

A polyglot culture

Kim Eddy uncovers the fascinating history of the transfer of knowledge through translation in 12th-century Toledo



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There is no question that English is the lingua franca for the transfer of knowledge in the modern era. Scholars and scientists the world over recognise the need to publish and deliver their research findings in English, whatever the format – online, journals, conference papers and posters, and so on. Indeed, many readers of these pages will be professionally involved in addressing this need.

I made a special trip to Toledo, Spain, with a group of translators and editors, following an itinerary that would highlight the role that the city's multilingual, multiliterate communities played in the transfer of knowledge from Greek and Arabic in the 12th century. The *Escuela de Traductores de Toledo* or Toledan School of Translators was not a school as such, but a group of learned scholars who worked in Arabic, Hebrew, Latin and, eventually, Romance (early Castilian). Until this time, European universities had known of the existence of Greek philosophers, but much of the content of their work remained a mystery. On their conquering path from the East, however, the Arabs had translated, studied and incorporated these works into their cultural heritage. In the process, they brought them to the Iberian Peninsula, where scholars like the 12th-century Cordoban jurist Averroes also wrote commentaries that influenced debates on reason v. faith in the Arabic-speaking world and would soon do so in Latin-speaking Europe as well.

A centre of learning

Our trip took place in 2007, in the context of the annual meeting of Mediterranean Editors and Translators

(MET) in nearby Madrid. MET is an interdisciplinary association that brings together people in the Mediterranean and southern European area who give language support for international communication in English in the sciences, finance, culture, politics, business, law and non-governmental organisations. MET meetings have attracted professionals from within the Euro-Mediterranean space and the greater Middle East (Algeria, Croatia, France, Greece, Iran, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Serbia and Spain) and beyond (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Poland, New Zealand, the UK and the USA). It seemed only fitting, therefore, that such an association should pay a visit to Toledo, a city renowned in the 12th and 13th centuries for being a centre of learning and transfer of knowledge through extensive translation.

The visit was inspired by María Rosa Menocal's book about al-Andalus, *The Ornament of the World*¹, in which Castilian Toledo and its intensive translation activity feature prominently. Indeed, Toledo was the first important Muslim city to be vanquished by Christian forces, in 1085 and, in 1126, the first enthusiastic phase of Toledan translation began. Raymond de La Sauvetat, a Cluniac monk named Archbishop of Toledo, set about promoting the translation of philosophical and religious works from Arabic to Latin, soon to be followed by astrology, astronomy and arithmetic. Early translation methods sometimes involved an 'Arabised' Jew or Christian known as a



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mozárabe – one who knew Arabic and the culture – acting as informant. The local translator provided an oral translation into Romance for a Latin-language expert, who then wrote out a version in that language. Texts were also translated into Hebrew, but it was the Latin versions that would transform many of the

embryonic European universities.

The arrival of King Alfonso X El Sabio, the Learned, in the 13th century marked the beginning of the second phase and a move towards the translation of treatises on astronomy, physics, alchemy and mathematics. It also heralded a monumental change. At the instigation of Alfonso, Latin began to make way for a vernacular language, the up-and-coming language of the peoples of Castile. As a result, Castilian would gradually evolve to address the same scientific issues previously reserved for Latin. In short, it was thanks to the labours of generations of multilingual scholars and translators based in Toledo that Europe was provided with the key to her future intellectual and

Above and above right: Arabic calligraphy appears alongside Christian imagery in Toledo's Church of San Román



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scientific development.

Against this learned backdrop, the small multilingual, multicultural group of MET delegates set off on a sunny October morning to take in the sights. After admiring the Tránsito Synagogue, now the Sephardic Museum – where we found decorative script in Arabic alongside Hebrew on walls visible from the women's balcony – our route led us up a steep climb to the hilltop Church of San Román, erected on the former sites of a mosque and a Visigothic church.

Intriguing discoveries

Picture the scene: a building with all the outward appearance of a church. You know from the tourist literature that today the early 13th-century Church of San Román is one of the best examples of Toledan *Mudéjar* or Moorish style. You also know that the church is characterised by a basilica with three naves, much like Romanesque churches in the rest of Europe, but that they are separated by red and white horseshoe arches, supported on pillars attached to columns with re-used capitals (several of Visigothic origin, the culture that preceded the Muslims), an apse and an elegant tower. The 13th-century frescos covering the walls contain a

combination of familiar Romanesque iconography as well as Hispano-Arabic influences in the form of highly decorative writing. But when you walk inside and are suddenly confronted by these huge horseshoe arches framed in Latin script, visions of the great mosque in Cordoba flash before your eyes. Light tumbles down from the high arches that flank the central nave, which has a rectangular feeling, not unlike the synagogue you've just left. Enormous winged angels and depictions of evangelists and prophets adorn the walls, yet Moorish windows are framed by Arabic-like calligraphy. Your gaze stops right there. Arabic? You could be forgiven for questioning the facts, but this building was erected as a Christian temple; it is not a converted mosque.

It was relatively unusual for Romanesque churches to be decorated with script. However, this Toledan *Mudéjar* innovation probably responded to the aesthetic notions of a literate, Arabised culture in which temples were traditionally decorated with script rather than human figures. Indeed, in her newest book, Menocal² has pointed out that faux Arabic script had been widely used for decorative and symbolic purposes throughout the Muslim world.

What does it mean?

A few delegates stand looking up at the 'Arabic' lettering, whispering among themselves. The delegates' common language is English, native or otherwise. Some speak Spanish, most do not. Several speak Arabic as their mother tongue. One of them is certain she's able to decipher the ornate calligraphy. Other Arabic speakers join in. They can make



The inscription is a reminder of Toledo's multicultural and multilingual history

out a phrase they think is suggestive of: 'There is no god but God' or something similar. But the script is highly decorative and they are unsure. They are, however, convinced that the language is truly Arabic.

In all fairness, it must be said that the Latin script was also hard to unravel, the calligraphy hindering interpretation. But even after leaving the church, it was difficult to forget the momentary ripple of excitement among the Arabic speakers: Arabic, first in a synagogue, and now in a church, prominently displayed.

At home, it was time for a little detective work. The curator of the museum kindly provided me with photos of the script, which I then showed to speakers of Arabic (none of whom spoke Spanish) in Oman, the UK, Iran and Algeria. The

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common response was like that of our colleagues, that it reminded them of 'There is no god but God' or similar, but they couldn't be sure because the calligraphy was very ornate and 'old'. Promising.

The same photos of the Arabic script were then given to Spanish professors of Arab and Islamic Studies, who went on to decipher it, concluding that it was a kind of refrain: *al-yumn wa l-iqbāl* ('good fortune and prosperity' or 'blessings/good fortune and prosperity') and was repeated some seven times.

When that refrain was shown (without the English translation) in a more recognisable form of script to the same Arabic speakers as before, their immediate unprompted and individual interpretations were identical: 'good fortune and prosperity' or 'blessings/good fortune and prosperity'.

Language of the people

What does this mean and what does it matter? Unlike Latin, which was purely a language of learning and beyond the grasp of the illiterate majority in the 13th century, Arabic

was and is very much a language spoken by people in all walks of life. The sentiment expressed in the supposedly faux Arabic on the walls of San Román is certainly a happy one, though not the religious one the immediate context had suggested to my fellow excursionists. Very likely, the 13th-century Christian worshippers would have been aware of its meaning, however, and felt it to be familiar.

Prior to the 1085 conquest by the Christians, Toledo had already been a prominent city-state of al-Andalus and was the home of an influential Mozarab community. Following the bloodless coup of King Alfonso VI in 1085, the fusion of Christian, Arab and Jewish culture transformed the city into the most important political and social centre in Castile. The intensive translation activity in Toledo emerged naturally when knowledge-seeking Cluniacs and others from all over Europe met a society of polyglots who were comfortable with the symbols and languages of their neighbours, be they Christian, Jew or Muslim. Toledan culture then was intertwined with the strands of the three major monotheistic religions through their languages and symbols. Perhaps the Church of San Román reflects the 13th-century inhabitants' admiration, regardless of religious ideologies, for the magnificent heritage of learning and transfer of knowledge that had come out of al-Andalus. We would like to think the blending of styles within the church reflects the language bridges used to convey such learning. In our troubled post-9/11 world, it is a nice thought that this little church that has endured the ravages and rigours of time stands proudly as a monument to the best moments of Toledo's past.

References

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- 2 Dodds, JD; Menocal, MR; Krasner Balbale, A (2008) *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture*. Yale University Press

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