

A Companion to Medieval Toledo

Reconsidering the Canons

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The Toledan Translation Movement and Dominicus Gundissalinus: Some Remarks on His Activity and Presence in Castile

Nicola Polloni

The origins of the Toledan translation movement can be traced back to the translation activities developed in Southern Italy and Northern Spain since the end of the 11th century. In Italy, the translations were realized from Greek into Latin; whereas in Catalonia and the Ebro valley, translators as Plato of Tivoli, Robert of Ketton, and Hermann of Carinthia translated Arabic writings. Following different linguistic tracks, these first translations shared a common interest on scientific works, and particularly astronomy. The activity of these first translators was also directly connected to the main scientific *milieux* of the time, namely Salerno and Chartres, where the translated texts were read and used.¹

By this point of view, Toledo does not appear to be a primary destination for those in search of scientific texts to translate. Despite the importance of the Toledan “school of Saʿid Andalusi,” whose members would be among the authors translated into Latin (starting with al-Zarqali), in the first phase of the translation movement only one translator is found in Toledo, Johannes Hispalensis atque Limiensis. In just a few decades, though, this scenario abruptly changed. In approximately thirty years, indeed, almost one hundred philosophical and scientific texts were translated from Arabic into Latin in Toledo, which soon became the main center of translating activity in Europe. The town attracted a wide number of translators and scholars, and the new works therein produced would be disseminated throughout the rising European universities.

To understand the social context in which the translation movement found a positive development, it is very useful to recall some important events that took place in the Iberian Peninsula between the 11th and the 12th centuries.

As it is well known, the taking of Toledo by the Christians in 1085 constituted a political shock for the Iberian Arabic kingdoms, and led Muʿtamid of

1 See Kristeller, “The School of Salerno,” 138–192. About the influences of the translated texts on William of Conches see Caiazzo, “The Four Elements in the Work of William of Conches,” pp. 3–66.

Seville to call the Almoravid King Yusuf Ibn Tashfin for help. The response to this call was the invasion of the peninsula by the Almoravids, who defeated the troops of Alfonso VI and besieged Toledo in 1109–10. This first invasion put an end to the instability of the *reinos de taifa*. But after a few decades of political precariousness, the Almoravid regime gave way to a new political order, established by the Almohad “revolution.”² In 1147, the religious movement of the *al-muwahhidun*, led by al-Mumim, conquered the Almoravid capital, Marrakesh, beginning the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula: the effect of the aggressive military approach and the radical theological positions of the Almohads was a wide movement of people migrating from al-Andalus toward the Christian kingdoms of the North.

From this perspective, Toledo was in a peculiar position. Not far from the border with al-Andalus, Toledo was, indeed, a wealthy town with an ethnically mixed population of *mozárabes*, Castilian migrants, Jews, and Arabs who had not fled after 1085.³ By this standard, Toledo was the center of the Kingdom of Castile, and it may be well defined as the Castilian economic, religious, and cultural capital. It is toward this town that the migratory fluxes from al-Andalus were directed, a fact which is corroborated by the 12th century documentary witnesses. These documents, as pointed out by Ladero Quesada, show a peak of documents written in Arabic in the second half of the century, after having reached an equilibrium between Latin and Arabic writings around 1150.⁴ This process is a clear result of the compass of Arabic-speaking populations—Jews and Muslims, with their skills, cultures, and books—migrating to Toledo in consequence to the Almohad invasion.

The new availability of skills and books is one of the main factors that made possible the development of a translation movement in Toledo, together with the displacement of the vast library of the Banu Huds from Zaragoza to the Castilian capital in 1140–41: a prominent library fund that made available to the translators many scientific and philosophical Arabic writings, as underlined by Charles Burnett.⁵ Thus, one can recognize in the Andalusian migration one of the most important factors for the establishment of a translation activity in Toledo, since it provided a wide availability of books and learned people.

2 For an overall perspective on the Almohadi invasion of Iberia, see Huici Miranda, *Historia política del imperio almohade*, Tetuán; and Fromherz, *The Almohads*.

3 See González Palencia, *Los mozárabes de Toledo en los siglos XII y XIII*; and Olstein, *La era mozárabe*.

4 See Ladero Quesada, *La formación medieval de España*, pp. 257–264.

5 Burnett, “The Coherence of the Arabic-Latin Translation Programme in Toledo in the 12th Century.”