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Breakthrough Translation of Avicenna's Physics Published

D. Morgan Davis

INSIGHTS

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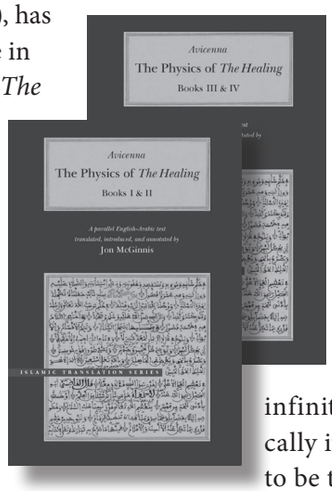
Breakthrough Translation of Avicenna's *Physics* Published

The Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, which publishes texts and accompanying English translations of important works of philosophy, theology, science, and mysticism from the classical Islamic period (roughly the 9th through 14th centuries), has announced the publication of a new title in its Islamic Translation Series. *Avicenna: The Physics of* The Healing, translated by Jon McGinnis, an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy of the University of Missouri, St. Louis, brings to 16 the total number of volumes published by METI in its various series.



In 2005 the Islamic Translation Series issued *Avicenna: The Metaphysics of "The Healing,"* translated by Michael E. Marmura. Both the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* are part of an encyclopedia of knowledge and philosophical reflection by Avicenna that was based on the philosophical corpus of Aristotle but infused with Islamic ideas, which impart a whole different character to Avicenna's thought. *The Healing* thus contained Avicenna's treatment of the whole range of Aristotelian topics—everything from logic and categories, to meteorology, ethics, music, and anatomy.

Avicenna (d. AD 1037) was by most accounts the greatest of the Islamic philosophers, and his *Physics* is one of his most important and challenging works. It is important because it was written as a prelude to the *Metaphysics*. As such, it is a prime source for understanding Avicenna's overall philosophical approach as well as the groundwork he lays within it for concepts he would amplify to their fullest in the *Metaphysics*.

Two things make it challenging. First, almost any serious inquiry into the physical properties and motions of objects prior to Newton or even to Einstein was, practically by definition, grappling with phenomena that were easy to observe but difficult to explain. For example, if the distance traveled by an arrow to its target can be mathematically divided by half an infinite number of times, how is it that the arrow ever reaches its target? The classical answer that Avicenna and others grappled with posited that space was not actually infinitely divisible, even though mathematically it seemed to be. Atoms were suggested to be the elemental units of space than which nothing could be smaller and which could not themselves be divided. The problem with this account, of course, is that it was easy to mathematically and theoretically contradict the assumption. There seemed to be no natural "hard stop" to the divisibility of space or time. In the *Physics* we see Avicenna wrestling with this conundrum and others like it. What is important is not so much that he made (or did not make) any headway on these problems, but the astuteness of his observations, the brilliance evident in his approaches to setting up and working through a problem, and the quality of his reasoning.

2010 NEAL A. MAXWELL LECTURE

Mark H. Willes

President and CEO of Deseret Management Corporation

Thursday, March 11, 2010, 7:00 PM
Assembly Hall, Hinckley Center, Brigham Young University

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The *Physics* is also a challenging work because it was written in classical Arabic using a philosophical idiom that was itself still being worked out as he wrote his treatises. This linguistic layer of difficulty—one that even native speakers of Modern Arabic find prohibitive—only compounds the problem of trying to make out the details or even the general contours of arguments that were abstruse to begin with. A translation of this text was first submitted to the Islamic Translation Series over ten years ago by an eminent scholar of classical Islamic philosophy, but as Daniel C. Peterson, the editor in chief of the series, worked his way through that translation, he realized that it simply wasn't making sense of Avicenna. Indeed, the translator himself had made no secret of the fact that this was by far the most difficult text he had ever tackled. Help was found in the name of Jon McGinnis, a younger scholar who had devoted his entire academic career up to that point to understanding this text. For his own benefit, he had already translated a large portion of the text in an effort to read it as carefully as he could. Peterson approached him for help, which eventually led to his agreeing to complete his translation and publish it with METI.

Because of its length, the *Physics* has been published in two volumes that are sold together. The Arabic text and the English translation are given on facing pages. A number of figures and illustrations accompany the work—some of them are original to Avicenna's text, others are provided by the translator in his notes to help make difficult concepts more understandable. There is also a complete index and a glossary of terms that details how certain technical words in Arabic were interpreted into English by McGinnis.

The Physics is the seventh volume in the Islamic Translation Series. In addition to the Islamic Translation Series, METI also includes the Eastern Christian Texts series and a series called The Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, the eminent Jewish rabbi and physician.

The Middle Eastern Texts Initiative continues to benefit from the diligent effort and goodwill of scholars and sponsors across the world and across many cultural, linguistic, and religious frontiers. All METI titles are published by Brigham Young University Press and distributed by the University of Chicago Press and available through the BYU Bookstore. ◆

By D. Morgan Davis
Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative

BYU Herculaneum Project Honored with Mommsen Prize

On January 11, the 2009 Theodor Mommsen Prize, Section Papirologia Ercolanese, was presented to Steven Booras, senior project manager with the Maxwell Institute's Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts and to Brigham Young University for "the production of multispectral images of the Herculaneum Papyri."

The prize has been presented annually for the past 19 years by the International Center for the Study of the Herculaneum Papyri to scholars and institutions that have made the most significant contributions to research on the Herculaneum Papyri. The award ceremony was held at the beautiful and historic Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn in Naples, Italy. In addition to Booras attending to receive his award, Roger Macfarlane, associate professor of Classics and principal investigator of the current Herculaneum project—which began under the auspices of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and is now housed in the College of Humanities—accepted a plaque on behalf of BYU, the sponsoring institution for the project.

From 2000 to 2004, Steven and Susan Booras performed multispectral imaging (MSI) on approximately 800 trays of carbonized papyri from Herculaneum, producing approximately 35,000 images. These important papyri, containing a large number of Greek philosophical texts that are preserved nowhere else, come from a single personal library, known as the Villa of the Papyri, at Herculaneum, which was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. The papyri were instantly charred (carbonized) and buried, preserving their contents but rendering them mostly or, at times, entirely illegible. Through the application of MSI, the legibility of these charred and blackened texts is vastly improved over conventional photography. ◆