

An Encounter with Dr. Dimitri Gutas:
The 2004 Sabbagh Lecture

By Majdur Travail

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[Tucson, 26 Feb. 04] **D**imitri Gutas, professor of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University gave this year's Sabbagh Lecture at the Arizona Historical Society Museum this evening to an aging intellectual audience that radiated wisdom, intellectualism and academia. The lecture discussed the transmission of Greek philosophical texts into Arabic and its influence on the flowering of Arab culture under the Abbasid dynasty.

The audience wore the stamp of educated reflection on their faces, especially in their eyes, but their attire gave away their bookishness, while mine reeked of poverty and labour. At thirty-eight years old, I was probably the third youngest in the room. Without asking one could expect that 50% of the attendees have a post-graduate education while the other 50% were at least married to someone with one. It was disappointing that the youth showed so little interest. The acquaintances murmured in quiet anticipation, words like "fascinating" drifted across the room.

"It should be fascinating. I suppose you are interested in the Greek?"

"Yes, very interested."

Having majored in Greek at the University of Montana and a student of Islam, I too was very interested. The relation of Arabic to Greek vis-à-vis philosophy, science and culture intrigued me; I was as anxious as the next scholar to learn the secrets of medieval *dar ul Islam*. The learned audience was not disappointed.

Dr. Gutas delivered his allocution with unmatched eloquence as he fluidly recounted the complex history of the founding of Baghdad and the Greek Scriptoriums which moved the Arabic culture into the narrative of history which was no mere transmission of Greek science into Arab culture, but culminated in the elevation of science to a whole new level. According to Dr. Gutas, Caliphal patronage of the sciences developed a critical mass of scientific knowledge in Baghdad wherein knowledge and scholarship

flowed without bias of ethnicity or religion. Medieval scholarship in the Arab empire had a greater tolerance for disagreement than we see in the western world today.

Dr. Gutas maintained that notions of conflict between religious orthodoxy and science is a presumption not borne out by the facts of history when, in fact, the ideal Arab ruler was the one who sponsored the most in High Culture which continued well into the 16th century when Europe made a qualitative leap in the sciences. Contrary to popular opinion, there are few records of discord although there were gross variances in practice even in questions of paramount religious obligations such as determining the direction of Qiblah. Astonishingly, the Maliki School of Islamic jurisprudence, maligned in the western press, was exceedingly tolerant on questions of astrology and philosophy and conflict was resolved by compromise. "There were many orthodoxies!" Dr. Gutas exclaimed.

The institutionalization of tolerance began in the 9th century. In the 10th century 14 variant readings of the Koran, based on vowel placement, were certified as correct. The unitary nature of the Islamic world was normative. As a result of the tolerant attitude within this climate, science developed with momentum. The medieval disposition on thought and culture ought to instruct both Islam and the West today.

Dr. Gutas has written several books including, *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation: A Study of the Greco-Arabic Gnomologia* (New Haven 1975), *Greek Philosophers in the Arabic Tradition* (Aldershot, Hampshire 2000) and many others. He is currently working on an edition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in both the original Greek and its medieval Arabic translation. We were fortunate to encounter him on this auspicious occasion.

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