

**The founding myth of the *Schola Salerni*:
the importance of contact among languages and the activity of translation
for interreligious and intercultural dialogue and the development of
knowledge.**

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Abstract: According to the legend, the *Schola salernitana* was born by the casual meeting of four physicians, symbolic characters, whose dynamics and values aim to underline the confluence (in the *civitas Hippocratica*, cosmopolitan Mediterranean port, 'open' and 'syncretic' as its nascent School) of different medical, and cultural more in general, traditions: disembodied from their legendary traits, the four figures show how peculiar, in that intercultural and interreligious dialogue (among the Jewish, Arabic, Greek and Latin ones), is the role of languages and the importance of the work of translation, in its first, and primary, etymological meaning of *tra(ns)-ducere*, 'transport from coast to coast'.

The proposed contribution intends to frame the founding myth of the *Schola Salerni* in the wider cultural background which was its host, contributor and supporter, highlighting the modern, meaningful value of its everlasting message also for the contemporary world, which is risking to lose sight of the main way of meeting, contact, exchange, dialogue for welfare and peace.

The *exemplum* of the *Schola medica Salernitana*, a litmus test of a wider cultural and linguistic debate (from the quite medieval research of the 'language of God' to the experiments of Frederick II), is emblematic of the absolute necessity of comparison in the construction of civilization and knowledge, comparison primarily passing through communication, and then, ultimately, on the linguistic field and activity of translation: the figure and work of Constantine Africanus are perhaps, in the specific case, the most significant examples.

Key Words: traductology, intercultural education, cultural studies, languages and cultures in contact, multilingualism

Introduction

The legend of the foundation of the *Schola Salerni* has it that⁴⁸:

Quidam magister fuit qui primitus legit medicinam in Civitate Salerni. Nomen ejus vocabatur magister Helinus et habuit quendam Sotium qui vocabatur Sarach, qui legebat phisicam prudens hebreus lingua hebreia unde magister Helinus cum Jone moratus fuit in castello lufoni. Unde lufonus vocatur cum dicitur apud Gramaticos funus Iovis, quia magister Helinus et Iuppiter cum magistro Sarach ubic defunti fuerunt unde illi tres magistri, sive Magister Pontus, magister Salernus et magister Primus ex ipso magistro Helino commemorati fuerunt in ipsa Civitate Salerni in loco qui nunc dicitur porta nova et prius illa porta dicebatur porta Helina, quia ibi moratus fuit magister Helinus et tres ipsi magistri invenerunt predictam istoriam, quae inferius hunc narratur.

The story, later modified, is to be found in *De antiquitate Scholae Salernitanae*:

Origo Scholae Salernitanae ex Cronico Civitatis reperto apud Cassinenses asserit quod cum adesset in civitate celeberrimus medicinae professor nominatus magister Salernus, qui medicinam Latinis de litera latina docebat in loco dicto bonae diei, et peregrinarent per orbem experiendi causa Rabinus Elinus haebreus, et Magister Adala Saracenus, tracti a fama magistri Salerni in hanc civitatem successive se contulerunt, et tam ob loci amoenitatem quam ob doctrinale commercium, et diversarum nationum affluentiam, pedes hic sistere deliberarunt, adeoque Helinus medicinam haebrais de litera haebraica at Adala Saracenis de litera Saracenicam publice legere coeperunt. Cumque temporis progressa e Graecia advenisset magister Pontus quaedam

⁴⁸ From the *Cronica di Elino*, quoted by De Renzi (1857: xxvi). This passage, like the following ones, is quoted *verbatim*.

*Hippocraticis conscripta secum ferens, eaque communicaverit dictis tribus magistris, in eorum societate fuit receptus, et Hippocratica medicina, vivente adhuc Hippocrate, coli coepit, unde Civitas denominata fuit Hippocratica, ut hinc orta fuerit primae medicinae universitas eaque in Italia post centum fere annos a quo tempore Pythagoras Samnius Cotrone Philosophiam docebat, nempe circa annum ab Urbe condita 350, ante Christi Domini nativitatem annis 100 circiter.*⁴⁹

Also in ***Dell'origine di Longobardi e di Normandi. Di Matteo Geronimo Maza Patricio Salernitano 1608:***

Ma più d'ogni altra cosa ha fiorito, e fiorisce in essa Città la filosofia et medicina, et hoggi più che mai ne tiene il grido, essendosi il suo antiquissimo Collegio, quale per la sua antichità non si sa il tempo della sua fondatione, pur si uede una Historia antichissima uersata assai in Salerno, et in altre Città d'Italia, et specialmente in Siena, della quale appresso a compimento si parlerà, et tra le molte cose dice, che il Primo che leggesse Medicina in la Città di Salerno, fu Maestro Helino Hebreo, del quale si scriue, che insieme con Gioue habitato hauesse, et in Gefone dopo moresse, onde Giuffone altro non risuona in lingua latina che Jovis funus, per le cenere di Giove che iui furono sepolte con l'ossa del sopradetto Helino. Doppo costui lesse filosofia naturale il Maestro Dottor Sarra di Nazione Hebraea in la lingua sua natia, et questo insieme con Helino predetto facevano stanza nel Borgo di Salerno, in quel luogo stesso, doue si disse per un tempo dal nome di costui Porta Helimana; ma dopo allargatosi l'accinto della Città si lasciò quel nome, et fu detto Portanoua. Laciorno scritto tra le molte cose quel che segue.

*Maestro Helino, et Maestro Pontio Greco, et Maestro Salerno mediante il fauor di colui, che a gli uomini diede il senso furono i primi, che a gli Hebrei, et a Saraceni leggessero medicina in lingua Arabica. Ma poiché i predetti Dottori ebbero i libri, che si tovarono in Arpaio gran tempo dopo la sua desolatione, ne andarono a Salerno, et tradussero quelli in lingua greca, et latina [...]*⁵⁰

Mutatis nominibus, the story appears again in the abridged version by Piscitello (2002):

Il medioevo fu tempo di pellegrini. Uno di questi - tale Antonio, discendente dalla nobile famiglia romana dei Flavi - fu sorpreso una notte da un violento temporale: trovato riparo sotto un arco dell'acquedotto romano nei pressi della città di Salerno vi incontrò un tale Areteo, proveniente da Alessandria, e gli tese amichevolmente la mano. Areteo si avvide di una ferita nel braccio di Antonio e voleva trattarla con un empiastro di melissa. Il ferito si oppose: preferiva coprirla con carne di gallo nero.

Presto la discussione si allargò ad altri due uomini, sopraggiunti nel frattempo: Isacco, un ebreo proveniente da Betania, e Abdul, un arabo di Aleppo. Isacco proponeva, in luogo della melissa di Areteo e della carne di gallo di Antonio, issopo e nepitella, mentre Abdul avrebbe preferito della ruta.

La discussione fece sì che i quattro si riconoscessero come medici: e poiché nessuno di loro aveva una meta definita, decisero di fermarsi e di mettere in comune le loro conoscenze a beneficio dei malati e di farne parte a chi volesse apprenderle: era nata la Scuola medica di Salerno.

Findings and discussion

The cultural *humus*

This “insulsa favoletta” (“silly tale”), unfairly discarded by De Renzi (1857: xxxi), can be read through the sources, the dynamics and the importance of its symbol-characters, in order to emphasize the converging, in Salerno, of different medical traditions and of their cultures, summed up in the following diagram (the value of number 4 is only hinted at since, in this case, it can be reinterpreted as an accent on the totality of knowledge convergence, from the four corners of the *orbis terrarum*:

Adela (ʿAbdʿillah)

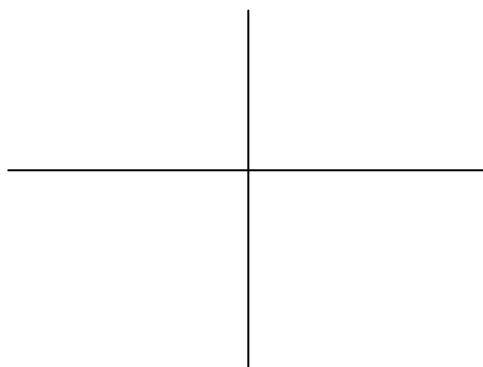
⁴⁹ As quoted by De Renzi (1857: xxix).

⁵⁰ As quoted by De Renzi (1857: xxx-xxxii).

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Abdul (from Aleppo)

Helinus (Eliseo)
Isacco
Alexandria)



Pontus
Areteo (from

Salernus
Antonio (Romano,
of the Flavians)

The variant richness testifies the existence of a *humus*, of a wider cultural background where the symbolic reflection on which the “istoria” (‘history’) is based can be inserted.



“Discussion among three medical doctors”, Bagdad 1224.

Some unavoidable analogies have become necessary, almost a *fil rouge* still present today.

From the *Dialogus inter Philosophum, Judaeum et Christianum* by Pietro Abelardo⁵¹, who, with these words, introduced the comparison (between *disputatio* and *altercatio*) among different religions, which are cultures, visions of the world:

Aspiciebam in visu noctis et ecce: viri tres diverso tramite venientes coram me astiterunt, quos ego statim iuxta visionis modum, cuius sint professionis vel cur ad me venerint, interrogo.

“Homines”, inquirunt, “sumus diversis fidei sectis innitentes. Unius quippe Dei cultores esse nos omnes pariter profiteremur diversa tamen fide et vita ipsi famulantes. Unus quippe nostrum gentilis ex his, quos philosophos appellant, naturali lege contentus est. Alii vero duo Scripturas habent, quorum alter Iudaeus, alter dicitur Christianus. Diu autem de diversis fidei nostrae sectis invicem conferentes atque contendentes tuo tandem iudicio cessimus”.

to *Nathan der Weise* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who condensed Daja’s disillusioned hope at Nathan’s smile about her dreams in the tragic stanza (I, 1, 151-153):

*Laßt lächelnd wenigstens ihr einen Wahn,
In dem sich Jud’ und Christ und Muselmann
Vereinigen; - so einen süßen Wahn!*

The famous *Ringparabel* (the source of his *Nathan*, acknowledged by Lessing himself)⁵² was told by Boccaccio in this way:

⁵¹ One of the many examples belonging to the same genre, such as *Disputatio judei et cristiani* by Gilberto Crispino or *De Pace Fidei* by Nicola Cusano, or the *Llibre del gentil e dels tres savis* by Ramon Llull (Raymond Lully).

⁵² In the third short story of the first day (cat III, scene 7, ll. 1911-2054), to the Saladin who asked him “quale delle tre leggi tu reputi la verace, o la giudaica o la saracina o la cristiana” (“Which of the three great religions is the truly authentic one?”)

Un grande uomo e ricco fu già, il quale, intra l'altre gioie più care che nel suo tesoro avesse, era uno anello bellissimo e prezioso; al quale per lo suo valore e per la sua bellezza volendo fare onore e in perpetuo lasciarlo né suoi discendenti, ordinò che colui de' suoi figliuoli appo il quale, sì come lasciatogli da lui, fosse questo anello trovato, che colui s'intendesse essere il suo erede e dovesse da tutti gli altri essere come maggiore onorato e reverito. E colui al quale da costui fu lasciato il simigliante ordinò né suoi discendenti e così fece come fatto avea il suo predecessore; e in brieve andò questo anello di mano in mano a molti successori; e ultimamente pervenne alle mani ad uno, il quale avea tre figliuoli belli e virtuosi e molto al padre loro obediendi, per la qual cosa tutti e tre parimente gli amava. E i giovani, li quali la consuetudine dello anello sapevano, sì come vaghi d'essere ciascuno il più onorato tra' suoi ciascuno per sé, come meglio sapeva, pregava il padre, il quale era già vecchio, che, quando a morte venisse, a lui quello anello lasciasse. Il valente uomo, che parimente tutti gli amava, né sapeva esso medesimo eleggere a qual più tosto lasciar lo dovesse, pensò, avendolo a ciascun promesso, di volergli tutti e tre sodisfare; e segretamente ad uno buono maestro ne fece fare due altri, li quali sì furono simiglianti al primiero, che esso medesimo che fatti gli avea fare appena conosceva qual si fosse il vero. E venendo a morte, segretamente diede il suo a ciascun de' figliuoli. Li quali, dopo la morte del padre, volendo ciascuno la eredità e l'onore occupare, e l'uno negandolo all'altro, in testimonianza di dover ciò ragionevolmente fare ciascuno produsse fuori il suo anello. E trovatisi gli anelli sì simili l'uno all'altro che qual di costoro fosse il vero non si sapeva conoscere, si rimase la quistione, qual fosse il vero erede del padre, in pendente, e ancor pende. E così vi dico, signor mio, delle tre leggi alli tre popoli date da Dio padre, delle quali la quistion proponeste: ciascuno la sua eredità, la sua vera legge e i suoi comandamenti dirittamente si crede avere e fare; ma chi se l'abbia, come degli anelli, ancora ne pende la quistione.

Like in a karstic river, this *Weltanschauung*, in its sensitivity, has saturated and permeated the whole Europe since the Enlightenment, showing, among the many possible reflections, that *scientia*, knowledge, derives from dialogue ("mettere in comune", "put together", as brilliantly underlined by Piscitello), which is respect and appreciation of diversity, whose peculiarities (different points of views of the same Reality) give rise to a preliminary complementarity, ancillary to that *reductio ad unum* that moves towards the process and leads to one shareable and shared truth.

Languages and translations

Let's get back to the founding myth of the *Schola Salerni*, setting it in its linguistic point of view. Mazza, (quoted by De Renzi, 1857: 121) underlining the use of many languages due to the variegated listeners, summed up:

HELINUS primum Salerni Medicinam Hebraicis de litera Hebraica legit. Magister PONTUS graecus de litera graeca Graecis. ADELA Saracenus Saracenis de litera Saracenicis. Magister SALERNUS Latinis Medicinam de litera latina legit.

Now, the diagram can be re-written in the following way:

Arabic

Adela ('Abd^ullah) - Abdul (from Aleppo)

Hebrew
Helinus (Eliseo)
Isacco
(Alexandria)

Latin

Salernus - Antonio (Romano,
of the Flavians)

Greek
Pontus - Areteo
(from

Judaism, Christianity, or Islam?"), Melchisedec the Jew, "il quale veramente era savio uomo" ("who was really a man of wisdom"), in order to get out of that predicament and face the "quistione" ("question"), replied with what was, according to his words, a "novelletta" ("short story").

Hence the importance and the meaning of *tra(ns)-duzione* (“translation”) that characterized the *Schola Salerni*, *in primis*, since its beginning. To translate means to mingle, to let people know each other, to impregnate thoughts making them create cross-breeds: it is the strength of the races that have mixed and won biologically in their most powerful ability to adapt. To translate means to pass through and criss-cross different ways of seeing things, hoping for sharing, for a germ of dialogue. The following passage, taken from the founding myth in the *Cronica di Elinio* is particularly meaningful:

isti tres magistri sive magister Primus, magister Pontus, et magister Salernus, mediante gratia illius qui dedit et tribuit memoriam et sensum eis. Ipsi fuerunt primi qui legerunt medicinam hebreis atque Saracenis de litera Saracenicis et qui invenerunt praedictam istam istoriam quatenus ipsorum magistrorum, qui fuit Magis. Pontus qui legit graecis medicinam, omnes isti magistri traslaverunt libros medicinales qui inventi fuerunt in civitate Arpae quae destructa fuit, predictos libros translaverunt in civitate Salerni

and *tra(n)slaverunt* underlines, as a whole and polysemously, ‘to transport’ and ‘to translate’.

Knowledge occurs primarily in communication, in that ‘communicating’ which is so pregnant in its etymologic value. We can’t help thinking of the Tower of Babel myth: if taking the Universal language away from Mankind resulted in tragedy and destruction, restoring communication leads to the re-establishment of the primary perfection. The value of contact, of pouring off, of osmosis, in all its richness and diversity appreciation, translation, in short, (both linguistic and cultural), become a sublime *medicamentum*: in the endless exchange, even under a merely linguistic point of view, life is perpetuated and its quality improved.

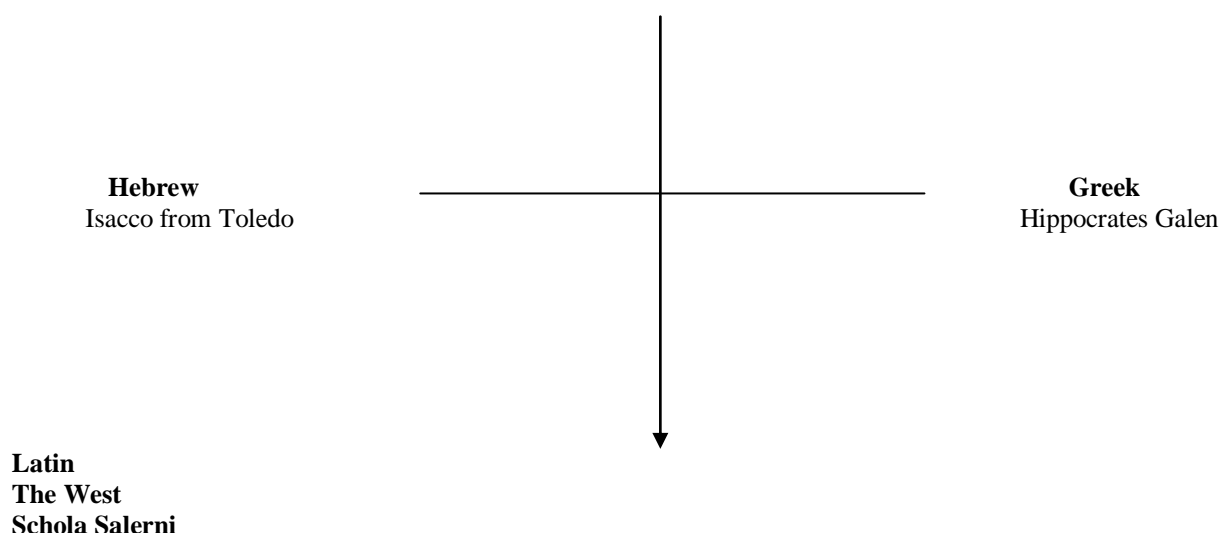
Costantinus Africanus

Hippocratic medical doctor who studied Chaldean, Arab, Persian, Indian and the Ethiop science and contributed with his translations from Greek (*Aphorismata* and *Prognostica* by Hippocrates and some works by Galen), from Hebrew (*Liber dietorum*, *Liber urinarium* and *Liber febrium* by Isacco Giudeo) and from Arabic (*Kitāb-al-malikī – Liber Regalis* by ‘Alī ibn ‘Abbās and *Viaticum peregrinorum – Zād al-Musāfir* by Ibn al-Jazzār, *Liber divisionum* and *Liber experimentorum* by al-Razī) Costantinus Africanus is an emblematic figure: the ‘*ifrīqiyy*’ who, as an *ante litteram* popularizer, contributed to spread *Ars Medica* from the East to the West, till his death, in 1087, in Monte Cassino.

Let’s re-write the diagram according to his translations:

Arabic

‘Alī ibn ‘Abbās – etc. etc.



Salerno, *civitas Hippocratica*, new Andalusia⁵³, meeting place of different cultures, on the Mediterranean seashore, was to host and support a school, as ‘open’ and ‘syncretic’ as the town itself, a harbour and a great trade area in the middle of *mare nostrum*. In a definite socio-cultural unity in Eurasia, that was to lay the foundations of its nature on the concepts of emigration and trade, the new Europe *secundo millennio ineunte* was reborn in contacts, pollinations, trade, mingling and interpenetrations.

People from all over Europe used to go there, as underlined by Matteo Geronimo Maza:

Non erano dimorati appena due anni in Salerno questi ualenti Dottori che ebbero concorso grande di Ualent’huomini, et gran filosofi, Ui ferno uenire da 150 maestri simplicisti, et furonui portati dalle parti di Fenicia, et di Arabia più di cento sorte di spetie, et all’hora giudicarno delle cinque maniere di mirabolani, et delle tra sorte et maniere di sarali ciò è bianco rosso et cedrigno. Questa radice è da pochissimi conosciuta, unirno tutti i libri composti da Hippocrate, et altri dotti, et ui ferno un collegio.

It was among the members of that ‘college’ (in the etymological sense of *cum + lego* ‘gather together’), and only at that juncture that the possibility of a sound discussion with the Other emerged.



The “Devil’s bridge” and its pointed arch.

Frederick II

It was not by chance that Frederick II, with the Constitution of Melfi in 1231, ratified the *auctoritas* of the *Schola*, the Frederick whose “mentalità indagatrice e sperimentale” (‘inquiring and experimental mentality’)⁵⁴ along with his proverbial *curiositas*, led him to that meaningful experimentation (*superstitio*, in the anti Hohenstaufen propaganda perspective of the time⁵⁵) into the linguistic path that was taking shape, as Salimbene said:

Secunda eius superstitio fuit quia voluit experiri cuiusmodi linguam et loquelam haberent pueri, cum adolevisent, si cum nemine loqueretur. Et ideo precepit bauli et nutrici bus ut lac infanti bus darent, un mammas sugerent, et balnearent et mundificarent eos, sed nullo modo blandirentur eis nec loquerentur. Volebat enim conoscere utrum Hebream linguam haberent, que prima fuerat, an Grecam vel Latinam vel Arabicam aut certe linguam parentum suorum ex quibus nati fuissent. Sed laborabat incassum, quia pueri sive infantes moriebantur omnes. Non enim vivere possent sine aplausu et gestu et letitia faciei et blanditiis baiularum et nutricum suarum

Without entering into the question of the primeval language research, it is interesting to point out that even in this passage the sensitivity being inquired about is emerging. To the ones that in the past were considered the three sacred languages⁵⁶, among which Hebrew was chosen as God’s language⁵⁷, Frederick added Arabic,

⁵³ Where the religious tolerance and the linguistic-cultural synergy of the Arab period were proverbial, to such an extent that Maimonide, among the greatest Hebrew philosophers, knew the name in its double form: רבי משה בן מימון (Rabbi Moshe ben Maymon, from whose vocal acronym comes the name *Rambam*) and موسى بن ميمون بن عبد الله القرطبي الإسرائيلي (Mūsā ibn Maymūn ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurtubī al-Isrā’īlī), pace the many modern misunderstandings.

⁵⁴ Definition given by De Stefano (1990: 89).

⁵⁵ Salimbene is the best example: about that “Federicus <qui> fuit homo pestifer et maledictus, scismaticus, hereticus et epycurus, currumpens universam terram, quia in civitatibus Italie semen divisioni et discordie seminavit” (Scalia 1998: 45), Salimbene denounced *superstitiones et curiositates et maledictiones et incredulitates et perversitates et abusiones*.

⁵⁶ Isidoro is a good example, when he said (*Etymologiae*, libro IX, 1, 3): *Tres sunt autem linguae sacrae: Hebraea, Graeca, Latina, quae toto orbe maxime excellunt. His enim tribus linguis super crucem Domini a Pilato fuit causa eius scripta.*

thus re-establishing that kind of “linguistic τετρακτύς” illustrated *supra*: it must be stressed that such a choice, made by Frederick, was not taken on a religious basis, but on secular considerations connected with the growing importance of Arabic in a cultural, scientific, trade and, more in general, ‘circulation’s environment’.

Onomastics

A short note, of onomastic character, as a conclusion: from Arechi II, who chose Salerno as his residence in the second half of the VIII century, till the last *magister* who witnessed the dissolution of the institution, on 29th November 1811, decreed by Joachim Murat, the selfsame list of the names of the medical doctors would be enough to testify the variety of the origin of the different people who founded the school and to emphasize the importance, never to be ignored, of meetings, dialogues and discussions among the diversities which were the basis of the richness and the novelty of the Salerno experience. A simple parade, even without any unrealistic aim at completeness, impossible to quote here because of evident lack of space, would prove to be results that speak for themselves.

Conclusions

If we take for granted the universal and eternal principle that “truth is symphonic”, the complex and rich linguistic-cultural dialogue that the *Schola Salerni* has been able to epitomize is its sublime *exemplum*: talking to the heart and the conscience of Mankind, it offers itself to contemporaneity as an ever present occasion of reflection, an emblematic beacon, a happy event in History, too often fragmented and dumb, unable to deal with itself, to grow and improve. Acknowledging meeting and dialogue as the ultimate purpose, the Salerno School still keeps its message of modernity, offering itself as a possible model, in a whirling globalization climate, where diversities might sooner or later crash against each other: the present *magistri* must create a dialogue basis on common, neutral grounds, in a neo-humanistic perspective that gathers together the basics of the different visions on man and on the world in order to support a constructive cooperation and a true integration within a healthy and real evolution. All this passes also, not to say primarily, through communication and, in the ultimate analysis, through language(s).*

⁵⁷ Cfr. at least Augustin., *De civ. Dei*, xvi, xi, 2: *Et ideo credenda est ipsa [scil. lingua Hebraea] fuisse prima illa communis..*

* I am thankful to Corinna Galeazzi for helping me out with the english version of the text. As always, all mistakes that undoubtedly crept in are all my own.

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