Anthology of Arabic Discourse on Translation

This anthology brings the key writings on translation in Arabic in the pre-modern era, extending from the earliest times (sixth century CE) until the end of World War I, to a global English-speaking audience. The texts are arranged chronologically and organized by two historical periods: the Classical Period, and the Nahda Period. Each text is preceded by an introduction about the selected text and author, placing the work in context, and discussing its significance.

The texts are complemented with a theoretical commentary, discussing the significance for the contemporary period and modern theory. A general introduction covers the historical context, main trends, research interests, and main findings and conclusions. The two appendices provide statistical data of the corpus on which the anthology is based, more than 500 texts of varying lengths extending throughout the entire period of study. This collection contributes to the development of a more inclusive and global history of translation and interpreting.

Translated, edited, and analyzed by leading scholars, this anthology is an invaluable resource for researchers, students, and translators interested in translation studies, Arab/Islamic history, and Arabic language and literature, as well as Islamic theology, linguistics, and the history of science.

Tarek Shamma is Associate Professor in comparative literature and translation studies at Binghamton University, NY. His recent publications include “In Search of Universal Laws: Averroes’ Interpretation of Aristotle’s Poetics”, in World Literature (2021) and “Universal Wisdom, Islamic Law: Translation Discourse in Classical Arabic”, in The Routledge Handbook of Translation History (2021).

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Anthology of Arabic Discourse on Translation

Edited by
Tarek Shamma and Myriam Salama-Carr

Mona Baker (Consultant)
To the memory of my father
(Abd al-Rahman Shamma, 1936–2017)
Tarek Shamma
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We would like to thank all our colleagues who have supported this project from its inception over the course of several years: Amal Al-Malki (Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences) and Moneera Al-Ghadeer (former Director of the Translation and Interpreting Institute) at Hamad bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar; Luiza Moreira, chair of the Comparative Literature Department at Binghamton University; Routledge Series Editor Brian Baer for his insightful comments on an early draft of this book; and our research assistants (especially Yiyi Zhang and Turki Altamimi from Binghamton University), whose painstaking efforts have been key to the project.

We are grateful to the various libraries that allowed us access to rare and valuable documents.

The funding of different bodies at the University of Manchester, and in particular the Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies, created the necessary academic and research environment.

Several grants from IASH (The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities) and the Comparative literature Department at Binghamton University provided indispensable funding for the translation of many of the Arabic texts in this volume. These grants, together with a grant from the Center for Translation and Intercultural Studies of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China, have funded the open-access publication of this book.
Transliteration guide

We have used a simplified transliteration system without special characters. However, when Arabic words, especially names of cities, religious terms, dynasties, or historical periods have more or less standardized spellings in English (e.g., Damascus, Sanaa, Umayyad, Souq, Hanafi), we have used the common English forms.

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<td>ٍ</td>
<td>2. Short: a for ً, ى for ى, ٍ for ٍ</td>
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Introduction

Translation in Arabic history

Translation has played a central role in shaping modern cultures and societies. As Delisle and Woodsworth point out in Translators Through History:

Translators have invented alphabets, helped build languages and written dictionaries. They have contributed to the emergence of national literatures, the dissemination of knowledge and the spread of religions. Importers of foreign cultural values and key players at some of the great moments of history, translators and interpreters have played a determining role in the development of their societies and have been fundamental to the unfolding of intellectual history itself.

(2012: 68)

Arab history is no exception. In fact, it could be argued that—due to the unique geographical position of the region, its rich history, and the multi-cultural/multi-lingual nature of its communities—translation has played an especially significant part in Arab history.

The early history of Arabic translation

Arabic emerged and developed in an environment marked by multifaceted forms of interaction among various ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities. Due to its position at the meeting place of Europe, Africa, and Asia, in the same cultural sphere where some of the most ancient civilizations and three world religions emerged, the birthplace of the Arabic language, and later Islam, was characterized by cultural diversity in all stages of its history, stimulating at different at times relations of harmonious cohabitation as well as conflict.

Classical Arabic, the ancestor of Modern Arabic, reached its final stage of development in the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula (or simply “Arabia”) before it was finally canonized as the vehicle for divine revelation through the Qur’an, and later as the official language of Islam. According to Islamic

DOI: 10.4324/9781003247784-1
tradition, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was born in Mecca in 570 CE, where he received revelation from God and started spreading the new religion. Persecuted in his birthplace, he and his followers migrated in 622 to the larger city of Medina, where he established himself as a religious and political leader. This event (the *hijra*, i.e., “migration”) is used as the starting point of the Islamic calendar. From this new location, Muhammad and his followers continued to spread his message, and upon his death in 632, Islam prevailed all across Arabia.

From its earliest stages, and even during Muhammad’s lifetime, Islam was a religion of global ambitions. Shortly before his death, Muhammad sent a military expedition into Byzantine-held Syria, and, according to Islamic tradition, dispatched (as early as 628) messengers to the rulers of the most powerful neighboring states of the time, including the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (see *al-Bukhari*, Chapter 1), the Sassanid Chosroes II, and Armah of Abyssinia, inviting them to convert to Islam. Muhammad’s successors continued this policy, and within 20 years after his death, Muslim armies had conquered and destroyed the Sassanid Empire in Persia and Iraq, and had driven the Byzantines from Syria and Egypt, then North Africa. By the early eighth century, Islam commanded an empire extending from Spain and Southern France to the borders of India.

While relatively removed from the regional centers of power (mainly the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires), the milieu in which Islam arose, even in the heart of Arabia, was not isolated from the cultural and religious life of the Near East. The direct military presence of the Romans and Persians can be attested in Arabia as early as the second century (Fisher 2011: 75). Perhaps more importantly, Roman, then Byzantine, as well as Persian monarchs, established alliances with and exerted influence over local leaders throughout the Peninsula (Ali 1993, vol. 8: 117, 175ff; Fisher 2011: 75; see also Chapter 2). In addition, the Arabs of the Peninsula had strong cultural, political, and commercial links with the Arab communities in neighboring areas, especially with the Lakhmids in Iraq and the Ghassanids in Syria, who founded kingdoms that were allied with and were clients of the Sassanid and Byzantine empire, respectively.

In the Arabian Peninsula itself, significant numbers of Jews and Christians had lived for a long time in Yemen, where Jewish and Christian kingdoms existed through the fifth and sixth centuries (Robin 2012: 294). Jewish, and to a lesser extent Christian, communities also inhabited other parts of Arabia. In Medina itself, there was a well-established Jewish community. In fact, Christianity and Judaism were certainly well known to pre-Islamic Arabs. As Sydney Griffith explains, “Even a brief perusal of the Arabic Qur’ān is sufficient to convince the first-time reader that the text presumes a high degree of scriptural literacy on the part of its audience” (2013: 7), although it is not clear in what ways (e.g., written or oral) this knowledge was acquired.

All these forms of interaction created the need for translation. In fact, some sources mention professional interpreters and translators between Arabic and
other languages who worked at the service of the monarchs of neighboring kingdoms. One of these was 'Udai Ibn Zaid al-'Abbādi (died c. 590), who was “interpreter and Arabic secretary to the Persian king Khosrow Parviz” (Ibn Qutaiba, al-Ma’ārif: 649). According to Jawād ’Ali, “Persians employed some of the Arabs of the Peninsula for their Arabic communications, including the family of 'Udai Ibn Zaid al-'Abbād [...] and an interpreter who translated for Rustam [a Persian commander], called 'Abbud, who was an Arab from Al-Hirah” (1993, vol. 4: 227; see also Ibn 'Asākir in Chapter 2). Other historians mention the less likely possibility (Kaegi 1992: 262–263) of professional interpreters who worked for the Byzantine emperor (see Ibn 'Asākir in Chapter 2). Thus, translation and interpreting in their different forms have been a shaping force for Arabic cultures throughout their history.

The Arabic terms for translation

The modern Arabic term for translation is “تَرْجَمَةٌ (ترجمة)” and it has a long and complex history. Contemporaneous with the beginnings of early Arabic, it is bound up with the rich linguistic and cultural diversity that characterized the emergence of this language. While modern Arabic linguists have traced “تَرْجَمَة” (through a process of back formation) to the root t-r-j-m, or even r-j-m (Ryding 2005: 63), the word is almost certainly a borrowing from Akkadian (which flourished from the third–eighth centuries BCE), albeit through the mediation of Syriac, another Semitic language with which Arabic has had close affinities. In fact, the Akkadian “تَرْجُمَانُ” (“translator”) is the source of translation terms in several Semitic languages, including Aramaic and Hebrew (Alexander 1992: 320), even though the Akkadian word is hypothesized to be a borrowing from Luwian, an ancient near eastern language of the Anatolian family, closely related to Hittite (Guth 2017: 58).

The earliest attested occurrence in Arabic of the word تَرْجَمَة, or one of its derivatives, is found in the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia in the form of “مَتْرَجَم” (c. 525 CE), which in the context meant “someone who interprets or explains.” The earliest occurrence of the word to refer to translation occurs in another poem (c. 600 CE) in the rare plural form “تَرْجِمُ” (الترجمة). In this context, it referred to “the innkeeper’s servants,” and also to interpreters, as “wine sellers were non-Arabs who needed someone to explain their speech to people” (al-Mufaddal: 849). Thus, from the earliest times, تَرْجَمَة combined other senses beyond translation and interpreting.

This complex genealogy—continued in later uses of the word where it acquired the added sense of “biography”—attests to the multiplicity, not only of the word تَرْجَمَة, but of the very conceptions of translation in this language. For it is an important fact that in Arabic, well into the early twentieth century, there was no unique term (تَرْجَمَة or otherwise) to designate the transfer of texts between different languages, nor was this activity itself distinguished from conceivably similar textual practices. As shown above, تَرْجَمَة and its derivatives covered meanings as varied as “translation,” “interpreting”
(in its two meanings of verbal interlinguistic transfer and explanation), “clarification,” and “biography,” not to mention the apparently one-off instance of “innkeeper’s servant.” On the other hand, the activity of translation was covered by several, usually interchangeable, terms (besides *tarjama*): *naql* (“moving from one place to another” or “conveyance”), “Arabization,” and, less commonly, “*taḥwīl*” (“conversion” or “transformation”), as seen in the anthology texts.

The aim of this etymological overview is not only to highlight the great variety in the terms used for translation as well as the perception of the activity itself, but also to point out the limitations of approaches that attempt to capture the supposed conception and function of translation in another culture (usually non-Western) on the basis of the (narrow) etymology of a single word in that language. Hence Maria Tymoczko’s account of the Arabic word for translation (i.e. *tarjama*) as originally designating “biography,” and consequently not requiring the faithfulness that is supposedly a feature of Western approaches to translation, as encapsulated in *translatio* (“carrying across”), the Latin root for the term in many European languages (Tymoczko 2007: 70–71; Fawcett and Munday 2009: 140). As shown here, *tarjama* has several senses, of which “biography” is only one—and neither the earliest nor the most common at that.7 It may be observed, by the way, that “*naql*” (“moving from one place to another”), one of the most common terms for translation in Classical Arabic, can be mapped to some extent to *translatio* (“carrying across”).

On the other hand, the conceptions of translation’s relationship to the original in Arabic were too complex to be captured by a general rejection of faithfulness. Many translators in the Classical age and the Nahda did adapt their sources to native beliefs and customs, sometimes in radical ways, but faithfulness was still a requirement at least in educational contexts (see, e.g., *Omar al-Migri*, Chapter 51) and in religious translation (see, e.g., discussions of the Qur’anic translation and commentary on *Sa’diya*). Furthermore, the importance of fidelity was theoretically recognized by some major Classical and Nahda scholars (such as al-Jahîdh, al-Sirâfî, and Uthmân Jalâl in this collection),8 even if some of them used it to question the very possibility of translation.

**Translation in Early Islam**

The emergence of Islam, as well as its later spread, were not divorced from the cultural and linguistic multiplicity of its environment, and the attendant translation activities. In fact, some Islamic scholars claimed that translation itself could be a medium for divine revelation. Sufyân al-Thawrî, the eighth-century *muḥaddith* (complier of the Prophet’s *ḥadîths*, i.e., “sayings and traditions”) says that “Divine revelations were all delivered through Arabic, then every prophet translated for his people in their own language” (qtd. in
Al-Šuyūtī, *Al-Itqān* 163). On the other hand, the fifteenth-century polymath Al-Šuyūtī says that “God Almighty sent down sacred scriptures only through Hebrew, which [the angel] Jibrīl translated for every prophet into the language of his people” (*Al-Lughāt* 19).

Of course, such interpretations were not widely accepted. Most scholars took the Qur’ānic verse “And We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people” (Ibrahim 14: 4) at face value. Yet, it is clear that translation was by necessity a matter of great importance for a religion with world-wide horizons, whose message was meant to be delivered to all people of the world, and one which sees itself as the continuation and culmination of a series of divinely inspired faiths (most notably Judaism and Christianity) that had emerged in the same wider region, albeit in different languages and environments.

Translation was certainly no less important for Christianity, which shares Islam’s global reach and proselytizing spirit. These common ambitions, combined with different conceptions of translation (as shown below), enriched the study of the purpose and methods of translation, not only in each of these religions, but also in the long interaction between Islam and Arabic Christianity, some instances of which are documented in this anthology in the form of debates, collaborative work, and apologetics.

Even translation as an everyday practice can be attested from the earliest stage of Islam. One Prophetic *ḥadīth* holds that Wirqa Ibn Nawfal, the cousin of Muhammad’s wife Khadija, “used to write in Hebrew; he wrote from the Gospels in Hebrew,” or, in another narrative, he “used to write from the Gospels in Arabic.” Thus, Wirqa—who according to different sources was a Christian, a Jew, or a *Hanif* (i.e., someone who rejected polytheism and believed in one God)—either read the Gospels in an Arabic translation or translated it himself. According to Islamic sources, it was Wirqa’s knowledge of the Bible and other scriptures that led him to accept the authenticity of Muhammad’s revelation, and to affirm that his message was a continuation and revival of previous revealed religions.

The Qur’ān itself, delivered to Muhammad though divine revelation, contained words that were recognized to be non-Arabic in origin, although it is a subject of debate whether these can be considered as truly foreign or adapted into Arabic phonetic structures and thus virtually Arabic (e.g., al-Zubaidi: 27). While some theologians have been defensive about these words (see al-Shāfi‘ī, Chapter 1), others cite them as evidence of the universality of the message of Islam. According to al-Suyūtī,

The Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him)⁹ was sent to all nations. As God has said that ‘We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people,’ then the book that was revealed to him must have items from the languages of all nations, even if it is originally in the language of his own people.

(al-Muhaththab: 62)
The first translator in Islam is said to be Zaid Ibn Thabit, a Companion of the Prophet, who was commanded by him “to learn the Book of the Jews,” so he could “write the Prophet’s letters and read the letters they wrote to him” (al-Bukhari, vol. 9: 76). In a different narrative, Zaid is asked to learn Syriac (al-Tirmidhi: 365). Besides learning foreign languages, Zaid became the Prophet’s official translator, who reportedly handled his communications with kings and heads of states outside Arabia. Zaid, we are told, “wrote to kings and responded to them in the presence of the Prophet (PBUH). He translated from Persian, Greek, Coptic, and Abyssinian, which he had learned in Medina from the speakers of these tongues” (al-Mas’udi, Al-Tanbih: 245; Ibn ’Abd Rabbih: 244).

**Translation in the Classical Age of Islam**

With the spread of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula, translation gained new momentum. During the Arab conquests themselves, interpreters were instrumental in communicating with the conquered populations, as well as with the opposing Byzantine and Persian armies (see al-Waqqidi, al-Tabari, Ibn ’Asakir, Chapter 2). Then, as the nascent Islamic state evolved into a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse empire with international diplomatic relations, translation and interpreting became essential for communication at all levels of administration and government, in intellectual and academic life, and even in daily interactions. In particular, the foundation of full-fledged state institutions during the Umayyad Dynasty (661–750) created new administrative needs, as well as financial and institutional resources for the state patronage of translation.

While the Islamic commonwealth brought a new religion, administrative structures, and worldviews, previous socio-cultural structures and loyalties still obtained to varying degrees in all parts of the empire. Intelligentsia from pre-Islamic civilizations, even those who had converted to Islam, maintained some form of connection with their past heritage, which they drew upon through general references, direct borrowings, and translation. They often used their pre-Islamic heritage as a form of cultural repertoire, tapping it for ancient lore, scientific, literary, and historical knowledge, and for material sources in theoretical and practical disciplines.

On the other hand, the emergence and flourishing of new sciences and intellectual pursuits (including, among others, medicine, astronomy, chemistry, and philosophy) was supported by state sponsorship (especially with regard to access to, and translation of Greek science) under the early Abbasid Dynasty (750–1258). As Adnan Abdulla argues, “No other culture had ever invested so much time, effort, and money in translation” (2020: 134). In fact, this large-scale translation movement has been described as “a major event in the history of world civilization” (Montgomery 2002: 89) and “a truly epoch-making stage, by any standard, in the course of human history” (Gutas 1998: 8).
**Translation in modern Arabic**

The nineteenth century ushered in the second major stage of translation in the history of Arabic. Translation, again as a major social and intellectual phenomenon, came this time from modern European languages. As a result, most notably, of contact with the West, and parallel to similar, often contemporary, historical developments in other non-Western countries (e.g., China and Japan), Arab societies went through a period of intensive intellectual change with the aim of “catching up” with the intellectual and technological advances of the West. Translation was a vital component of the intellectual life of this period, known in Arabic as the *Nahda* (النهضة), or “renaissance,” which extended through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Translation flourished in the Levant, and especially in Egypt, leaving a major imprint on modern Arab societies—not only on their intellectual development but also on many aspects of their social, cultural, and political life. Specifically, translation was a primary vehicle of “modernization” and revival, introducing contemporary European thought and science, as well as new literary genres and techniques that launched a new phase of Arabic literature.

**Current research on Arabic translation history**

The outline provided above portrays the history of translation into Arabic as described in most sources on the topic. The texts selected for this book are intended to make available for translation scholars new Arabic sources, most of which never before translated into English and some published for the first time, to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of translation in the Arabic world and, in doing so, to contribute to the project of creating a polyphonic, rhizomatic history of translation.

The one point we need to emphasize here (to be discussed below in further detail) is the continuous relevance of translation in Arabic intellectual life throughout its history. There is no reason to disagree with the conventional wisdom that the Umayyad/early Abbasid and Nahda periods were major landmarks of translation in Arabic history (unprecedented in scope until the twentieth century). However, Arabic translation discourse (if not the practice of translation) persisted at varying levels of intensity and influence in all stages of this history, as evidenced by our collected corpus (see Appendices). Beyond debating its practical aspects, reflection on translation was firmly grounded in the intellectual, religious, and social life of Arab and Muslim communities in ways that warrant further study and analysis.

It is the continuity, versatility, and wider relevance of translation discourse that we aim to reveal through the primary sources presented in this volume. For the study of the history of translation in Arabic still falls short of its full, and very promising, potential. While translation in the golden age (in the Abbasid period, and to a lesser extent during the Nahda) is an important theme in historical accounts of these periods, relatively few studies have tackled the
primary sources, i.e., the translations themselves and writings about them. Examinations of primary sources usually revolve around canonized and repeatedly analyzed texts (e.g., by al-Jahidh or Ibn al-Nadîm), while rich sources of data (translations, paratexts, and writings about translation) that are scattered across all kinds of books, often dealing with topics other than translation, remain largely untapped. In fact, texts by well-known and widely studied authors in other fields (e.g., al-Shâjâbi, Ibn Taimiya) have yet to be studied from the perspective of modern translation studies (if studied at all). Furthermore, the periods that lie between the two translation movements, of the Islamic Golden Age and the nineteenth/early twentieth centuries Nahda, remain even less explored.

We can illustrate the dearth of primary sources on the translation movement in the Abbasid age with reference to the two systematic, large-scale studies of the translation movement in that period: Dimitri Gutas’s *Greek Thought: Arabic Culture* (1998) and George Salîba’s *Al-Fikr al-‘Ilmi al-‘Arabi: Nash’atuhu wa Tatâwuruhr* [Arab Scientific Thought: Emergence and Development] (1998). Gutas’s interpretation of the official support of the translation movement (that it advanced the interests of the “Persian faction” by adopting the Sassanid official doctrine of political astrology) hinges on two Arabic translations of a Pahlavi text which had been taken from the Zoroastrian book the *Dēnkard* (Gutas 1998: 37–40). The first Arabic version, an anonymous translation, was available to Gutas only in a second-hand English translation of a manuscript that he had not seen (Gutas 1998: 37, footnote 16); the second, a translation by the Persian astrologer Ibn Nawbakht, is quoted in Ibn al-Nadîm’s *al-Fihrist* (1997: 38, footnote 19; see Ibn al-Nadîm, Chapter 110). The same text, as cited in *Al-Fihrist*, is central to Salîba’s own interpretation of the translation movement. Salîba collates ibn Nawbakht’s text, cited in two versions in *al-Fihrist*, with two other narratives, taken from the same book (1997: 49–50 and 52–54; see Ibn al-Nadîm), to provide a different account of the emergence of the translation movement. Based on these three narratives, Salîba attributes the official support of translation to the influence of Syriac scholars who were trying to restore the privileges they had lost after the Arabization of the government administration under the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) by instigating a translation movement in which, due to their knowledge of Greek, they would be indispensable.

The situation is no more encouraging in studies of translation in the Nahda. It is widely recognized that, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, translation was instrumental to the intellectual, as well as material, renaissance of Arab societies. By all accounts, a tremendous number of European (especially English and French) works were translated. The first stage in the translation movement was initiated by Muhammad Ali, governor of Egypt between 1805 and 1848. As part of his efforts to modernize the country, Muhammad Ali sent student missions to Europe—first to Italy, then mainly to France—to acquire modern knowledge, science, and technology. Upon their return, students were instructed to translate European books that
were needed to modernize the growing army and government administration (Al-Shaiyāl 1951: 33ff). Thus, translations in that period focused on books of science, technology, and administration. The second stage in the translation movement spans the second half of the nineteenth, up to the early twentieth century. Most translations in that period did not enjoy official support: they were conducted by individual translators trying to meet the demands of a new and growing market, created by the “mushroom growth of non-governmental journalism” (Cachia 1990: 33).

Still, there has been relatively little research on the translations themselves, or the translators’ methods, at least in the field of translation studies (as precious, although scattered information can be found in some philological works). Discussion of the translation movement during this period, as with Abbasid translators, tends to adopt a macro-level approach, investigating its role in the political and social debates of the period, and its contribution (actual or exaggerated) to the emergence of new literary genres, such as the novel and the theater, and the development of a new Arabic style. Little attention has been given so far to the investigation of the translated works, and, more relevant to our purposes, the discussion of translation, which was a major concern in the Nahda. Indeed, many intellectuals in that period engaged in debates on the strategies of translation, and the effect of translated works (negative and positive) on Arab societies in periodical articles, as well as in introductions to and notes on translated works. To illustrate the sheer size of the translation activity that still needs to be examined, we can cite the example of Tainius ’Abdo (1869–1926), a translator who is reported to have produced as many as 700 translations and adaptations (Moosa 1997: 108), including the first published Arabic translations of Shakespearean drama (Hanna 2016: 31). Thus, translated books in many fields, including introductions and commentaries, as well as debates over translation, especially in long-out-of-print periodicals, constitute a wealth of data on translation discourse in Arabic that still awaits further study.

This anthology presents Arabic translation discourse from its original sources, sampled in texts that tackle translation from different angles and in various stages of the history of Arabic thought. Our aim is to contribute to a comprehensive survey of these sources, which could bring needed attention to texts that have hitherto been largely unacknowledged and highlight the need for a deeper investigation of this discourse from its original sources.

The anthology

This book is the outcome of a multi-year research project to locate pre-modern Arabic texts that deal with translation in the form of reflection, commentary, or discussion. The early stage of the project (involving the identification and collection of Arabic texts) was supported with a three-year grant from QNRF (Qatar National Research Fund), which started in 2015. The research team was comprised of Tarek Shamma (Binghamton University) as lead primary
investigator, Myriam Salama-Carr (Manchester University) as a co-lead primary investigator, and Mona Baker as a consultant, in addition to research assistants from several universities in Qatar, the United States, and the UK. The translation of the Arabic texts into English was supported with a grant from Binghamton University’s IASH (Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities) and Department of Comparative Literature.

The scope of the study extended from the earliest recorded instances of Classical Arabic (specifically the in pre-Islamic poetry of Arabia) in the early 6th century CE (Versteegh 2014: 8) until the end of World War I, which we set as the conclusion of the pre-modern and the start of the modern periods in the Arab World. Our choice of these dates is not based on a consensus among historiographers about the advent of the “modern age” in the Arab World, for modernity is not an easy concept to define in any discipline. In Arabic, it has often been the subject of heated disputes over ideological as well as methodological differences (see the discussion of the start of the Nahda period below).

While any choice is bound to be somewhat arbitrary, we have settled on this date for the conclusion of our historical scope for several reasons. World War I left profound global effects that in the Arab World were most dramatically represented by the demise of the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the Arab East since the early sixteenth century. The turn of the twentieth century generally marked the end of the Nahda period with the completion of the profound changes that transformed all aspects of Arab communities throughout the nineteenth century: the traditional forms of government under the Ottoman Sultanate were replaced with modern state institutions; traditional education, based in the early nineteenth century on Qur'anic schools and university mosques, were replaced with modern grade schools and colleges; the judiciary system based on Sharī‘a [Islamic law] was replaced with modern legal codes; and finally Classical Arabic was replaced with Modern Standard Arabic. To be sure, other researchers with other priorities may have different perspectives. But the choice of exact dates is unavoidable, and one has to settle for the limitations of any option.

When the project boundaries (spatial, linguistic, and temporal) were discussed, it was felt that the Abbasid period and the Nahda were convenient landmarks to start from and finish with, particularly given the constant presence of the earlier period in the translation discourse of the Nahda (see Section 3.5). The texts of the anthology have thus been divided into two broad historical periods: the Classical age (sixth through eighteenth centuries CE) and the Nahda (1800 to 1918 CE). In our initial plan, the anthology was designed to focus on the Nahda and on the “golden age of translation” in the early Abbasid Dynasty, and, to a much lesser extent, in the preceding Umayyad Dynasty, as the two landmark periods of translation activity in the history of Arabic. However, as we progressed further, and as more and more texts accumulated (at a rate we did not quite anticipate), it became clear that translation discourse (if not necessarily translation practice) was present over such long periods and at such a scale that it cannot be limited to two
discrete stages. Dialogue on translation persisted after the Abbasid age, and practically through all successive periods, albeit at varying levels of intensity. As a result, we had to expand the scope of the first part of the book to span the entire pre-Nahda age, which raises the question of historical periodization (see the further discussion below).

It is this continuity that we aim to represent here. Drawn from a much larger corpus (see below), this anthology is intended to provide a cross section of translation discourse in Arabic, distributed over a variety of subjects and time periods.

**Methodology**

Texts were investigated in all contexts, disciplines, and intellectual pursuits, regardless of the author’s ethnicity or geographic location. The research team probed translation discourse in all potential sources, including translation pratechs and works that addressed translation as a topic of discussion. Thus, the search covered a substantially wide scope, especially in the pre-Nahda period, in which translation was not seen as an independent discipline for which specialized works could be dedicated (see Initial Findings below). Consequently, works mined for texts in the Classical age (besides translated works, few of which contained any paratexts) included books on literature and linguistics (as the first candidates for inquiries into translation); philosophy, astronomy and medicine (sciences that, to a great extent, were established through translation); religious writings (Islamic, Christian, and Jewish), in which translation was sometimes an important topic of discussion in contexts of scripture translation and religious apologetics; and books of history and travel. Beyond previously published works, we have also examined a limited number of available manuscripts and found texts of great interest, some of which have been included in the anthology.

Translated works played a much larger part in our search in the Nahda period, as a significant number (though still a minority) of translators employed paratexts of varying lengths as introductions, and occasionally footnotes, in their translations. Other sources unique to this period included full works that dealt with translation as the major topic, and official documents that shed some light on the contemporary conditions of translation as a profession.

While our search focused on primary sources, we have also consulted secondary sources—mainly in English and Arabic, to a lesser extent in French, and occasionally in German. For studies of the historical periods under question (general reference works, as well as case studies), whether they deal with translation or other disciplines, such as literature, philosophy, linguistics, and science, sometimes cite or reference instances of translation discourse, even though these were often texts that have been published and discussed widely.

Published works (print and electronic) were identified using bibliographic sources and databases of all kinds. The primary investigators and research
assistants also consulted major public libraries (especially for rare works and manuscripts), including Qatar National Library in Doha, the Egyptian National Library and Archives in Cairo, the British Library in London, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) library in London, and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

Digital databases (while not always reliable) were very useful when used with care. These included, among others, the World Digital Library and the Internet Archive, as well as Arabic databases that were useful for Classical works, such as Alwaraq (الوراق) and al-Maktaba al-Sha'mila (المكتبة الشاملة), or for periodicals, such as Sakhr’s Archive for literary and cultural journals. Many of the sources under study have been digitized in recent years, which greatly facilitated and sped up the search process.

Upon the completion of the search process, which spanned several years, the collected corpus was organized for analysis. The collected texts, classified by historical periods, were abstracted by research assistants to facilitate the primary selection process. As the corpus was examined for general trends, the researchers established the selection criteria (see below), as well as the general structure of the anthology and the general guidelines for commentaries. The texts were finally selected for the anthology by the primary investigators, in deliberation with the project consultant.

The Corpus

Upon completion of the search, the collected texts were combined into a single corpus (see Appendices). The collected material includes 543 texts, of widely varying sizes, ranging from thematic series of articles in the Nahda to brief notes of a few lines (in all periods, but especially in the Classical age).

In classifying the collected texts, we strove for comprehensive criteria. Texts were organized by historical periods of centuries for the Classical age and decades for the Nahda age. This was due to the great imbalance in the number and length of collected texts (360 for the 12 decades of the Nahda and 183 for the 11 centuries of the Classical age).

In addition to historical period, the texts were tagged by author and topic; the language(s) translated from/into or discussed in theoretical debates, if at all; and whether the extract was taken from a translated work (i.e., from its paratexts) or from an original work (i.e., an “independent source”). An additional criterion in the Nahda texts was the medium of publication: books, periodicals, and documents, besides a handful of manuscripts.

We have included full statistical tables for the collected texts in Appendices 1 and 2.

Text selection criteria

The texts having been collected, classified by period, and tagged, the primary investigators had to select the targeted total of 50 texts for the anthology,
divided evenly between the two historical periods in question. This involved some very tough decisions, due to the magnitude of the collected material and its great diversity in terms of potential research interest. After deliberations about the aim of the anthology and intended uses and audience, we agreed about the following criteria. (We strove to provide a balanced representation of the main trends in the collected material and to connect them as much as possible to contemporary historical problems, literary, political, social, etc., and modern concerns, especially in translation studies):

1. Originality: comprising texts that have not received sufficient attention, especially those dealing with new topics or tackling a common topic from a different angle.

2. Impact and wide recognition: complementing the above criterion. Some texts, though widely known and studied, cannot be left out of an anthology of this kind, due to their influence on contemporaries and/or modern scholars.

   We found it necessary to maintain some balance between the above two criteria. While there is little point for the bulk of the material to rely on canonical and extensively discussed texts (albeit within the comparative context of an anthology), it would be misleading to confine the selection to obscure and little-known texts, creating an unbalanced view of the collected material and the intellectual trends reflected in it.

3. Size: While texts considered for selection were only those with a minimum amount of discussion of translation (i.e., beyond a mere reference), their lengths, as stated above, varied considerably. Due to the large size of the collected corpus, we decided to omit extremely short texts (of no more than several lines). Still, some of these were referenced or cited in commentaries on the selected texts when they were deemed to be significant, of special relevance to the issue under discussion, or worthy of further investigation.

4. Connection to significant social, political, or intellectual issues in the historical context of the text, and potential contribution to historical research.

5. Relevance to modern translation studies or related fields, particularly with the aim of de-centering translation studies.

6. Relevance to current problems in Arabic studies—intellectual, cultural, or sociopolitical.

   We were careful to maintain a balance among the three criteria above. We strove to underline the immediacy and currency of the issues raised in these texts, without unduly ignoring their historical context or subjecting them to modern perspectives which diminish the historicity of these texts and their embeddedness in specific historical settings.

7. Variety: a principle of the selection process itself, where we tried to maintain a multiplicity of topics, issues, and theoretical approaches, and to reflect as broad a historical range as possible.
Translation anthology as cultural representation

Over the course of its rather short history, translation studies has undergone several putative “turns”: the “cultural turn,” the “audiovisual turn,” the “international turn,” the “postcolonial turn,” the “power turn,” among others. While such terms do not point to a major change of direction for the whole discipline (nor were they, one assumes, intended to do so by their progenitors), they do indicate how the field has been actively growing and expanding in various directions. One of the most consistent of these new directions in recent years has been the call to expand theoretical reflection on translation—its historical conditions, practices, and very definition—beyond the dominant Western framework (Gaddis Rose 2000; Hermans 2006; Hung and Wakabayashi 2014; Tymoczko 2007; Baer 2020).

An anthology dealing with a non-Western tradition would seem to fit naturally into these efforts. Hence, Martha Cheung’s pioneering *Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation* (2006) was seen as an important contribution to “opening up translation studies to the world outside the West” (Baker and Saldana 2020: xx). Even more, and beyond relativizing “the Eurocentric mode that dominates the present scene” (Cheung 2006: 2), Cheung’s project was committed to a more local cultural agenda: highlighting “translation as a form of cultural representation, and not merely as a process of interlingual communication.”

To address the second of these potential objectives, this anthology is not intended as a project of cultural representation of Arab or Islamic culture—much less their identity. Besides the obvious difficulties of applying the broad generalization to such wide populations over such a large span of time, an anthology of theoretical discourse on a specialized topic seems to be a very narrow vehicle for cultural representation. To be sure, cultural representation is not absent from this anthology: the debates and reflections sampled in the following pages could provide illuminating glimpses into the intellectual life of Arab and Islamic cultures, no matter how we choose to define them. Although an important byproduct, this is not an end in itself. Focused as it is on one aspect of intellectual production in Arabic (through tackled from numerous angles), this collection cannot be expected to provide a representative picture of Arabic intellectual heritage, neither in terms of the anthologized authors, nor of the selected texts themselves. For this picture is filtered through the single lens of translation, which is only one dimension of the context of political, intellectual, and literary history. For example, the fact that Bible translation occupies a more prominent position than Qur’anic translation in this anthology does not reflect their relative significance within the contexts of study, but the practical conditions whereby translation was the sole channel for the transmission of Christian and Jewish scriptures into Arabic, while the Qur’an exercised its enormous influence through its original language.

Addressing the Western bias in modern translation studies is less problematic. So, we find it necessary to situate the anthology relative to
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this undertaking and to explain why it is not central to it. While one cannot but appreciate the motives behind the drive to “incorporate non-Western experience” and the promise that it could take translation studies to new horizons, some reservations are in order. In a statement about the basic necessity of this endeavor, Maria Tymoczko explains:

the critique [of current translation research] has been simply that the field in fact includes a broader range of products, processes and contexts than has been explored heretofore and that, hence, translation theory is based on an incomplete sample of the actual data […] The preponderant use of case studies from European cultures has limited the field’s flexibility and acuity in understanding the practice of translation.

(Tymoczko 2014: 104)

Thus, the field, she continues, “needs more data with a broader range in order to evolve a general theoretical framework that will serve present needs, describe past practices and frame future developments” (ibid.).

This seems reasonable enough from a basic common-sense perspective. But singling out the exposition of non-Western views as the primary aim of investigating a translation tradition which happens to be non-Western involves several disputable assumptions—that labels such as “West” or “East” denote somehow homogeneous realities that can be identified objectively, that positions on translation are determined (or at least shaped in crucial ways) by their cultural contexts, that non-Western theories must be different just by virtue of their location, and, most problematically, that it is this difference that justifies our interest in them. Of course, few of these assumptions are stated explicitly, but they are implicit in the very orientation of this endeavor.

If we set the recovery of non-Western views on translation as the primary aim of investigating a translation tradition, we risk limiting our scope, and even our interpretation of phenomena, in serious ways. For even if we concede that we can recognize particular perceptions or practices of translation as characteristic to many (or most) Western linguistic communities, what reason do we have to suppose that their counterparts in other communities throughout the world must necessarily be different? There is no doubt that investigation will reveal important differences, but this should not be the goal of analysis; it cannot take precedence over what should be the main focus of research, which is simply to reveal what translation meant to particular people in this tradition at a particular place and time, regardless of whether it is similar to those in the West or not. If, on the other hand, we have “to watch with an attentive eye, to be sensitive to local customs and traditions, to pick out the unique features, to appreciate differences” (Cheung 2009: 32), we may end up with a partial, perhaps a slanted, image of the translation culture in question, which, in the process, paradoxically reasserts the Eurocentrism of the West as the measure by which other cultures are approached, even if in opposition. Thus, as Salama-Carr explains, “As research on other non-Western traditions
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shows, the challenge to the researcher is to navigate between Eurocentric master narratives and the risks of essentializing given that an anthology will help reinforce an identity and privilege certain voices” (2020: 293). In fact, at least within the historical and geographical scope of this anthology, Salama-Carr argues that “several historians reject the East/ West construct when mapped onto medieval cultural exchanges and that Arab- Islamic historical thought was not entirely cut off from the rest of the world” (2020: 293; see also Kaye 1985). Many historians have questioned the value of “East” and “West” as categories, especially in the study of the premodern world (Salama-Carr 2020: 293; Baer 2020: 235; Baker and Saldanha 2020: xxvi). Within the field of translation studies, Andrew Chesterman (2014) has argued against the Western/non-Western division.

The most contentious aspect of these calls for cultural relativity in translation studies is the rather elusive notion of “culture” which seems to exert some kind of indescribable influence on people’s thinking and behavior. To be sure, those who seek to expand the West-dominated theoretical perspective do not assume that certain intellectual positions are inherently and naturally Western, but are the product of political, social, and material conditions that, for several reasons, may have obtained more prominently in the West. But if this is the case, then it would seem far more instructive to investigate translation discourse in the context of these historical and material conditions on a-case-by-case basis, rather than resorting to such overarching and mystifying categories as “the West.” What we miss if we persist in this narrow view (besides understanding a translation tradition on its own terms) is the chance to expand our perspective not only through differences, but through continuities and parallels that may seem uninteresting but could be just as important in attaining a wider perspective. This, it is hoped, would allow us to reconfigure translation studies not simply as a space of the “West” and its others, but, in Baer’s apt metaphor, “as a rhizomatic plant, a decentralised, non-hierarchical model according to which different cultures crop up from a root system that extends horizontally” (2020: 234).

To be sure, we do not propose to drop culture as a unit of analysis altogether, but only to bear in mind that it is never consistent, homogeneous, or even coherent. We believe that intellectual debates and theoretical positions should be grounded in their historical and socio-political conditions, of which culture is a general encompassing framework, but not very meaningful as a category in and of itself.

On the historical perspective

Chronological vs. thematic organization

In the early stages of project, we had to settle on a methodology for organizing the anthologized texts. Two options presented themselves: chronological (by historical phases) or thematic (where texts are grouped by topics,
such as “Qur’an Translation,” “Religious Translation,” and “Translating Philosophy”).

Each method involves advantages as well as compromises. Thematic threads allow considerable consistency in text selection and commentary. Texts (even when written in different periods) can be linked by similar topics, revealing long-term historical trends, and allowing a more thorough analysis of the issues in question. In addition, duplication and overlap can be reduced in texts that deal with similar topics in different periods. This can be seen, for example, in jurisprudence and theological debates, where each author references and quotes his predecessors in a long chain sometimes extending from the Umayyad period up to the Nahda. Finally, an important advantage of a thematic focus is that it can expand the scope of selection, as a number of texts can be combined to highlight the various aspects of one topic.  

However, we concluded that the thematic organization would run into serious methodological and practical hurdles. For one thing, a similarity of topic may mask diverse implications arising from the different contexts. Even the recurrence of the same text through a citation in a later period may give it a different significance in a new environment and from a different authorial perspective. Practical difficulties would also be significant: one text may touch upon multiple topics and may be tackled from various theoretical perspectives, which would make it difficult to classify it under one category. Above all, the main problem with the thematic approach is that it imposes a coherence that may be completely artificial, as it reflects the researcher’s own judgment of what issues may be of interest in a certain a group of texts (see also Salama-Carr 2020: 288–289).

Therefore, we eventually decided on a chronological organization, although it limits the selection somewhat and does not register links among chronologically detached texts. For the chronological order allows a better alignment with the texts’ historical context, which is of prime importance in an anthology of this type. It was hoped also that this approach would help minimize the researchers’ intervention—this while acknowledging that intervention is inherent in the very nature of the anthology as a selection of texts based on preset criteria, no matter how objective and comprehensive we have tried to make them. Still, we have not abandoned thematic connections completely. We have highlighted thematic continuities whenever possible through references or citations in the comments and other paratexts.

Periodization

The choice of a chronological order raises the thorny question of the periodization of Arab-Islamic history—how to define the major periods, and what historical landmarks may best denote the transition from one stage to another. Choices in this area do not only shape the presentation the texts; they could frame their reading and interpretation. Thus, even as we set the
two periods of the Classical Age and the Nahda as the general historical backdrop, it proved more difficult than expected to mark their boundaries.

The Nahda seemed generally unproblematic in terms of its overall span. Yet, having decided on the end of World War I, as stated above, as the terminal date, it turned out far more problematic to define its starting point. A date that is bound to be interpreted as the commencement of the age of “modernization” in the Arab World has become a highly controversial question among Arab scholars and intellectuals in recent years. Although it is generally agreed that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw a transition into a new age, divergent views about its genesis and causes have been bound up with conflicting political and intellectual positions.

In their study of the periodization in Arabic historiography, Hirschler and Savant argue that three parameters determine the process of periodization: space and subject matter, as they interact with agency (2014: 6). Hence, if we agree about the space and subject matter of the Nahda, were does the agency lie? What factors, in other words, started this process of “awakening” or modernization? The answer depends, in great measure, on defining the starting point of this period. Pointing to the French Campaign in Egypt and Syria (1798–1801), a position first expressed during the Nahda itself and still widespread today, attributes the start of modernity to contact with the external forces of Europe. Other scholars, however, identify earlier indigenous dynamics, such as the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms, whose genesis is dated as early as the late eighteenth century, although they reached their peak in the nineteenth century (Davidson 1973). In his highly influential *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (1979), Peter Gran argues that the genesis of modernism in Egypt can be traced to even earlier, predominantly internal economic developments. This debate is certainly far from resolved, and it is beyond the scope of this study to partake in it.

Therefore, we have decided on the start of the nineteenth century as a reasonable compromise. Besides being close to the timelines proposed by the various perspectives on this issue, this date is especially significant for the study of translation, as it is also close to the accession of Muhammad Ali as the ruler of Egypt in 1805. In fact, the reign of Muhammad Ali is itself a candidate as the starting point for the start of “modernization,” and is undoubtedly a key event of the Nahda. It certainly inaugurated a large-scale, state-supported translation movement (often compared by contemporary and modern scholars to the Abbasid translation movement) and educational missions to Europe, from which students returned with the expertise and training to contribute to Muhammad Ali’s modernizing projects, including the translation movement itself (see *al-Tahtawi*, Chapter 28).

Looking at the period preceding the Nahda, we face another problem of periodization. Conventional historiography divides the classical age of Islam by reigning dynasties—the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, etc. While this approach is still widely used (especially in educational settings), it has been subject to heated debate. It has become increasingly recognized that the
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The life of the community may not neatly coincide with the rise and fall of political regimes and the mainstream cultural systems they sustain. Thus, since the second half of the twentieth century, the study of history has become more and more pluralized. Moving away from the exclusive concern with political history and high culture, new fields of inquiry have explored “multiple, often overlapping histories, be they social history, cultural history, gender history, or historical anthropology” (Hirschler and Savant 2014: 13). As a result, periodization by dynasties became widely untenable, or at least one option among others. As Hirschler and Savant argue, these developments have been especially pertinent in the “field of Middle Eastern history […] on account of the prominent position that dynastic periodizations have held” (ibid.: 6). And to be sure, this approach is especially pertinent to this study, which focuses on aspects of cultural, mostly non-political, history without neglecting the close connections between the two.

One direct offshoot of these reevaluations has been calls for new chronological frameworks. In Arabic historiography, proposals have ranged from the integration of Islamic history into broader global frameworks to treating it as a separate process with its own internal dynamics (see Abu Shawk 2017: 83–99). Needless to say, these reevaluations have not resulted in an agreed-upon methodology of periodization; nor are they likely to, since they are inevitably grounded in different approaches to the study of history, not to mention sometimes overt, ideological orientations. The only reliable consensus is that conventional periodizations need serious reconsideration (e.g., see Abu Shawk 2017: 98; Bin Thair 2014: 44–45).

Still, the traditional dynastic periodization remains mostly prevalent in the historiography of Arabic translation, where studies identify specific high points, usually limited to the “golden age” of translation in the early Abbasid (and to a lesser extent Umayyad) Caliphates, and then during the Nahda (see Salama-Carr 2020: 287). In this regard, one of the major questions we have faced in designing and compiling this anthology is the extent to which the traditional periodization, which ties translation to dynasties and political systems, can provide a usable and effective framework for the study of translation discourse in Arabic history. The answer, based on our experience with the material under study, may reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the conventional approach to periodization and could help delimit its areas of applicability.

On the one hand, translation history seems to be relatively in harmony with the political history of the Islamic empire in its early stage. Translation in that period had political, diplomatic, and administrative functions that called for direct governmental interest and patronage. Examples can be found, among other fields, in the role of interpreting in Islamic conquests, the Arabization of the diwans (government departments) during the Umayyad Caliphate, and the patronage of translation by the Abbasids, where political events and the ideologies of the ruling classes were instrumental in directing translation activities. In later stages, the situation became far more complicated. Even
before the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, usually postulated as ushering in an age of decline in all fields, translation activities were far more complex, varied, widespread, and less connected to the central government, to be subsumed under the general heading of “translation in the Abbasid age.”

More relevant to our purpose—notwithstanding the cessation of official patronage of translation, and even after the demise of the Abbasid Caliphate—translation discourse persisted (apparently unabated) in different contexts and in extremely varied geographical locales. Indeed, some of the collected texts (including introductions to translated works) are evidence of the continuation of some translation activity. Furthermore, the translation dialogue in these texts reveals links and continuities that transcend political vicissitudes.

The same principle (that translation can be linked to political history only when supported directly by the state) seems to apply to the internal periodization of the Nahda. Dynastic historiography seems to be a viable approach to translation during the reign of Muhammad Ali in the first half of the nineteenth century (1805–1849) when the bulk of translations by far were produced through government intervention. When official patronage ceased under most of Muhammad Ali’s successors, the focus shifted to the efforts of individual translators who worked for publishing houses and private periodicals. These new dynamics caused a shift in the nature of translated works themselves, from a preponderance of technical and practical works (usually commissioned by state institutions) to less technical works, especially literary fiction, to meet the popular demand which now determined the selection and implementation of translated texts.\(^{11}\)

These general observations aside, we have found that the multiplicity of factors that influence periodization are too complex to lend themselves to conventional categories. On the other hand, a new periodization of the history of translation is beyond the realm of this study, especially given the fact that, as indicated by current research and confirmed by our initial findings, research into translation history in Arabic is still in its early stages, whereas a substantial body of primary sources remains untapped (as indicated in Gutas 1998; Saliba 1998; Salama-Carr 2020; Santoyo 2006). Therefore, we have decided to abandon the original framework of the study which identified the early Abbasid age and the Nahda as the primary textual sources. Instead, we have divided the historical range of the study into two broad stages covering the Classical age and the Nahda period of early modernity.

We recognize these categories (especially the first one) to be rather sweeping in range. However, in the current state of research, we believe them to be more reliable than divisions based on clear-cut but artificial boundaries, which may ultimately do more to hinder than to facilitate the investigation of historical trends. Undoubtedly, further research will contribute to the formulation of a more accurate framework of periodization of the history of translation in Arabic.
While a historical perspective informed the process of organizing and categorizing the anthologized texts, to what extent is it effective in approaching and analyzing (and, for our purpose, commenting on) the individual texts? And how do we balance grounding in historical research with our grounding in modern translation studies.

Christopher Rundle argues that there are two approaches to the history of translation, depending on whether one’s aim is to contribute to translation studies or to historical research. As he explains:

When we carry out research on translation history, we face a choice. Are we going to attempt to extrapolate the translation features we uncover in the historical context we are examining in order to contribute to a wider, general or more global history of translation—thereby also making our work more accessible to Translation Studies (TS) in general—or are we going to address those scholars who share our historical subject and introduce them to the insights which the study of translation can offer? In short, is translation the object of our research, or is it the lens through which we research our historical object?

(2011: 13)

While this anthology, as stated above, is addressed to translation scholars and those in related fields, we have found it essential to keep track of the historical context of each text. For we do not quite agree with the strict separation between a history-oriented and a translation-oriented approach. The two procedures seem to us to be inseparable. As we cannot arrive at a full understanding of a view of translation as situated practice without considering the historical milieu in which it was produced, so a historical analysis of the political, social, or cultural conditions of the text would be greatly lacking without an informed understanding of the practical and theoretical aspects of translation issues involved in the text.

To take as an example one of the anthologized texts: the late tenth-century debate between Matta Ibn Yunus and Abu Sa’id al-Siraﬁ. In their discussion of translation, the two scholars raise linguistic and philosophical issues that are still relevant today, especially the contrast between a “universalist” and “relativist” view of linguistic and cultural difference. From a translation studies angles, it can be argued that this question has played a significant part in formulating translation strategies and shaping the translators’, as well as the readers’, attitudes toward translated texts. Indeed, the difference between universalism and relativism is at the root of the perennial dichotomy between free and literal translation, which has, in different manifestations, informed much of the debate on the theory and practice of translation. However, as we consider the debate from this side, we cannot overlook the historical situation, in which universalism and relativism reflected (indeed were manifestations of) opposing attitudes.
toward the influence of foreign knowledge, specifically Greek philosophy, on Islamic thinkers. Hence, al-Sirafî’s insistence (as a defender of the “traditional” disciplines) on the impossibility of translation (a natural outcome of his extreme relativism) stems as much from his rejection of Greek philosophy as from his views of language and culture per se. Similarly, Matta’s staunch advocacy of its possibility is linked to his position as a logician and a translator of Greek philosophy, of which his universalism is possibly more an outcome than a cause.

Therefore, while investigating translation methods and perspectives remains our primary purpose, this should not detract from situating the texts within their immediate social, cultural, and political conditions, which in turn will greatly enrich our understanding of translation. But limiting our reading of the collected texts to a purely historical framework would blind us to their relevance to modern debates in ways that reveal their historical pedigree or enrich our understanding of the sociocultural functions of translation through a variety of historical and modern cases. While these connections may seem contrived to the historian, they are critical goals for the translation scholar’s approach to history. At the same time, we should be careful (in pursuit of pioneers and historical precedents) not to project our modern viewpoint in ways that would isolate the texts from their contemporary connections and radically interfere with the nuanced comprehension of their significance. As Dirk Delabastita argues in his response to Rundle’s position on the link between history and translation studies,

If history as a discipline (understood as focusing more on the specifics of the translation project being investigated) and translation studies (understood as aiming for more general models of translation) feel like forces pulling in opposite directions, it is still the task of the scholar to keep the dialogue going between the two.

(2012: 246)

Initial findings/observations

If there is one word to describe the history of translation in the Arabic tradition, as reflected in our collected corpus and, hopefully, in this anthology, it is diversity. Any sweeping generalizations would be problematic, especially at this stage when this tradition is still being explored and analyzed. Yet, the collected corpus constitutes a relatively large sample of Arabic translation discourse, which may allow us to point out trends as well as reflections and debates that may arguably be relevant to modern concerns in translation studies, Arabic and Islamic history, and related disciplines.

Below are our main initial findings/observations which we hope will stimulate further research into existing lines of research or initiate new ones:

• Translation discourse in Arabic continued throughout all historical periods, at an intensity and variety arguably higher than previously
assumed. There is also evidence of translation practice (at least in some fields), contrary to at least the most pessimistic speculations that it ceased all together (see comment on al-Rifa‘i, Chapter 25).

- As explained above, the division into two periods of thriving translation, at least when considering translation discourse as opposed to translation production, seems arbitrary and inaccurate.
- Aside from the translation of the Qur’an, prayer, and Islamic terms, which, due to the swift spread of Islam and the rising numbers of non-Arab Muslims, called for immediate and practical solutions, translation thinking in the Classical Period did not start until later in the Abbasid period. Translation discourse flourished subsequent to the flourishing of translation itself. Thus, the Abbasid period was not necessarily the golden period for translation theory or translation conceptualization (as opposed to translation production). Aside from al-Jahiz’s widely publicized views and Hunain’s Epistle, in-depth discussion of translation thrived in later times.

A comparable trend can be detected in the Nahda period. The first phase of extensive, state-sponsored translation under Muhammad Ali during the first half of the nineteenth century produced relatively little reflection on translation (most texts we collected from that period are limited to brief notices in introductions or epilogues to translated books). In contrast, translation discourse boomed in the second half of the century. One important difference to note is that the practice of translation, unlike in the Classical age, continued at steady rates through the whole Nahda period.

- One phenomenon that may help explain the above observation is that translators (especially in the Classical Age) do not seem to have themselves engaged in significant theorization about translation. This gap is especially striking in the case of translators who were themselves scholars and made intellectual contributions in other fields of knowledge (Salama-Carr 2000; Faq 2000). Most discourse on translation was conducted by scholars in other disciplines for various purposes. In this respect, Hunain’s Epistle seems to be the exception rather than the rule. A comparable disparity can be seen in the Nahda, where original scholarly works were a far more common vehicle for translation discourse than translation paratexts, which were mostly brief and cursory when used at all (see Appendices).

In this regard, what is absent from our corpus statistics (see Appendices), limited as they are to what is written about translation, is the large number of translations unaccompanied by any paratexts. This is especially apparent in articles and translated fiction in periodicals (the primary publishing venue in the Nahda), which rarely had any introductions or comments, other than the author’s name, and occasionally the original venue of publication. In fact, some of these did not have introductory material, or actually any overt indication that the text is a translation.
As an illustrative example, we examined a random sample of the 24 issues published in the year 1847 of the bimonthly *al-Jinan*, a well-known periodical edited by Butrus al-Bustānī (himself a prominent translator). None of the 30 translated texts published in that year had an introduction longer than a brief notice, such as “a summary of what *The Levant Herald* said is translated below,” “That letter was sent to the emperor of Austria, and it is a fine composition indeed. Below is translation of a part of it, especially the beginning,” and “We have read in a European book the following story about the Arab caliph al-Ma‘mun, translated below.”

It is worth noting as well that many scholars in all ages (but especially in the Classical period) who discussed translation at length were not themselves translators. It may be that translators were more absorbed in the practical aspect of the activity.

- A related phenomenon is that theory and practice were not always closely linked. As stated above, reflection on translation did not necessarily derive from translation experience, nor did it seem to influence its practice. This is especially the case with prescriptive approaches, which subjected translation practice to pre-determined theoretical rules. This trend can be seen most plainly in theological discussions of translation, which drew directly on Qur’anic and Hadith exegeses and analogy with theological principles applied to translation from presumably similar practices. Hence, the disagreement about how many interpreters are required in trials stemmed from different interpretations of the “equivalent” case of court testimony (for which Islamic law requires two witnesses), regardless of the practical limitations which in most cases did not allow for the use of more than one interpreter (see *al-Shafi‘i, al-‘Asqalani, Ibn Qaiym*).

- Rebecca Gould states that “no extant Arabic manifesto specifically adumbrates a methodology for translation” (2013: 85). Apart from the need to define what a “methodology” of translation is, it seems unrealistic to interrogate ancient scholarship for theoretical tools that belong to the modern age. Besides, Gould’s statement overlooks sophisticated discussions of translation practice that can be seen as precursors of a modern translation methodology. In fact, it can be argued that Hunain’s Ibn Ishaq’s *Epistle* (see *Hunain Ibn Ishaq*) offers much in terms of methodology.

However, it is undeniable that translation in Arab-Islamic history was not seen as an independent discipline or an “art” in its own right, which is the case for much of medieval translation. Translation was not treated as such in the literature we have examined. Nor was it designated as an independent discipline in the several encyclopedic works that classified the branches of knowledge, scholarship, and arts in Classical Arabic. This was the case despite the thoroughness with which these works investigate disciplines and arts in all areas; some of them list arts and sciences such as housekeeping, dancing, and “burning mirrors.” The only work we found that gives translation a separate classification is...
Abu al-Baq’a al-Kafawi’s *Al-Kuliyat* (Totalities) (the second half of the seventeenth century), a dictionary of linguistic terms and distinctions. Here “*tarjama*” is defined as “the replacement of one word with another that can take its place, apart from explanation” (313). While al-Kafawi limits the scope of *tarjama* compared with its highly diverse uses in other contexts, his definition is not specific to inter-lingual transfer; it encompasses paraphrase or restatement without additional explanation, i.e., what is termed today “intralingual translation.” This confirms our earlier observation that translation as interlingual transfer was grouped with different textual practices such as explanation, exegesis, paraphrase, and other forms of rewording.14

- Another period when translation practice was significant (especially politically and socially) is the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) (see *al-Qalqashandi*, Chapter 23 and *Treaties*, Chapter 17). Areas of interest in this period include institutional translation at government offices (*diwans*) and interpreting, especially in the context of commerce, diplomacy, and even tourism (see, e.g., Wolff 2003).

**Recommendations for further research**

In our study of the collected corpus, we have identified promising areas in the history of translation in Arabic that have not yet received due attention.

The most significant of these include:

**Interpreting**

References to interpreters abound in all periods of Classical Arab history. With the early rapid expansion of Islam out of the Arabian Peninsula, increasing contact with the populations of the conquered countries created new communication needs. Some of the most dramatic of these cases can be found in early Islamic conquests of the larger Near East (see *al-Waqidi*, Chapter 2).

Interpreting is also a frequently referenced activity in Classical Arabic travelogues, such as those by Ibn Battūta (1304–1368), whose travels stretched between China and the Iberian Peninsula, and Ibn Fadlan (c.879–c.960), who travelled in Eastern and Northern Europe. Interpreting was also essential in multicultural and multilingual environments. Thus, Usama Ibn Munqidh’s *Al-I’tibar* (Learning by Examples), one of the major Arabic accounts of the crusades, contains numerous accounts of daily-life interactions between the Arabic-speaking people of the Levant and the “Frankish” Crusaders, in which interpreting was instrumental. However, in most of these cases, the interpreter is mentioned in passing, without any details about the nature, or, much less, the problematics of their activities.

We also find examples of the widespread use of interpreting in various parts of the Islamic Empire, especially in the newly conquered regions where