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ECKART SCHÜTRUMPF

**THE EARLIEST TRANSLATIONS
OF ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS
AND THE CREATION OF POLITICAL
TERMINOLOGY**

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This study goes back ultimately to a response I gave on two papers presented on “Translating Aristotle’s *Politics* in Medieval and Renaissance Europe” at the “International Conference on Translation. The History of Political Thought,” at CUNY in 2005. Immersing myself in the more recent scholarly literature on Humanist translations of Greek philosophical texts I learned that one voice was all but absent—the voice of classicists whose scholarly focus is the Greek texts that were translated from the 13th century onwards. Such a voice needs to be heard especially for an assessment of the style of the Greek originals and for the ancient tradition behind the emerging political terminology in the 14th century, e.g. the changing meaning of *res publica*. For both issues an informed reference to classical texts will at times lead to different results than those drawn by Medievalists. This study examines the earliest Latin translations of Aristotle’s *Politics* from the angle of a classicist.

I presented arguments of this study at the Humboldt University Berlin, University of Cologne, University of Colorado at Boulder, Universidad Carlos Terzero Madrid, and the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. I am grateful for the critical comments I received. My former student Dr. S. Farrington and my daughter Caroline Schütrumpf checked the English of this text; any remaining flaws are my responsibility. I would like to thank the directors of the Morphomata Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Cologne, Professors Dr. G. Blamberger and Dr. D. Boschung, for accepting this study for the MLC series and Dr. Sidonie Kellerer for thorough copy editing.

1. THE EARLIEST LATIN TRANSLATIONS OF ARISTOTLE—
WILLIAM OF MOERBEKE

Cicero introduced considerable parts of Greek philosophy in Rome in a systematic fashion. He did so by choosing the literary form of the dialogue in which he presented selected philosophical topics from the viewpoint of different philosophical schools to a Roman audience. The alternative, that of producing Latin translations of Greek philosophical works, he chose to a much lesser degree, and due to the loss of the texts in question we are not well informed about this option. He translated Plato's *Protagoras*, likely the entire dialogue, and, as part of an intended dialogue on natural philosophy, sections from Plato's *Timaeus*. In *De Finibus* I, he writes hypothetically about translating Plato and Aristotle,¹ but acknowledges that he has not done so yet, however, he does not believe that it is forbidden to him. He wants to limit himself to a translation of "certain passages" (*locos quidem quosdam*). On rare occasions, we find translations of brief Platonic passages in Cicero's philosophical writings, like that from the *Phaedrus* (245c5–246a2) in the *Somnium Scipionis* in *De Republica* VI 27–28. It is indicative of Cicero's approach to translation that he did not reveal that the section *De Republica* VI is actually his translation of Plato's text.² Cicero intended *De Republica* as a counterpart to Plato's *Politeia*³ and the dream of Scipio in the final section of Cicero's *De Republica* VI was inspired by a myth which is found at the end of the last book of Plato's *Politeia*.

1 *De Finibus* I 3.7, cited below n. 113.

2 In other cases, namely translations of only a few lines, Cicero identified the Platonic dialogue from which the passage was taken, so the *Gorgias* and *Menexenos* at *Tusculanae Disputationes* V 12.34–36.

3 *De Legibus* I 5.15.

Instead of outlining at the end of this work the Platonic concept of the ultimate principle of motion, Cicero allows Plato to end the treatise by speaking in his own words, only translated by the Roman author of the dialogue.

On the other hand, we do not find in Cicero's philosophical writings comparable translations of works of Aristotle. Could Cicero have composed such a translation? There has been for quite some time an intense scholarly debate about Cicero's knowledge of Aristotle's work.⁴ Paul Moraux has argued that Cicero had access only to the exoteric works of Aristotle, that it is his dialogues, but not the treatises which we now possess as the *Corpus Aristotelicum*. Specifically, he argues that there is no indication whatsoever that Cicero had read either the *Nicomachean Ethics* or the *Politics*. Moraux draws attention to the fact that with regard to Aristotle's ethical and political writings, it is the dialogues of Aristotle, either *On Justice* or *The Statesman (Politikos)*, Cicero refers to, and not the *Politics*.⁵ This means Cicero could not have chosen a passage from Aristotle's *Politics* in order to adorn one of his philosophical works for the simple reason that this work was not known to him. Moraux refers to Cicero's letter to his brother Quintus (*Ad Quintum fratrem* 3.5.1 from Oct./Nov. 54). There, Cicero writes that, after a reading of a draft of his work on the best state and the best citizen, Sallustius had pointed out that these issues could be discussed with much more authority if he, Cicero, spoke about the state, especially in view of his experience as consul and involvement in state affairs of utmost importance. Sallustius refers then to Aristotle, who presented himself as a speaker in his dialogues to express his views about the state and the leading man.⁶ Moraux infers from this remark that Cicero only knew Aristotle's dialogues. One might object to this line of argument, noting that when Cicero was discussing the role he would play in a *dialogue* and considering Sallustius' suggestion to

4 Cf. the overview in Moraux 1975, 81 n. 1.

5 Moraux 1975, 94: "Cicéron ne connaît, comme ouvrages politiques d'Aristote, que des ouvrages dialogués; il ne semble pas soupçonner l'existence de la *Politique* que nous lisons encore."

6 *Aristotelem denique, quae de re publica et praestanti viro scribat, ipsum loqui.*