

BOOK REVIEW

Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam: A Critical Edition, English Translation, and Study of Bryson's Management of the Estate. By SIMON SWAIN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 573. Hardcover, \$160.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02536-3.

The transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages is of considerable and growing interest among scholars of both the Christian and Muslim worlds. Indeed, a dominant trend for the study of this period is the focus on continuities in the midst of significant discontinuities. Scholars of early Islam interested in continuities with Greece and Rome point to the Translation Movement of the 9th and 10th centuries CE as an example in which a wide range of ancient texts were translated into Arabic and formed the basis for much Islamic intellectual activity. In many cases, ancient texts have only survived to the modern day through the mediation of these translations.

One such text is that attributed to Bryson (probably writing in the first century CE) written in the *oikonomiko* tradition—advice on the management of a personal estate and household (wife, children, slaves) within the context of the *polis*. The original Greek text is lost (outside of a few fragments excerpted in Stobaeus' *Anthology*), and the bulk of the content survives only in later translations—the earliest of which is an Arabic recension produced around 900 CE. Elites of the early Muslim period had worldviews and concerns similar (though not identical) to those of the Greco-Roman elites, and studying the texts they chose to translate and how they chose to do so helps us to understand both similarities and differences between ancient and Islamic civilizations.

However, Simon Swain argues that Bryson's text, which has long been used by Islamicists, should in addition be used by classicists, to whom it has been virtually unknown—that is, he wants to transform Bryson Arabus back into an ancient text, available for students of the ancient economy and family. The hinge on which this argument swings is the question of the faithfulness of the Arabic translation to

the Greek original, and thus its utility for classicists. *Contra* Martin Plessner,¹ Swain finds reason to believe that the Arabic version is, while not a word-for-word translation, a fair representation of the essence of the Greek text. This, indeed, was the purpose of translation and a product of the shared concerns among elites of the two periods—content was the very reason that Muslim intellectuals chose to translate, use, and adapt the Greek text, and to distort it makes little sense to Swain.

To support his argument, Swain compares the Arabic translation to the existing Greek fragments (and dismantles the objections to Bryson Arabus leveled by Plessner). The problem, of course, is that many classicists do not know Arabic and would thus rely on Swain's English translation of the Arabic recension of the Greek text—a level of remove that is likely to make most classicists uncomfortable. For those who do know Arabic or Hebrew, Swain provides, in Part V of this book, editions of the two Arabic recensions (a complete one for the early text and an extract of the later medieval recension), the medieval Hebrew version, as well as the Latin epitome. Those with the linguistic skills and interest can thus decide for themselves which version to use and how to use it.

Part I presents Swain's English translation of Bryson Arabus, while Part II introduces the context of Bryson's work and the various later texts and their transmission histories. Parts III and IV detail Swain's reading of the text and how he believes it could be used to revise scholarship about ancient economy and family. Part III analyses Bryson's treatments of property and slaves in the context of ancient economic thinking, which Swain adamantly asserts that the Greeks did do. His primary target in this matter is M. I. Finley, against whom Swain argues that Bryson's text proves that Greco-Roman elites did have interest in economic theory, since Bryson's text has one. Of course, *oikonomia* means something far different than the modern sense of trade and capital growth, but it is clear that Swain finds in Bryson support for the idea that wealthy Greek landowners actively sought to increase their estates' holdings and their personal wealth. *Oikonomia* is management—of the estate, the family, and subordinates (slaves)—and Swain's analysis supports the idea that an estate-holder should pay careful attention to preserving and expanding his wealth. Whether this reading will lead to a full-scale reevaluation of ancient economic thought is an open question.

¹ Martin Plessner, *Der Oikonomikós des Neupythagoreers 'Bryson' und seine Einfluss auf die islamische Wissenschaft: Edition und Übersetzung der erhaltenen Versionen, nebst einer Geschichte der Ökonomik im Islam mit Quellenproben in Text und Übersetzung* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Univesitätsbuchhandlung, 1928).

Part IV is less historiographically adversarial, and focuses on inter-personal relationships and the management of wives and children (“the boy”). Swain analyses these sections of Bryson within the larger context of intellectual traditions (Greco-Roman and early Islamic) about marriage, education, emotions, and social rules of behavior. The primary role of the wife is to manage the estate’s personnel and the estate itself in the owner’s absence, as an active partner with the husband. The secondary role of the wife is procreative, which discussion fits solidly within ancient traditions of female virtue and roles in the family; in contrast, Swain notes the ways in which Islamic thinking about marriage departed from Bryson. At the same time, Bryson’s wife displays managerial acumen and an emotional connection to her husband and children that could help to revise our understanding of ancient emotion.

As for the upbringing of (male) children, Bryson potentially offers new avenues for study since, as Swain points out, there is little other ancient textual discussion of childhood, paternal emotions towards children, or how to raise a son to be an estate owner in his own right. Swain proposes that Bryson’s text could aid in re-imagining ancient marriage relationships and childrearing as well the ways in which the classical traditions of family life were transformed in the Islamic and Christian spheres.

This book provides much food for thought. Swain’s suggestion that classicists use Bryson Arabus to study the ancient economy and family relationships is provocative, but further study may well prove that deft academic use of this text can also transform scholarship. Even cautious scholars may find here something of use, if they choose to do so, for, while Swain proposes ways to read this text back into the Greek past that are challenging, he does so carefully, within larger intellectual contexts, and with full acknowledgement of the preliminary nature of his conclusions.

It remains to be seen how classicists will take up this challenge, and whether Bryson will indeed re-enter the canon of classical texts. What should be clear, however, is that ancient traditions should not be studied in isolation from the medieval Christian and Islamic traditions that followed them, and that scholars and texts of the Islamic world have much to contribute to our understanding of the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages and, perhaps, of antiquity itself.

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