and the release of those detained under its policies occurred later in 237 AH (851–52 CE) with the dismissal of Ibn Abī Du'ād (d. 240/854). Alongside this ban, the caliph also prohibited debates (jadl) and disputations (munāẓara) on religious matters among scholars and the general public (Mas'ūdī 1988, vol. 4, p. 3). While some researchers have argued that this restriction weakened the study of philosophy during this period, evidence suggests otherwise. Al-Mutawakkil did not hinder the intellectual community's engagement with philosophy and ancient sciences. On the contrary, many works of Aristotle were either translated into Arabic or revised during this time, reflecting continued interest in and support for these disciplines (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014; D'Ancona 2011; 2015, pp. 18–29).⁶

To gain public favor, Caliph al-Mutawakkil abolished the Mihna on the one hand, while on the other, he began imposing restrictive measures on his non-Muslim subjects, particularly Christians.⁷ His primary aim was to mitigate the growing unrest among the Muslim population. In this context, he issued a decree prohibiting Christian scribes from working in the state bureaucracy. However, historical sources indicate that al-Mutawakkil did not strictly adhere to this decree (Öztürk 2012).

His political authority had significantly weakened in the final years of Caliph al-Mutawakkil's reign. This decline was primarily due to the dominance of Turkish commanders, who had effectively monopolized political power. To escape their influence, the caliph decided to relocate the capital. He even traveled to Damascus with this purpose in

mind, but his efforts failed, forcing him to return to Sāmarrā (Figure 1). Upon his return, he ordered the construction of the city of al-Mutawakkiliyya and moved the court there.



Figure 1. Al-Mutawakkil's strategic capital shift: from Sāmarrā to Damascus.

In the later years of his rule, al-Mutawakkil became embroiled in a succession conflict with his son al-Muntaṣir (d. 248/862), a rivalry that ultimately led to his demise. With the support of Turkish commanders, al-Muntaṣir orchestrated the assassination of his father and al-Mutawakkil's closest advisor, al-Faṭḥ b. *Khāḳān* (d. 247/861). Following the caliph's death, the Turkish commanders fully seized control of the Abbasid political structure. Moreover, by orchestrating the assassination of the caliph, they dealt a significant blow to the spiritual authority traditionally held by Abbasid caliphs.

Despite these political upheavals, translation activities did not come to a halt. While some scholars argue that the overall output declined compared to earlier Abbasid caliphs, existing patronage networks ensured its continuity. The continued presence of figures such as Ḥunayn b. *Ishāq* and the Banū Mūsā brothers suggests that translation activities remained active, even if the nature of patronage shifted away from centralized state funding. The following section will delve into the specific dynamics of translation activities during al-Mutawakkil's reign and explore their scope and impact.

3. Translation Initiatives and Power Dynamics: Shaping the Golden Age of Translation Under al-Mutawakkil

To understand how translation activities managed to persist in such a politically volatile environment, it is essential to examine two key aspects. First, the role of patrons who facilitated and supported the translation efforts must be analyzed. Second, the translators themselves and the works they translated require closer scrutiny. By addressing these two dimensions, we can better understand the mechanisms that sustained translation activities during this era.

While al-Mutawakkil did not establish new translation institutions, he maintained support for existing networks and continued to rely on scholars like Ḥunayn b. *Ishāq*. Classical sources suggest that he valued medical and scientific translations, even as philosophical translation activities became less prominent. He appointed Ḥunayn b. *Ishāq*—one of the most prominent figures in the translation movement—for this task. Ḥunayn also served as one of the caliph's closest physicians. Recognizing Ḥunayn's exceptional translation skills, the caliph encouraged him to assemble a team of copyists and translators.

Among those in his circle were Ḥubaysh b. Ḥasan (d. 9th century CE), Iṣṭafān b. Bāsīl (d. 298/910), Mūsā b. Khālīd (d. late 9th or early 10th century CE), and Iṣā b. Yaḥyā (d. 9th century CE)⁸ (Ibn Juljul 1985, p. 69). These scholars translated works—most likely from Syriac and Greek—into Arabic, after which Ḥunayn meticulously reviewed and refined the Arabic translations (Ibn Juljul 1985, p. 69; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah n.d., p. 262). Thus, despite political instability, al-Mutawakkil actively participated in and directly supported translation endeavors.

In the translation activities that flourished under al-Mutawakkil’s patronage, not only the caliph himself but also his closest companion, al-Faṭḥ, took an active interest in intellectual pursuits. An avid reader, he dedicated every opportunity to engaging with books. To support this passion, he commissioned ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā al-Munajjim (d. 275/888) to establish a library, which became one of the richest collections of its time. To further enrich this collection, ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā contributed several philosophy books from his personal library. Many scholars benefited from this institution, which emerged as an intellectual hub of the period (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014).

While historical sources do not explicitly mention him as a patron of translation activities, they highlight al-Faṭḥ’s role as a patron for scholars,⁹ including Isrā‘īl b. Zakariyya al-Tayfūrī (d. 9th century). Isrā‘īl, one of the physicians he valued highly, was among those who translated works from Greek into Arabic and worked under Ibn al-Zayyat. He later took on the role of a patron himself, commissioning Ḥunayn b. Ishāq to translate Galen’s *fi ta’arrufi ‘ilali al-a’dā’ al-bāṭina* (Classification of the Diseases of the Internal Parts) from Greek into Syriac. His contributions, along with those of other patrons and translators, demonstrate the interconnected roles that shaped the intellectual landscape of al-Mutawakkil’s period (Ḥunayn b. Ishāq 2005, p. 14; Ibn al-Nadīm 2014, vol. 1, pp. 578–88; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah n.d.; Endress 1987; Gutas 1999, p. 128).

‘Alī b. Yaḥyā not only established a rich library for al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān but also built a similar one for himself. The richness of this library captivated Abū Ma’shar al-Balkhī (d. 272/886), who abandoned his pilgrimage journey midway to immerse himself in the knowledge it offered (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014, vol. 1, pp. 361, 442; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘ah n.d.). ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā, a court astrologer, played a significant role in supporting Ḥunayn b. Ishāq’s work as a translator. He commissioned Ḥunayn to author the well-known *Risālat ilā ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā*, a treatise in which he introduced Galen’s works. The treatise introduced Galen’s texts and listed the translators who rendered these works from Greek into Syriac and, subsequently, into Arabic. The treatise mentions a work that Ḥunayn translated Greek into Arabic specifically for ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā, *fi al-madkhal ilā al-manṭiq* (Introduction to Logic). Ishāq, son of Ḥunayn, also translated for him Galen’s commentary on Hippocrates’ *fi kutubi Buqrāṭi al-saḥīḥa wa ghayri al-saḥīḥa* (Authentic and Spurious Works of Hippocrates) as well as Galen’s own work *fi ‘adad al-maqāyīs* (The Number of Syllogisms). Additionally, Ḥunayn’s nephew, Ḥubaysh, also translated for ‘Alī b. Yaḥyā. He translated Galen’s *fi al-‘ilal wa al-a’rāḍ* (Causes and Symptoms) into Arabic for him (Ḥunayn b. Ishāq 2005).

Another prominent patron of this period was al-Kindī, who actively promoted translation efforts while authoring numerous works on logic, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, astrology, physics, optics, and chemistry (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014; Kaya 2002; 2018, pp. 17–104). Although the exact number of his works remains uncertain, it is estimated that he wrote approximately 277 treatises (Kaya 2002; 2018, pp. 65–104). Al-Kindī was crucial in fostering translation activities, collaborating with pre-Ḥunayn translators such as Yuḥannā b. al-Bitrīq (d. 200/815 [?])—and those active during Ḥunayn’s era (Endress 1997). During the reign of al-Mutawakkil, he worked closely with Eustathios and ‘Abd al-Masīḥ b. Na‘īma al-Ḥimṣī, both of whom actively translated Greek works into Arabic. Their contributions included translations of Galen, Aristotle, and Plotinus, which significantly

enriched the intellectual landscape of the Abbasid court (D'Ancona 2011; 2015, pp. 18–29). While no direct evidence confirms that al-Kindī personally initiated translation projects during al-Mutawakkil's reign, he actively collaborated with translators who were engaged in such work. Rather than merely observing, he integrated these translations into his own scholarship, drawing upon them to advance his logic, medicine, and metaphysics studies. His engagement with Eustathios (d. second half of 9th century) and 'Abd al-Masīh b. Na'ima al-Ḥimṣī (d. second half of 9th century) played a pivotal role in the transmission of Greek knowledge into the Islamic world, and his close interaction with their translations contributed to the refinement of scientific and philosophical discourse. Al-Kindī's role as both a patron and a scholar highlights his deep involvement in the intellectual and scientific transformations of the period (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014; Rudolph et al. 2016). His scholarly engagement with the works of these translators not only facilitated the expansion of scientific knowledge but also positioned him as a key figure in the Abbasid era translation activities (Endress 1992, 1997; Adamson 2006, 2007; Rudolph et al. 2016).¹⁰

Al-Kindī also owned a highly valuable library, which played a crucial role in his intellectual endeavors. However, tensions arose between him and the Banū Mūsā brothers during this period, likely stemming from scholarly jealousy. The Banū Mūsā accused al-Kindī of an unspecified offense before Caliph al-Mutawakkil. The caliph, trusting their statement, confiscated al-Kindī's library and transferred it to the Banū Mūsā brothers. Although they eventually returned the library to al-Kindī toward the end of al-Mutawakkil's reign—reportedly due to the intervention of Sanad b. 'Alī—(Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d., pp. 286–87), this incident disrupted his access to essential texts. It may have temporarily hindered his contributions to translation activities (Kaya 2018, p. 18).

Another significant group of patrons during the reign of al-Mutawakkil were the Banū Mūsā brothers—Muḥammad (d. 259/873), Ahmad (d. 9th century CE), and Hasan (d. 9th century CE)—named after their father, Mūsā b. Shākir (d. 9th century CE) (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014, vol. 2, pp. 224–25; Ibn al-Qifṭī n.d., vol. 2, pp. 585–88). These three brothers maintained a close relationship with al-Mutawakkil and leveraged their connections with the court and their wealth to gather translators around them. They specifically engaged Hunayn b. Ishāq, his son Ishāq b. Hunayn, his nephew Hubaysh b. al-Ḥasan al-A'sam al-Dimashqī, Iṣṭifān b. Basīl, Ibrāhīm b. al-Ṣalt (d. 9th century CE), Iṣā b. Yaḥyā b. Ibrāhīm, and Thābit b. Qurra (d. 288/901) translated numerous works on medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy into Arabic (Hunayn b. Ishāq 2005; Ibn al-Nadīm 2014; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d., p. 260). Especially, nearly half of the works translated by these scholars for the Banū Mūsā brothers were retranslations into Arabic (Sezgin 1970, 1974, 1978; Hill 2016).

The Banū Mūsā brothers were key figures in the transmission of ancient knowledge into the Islamic world. Their strong scholarly ambitions, however, occasionally led to conflicts with other scholars, influencing the dynamics of scholarly patronage during this period. They slandered al-Kindī, a prominent patron and scholar, disrupting his intellectual pursuits—similarly, Sanad b. 'Alī (d. second half of 9th cent.), a distinguished astronomer of the time and an expert in using the astrolabe, became a target of the brothers' envy (Ibn al-Qifṭī n.d., vol. 1, p. 278; Ṣafadī 2000, vol. 15, p. 294). They spoke negatively about Sanad b. 'Alī to the caliph, leading to his removal from the court. In his stead, they placed al-Farghānī, a member of their circle, in a prominent position at the palace. However, towards the end of the caliphate, due to a mistake made by al-Farghānī (d. 246/860) in planning a canal intended to supply water to al-Mutawakkiliyya, Sanad b. 'Alī was recalled to the court and tasked with supervising the construction of the canals. Sanad b. 'Alī's return to the court alarmed the brothers, ultimately compelling them to return al-Kindī's

renowned library, known as “al-Kindiyya,” likely under Sanad b. ‘Alī’s influence ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#), pp. 286–87).

The last patron associated with the court and the transmission of ancient works into Arabic was Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 9th century CE). Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah mistakenly referred to him as Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. ‘Abd al-Malik, but this individual was, in fact, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik, the brother of Mūsā b. ‘Abd al-Malik (d. 246/860–861) ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#), p. 283; [Ṭabarī 1967](#), vol. 5, p. 175). Mūsā served as a tax secretary under al-Mutawakkil. Both brothers lived during this period ([Ṭabarī 1967](#); [Ibn Khallikān 1968](#), vol. 5, pp. 337–41). Some modern researchers argue that the patron of these translations was not Muḥammad but rather Mūsā ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah 2024](#), vol. 3–1, p. 553; [Vagelpohl and Sánchez 2022](#), p. 299). Muḥammad commissioned the Arabic translation of numerous medical works ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#), p. 283). However, there is no information regarding the translators in his circle or, whether the translated works were authored by Greek physicians or scholars from other scientific traditions.

The network of patrons and translators within the court and its surrounding intellectual circles should not be analyzed solely through Arabic translation activities. Examining Syriac translation efforts is equally crucial for understanding the scholarly environment of Christians within the court during al-Mutawakkil’s reign. Two Christian sects were actively involved in scholarly pursuits at the court: the Melkites and the Nestorians ([Treiger 2022](#)). During al-Mutawakkil’s reign, Nestorians were particularly prominent as patrons and translators. Among them, the most significant figure was Bukhtīshū b. Jibrīl, who was the leading court physician at the beginning of al-Mutawakkil’s caliphate ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#), pp. 201–9; [Öztürk 2012](#)).

Bukhtīshū contributed to translation activities in two key ways. First, he was a patron, commissioning translations from Greek into Syriac, primarily of Hippocratic and Galenic works. Second, he was actively involved in translation himself. Early in al-Mutawakkil’s rule, he was among the translators working under the patronage of Ibn al-Zayyāt, where he likely contributed to translating Syriac texts into Arabic. A similar case can be observed with another prominent court physician, Yuḥannā b. Māsawayh, who passed away in the mid-years of al-Mutawakkil’s reign ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#), pp. 242–55). Like Isra’īl b. Zakariyya al-Tayfūrī and Bukhtīshū, Yuḥannā functioned both as a patron and a translator, commissioning scholars such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, Ishāq b. Ḥunayn, and Ḥubaysh to translate texts into Syriac, while also working under the patronage of Ibn al-Zayyāt and the Banū Mūsā brothers to translate texts into Arabic ([Ḥunayn b. Ishāq 2005](#); [Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#); [Meyerhof 1926](#)).

Conflicts among Christians during his reign also directly impacted translation activities—for example, Bukhtīshū b. Jibrīl, envious of Ḥunayn b. Ishāq’s exceptional scholarship, translation skills, and growing influence at court, sought to undermine him in the eyes of al-Mutawakkil. Out of jealousy, Bukhtīshū falsely accused Ḥunayn of supporting iconoclasm, a charge that resulted in Ḥunayn’s imprisonment ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#), pp. 201–6, 265; [Öztürk 2012](#); [2013](#), pp. 220–22). Despite these challenges, Ḥunayn continued his translation efforts, working on texts in both Syriac and Arabic, showcasing his resilience and dedication to the intellectual endeavors of the time ([Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’ah n.d.](#); [Vagelpohl 2018](#)).

Although Ḥunayn b. Ishāq was initially imprisoned, he was later released by the caliph and went on to reach the pinnacle of his career, eventually becoming the chief physician of the Abbasid court ([Ibn Juljul 1985](#), p. 69). During this period, Bukhtīshū was exiled from the court, and Yuḥannā passed away.¹¹ Following these developments, while serving at the Abbasid court, Ḥunayn continued translating numerous works by Galen and Hippocrates into Syriac and Arabic.¹² Even Caliph al-Mutawakkil actively supported his translation

activities. He primarily engaged in retranslating Syriac versions of Greek texts, while also striving to produce the first Arabic translations of many works. In doing so, he generally translated directly from the original Greek, avoiding intermediary languages (Watt 2021).¹³ In addition to medical texts, he contributed to the Islamic intellectual tradition by translating works on logic, philosophy, mathematics, and other disciplines (Meyerhof 1926; Sa'di 1934; Hoyland 2004; Watt 2021).

During this period, Ishāq primarily undertook Syriac translations for his students, Īsā b. Yaḥyā and Ḥubaysh, as well as for his son, Ishāq (Ḥunayn b. Ishāq 2005; Sa'di 1934). In due course, Ḥunayn was appointed by Caliph al-Mutawakkil to oversee a significant translation project.¹⁴ To facilitate this effort, he was given a team of skilled translators who prepared initial drafts, which were later revised and refined by Ḥunayn. Among the translators supervised by him were Iṣṭifān b. Basīl and Mūsā b. Khālīd, the latter specifically referred to as al-Tarjumān (the translator), indicating his prominent role in translation (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d., p. 262; Vagelpohl and Sánchez 2022, p. 295).

Mūsā b. Khālīd was also responsible for translating the Sixteen Books and various Galenic treatises into Arabic. However, his translation was reported to be of poor quality. The Sixteen Books had already been condensed into the *Jawāmi' al-Iskandarāniyyīn* (Alexandrian Summaries), essential for preserving and transmitting Galenic medical knowledge (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d., p. 281; Pormann and Savage-Smith 2007, pp. 13–15). Despite the variations in the quality of their translations, these scholars made significant contributions to the Abbasid-era translation activities, which facilitated the transfer of Greek and other scientific texts into Arabic and Syriac.

Another significant Syriac translator of this period was Iṣṭifān b. Basīl. He primarily translated medical texts from Syriac into Arabic for Muḥammad b. Mūsā. Among his notable contributions, he rendered Dioscorides' *Materia Medica* into Arabic (Chipman 2021), significantly enriching the Islamic medical tradition—additionally, Iṣṭifān b. Basīl translated several works by Galen, including *fī ḥarakati's-ṣadr wa'r-rīḥ* (On the Movement of the Chest and the Wind), *fī 'ilali't-ta'naffus* (On the Causes of Respiration), *fī ḥarakati'l-'aḍil* (On the Motion of Muscles), *fī'l-ḥājati ilā't-ta'naffus* (On the Need for Respiration), *fī'l-imtilā* (On Repletion), *Fī'l-mirreti's-sawdā* (On Black Bile), *fī'l-fasd* (On Venesection; partially translated), and *fī'z-zubūl* (On Decay) (Ḥunayn b. Ishāq 2005; Meyerhof 1926). Iṣṭifān also translated Oribasius' *Collection* (Raiola 2020). These translations were crucial in transmitting Hellenistic medical knowledge to the Arabic-speaking world, shaping medical scholarship in the Islamic Golden Age.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the reign of al-Mutawakkil is often regarded as a period when the Abbasid Caliphate began to experience political decline. While he attempted to remove the Turks, who held significant political influence, from the political sphere, this ultimately led to his assassination. Following his death, the caliphate lost its political authority entirely. To weaken their influence, he even sought to relocate the capital, yet his political power was insufficient to sustain the change, forcing him to return to Sāmarrā.

From the perspective of translation activities, this period presents a complex picture. To ease societal tensions caused by ideological and theological conflicts, the caliph ended the *Mihna*. Moreover, he prohibited theological debates to prevent further discord. However, some modern scholars argue that this policy negatively impacted the translation activities, as it limited intellectual discourse (Abdulla 2021).

Furthermore, al-Mutawakkil implemented restrictive policies against the Christian population, placing limits on their religious practices. He even issued decrees to remove them from official positions within the court. However, historical records indicate that

these policies were not strictly enforced, as many of the leading physicians and scholars in the Abbasid court remained Christians. Indeed, the caliph retained Christian scholars at his court and personally encouraged his close physician, Ḥunayn, to participate in the activities. Al-Mutawakkil directly supported scholars such as Ḥunayn, ensuring that translation efforts remained robust during his reign. While his political stance towards religious minorities was complex, his court remained a center for intellectual exchange. Through his patronage, Ḥunayn expanded his network of translators, further enhancing the intellectual connections that supported the Abbasid translation movement.

Despite the ongoing political and religious tensions, al-Mutawakkil's era must be acknowledged as a vital segment of the golden age of translation, largely due to continued patronage networks and the institutional momentum built during previous reigns. During this period, bureaucrats, prominent scholars such as the Banū Mūsā brothers, and intellectuals like al-Kindī actively engaged in translation projects (Figure 1). The intensity of these efforts reached such a level that competition and rivalry arose among scholars. The Banū Mūsā brothers, some of the most influential patrons of this period, used their close ties to the court to exclude individuals like Sanad b. 'Alī and al-Kindī from court circles.

However, al-Kindī's exclusion from certain court circles did not entirely diminish his role in the translation movement. Although he lost direct access to some patronage resources after the confiscation of his library, he remained an active participant in intellectual and translation endeavors. His close collaborations with translators such as Eustathios and 'Abd al-Masīḥ b. Na'īma al-Ḥimṣī indicate that he was still deeply involved in the dissemination of Greek knowledge into Arabic. Unlike the Banū Mūsā brothers, whose patronage was highly centralized and court-oriented, al-Kindī operated through a more independent scholarly network. This distinction highlights the existence of multiple layers of patronage and intellectual exchange during al-Mutawakkil's reign, rather than a singular state-directed translation effort.

Similar rivalries were also evident among Christian scholars. For instance, before Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq, the chief physician of the Abbasid court was Bukhtīshū. However, upon recognizing Ḥunayn's growing reputation in medicine, Bukhtīshū became envious and orchestrated his imprisonment. Despite these challenges, Ḥunayn remained committed to translation and original scholarly works. Aware of Bukhtīshū's jealousy, the caliph eventually removed him from the court and appointed Ḥunayn as the new chief physician. Consequently, Bukhtīshū was exiled from the capital and ceased to participate in translation activities, both in Syriac and Arabic. This marked the beginning of Ḥunayn's most successful period, during which he earned increasing respect from al-Mutawakkil. With the caliph's support, he expanded his translation efforts into Arabic.

The differing experiences of al-Kindī and Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq during al-Mutawakkil's reign underscore the variability of patronage structures and power dynamics within the translation movement. While Ḥunayn's expertise in medicine secured him continued court support, al-Kindī's focus on philosophy and speculative sciences made him more vulnerable to court intrigues. This suggests that al-Mutawakkil's patronage preferences, along with court politics, played a role in determining which scholars and fields received sustained financial and institutional backing.

Additionally, this study further examines how political, economic, and religious factors shaped the intellectual landscape of al-Mutawakkil's reign. Politically, while the abolition of the Mihna reduced ideological persecution, it did not eliminate court rivalries, as seen in the conflicts between patrons such as Banū Mūsā and al-Kindī. Economically, the patronage structure remained crucial for sustaining translation activities, with wealthy patrons like Banū Mūsā directing resources toward disciplines such as mathematics and astronomy, while figures like al-Faṭḥ b. Khāqān supported literary and scientific

translations. Religiously, while al-Mutawakkil's policies placed restrictions on Christian bureaucrats, his court continued to rely on Christian scholars, particularly in medical and philosophical translations. These intertwined political, economic, and religious dynamics demonstrate that the translation movement under al-Mutawakkil was not a passive continuation of previous efforts but rather an evolving process shaped by competing interests and shifting alliances.

Beyond his own translations, Hunayn also trained three students—one of whom was his son, Ishāq—ensuring that his translation methodology was preserved for future generations. Furthermore, during this period, he focused extensively on Syriac translations, many of which were revisions of earlier works. This suggests that al-Mutawakkil's reign should be recognized not only as a peak period for Arabic translations but also as an era when retranslations into Syriac, including works originally rendered from Greek, were systematically produced.

As a result, despite the political and religious challenges of his reign, it stands out as one of the most significant periods in the history of translation, thanks to the robust academic activities the caliph himself participated in, along with the institutional structures that supported scientific translations. Thus, rather than viewing al-Mutawakkil's reign as a period of stagnation, it should be seen as a continuation of the Abbasid translation movement, sustained through both caliphal patronage and independent scholarly networks (Figure 2).

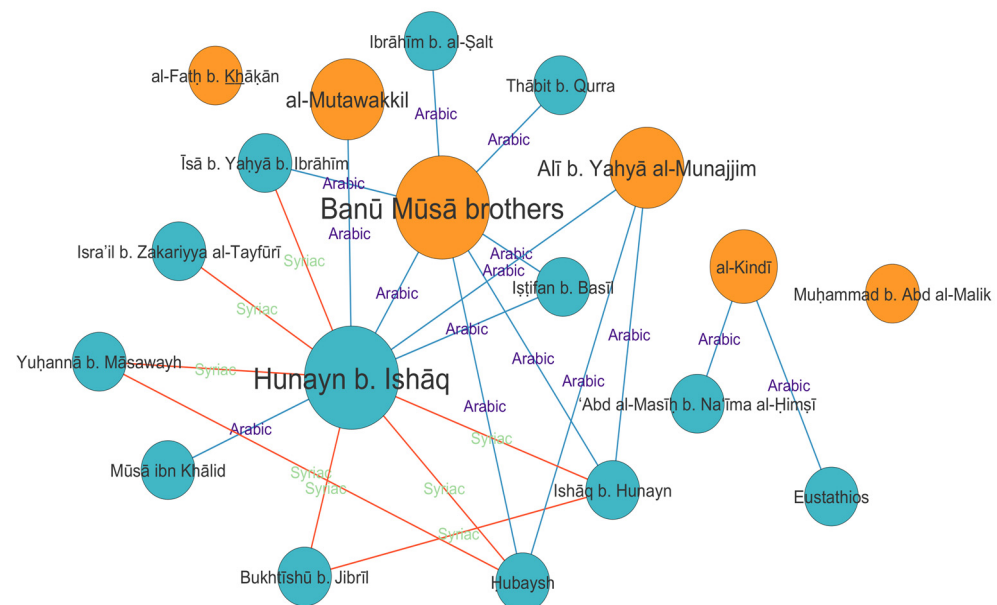


Figure 2. Patrons, translators, and languages: the social network of translation activities in al-Mutawakkil's court.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The maps and visualization used in this article are based on data collected and processed by the author. Further inquiries can be directed to the author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Scholars have extensively examined translation activities, proposing numerous periodizations and interpretations of translation efforts in the Islamic world over the past two centuries. Modern researchers generally divide into two main groups regarding the origins of translation activities. The first group maintains that translation efforts began during the Umayyad period, whereas the second argues they emerged during the Abbasid era (Gutas 1999; Pormann and Savage-Smith 2007; Saliba 2011). Consequently, the latter group frequently attributes all activities from the Umayyads to the Abbasids or dismisses individuals from the earlier period as mere historical figures. At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental question: Should translation be viewed as an activity or a organized movement during these periods?
When examining early translation efforts, it becomes evident that the period from the late reign of al-Ma'mun to nearly a century afterward marked a phase of systematic and intensified activity. Nonetheless, even during this period, it remains debatable whether translation efforts can be classified as a fully organized movement. Before and after this phase, translation activities appear to have fluctuated, alternating between periods of decline and resurgence. Drawing on the framework of my study, I present this phenomenon as an activity rather than an organized movement and have provided a concise overview of its trajectory leading up to the reign of al-Mutawakkil.
Additionally, for a detailed analysis of the concept of Early Islam (Yılmaz et al. 2024).
- ² For a detailed discussion on the scholarly activities of the Syriacs during the Umayyad period, see (Şenel 2021, 2022; Hugonnard-Roche 2007; D. King 2019).
- ³ Meyerhof mistakenly considered the city of Karkh as a location in Baghdad. He failed to recognize the existence of cities with similar names (Meyerhof 1926, p. 704).
- ⁴ İhsanoğlu, who has authored a comprehensive study on Bayt al-Hikma, does not consider Yaḥyā b. Khālīd b. Barmak as its founder but rather as someone who served there along with the caliph (İhsanoğlu 2023).
- ⁵ Al-Mutawakkil placed great importance on poets and actively fostered their development within the court. During his reign, Arabic poetry evolved through interactions with diverse cultural influences, adopting new literary forms, which poets then performed in the courtly setting (Mas'ūdi 1988, vol. 4, pp. 3–40; Aslan 2022, pp. 11–12).
- ⁶ The abolition of the Mihna under al-Mutawakkil marked a decisive moment in Abbasid intellectual history, shifting the state's ideological orientation toward Sunni traditionalism. This shift coincided with al-Mutawakkil's attempts to honor Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, the prominent traditionist persecuted during the Mihna. However, despite the caliph's overtures, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal remained distant from state patronage and rejected official recognition, maintaining his independence from political authority (Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jābirī 2019). Western scholars have often equated the Mihna with Mu'tazilism; however, this perspective does not fully capture the diversity of theological positions involved in the controversy. Those who supported the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an were not exclusively Mu'tazilites but also included Kharijites, Zaydis, Murji'ites, and Rafidites. Al-Mutawakkil's policies, particularly his appointments, should therefore be viewed not merely as a reaction against Mu'tazilism but as part of a broader effort to redefine the religious and political landscape of the Abbasid Caliphate (Hinds 1993, vol. 7, pp. 2–6; Melchert 1997, 2019).
While some scholars argue that this ideological transition influenced al-Mutawakkil's approach to translation—favoring scientific and medical works over speculative philosophy—recent scholarship suggests that his patronage decisions were shaped by a broader framework of Abbasid administrative continuity. His preference for Quraysh lineage and Basra-educated officials, a pattern also observed under al-Ma'mun, demonstrates that his intellectual policies were not solely dictated by doctrinal shifts but were also informed by established bureaucratic and political considerations (Melchert 2019, pp. 106–19). While discussions about al-Mutawakkil's views on speculative philosophy continue, his rule did not halt philosophical translation. Instead, it signified a reorganization of the patronage systems that supported scientific and medical translations. This change indicates a transition in Abbasid intellectual priorities rather than a complete stifling of philosophical exploration.
- ⁷ During the reign of Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil, elections for the Christian patriarch were marked by significant controversy and intrigue. Disputes in these elections, coupled with the sudden deaths of several candidates, prompted al-Mutawakkil to intervene in the process. Notably, the interference of palace doctors Buhtishu and other influential Christian bureaucrats in the elections elicited a strong reaction from the caliph. Consequently, Theodore, elected patriarch through bribery and manipulation, was imprisoned shortly thereafter, leading to increased pressure on Christians in Sāmarrā. Churches were demolished, clergy members were exiled, and Christian officials were removed from their government positions (Mārī b. Sulaymān 1899; Öztürk 2012; Kırkpınar 1996).
Furthermore, al-Mutawakkil issued a decree in 235 (849) demanding the removal of Christian officials from state roles. However, it was noted that Christians continued to serve at state levels in the years that followed. Events such as the mass dismissal of Christian officials in Sāmarrā in 238 (852) and the destruction of patriarch tombs are directly linked to the political tensions of the era. Christian sources suggest that al-Mutawakkil's anger towards Buhtishu provoked these harsh measures. Similarly, public pressure and the bureaucratic influence of Christians compelled al-Mutawakkil to make new decisions consistently. Nevertheless,

it can be understood that even his severe policies were not fully realized in the long term, and Christians persisted within the state. For a detailed analysis of al-Mutawakkil's activities toward his Christian subjects, consult Levent Öztürk, *İslam Toplumunda Hristiyanlar* (Christians in Islamic Society) (Öztürk 2012).

- 8 Ibn Juljul mentions a translator named Yaḥyā b. Hārūn as part of the group of translators surrounding Hunayn. However, Hunayn himself does not refer to anyone by this name. Instead, he mentions Īsā b. Yaḥyā in his epistle, attributing several Arabic translations to him. Uwe Vagelpohl and Ignacio Sánchez, who examine patrons and translators in biographical sources, do not provide any information about this individual. However, it is likely that this figure should be identified as 'Īsā b. Yaḥyā (Hunayn b. Ishāq 2005; Ibn Juljul 1985, p. 69; Vagelpohl and Sánchez 2022, p. 306).
- 9 Among the scholars supported by al-Faṭḥ was al-Jāḥiẓ, who in turn authored works such as *The Virtues of the Turks* (*Manāqib al-Turk*), *Ar-Radd 'alā al-Naṣārā* (The Refutation Against the Christians), *Al-Tāj fī Akhlāq al-Mulūk* (The Crown on the Ethics of Kings) specifically for him (Ibn al-Nadīm 2014, pp. 578–88; Şeşen 1993; Toorawa 2005).
- 10 Hunayn retranslated some of the books previously translated for al-Kindī, possibly to refine their content, adapt them to new concepts, or apply updated translation methods (Adamson and Pormann 2012; Şahin 2018). However, Treiger interprets these retranslations differently, viewing them as part of a rivalry between two Christian communities—the Nestorians and the Melkites. According to him, the Melkites formed the group of translators around al-Kindī, and their translations were often criticized. In contrast, the Nestorians, particularly those within Hunayn's intellectual circle, were portrayed more favorably. Many of the works listed in Hunayn's *Risāla* were initially translated into Syriac, and their patrons were primarily Nestorian scholars. Treiger notes this reflects an implicit attempt to elevate the Nestorians as the group producing superior translations (Treiger 2022).
- 11 Although Yuḥannā passed away in the mid—reign of al-Mutawakkil, Hunayn b. Ishāq translated *fī tarkīb al-adwiya* (On the Composition of Drugs) from Greek into Syriac for him during this period (Hunayn b. Ishāq 2005, p. 45).
- 12 For the works translated by Hunayn into Arabic and Syriac, as well as his original compositions, see (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d.; Sa'di 1934; Watt 2021).
- 13 To evaluate the translation method, see (Brock 1991; Acat et al. 2018).
- 14 In addition to his translation efforts, Ishāq also authored original works upon request from the Abbasid court. One notable example was a treatise commissioned by Qabīḥa, the wife of Caliph al-Mutawakkil, who requested a work on embryology. In response, Hunayn b. Ishāq composed *Kitāb al-Mawlūdīn li-Samāniyyat Ashur* (The Book of Those Born in Eight Months), reflecting his expertise in medical sciences (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah n.d., p. 273; Gutas 1999, p. 126).

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