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## ARABO-BYZANTINE RELATIONS IN THE 9TH AND 10TH CENTURIES AS AN AREA OF CULTURAL RIVALRY

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At first glance, one might think that the cultural splendour of the Abbassids, as much as anything else that happened in the caliphate, was completely indifferent to the Byzantines. The sources which they left hardly ever commented on Muslim cultural exploits. But the verbal frankness or deep introspection are not the characteristics of Byzantine culture and the selective and self-interested nature of Byzantine documents when they refer to foreign cultures is notorious. Bearing this in mind we can approach the theory of impact of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement on the so-called “Macedonian” Renaissance. This hypothesis has been advanced by Dimitri Gutas<sup>1</sup>, who suggested that the Arabs could have developed in the Byzantines a kind of inferiority complex and a desire to compete with the Muslim intellectual achievements. Consequently, these attitudes would have become one of the reasons of the literary revival in Byzantium.

I believe that in order to better analyse this concept we must take into account the particularities of the diplomatic relations between Byzantium and the Caliphate in the 9th century. It seems that the embassies between Byzantium and the Arab world, intense and regular at that time<sup>2</sup>, were used by the two parties not only to resolve practical issues. The sources from both sides describe every diplomatic mission as a major opportunity to demonstrate superiority of the Byzantine or Arabic civilisation. As a result we have many examples of the deliberate shows performed by the ambassadors and their hosts. It happens so that some of them have been already described at this conference by Koray Durak<sup>3</sup> who presented Arabo-Byzantine prisoner exchanges on river Lamis as a deliberate performance exerted by both

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1. GUTAS (1998) 175-186.

2. KOUTRAKOU (2007) 96-98; SHEPARD (1998); SHEPARD (2000) 375-396; DROCOURT (2004) 348-381.

3. K. Durak, “Traffic across the Cilician Frontier in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries: Movement of People between Byzantium and the Islamic Near East in the Early Middle Ages”, in the present volume.

sides. They are a good illustration of the theatrical aspects of Arabo-Byzantine diplomacy. I will enrich this picture with examples of the shows performed during the most important embassies to the capitals themselves.

The chronicle of Theophanes Continuatus exhaustively describes the impression that was made in 830 at the caliph's court by a Byzantine envoy who was no one else than John the Grammarian, not yet the patriarch of Constantinople, but already an acclaimed scholar<sup>4</sup>. The Emperor Theophilus had given him not only valuable gifts to offer to the Caliph in his name, but also large financial resources, money and precious items, necessary to impress the Muslim court and everyone who watched his visit. In the caliph's palace he orchestrated a sophisticated trickery with two identical priceless vases in order to make believe the caliph that Byzantine richness was infinite. The caliph gave equally valuable presents to Theophilus<sup>5</sup>.

We have similar accounts of diplomatic shows from the Muslim side. According to Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030)<sup>6</sup>, when in 917 two Byzantine ambassadors came to see the caliph, they had to wait two months before entering Baghdad, in order to the palaces and demonstration be prepared for them, which allegedly required no less than thirty thousand dinars. Similarly Hilāl al-Ṣābi'<sup>7</sup>, speaking of the same embassy, describes the sumptuous decorations that were installed to beautify the palace for the entry of the Byzantines, for example the embroidered carpets that were hanged on the walls. Before reaching the palace of the Caliph the guests were given a guided visit of the caliph's palaces, which included among others a great stable, a zoo with elephants and other animals, a park with an artificial lake, another park with the famous silver tree with golden leaves and artificial singing birds<sup>8</sup>.

The gifts that were exchanged during embassies and intended to impress the other side<sup>9</sup> were not limited to luxury goods. Interestingly for me they often included Greek manuscripts, which were highly desired by Arab rulers. For example, according to Ibn Ğulġul (d. around 994), in around 948, during a period of intense contacts between Byzantium and al-Andalus, the Byzantine emperor sent to 'Abd

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4. Theophanes Continuatus 96. Other accounts: Ioannis Scylitzae 56-58; Ioannis Zonarae 361. Short analysis: ROSSER (1976) 168-171.

5. This seems to be confirmed by an Arabic source, which Nadia Maria El-Cheikh unfortunately does not name (EL CHEIKH 2004, 157). This source would speak about gifts sent by al-Ma'mūn to the Byzantine emperor, a hundred times more precious than those he had received.

6. Ibn Miskawayh 53-55.

7. His account is quoted by al-Ḥatīb al-Baġdād I 117-120.

8. Episode analysed by Hugh Kennedy. KENNEDY (2005) 153-155.

9. BRUBAKER (2004) 175-195; CUTLER (1996) 51-66; CUTLER (2001) 247-278; CUTLER (2008) 79-101.

al-Rahman III generous gifts which included the magnificent manuscript of Dioskorides and a historical work of Paul Orosius. At a later date his son and new caliph al-Ḥakam II, sent a request to the Byzantine emperor for philosophical works. Earlier, during an exchange of gifts between al-Ma'mūn and one of the Byzantine emperors, the caliph is said to have received the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid and Ptolemy<sup>10</sup>. The manuscripts can be said to have been more precious than gold, and genuinely desired by the Arabs. According to the earlier and more credible account of Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Ma'mūn wrote to the Byzantine emperor to ask him for a selection of old scientific manuscripts, hoarded and cautiously kept under surveillance in Byzantium<sup>11</sup>. After having refused at first, the emperor agreed to send them to the caliph, who thus sent a group of famous scholars in order to bring them to Bagdad and translate.

As we see, the diplomatic exchanges carried an intellectual dimension which I want to investigate here. In most of cases we observe two interesting phenomena concerning the major embassies exchanged between the Byzantines and the Arabs. Firstly, they often included religious and intellectual controversies. Secondly, an impressive number of ambassadors were intellectuals. I will not present a lot of these stories, since Benjamin de Lee has already provided us with a broad image of Arabo-Byzantine theological rivalry from the propaganda perspective<sup>12</sup>. So I will leave behind the well known literary genres of apologetical literature and theological correspondence<sup>13</sup>, and I will focus on the ambassadors that actively engaged in intellectual or theological disputes. Already in the early 7th century two Muslim theologians were allegedly sent to Byzantium as ambassadors<sup>14</sup>. However, not only religious matters were an object of intercultural competition. In 10th century, Abū Firas a famous Arab poet, spoke with the Emperor Phocas about theology and the virtues of the Arabs and Greeks when he was imprisoned in Constantinople<sup>15</sup>. According to Mas'ūdī<sup>16</sup>, a Byzantine ambassador in 945 –namely Ioannes Antypatos Patrikios Musdaxos– a monk who was received in Damascus by Ibn al-Ṭuġġ Iḥšīdi

10. Sa'īd al-Andalusi 48; BALTU-GUESDON (1992) 134.

11. Ibn al-Nadīm 584. Other account of al-Ma'mūn's attempts to get manuscripts from Byzantium: BALTU-GUESDON (1991) 136; al-Qifti 380.

12. B. de Lee, "Theological Diplomacy in the Middle Byzantine Period: Propaganda War between Constantinople and Caliphate or Interfaith Dialogue?", in the present volume.

13. The most recent research tool for this subject are the three volumes of *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, Leiden 2009-2011.

14. This and other examples in: JOKISCH (2007) 333-334.

15. JOKISCH (2007) 334; ADONTZ and CANARD (1936).

16. Mas'ūdī 165; translation: CARRA DE VAUX (1896) 261.

(935-946) was highly appreciated for his great intelligence and possessed a deep knowledge of the history of the Greeks and Romans as well as of their philosophical ideas<sup>17</sup>. According to a story recorded by Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamaḡānī in the very beginning of 10th century, ‘Umara b. Hamza, secretary of the caliph al-Manṣūr, was sent as ambassador to Constantinople during the reign of Constantine V, where he saw the Emperor *change copper into silver and gold by means of a dry powder*<sup>18</sup>. Actually this is the story that I. Psaroudakis investigates in his paper<sup>19</sup>. Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamaḡānī suggests that it was precisely this event that led al-Manṣūr to take interest in alchemy. We see that in this case, one small hint of Byzantine superiority in one of the domains of science has been presented as being sufficient to arouse the caliph’s interest.

As it is possible to guess from the title of my paper, we find similar accounts in the Byzantine sources. While describing the embassy of John the Grammarian, Theophanes Continuatus acknowledges his excellent qualities of statesman and especially his skilfulness in debates<sup>20</sup> and compliment his actions on the embassy to the Arabs. According to the same source, a student of Leo the Mathematician, taken as a slave by the Arabs, was brought to the court of the caliph, where he was involved in a philosophical and mathematical dispute in which he impressed everyone with his knowledge. The Slavonic life of Constantine/Saint Cyril provides us with the most engaging of such accounts<sup>21</sup>. The saint would have been sent to the embassy to Baghdad for no other reason than to counter the “blasphemies” against the doctrine of the Trinity. Actually the Muslims encouraged the Byzantines to send men who can talk about it and convince them about this. The Byzantines chose to send Constantine and as soon as he arrived to their country, *the Hagarenes, people wise and versed in letters, knowing the geometry and other disciplines* submitted him to a series of questions which he answered easily and presented with temptations of riches and power which he adamantly rebuffed. Having remained indifferent to their attempts he declared that the Byzantine Empire was the source of all arts and sciences in which his interlocutors were pretending to be experts. Photius<sup>22</sup> and Leo Chairo-

17. STERN (1950).

18. Ibn al-Faḡīh al-Hamaḡānī 137-139; MAVROUDI (2002) 329; GUTAS (1998) 115-116.

19. I. Psaroudakis, ‘Umāra ibn Hamza, Constantine V and the “elixir”: A Display of Alchemy in the Byzantine Court’, in the present volume.

20. Theophanes Continuatus 96.

21. *Les légendes de Constantin et de Méthode vues de Byzance* 354-355; DVORNIK (1967, 1971); VERSTEEGH (1979).

22. In the Preface to his “Bibliotheca”. TREADGOLD (1977); DVORNIK (1967); AHRWEILER (1966) 348-363.

sphaktes<sup>23</sup> didn't mention this kind of philosophical debates in their accounts of expeditions to the caliphate, yet it is interesting to note that they provide two other examples of the intriguing phenomenon of important Byzantine scholars who travelled to the caliphate<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, the intellectual potential seems to have been a crucial requirement in the choice of Byzantine ambassadors. It was explicitly stated by *Peri Presbeōn*, a small 10th century manual of Byzantine diplomacy, that a Byzantine ambassador must be a person of *probity, piety and scholarship*<sup>25</sup>. It seems that the intellectual, religious and cultural aspect of embassies was as important as addressing the ongoing political issues.

Needless to say, many of these stories, both Arabic and Byzantine, look like legendary narratives. However their abundance is significant. Even if they don't reveal the facts, they do expose the authors' attitudes. Another obvious remark to make is that the internal background of our texts is more important to understand them than the external policies of the rules. It was natural for both Muslims and Byzantines to treat the embassies as means to demonstrate their greatness and especially the religious or (more importantly for me) intellectual superiority over the rival power. But were the rulers concerned with the enemy in the remote capital of Constantinople/Baghdad or with their own subjects who witnessed those diplomatic spectacles? Perhaps it was a matter of internal rather than external politics?

The Arabic sources, especially the historians of science portraying the launch of Graeco-Arabic translation movement by the Abbasids, present the appropriation of Greek scientific heritage in the light of the of historical responsibility of the ruling dynasty to care and maintain ancient knowledge (an ideology inherited from Sassanides) and of conflict between Muslims and Byzantines or Christians in broad sense. The wars with Byzantium were considered as one of the main responsibilities of the Muslim caliphs, beside the religious duties such as organisation of pilgrimages to Mecca<sup>26</sup> and in addition to it the Abbasids adopted a Sassanid tradition of the role of the ruling dynasty in preserving ancient knowledge<sup>27</sup>. Caliph al-Ma'mūn was particularly keen on presenting himself as a model ruler and champion of Muslim community. His actions as defender of Islam can be seen in the light of his political involvement in mutualism and aggressive policy against the Byzantines. Significantly, he was also a great patron of Graeco-Arabic translation movement. But

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23. About Leo's mission to the Arabs: JENKINS (1963) 167-175; BEIHAMMER (2010) 117-120.

24. MAGDALINO (1998).

25. *Proemium ad Excerpta de Legationibus* col. 637; KOUTRAKOU (2007) 95.

26. YÜCESOY (2009) 106-115.

27. GUTAS (1998) 36-45.

what does this hostile agenda towards the Byzantines has to do with the Abbasids' interests in Greek culture?

Actually, the Abbasids conceived their philhellenism as a kind of antibyzantinism. Upon the translocation of the capital to Baghdad, they released the Greek culture from the Byzantine context in which it was inevitably immersed because of the large post-Byzantine Greek-speaking population of Syria and Palestine and the proximity of Damascus to the warfare with the Empire<sup>28</sup>. Since the foundation of Baghdad the Arabic sources promote a clear distinction between the Greeks and Byzantines. The Byzantines are presented as unworthy of the heritage of the Greeks. They turned their backs on the ancient science and more so, they prohibited it when they adopted Christianity. All this was contrary to the Muslims' approach who warmly welcomed ancient Greeks' wisdom. Ibn al-Nadīm (10th c.) attributed the origins of philosophy to Greek and Romans, but deplored the fact that the Byzantines after adoption of Christianity prohibited it and burnt books or threw them into hiding<sup>29</sup>. It was probably the need to maintain consistency between antibyzantine propaganda and philhellenist cultural policy of the Abbasids that created the need for a distinction between the Greeks and the Byzantines.

In the Byzantine sources, we find almost no direct analogy of Abbasid antibyzantine cultural policy, not even a trace of an analogy of this smear campaign that abounds in Muslim sources. Actually, the rare explicit commentaries of Arabic cultural exploits praise the Arabs, as for instance Michael Psellus who complains of abandonment of the cultural tradition of antiquity by his countrymen, especially philosophy and science and contrasts it with their blossoming among eastern neighbours of Byzantium, especially the Arabs. As he says vividly: *The Greeks became barbarians while the barbarians became Greeks*<sup>30</sup>. In spite of the scarcity of signs in the sources, can we assume that the Byzantines have aroused the same desire to compete with their enemies? Is it possible that this desire was stimulated through diplomatic contacts – which, as we have seen, were considered by both parties as a way to prove their cultural supremacy? We do not possess any easily observable evidence, but the allusions found in some Byzantine sources lead me to believe that this could be possible.

Interesting clue is perhaps the story of the great ninth-century Constantino-

28. GUTAS (1998) 18-19.

29. Ibn al-Nadīm 579; other accounts: GUTAS (1998) 89-93; BALTŲ-GUESDON (1992) 136; DI BRANCO (2009) 47-51; EL CHEIKH (2004) 22-23.

30. Sathas (1874) XLVII-XLVIII; KOUTRAKOU (2007) 85-86.

politan scholar Leo the Mathematician, renowned for his knowledge in various areas: philosophy, mathematics, medicine, literature, philology, astrology. What interests me here is the account of his contacts with the Abbasid caliph, existing in two versions, generally similar, but significantly different in details. The main tradition of this story, as related by a number of 10th century chronicles<sup>31</sup>, goes like this. Caliph al-Mu'taṣim while besieging the Byzantine city of Amorion encounters a fierce resistance and is about to give up. However, one of the defenders, which happens to be a student of Leo the Mathematician, contacted him and advised to keep the siege because of the imminent collapse of Amorion. At the end, the caliph conquered the city through treachery and asked his informant how he could foresee the facts. The Byzantine said that he owed his knowledge to his teacher, Leo the Mathematician, a scholar even more learned. Hearing that the caliph wanted to have the services of such a genius for himself. He sent a letter to Leo promising sumptuous gifts. It was only then that emperor Theophilus learned about Leo and his talent and stopped him in Constantinople fearing that science would pass to the enemy of Byzantium. Additionally, he made Leo the master of a new imperial school and centre of learning that he founded in Magnaura palace. In the expanded and very colourful version of Theophanes Continuatus some details are different. As argued by Paul Magdalino, the author of this text elaborated the initial story related by the chronicles in order to hit the national pride of his compatriots<sup>32</sup>. The goal of this transformation is to make Leo, or rather his erudition, a kind of national asset. He points additionally that this type of Byzantine cultural treasures are more explicitly described by Constantine Porphyrogenetos<sup>33</sup>. According to his text God himself assigned to the Byzantines the responsibility for protecting some special "articles" – imperial costumes and crowns treasured by Constantine the Great in Hagia Sophia, imperial princesses who cannot be married to the infidel and unworthy rulers and the Greek fire, fabricated by Christians in Christian lands that cannot be taught or sent to any other country.

In the previously described accounts about embassies we find suggestions of comparable Byzantine "artefacts" that were contributing to the empire's international position and renown. While describing the embassy of John the Grammarian, Theophanes Continuatus tells us that Emperor Theophilus entrusted him valuable gifts to the caliph, *including those for which the Roman Empire is*

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31. Pseudo-Symeon 638-640 and Georgius Monachus Continuatus 805-806.

32. MAGDALINO (1998) 198-201.

33. Constantine Porphyrogenitus 66-70.



*famous*<sup>34</sup>. Qadi al-Nu'mān ibn Muḥammad informs us that the aforementioned Byzantine embassy to the Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz brought as gifts *many precious items of theirs*<sup>35</sup>. I find this expression quite similar to that of Theophanes Continuatus and it seems to me that these two sources speak about a group of unique artefacts, hallmarks that the Byzantines wanted to be famous for. The story of Leo the Mathematician and caliph could be interpreted in this context. We can imagine that this text was written by a Byzantine author to highlight the gap between the Arabic and Byzantine cultural standing. The author seems to feel distressed that intellectuals in Byzantium lived in anonymity, while in the caliphate they were held in high esteem. I understand this story as a message aimed at the Byzantines urging them not to allow the supremacy of Muslims in the matter that belongs to their own national heritage and to protect their own culture.

In order to summarise, let me first look back to the Arabic sources. The picture of cultural rivalry played quite an important role in the Arabic accounts about the origins of Graeco-Arabic translation movement. The main line of Abbasid propaganda is that the Muslims are either preserving the ancient knowledge neglected by the Byzantines or, in a somewhat contradictory manner, that Abbasid interest in science is a response to Byzantine cultural power. An example of the latter is for example when al-Ma'mūn allegedly reacted to Byzantine emperor making alchemical show in front of the Arab ambassador, by launching a study of science in Baghdad. In the Byzantine sources, these accounts are much more modest. However, we see clearly that from a given point in time, the Byzantines start to acknowledge the Arabic cultural glory and some sources (Theophanes Continuatus, Michael Psellos) even seem to pressure the Byzantines to react actively against the Arabic intellectual pressure. Without doubt at least some Byzantines at a certain moment started to conceive the Arabs as a magnificent civilisation. Besides the account of the Life of St. Cyril (mentioned above) we have the extraordinary account of the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos who claims that *there are two lordships, this of the Sarrasins and this of the Romans, who dominate and illuminate the entirety of the worldly dominion, as two great radiances on the firmament*<sup>36</sup>. We are here far away from the early Byzantine image

34. Theophanes Continuatus 96: ἄλλα τε δούς αὐτῷ πολλὰ οἷς θαυμάζεται βασιλεία Ῥωμαίων καὶ τῶν ἄλλοφύλων γένος ἐπτόηται.

35. KOUTRAKOU (2007) 92; STERN (1950).

36. Nicholas Mystikos 2-3: Ὅτι δύο κυριότητες πάσης τῆς ἐν γῆ κυριότητος, ἧ τε τῶν Σαρακηνῶν καὶ ἡ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ὑπερανέχουσι καὶ διαλάμπουσιν, ὥσπερ οἱ δύο μεγάλοι ἐν

of Arabs as tent-dwellers and barbarians. The important question to ask is when did this transformation take place.

It would not be unfounded to attribute it to the reign of Theophilus (829-842). There are four facts that could reinforce such hypothesis. Firstly, there is the account of the embassy of John the Grammarian (above) which presents Theophilus as highly preoccupied with the image of Byzantium in Baghdad, provides his envoy with gold to astonish the population of Baghdad and sends to the caliph precious gifts – the first, it seems, such action in Byzantine-Arabic contacts. Secondly, it is said<sup>37</sup> that upon returning to Constantinople, John managed to construct in the district of Bryas a palace in Arabic style<sup>38</sup>. Thirdly, there is the account of Leo the Mathematician, in which the Arabs are recognised as a cultural power, and in which Theophilus learns of Leo's talents because of the Arabs' letters and consequently reacts by placing Leo at the head of a great school in Constantinople. Fourthly, according to the ninth- and tenth-century sources<sup>39</sup>, he is the first emperor to install the mechanical automata in the imperial palace, later described by Liutprand of Cremona and highly similar to those found at the caliphal palaces and used in 917 to amaze the Byzantine ambassadors<sup>40</sup>. Leaving apart the difficult question of the precedence of these devices (were they the Arabs or the Byzantines who constructed them first?) and of its potential classical origin<sup>41</sup>, we can be sure that they are one of the first instances of the common diplomatic language that develops in 9th and 10th century between the Byzantines and the Arabs. Fourthly, the intellectual dimension of Arabo-Byzantine contacts under Theophilus should be underlined. The manuscripts surviving from the first half of the 9th century testify for a major and unexpected revival of scientific interests in Constantinople<sup>42</sup>. It would be difficult not to remark that it was paralleled by the similar wave of interest in classical scientific knowledge in al-Ma'mūn's Baghdad and that the main figures of this revival, John the Grammarian and Leo the Mathematician were directly involved in Arabo-Byzantine

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*τῷ στερεώματι φωστήρες. Καὶ δεῖ κατ' αὐτό γε τοῦτο μόνον κοινωνικῶς ἔχειν καὶ ἀδελφικῶς.*  
About Nicholas and the Arabs: VAIΟΥ (2010) 168-183.

37. Theophanes Continuatus 98-99.

38. RICCI (1998); KESHANI (2004).

39. Georgius Monachus 793. An identical account: Leo the Grammarian 215; Pseudo-Symeon 627.

40. al-Haṭīb al-Baġdādī I 117-120; translation: LASSNER (1970) 90 and 269-270, n. 14. Analyse: KENNEDY (2005) 150-155.

41. BRETT (1954) 477-487.

42. FLUSIN (2006) 350-353; IRIGOIN (1962) 287-302; LEMERLE (1971) 168-171.

relations of the period and played a role in taking care of the Byzantine “international image”. In my opinion, Theophilus’ role in the discovery of the Arabic cultural noteworthiness is quite noticeable. However what needs still to be done is an analysis of the 10th century sources, most importantly the literary atelier around Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus, and their own attitudes towards the Arabic culture, their ideology and concept of Byzantine state. It is a necessary task in order to understand whether our image of Theophilus and Arabo-Byzantine contacts in the 9th century is not – to certain extent – an anachronique transposition of the situation from the 10th century.

There are some indications, that the diplomatic contacts had an intellectual and cultural dimension, most importantly the accent put on the intelligence and knowledge of the ambassadors, many of whom were in fact prominent intellectuals. The most important question involves the uncertainty whether these intellectual rivalry was performed for the sake of the internal “public” or rather the Byzantines and the Muslims were genuinely interested in somehow proving their intellectual or theological supremacy in front of each other. If we think about imperial engagement in the internal theological issues in Byzantium, we observe that the emperors’ attempts were aimed not only for a propaganda victory. They seem to have been genuinely interested in proving their own theological views as valid. They organised ecumenical councils, theological disputes, they even actively searched for the actual evidence of their views in old patristic works in Constantinople’s libraries. In my opinion it would not be unconceivable that the similar desire to prove their intellectual and theological authority before the Muslims would have led the Byzantine emperors and intellectuals to provide an intellectual response to the arabic cultural challenge. The Medieval people were not devoid of feelings and we should not downplay the role of not pragmatic factors that guided them. It would be even more true of the Arabs who lived for centuries under the cultural shadow of the mighty Byzantines<sup>43</sup>, and they would have had probably a genuine desire to prove themselves superior. In any case, a direct answer to this question would be difficult to be given, but the fact remains that the common “diplomatic language” that the Muslims and the Byzantines developed in the 9th and 10th centuries had an evident intellectual dimension that needs further investigation.

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43. EL CHEIKH (2004) 54-60.

## ABSTRACT

Ninth century is conceived a period of important cultural changes in Byzantium. At that time, written culture of the empire emerges from the “Dark Age” in which literary production was in decline. The most important participants of these changes are few larger-than-life and easy to pick out figures. Interestingly, all of the most important Byzantine 9th-century men of letters were sent as emissaries to the Abbasid capital: John the Grammarian, Photius, Constantine/St. Cyril, Leon Choïrosphaktes. The only one who was not – Leon the Mathematician, was actually said to have been invited avidly to Baghdad by the caliph. It cannot be just a coincidence. In my opinion it is connected with the growing consciousness in Byzantium of the cultural prowess of the Arabs. In 9th century the Byzantines were starting to consider the caliphate as not only a temporary phenomenon at its eastern border, but as a permanent rival. This recognition was not only political. The Byzantines seemingly became aware of the cultural excellence of the caliphate, in which the impressive, large-scale Graeco-Arabic translation movement was taking place at that time. At the same point, the Byzantines constituted the main axis of ideological rhetoric of the Abbasids of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement. They were presented in the sources of the period as not worthy the ancient Greek culture which they accidentally fell heirs to, and the Arabs as the true, worthy inheritors. The big embassies provided an opportunity to this kind of interaction. That being the case, they gained particular cultural character. They appear to have been regarded by both parties as a way to get political affairs resolved, but furthermore as an occasion to display the supremacy over the rival empire. Consequently, the leaders of the embassies between Byzantium and the Abbasids seem to be on a centre stage of the supposedly conscious cultural rivalry.

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