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ABBASIDS ERA TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES AND BEYTÜ'L-HİKME

ABBASİ DÖNEMİ ÇEVİRİ FAALİYETLERİ VE BEYTÜ'L-HİKME

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ÖZ

Abbasids Era is one of the primary periods in the human history that translation activities towards different religions, languages and cultures were conducted. By means of Beytü'l-Hikme which was established in the Abbasids Period, these studies could be carried out efficiently. This institution which was established by taking the former Cüdişapur Academy as an example had a considerably advanced structure. Besides its extensive library, it involved various spaces for the activities as copying, writing and translation activities, and it even involved various spaces for readers. This institution was also an environment where scientific issues were discussed and debated. Particularly, in the period of al-Me'mun, all kinds of ideas and opinions could be discussed "conveniently" in the scientific meetings which were carried out regularly per week. The impact of the books that were translated from the languages as Greek, Syriac, Persian, Coptic, Indian and so on have been felt in various fields in this period and afterwards. In this article, Abbasids Era translation activities which covered the period particularly between the mid-8th century and end of the 10th century and have had a significant impact in terms of the emergence of the idea of İslam and evolvment of sciences in the region of İslam.

Keywords: Abbasids, Translation, Beytü'l-Hikme

ABSTRACT

İnsanlık tarihinde farklı din, dil ve kültürlerle ait eserlerin tercümesi faaliyetinin yapıldığı dönemlerin başında Abbasiler devri gelmektedir. Abbasiler döneminde kurulan Beytü'l-Hikme marifetiyle bu çalışmalar etkin bir şekilde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Eski Cüdişapur Akademisi örnek alınarak kurulduğu söylenen bu müessese, günün şartlarına göre oldukça gelişmiş bir yapı arz ediyordu. Oldukça geniş kütüphanesi yanında istinsah, telif ve tercüme faaliyetleri için, hatta okuyucular için ayrı mekânlar ihtiva ediyordu. Bu müessese, aynı zamanda ilmi meselelerin müzakere ve münakaşa edildiği bir ortamdı. Özellikle el-Me'mun döneminde her hafta düzenli olarak yapılan ilmi toplantılarda her türlü fikir ve görüş "rahatlıkla" tartışlabiliyordu. Yunanca, Süryanice, Farsça, Koptça, Hintçe... gibi dillerden çevrilen kitapların etkisi bu dönem ve sonrasında birçok alanda varlığını hissettirmiştir. Bu makalede İslam düşüncesinin oluşmasında, İslam coğrafyasında bilimlerin gelişip, yayılmasında çok önemli yeri olan, özellikle de 8.yy ortalarıyla 10. yy sonları arasındaki dönemi kapsayan Abbasi dönemi çeviri faaliyetleri ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Abbasiler, Çeviri, Beytü'l-Hikme

1.INTRODUCTION

The main development that accelerated the translation activities was the expansion of the borders of Muslims and emergence of interest and curiosity towards other civilizations as a result of the established contact with these civilizations. This situation arose from the fact that the region of Islam was not unconcerned with other civilizations intellectual, scientific and cultural accumulation. Furthermore, as a result of the relationship established with these different cultures, the need for Muslims to defend their beliefs and opinions also brought about learning other sciences (Dağbaşı, 2013:178).

When we examine the translation activities in a general sense, we understand that they displayed themselves in Emevi Period. However, these activities turned into a serious state policy in the Abbasids Period. The Arabic culture that reached to the satisfaction in a sense from the political, economic, marital and cultural aspects became ready for external contacts in terms of these powers. With the accession of Abbasids to the

power, Muslims tended towards to benefit from the intellectual and scientific products of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Assyria, Greek and Indian civilizations. These cultural contacts that emerged in the Abbasids Period were based on a historical foundation that was formed through a well-established preparation process. The cultural activity that was shaped as a consequence of this preparation process presented itself as a translation movement. The Abbasids realized the second culture transmission, that the first was actualized by the Greek during the history of the humanity, by means of integrating the books on science and opinions possessed by Greek, Indian and Iran civilizations through translation with their own accumulation of culture (Karliņa, 2004:175).

The movement of translation that was developed during the Abbasids Period can be explained by the 'socio-cultural preference' thesis. According to this perspective, the movement is a cultural phenomenon that was triggered by personal beyond being an artificial process. As this activity cannot be explained by a dream of Caliph al-Memun, it cannot also be limited by the preferment of the mediator factors, particularly Assyrians, or by a political project of Caliph Halife al-Mansur. On the contrary, it originated from an intensive process that was developed by the support of the high state officials, particularly of the caliphs, and rich aristocrats received the support of all segments and high-level generations and continued for two centuries (Tanrıverdi, 2006:178).

The Arabs who were focused on an expansion policy also discovered the power of knowledge. This situation gave rise to the acceleration of translation in Abbasids as they need to translate in order to reach the knowledge. In the Abbasids Period Muslims inclined to Aristo logic and Greek philosophy in order to support their thesis in an environment where the intellectual discussions were rising among the Muslim and Christian intellectuals. In this way, the necessity of the translation activities came to the forward. Furthermore, the evidences as the increased commerce with the neighbor countries, emergence of long-established transformations in the Arab society with Islam, the clear demand of Islam for science and support for the ones who are performing scientific activities, and indicated that in various verses and hadiths can be given as the factors that ensured the emergence of the translation movement (Suçin, 2012:34).

In light of this information, it is understood that the emergence process of the translation movement arose from various determinants. The translation activities received support from the elite segments of the Abbasids society as caliphs, emirs, state officials, commanders, merchants, and scientists. Therefore, the Arabic translation movement conducted on a new era in the history of humanity by means of the support that occurred in Bagdad (Akreş, 2016:17).

2. THE ROLE OF ABBASID CALIPHS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES

The second Abbasid Caliph, Mansur, is also the actual founder of the Abbasids state. Al-Mansur established a new state in his capacity as the caliph of the Abbasids and by means of his genius idea, and in this way, he put his project of establishing a new social structure in life. With this, he was aiming to start everything from the begging in terms of politically, economically and scientifically, and to form a balance between the powers and realize the transformation. In this way, Abbasids revolution would integrate with the society and the opposition power will be weakened. Another aspect of this project was the movement of translation. In parallel to the official support of al-Mansur and his allocation of funds for this fund, the translation movement was developed in two directions: One of them was providing certainty and accuracy. The other one is the emergence of new scientific disciplines and subjects that would worth to translate (Gutas, 2011:38).

Bagdat, which was established as the administrative center of the state by al-Mansur, appealed the existent culture dynamics as the center of the translation process in the region where Arabic culture spread and dominated. In the period of al-Mansur, many pieces belong to the Indian, Greek, China and Iran civilization on almost every issue as scientific, literal, philosophical, metaphysics, arithmetic, geometry, music theory, ethics, physics, zoology, botanic, pharmacology, veterinary medicine, medicine, the martial arts and erudite sayings It is explained in detail by Gutas (2011:42-44) that the in period of al-Mansur's power there were many Iranians living within the borders of the Islam empire who were Arabicised and have effective positions, and that they adopted a philosophy of Zoroastrianism and al-Mansur also used the Sasanian Zoroastrianism and cultural traditions for his own ideology, a translation movement emerged as a planned part of this ideology in the form of translating the pieces written in Middle Persian to Arabic.

Al-Mehdi, who had to solve the issue of the social tensions that was aroused due to the policy of encouraging apostasy also supported the translation movement that was initiated by al-Mansur already for a different

purpose. Because al-Mehdi devoted himself to destroy deviants and the ones who were apostatized from the religion of Islam, and in his period the books that were written by the ones who declared that they have different beliefs apart from that Islam started to become widespread. In return, al-Mehdi assigned the religious scholars to write a book against the opponents of Islam and heretics and these scholars adduced evidence patiently to the ones who opposed to the religion of Islam, solved the problems created by deviants and they explained the truth clearly to the ones who had suspicions. While they were doing this they benefitted from translation to a great extent (Dağbaşı, 2013:179).

The book of Aristoteles, Topics, was translated into Assyrian to Arabic by the Nasturi patrician I.Timotheos in al-Mehdi Period. Topics was a book of dialectics that was written for the purpose of teaching the art of argumentation and discussion on a systematic basis. Topics was directly related with the social needs of the first period of the Abbasids power and the interreligious discussions by its content. Mehdi, who took stringent precautions against the profanes who endeavored to revive the ancient Iranian religions and created an institution under the name of 'Divanu'z-Zenadika' for the purpose of following and punishing them, also became the first caliph who ordered to write argumentation books in order to criticize denialism and Zendika. Al-Mehdi was also a good student; he read the book Topics carefully and found a chance to apply it. He became the first Muslim who discussed the issue with a Christian and defended Islam. The one that he discussed was not someone else but the Nasturi patrician I.Timotheos who he assigned to translate Topics (Gutas, 2011:66).

The first theological discussions among the Muslims emerged in accordance with the political and social progress that occurred during the first century of Islam. In the center of these discussions, apart from the theological issues as whether the Quran was created or not, whether the suffering of grave is real or not, and as kalams which the existence of the God was tried to be explained; there are political issues as the legitimacy of the caliphate, the relationship of the leader with religion and questioning the inadequacy of these relations. In the previous periods, Christians were interested in Greek philosophy and logic in order to define their opinions strongly in theological discussions they make among each other. The same interest was appearing in Muslims for the same purpose and reasons. At this point, it is understood clearly that why al-Mehdi demanded to translate the Topics written by Aristoteles (Suçin, 2012:37).

In addition, in the period of Mehdi, Theophilus from Urfa prepared a military astrology book who had a knowledge on Greek, Middle Persian and Indian sources as the astrologer of the palace and military consultant (Aydınlı, 2011:11).

It is possible to state that Abbasids period translation activities became more systematic in Harun Reşid Period. Harun Reşid translated Usul al-Hendese by Euclid for Haccac b.Yusuf b.Matar who was teaching at Pagan School which was under the influence of Platonism (İbn Nedim, 1997:234). In addition, in the same period, translations from the Greek language were made by Assyrian Yahya b.al-Bitrik. As a result of the expeditions made by Harun Reşid to Anatolia, many books were brought to Bagdad from Ankara and Ammuriye. Yuhanna b. Maseveyh was known as the master of translation in the period of Harun Reşid. Maseveyh was particularly assigned for translating ancient books (Hudari,1970:219).

Furthermore, it is seen that the well-known vizier of the Harun Reşid period, Yahya b. Bermek also put a great effort to bring Indian, Persian and Greek books (Demirci,1995:48).

Despite the fact that it was indicated in many sources that the translation activities reached to the top in the al-Memun period, Gutas (2011:79-83) states that in fact, al-Memun maintained a long-established tradition of Abbasids according to the writings of Ahbari, who was the most significant historian of the period.

The caliph al-Memun invited scientists to the council, and organized meetings on issues of fiqh and philosophy. In addition, he sent gifts to the Byzantium kings and asked them to send books on philosophy, medicine and so on. For this reason, Byzantium kings send pieces from the philosophers as Plato, Galen, Hippocrates, Euclid, Batlamyus and Aristoteles.

It is known that Me'mun was maintaining his connection with the Byzantium emperor, demanded certain scientific books that were located in Byzantium cities to be sent to him, and for this matter, he sent delegations which included the most important interpreters of the period as Haccac b. Matar, İbn Batrik, Yuhanna b. Maseveyh ve Huneyn b. İshak'ın and the head of Beytü'l-Hikme. These delegations travelled to different cities and brought pieces to Bagdad (Sami 1302: 33; Hudari Bey 1970: 2/220; Hitti 1980: 2/477-479; Avcı 1997: 98-99).

On the other hand, it is known that al-Memun supported the opinions of dissenters (Mu'tazila) who were inclined to solve the religious matters with rational solutions. The opinions that emerge from the discussions of kalam that base on reasoning constituted the foundation of his religious policy. The translation activities were the best medium that could enhance these policies. One of the main reasons that the translation activities reached to the top was also the aforementioned fact (Suçin, 2012:38-39).

On the other hand, Gutas (2011:100-102) claims that al-Memun's dream is an extension of his own policies, and it would not be accurate to say that a dream can start the translation activities with all of its speed, and indeed the dream is not the reason for the translation activity yet its social consequence, and Aristoteles claims that the dream could be made up in order to justify al-Memun's pro-dissenter (Mu'tazila) politics.

As a result, when the sources are examined, we can say that the translation activities were maintained rapidly in the al-Memun Period.

3. THE PLACE AND IMPORTANCE OF BEYTÜ'L-HIKME IN TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES

Beytü'l-Hikme is the institution that has the most important share in terms of enhancing the science and culture activities to reach the top by differentiating from the periods before the Abbasids caliph Me'mun. Beytü'l-Hikme, which is the first higher education institution that is known in the İslam culture history (Hitti 1980: 2/ 630; Ahmed Emin 1933: 2/64), was ordered to be made by Harun Reşid in the latest period of his power as a library next to the palace at the recommendation of Yuhanna b. Maseveyh.

The institution that hosted various scientific studies of the Abbasids Period is Beytü'l-Hikme. The term, Beytü'l-Hikme is an expression that mean library in Sasanian language. According to some sources, it was stated that sixty-five translators were working in Beytü'l-Hikme, and forty-seven of them are Assyrian origin translators who were from Byzantium and settled in Anatolia. It is understood that other translators are Greek and Jewish scientists who were spread from Alexandria.

When we examine the structure of Beytü'l-Hikme from the initial period, we understand that it had been provided as a library and a simple space for studying yet it was expanded in time and turned into a center for science. Beytü'l-Hikme is the institution that has the most important share in terms of enhancing the science and culture activities to reach the top by differentiating from the periods before the Abbasids caliph Me'mun. Beytü'l-Hikme, which is the first higher education institution that is known in the İslam culture history (Hitti 1980: 2/ 630; Ahmed Emin 1933: 2/64), was ordered to be made by Harun Reşid in the latest period of his power as a library next to the palace at the recommendation of Yuhanna b. Maseveyh (Kıfî: 169; Ataullah: 329; Çelebi 1976: 177178).

The information which indicates that the core of Beytü'l-Hikme is a library that was established in the palace in the Caliph Mansur period, translated books were preserved there since the past and due to the fact that the space is not sufficient to preserve all of the books that were brought from outside a library under the name of Hizânetü'l-Hikme by Harun Reşid (Demirci 1996: 45-49). When the interest of Bermekis for science and the support they provided for the studies, it is considered that they also contributed to the establishment of Beytü'l-Hikme (Öztürk 1998: 451).

In Beytü'l-Hikme the employees were given generous salaries and the barriers that will prevent them from working were eliminated. With the incentives such as giving gold to the translator equal to the weight of the piece that was translated, scientists were directed to conducting research, and researchers were supported (Ataullah: 372).

These attitudes of the administrators summoned other scientists to Bagdad. In addition, apart from the Caliph, the support of administrators and elites for scientific and cultural studies should be effective in terms of increasing the attractiveness of Beytü'l-Hikme in the eyes of the scientists.

For example, three brothers, Muhammed, Ahmed and Hasan who were called as Benû Musa found and transported important pieces through the delegates that they established and also make them translated by the translation delegates. It is also stated that the scholars of the translation delegates were paid satisfying salaries of 500 dinars for each (İbn Nedim 1988: 304; Hudarî Bey 1970: 1/220; Hasan 1985: 3/174-175).

As a result of the translation activities actualized in Beytü'l-Hikme, a part of the most important Greek pieces were translated into Arabic. The translated pieces of Babillier and Indians also facilitated the emergence of an Islamic institution that will be maintained for a few centuries.

In order to state briefly, the Islamic thought played the role of a great basin which also included whole basins of civilization. Therefore, this exceptional initiative of Islamic thought that occurred around a library whose core is Beytül-Hikme Hizanetül-Hikme should not be seen only as a tendency to philosophical pieces. The philosophy only took its share from this tendency occurred in the Islamic world, and later on, it played an important and effective role in speculative and religious thinking.

Despite the fact that the translation movement benefitted from Indian and Persian pieces, the Greek science and philosophy constituted the focal point of this movement. While the science of medicine was the most preferred field that was translated, mathematics, philosophy, astrology and astronomy followed it. The most frequently translated writers were Galen, Rufus from Ephesus and Ptolemaeus. In addition, the pieces of philosophers as Socrates, Plato, Aristoteles, Proclus, Plotinus, Themistius were also translated.

Another characteristic of translation that drew the attention was the translation of some texts to Arabic by using a 'bridge language'. For example, the piece that needed to be translated was translated from Greek to Middle Persian at first, and afterwards, it was translated from Middle Persian to Arabic. The aforementioned role a bridge language was fulfilled by Middle Persian in Indian and Greek texts in the first periods. Later on Assyrian was started to play this role particularly for texts translated from the Greek language, however, translations made from the original texts to Arabic also gradually increased (Suçin, 2012:48-49).

The personal demands in translation activities were also effective on the qualities of the translated texts even though they were not the main factors. As an example, the incident that the appointment of al-Gassani by al-Mehdi who was interested in hunting hawks to review Arabic sources and compose a book on the issue can be shown. If al-Medhi would not like hawk hunting we could not have this book today. On the other hand, if there would not be a translation culture that encouraged to go out of the borders of the Islamic culture to reach the knowledge regardless of the subject, the book of al-Gassani could only give us the knowledge that Arabs possessed on hawk hunting (Gutas, 2011:77).

In the period of Abbasids, two different translation methods were employed. The first method is the one that we can call as verbatim/literal/word to word translation which requires to find the equivalent of the word in the first source in the target language. Yahya b.al-Bitrik was the prominent name of this method. The other one is the methods that we could name as 'meaning translation' that focus on the meaning of the text as a whole, and the most well-known translator of the period, Huneyn b.İshak, adopted this method. There were different opinions on which method was more appropriate The prominent thinkers of the time presented their own opinions on the issues as whether the texts can be translated or not.

Ibnu'n Nedim presented lists on the ones who participated in translation activities in al-Fihrist (1994:302-303). According to this, some of the persons who translated from Greek were as given; İstefan al-Kadim, Bitrik and his Ebu Zekeriya Yuhanna b. Bitrik, Hasan b. Sehl, Haccac b. Matar, Teofili, Şemli, Ebu İshak al-Kuveyri, Sabit b. Kuma, Kusta b. Luka, İbn Dehn al-Hindi ve İbn Vahşiyye.

It is considered that the translation activities that had the most advanced period until the al-Memun Period, lost its rapidity gradually. Indeed, it is more accurate to express that rather than losing its rapidity, the translation period had been concluded. It is certain that the translation activities were maintained by the caliphs after al-Memun, yet the translation activities that were sustained almost for two centuries left their place to 'writing'. Because the Arabic philosophy reached to the level to stand on its own feet's. As a result of the accumulation of knowledge that was constituted, Bagdad became the center of knowledge and the scholars as İbn-i Sina, Biruni, İbn-i Rüşd, İbn-u'l Heysem, al-Harizmi started to write their own pieces.

4. CONCLUSION

The rapid expansion of the borders of Islam by exceeding Arabia and the increasing interaction with other nations, a cultural exchange had occurred between the nations aroused. With the Abbasids, the interest of Muslims to scientific pieces had increased and the translation activities that had been started in the Emevi (Omayyads) Period became a society based-state policy which was supported mainly by the caliphs and every segment of the society in the Abbasids Period and went beyond the individual initiatives. Beytül-Hikme which was established and developed in the brightest periods of the Abbasids period is the first science and culture academy of the Islamic world which was the product of a civilization that was developed in various science and culture basins, particularly the centers of science as Alexandria, Harran and Cundişapur and where the pieces that could be reached were collected, preserved and translated and also improved through studies.

The institution fulfilled the role of a catalyzer in terms of the improvement of sciences- even not of religious sciences, specifically, it facilitated the contribution of Greek science and philosophy to the Islamic world. The Abbasids centred- translation activities focused mainly on medicine, engineering, astrology and mathematics, and particularly translations from the pieces of the Hellenistic culture became prominent in these activities. In terms of the translation activities, the non-Muslim names came to the forefront and many rich families spent significant amounts of money on translation by being aware of the new knowledge. As a result, with the translation movements, the Abbasids had actualized a significant transmission of knowledge that marked a new epoch in the history of humanity that can also be befitted by other nations.

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