

## Toledo School of Translators and Its Importance in the History of Translation in the West

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### Abstract

This article aims to accentuate the critical role played by the Toledo School of Translators during the 12th and 13th centuries and explore its journey from its foundation until its decline within the framework of translation history. This institution was instrumental in the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to medieval Europe. By translating a broad spectrum of scientific, philosophical, and literary works from Arabic into Latin, the scholars of the Toledo School significantly influenced the intellectual landscape of Europe, paving the way for the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. The article delves into the foundation and developmental processes of the Toledo School, highlighting the contributions of key members such as Raymond de Sauvetât and Alfonso X of Castile. It also discusses the broader cultural implications of their work, emphasizing the profound impact these translations had on European thought and culture. In the article, the decline of the Toledo School is attributed to political changes, the rise of new intellectual centers, and the death of key figures. Despite its eventual decline, the Toledo School's legacy endures, having played a crucial role in the history of translation and the development of Western civilization. Through this exploration, the article underscores the lasting significance of the Toledo School of Translators as a beacon of cultural and intellectual exchange.

**Keywords:** Toledo School of Translators, Al-Andalus, Arabic-Latin translation, translation history, translation in Medieval

### Toledo Çevirmenler Okulu ve Batı'daki çeviri tarihi açısından önemi

#### Öz

Bu makale, Toledo Çevirmenler Okulu'nun çeviri tarihi açısından 12. ve 13. yüzyıllarda oynadığı kritik rolü vurgulamayı ve Toledo Okulu'nun kuruluşundan çöküşüne kadar olan yolculuğunu incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu kurum, bilginin İslam dünyasından Orta Çağ Avrupa'sına aktarılmasında etkili oldu. Geniş bir bilimsel, felsefi ve edebi eser yelpazesini Arapçadan Latinceye çevirerek, Toledo Okulu'nun akademisyenleri Avrupa'nın entelektüel manzarasını önemli ölçüde etkileyerek Rönesans ve Bilimsel Devrim'in yolunu açtılar. Makale, Raymond de Sauvetât ve Kastilyalı Alfonso X gibi kilit üyelerin katkılarını vurgulayarak Toledo Okulu'nun kuruluş ve gelişim süreçlerini ele almaktadır. Makale aynı zamanda, bu çevirilerin Avrupa düşüncesi ve kültürü üzerindeki derin etkisini vurgulayarak, çalışmalarının daha geniş kültürel sonuçlarını da tartışmaktadır. Makalede, Toledo Okulu'nun gerilemesi siyasi değişimlere, yeni entelektüel merkezlerin yükselişine ve önemli şahsiyetlerin ölümüne bağlanmaktadır. Nihai düşüşüne rağmen, çeviri tarihinde ve Batı medeniyetinin gelişiminde çok önemli bir rol oynamış olan Toledo Okulu'nun mirası varlığını sürdürmektedir. Bu inceleme aracılığıyla makale, Toledo Çevirmenler Okulu'nun kültürel ve entelektüel alışverişin bir işaretçisi olarak kalıcı önemini vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Toledo Okulu, Endülüs, Arapça-Latince çeviri, çeviri tarihi, Ortaçağ'da çeviri

### Introduction

The region of the Iberian Peninsula, particularly during the Al-Andalus era, stands as a critical intersection for Eastern and Western civilizations, profoundly influencing the history of culture, literature, and translation. Before the Muslim conquest in the 8th century, the Iberian Peninsula had already been a melting pot of diverse civilizations, including the Romans, Vandals, and Visigoths (Safran, 2013). The Muslim invasion in 711 CE, led by Tariq ibn Ziyad, marked the beginning of a new era of cultural and

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intellectual synthesis, with Andalusia's history becoming intricately linked to the North African coast until the late 15th century (Kennedy, 1996).

This period saw the emergence of a polyglot society where Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and local Romance dialects coexisted, leading to the creation of new linguistic and literary forms. As Menocal (2002) discusses, the amalgamation of these cultures in Al-Andalus fostered an environment of remarkable intellectual and cultural exchange, giving rise to significant advancements in various fields. This cultural dynamism was particularly evident in the city of Toledo, which, after its reconquest by Alfonso VI in 1085, became a beacon of scholarly activity and a hub for the translation of Arabic texts into Latin (Menocal, 2002).

The establishment of the Toledo School of Translators, a collective of scholars dedicated to translating a vast array of philosophical and scientific works from Arabic to Latin, played a pivotal role in this intellectual renaissance. As Burnett (2001) elaborates, the translations produced in Toledo during the 12th and 13th centuries were instrumental in reintroducing classical knowledge to Europe, thereby laying the groundwork for the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. The efforts of the Toledo translators ensured that many scientific and literary works were preserved and integrated into the Western intellectual tradition, which otherwise might have been lost.

Toledo's strategic importance as a center of translation can be attributed to the concerted efforts of figures like Raymond de Sauvetât and Alfonso X of Castile. Raymond, serving as the Archbishop of Toledo, established a library and translation center within the cathedral, where numerous scientific and literary works were translated into Latin (Burnett, 2001). Alfonso X further enhanced Toledo's status by patronizing translation activities and promoting the Castilian language, thus ensuring the continued flow of knowledge between cultures (O'Callaghan, 1993).

In this study, the foundation and development of the Toledo School of Translators, examining its influence on the history of translation and its broader cultural implications are revealed by underlining the importance of Toledo school for the history of translation practice. The analysis of the contributions of its key members and the methodologies they employed is to highlight the profound and lasting impact of the Toledo School on both European and global intellectual history.

### **1. Foundation of the Toledo School of Translation and initiation of its activities**

The impact of the Toledo School of Translators extended beyond the preservation of texts; it fundamentally reshaped the intellectual landscape of Europe. As Hasse (2016) points out, the reintroduction of Aristotelian philosophy and other classical works into the European academic sphere challenged the prevailing scholastic dogmas and encouraged a more empirical and rational approach to science and philosophy. This intellectual shift was crucial in paving the way for the Renaissance and the subsequent development of modern scientific thought. It is widely accepted that the region of the Iberian Peninsula (now in Spain) which can be considered as an intersection for the eastern and western civilizations has undeniable importance for the history of culture, literature, and translation, particularly during the Al-Andalus era. Before the Iberian Peninsula was conquered by the Muslims in the 8th Century, numerous different civilizations like Roman rule lasted Vandals and Visigoths used to settle there. In 711 CE Muslims under the rule of Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the Strait of Gibraltar from Tangier (now in Morocco) and invaded southern Spain, ending Visigothic rule. Henceforward Andalusia's history was closely linked with that of the North African coast until the end of the 15th century. ("History of Andalusia", 2022). After the Umayyads, who captured the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century, carried this civilization to the Andalusian State they established in the Iberian Peninsula. When the early Arabic-speaking rulers who arrived in 711 merged and married the local populations, the shared existence of Arabic, Hebrew, Latin,

and local Romance dialects proved saw the emergence of new types of pidgin stethoscopes and bilingual song forms, as well as the creation of new literary bodies in Arabic and Hebrew. The environment gave birth to polyglotism. ("Toledo School of Translators", 2022). When the Umayyads had to leave the Iberian Peninsula altogether in the 15th century, they left behind an endless treasure. (Eruz, 2003 pp. 25-26) In the 12th century, the city of Toledo was now under the rule of the Spanish, they started to translate the books left by the Arabs from Arabic to local languages such as Latin and Catalan. (Eruz, 2003 pp. 25-26)

In 1085, King of Castile VI. Alfonso reconquers Toledo and makes it the capital, Toledo becomes the first city captured by the Christians; however, the three cultures continued to coexist at that time. (Öztunalı, 2017, p. 1323) As Eruz (2003) accentuates, Toledo became a city, where scientists from several different nations and three Abrahamic religions came together for several intensive translation activities, which continued until 1284 and played a crucial for science spread around the Western world. (Eruz, 2003, p. 27)

The importance of the Iberian Peninsula is due to the fact that it is home to the city of Toledo and Toledo School of Translators (Escuela de Traductores de Toledo), which is the group of scholars that translated many of the philosophical and scientific works between Classic Arabic and Latin during the 12th and 13th Centuries. ("Toledo School of Translators", 2022). The impact of translation activities carried out by the members of the Toledo School of Translators were so profound and efficacious that they made inroads into an enlightenment movement in Europe, which lead the continent to renaissance and reformation. Therefore, what members of the Toledo School of Translation did in the Al-Andalus era can be easily considered as a cultural revolution for not only the Iberian Peninsula but also for the whole of Europe and even humanity itself, since they saved many scientific and literary works from getting lost or perished due to being unrevealed because of the lack translation and scholastic thought that hegemonized Europe during the pre-renaissance Era. (Eruz, 2003, p.27)

As Vasoli (1992) asserts: 'It is impossible to understand the meaning and historical dimension of the cultural revolution carried out in Europe without considering the contribution and determining the impact of the science and philosophical thought coming from the Eastern culture and spread around Europe between the 12th and the 13th Centuries.' (Vasoli, 1992, p.39, as cited in Eruz, 2003 p.26)

Another reason for the importance of Al-Andalus at the time was that the Christian rulers of many other parts of Europe considered many of the sciences and theology to be studied by the ancients, and scientists and Arabic-speaking philosophy is heretical. For example, judgments 1210-1277 at the Medieval University of Paris were issued to restrict the doctrines of certain theological works, including Aristotle's treatises on physics and other theological works. the work of Averroes (The Latinized name for Al-Andalus philosopher-physician, Ibn Rushd). (Ridder-Symoens, 2003, p.413)

Raymond de Sauvetât also known as 'Raymond of Toledo', who was a Spanish originated French monastic and served as the Archbishop of Toledo between 1125 and 1152 can be considered as the founder and pioneer of the Toledo School of Translators, since he constructed the Cathedral of Toledo and arranged a section of the cathedral as a library and school, where several scientific and literary works, most of them were inherited from the Ancient Roman Civilization were translated into Latin. ("Toledo School of Translators", 2022).

Works translated by the members of the Toledo School of Translators were written by those who shaped the bases of today's positive sciences like physics, chemistry, geometry, and medicine, as well as philosophy. As an illustration, the most essential works translated by the members of the Toledo School were, 'The Canon of Medicine' by Avicenna, 'On the Measurement of the Circle', by Archimedes, 'Elements of Geometry by Euclid, 'On Algebra and Almucabala' by al-Khwarizmi and 'On the Classification of the Sciences' by al-Farabi. ("Toledo School of Translators", 2022). Almost all of the aforementioned works are

studied at even today's universities, particularly on the courses related to 'History of Mathematics' or 'History of Medicine, etc. Furthermore, several books by Aristotle and Plato, such as: 'Posterior Analytics', 'Physics', 'On the Heavens and the World', 'On Generation and Corruption, and Meteorology' and 'Nicomachean Ethics' have become accessible for today's readers from all over the world and hundreds of native languages thanks to the efforts of the translators who belongs to the tradition of the Toledo School of Translation. ("Toledo School of Translators", 2022).

Campbell (1926) defines the process of translation from Arabic to Latin, particularly during the translation of medical texts, as the following:

"The main body of the Latin translations were indifferently executed owing to the method adopted; the Latin equivalent was placed over the Arabic, and where the translator was at a loss for the correct Latin interpretation, the Arabic was transcribed bodily, with the result that such terms as alcohol, alchemy, and zero have been passed on to us; the Latinity was subsequently reviewed by a clerk, who usually put his name to the MS. It will thus be seen why the Latin translations failed to convey a true conception of Arabian Medicine ("Sarracenic studies") to the medieval scholastics." (Campbell, 1926, p. xii)

Another important pioneer in the foundation of the Toledo School of Translators is Alfonso X of Castile. Thanks to him, the Toledo School of Translators experienced its golden era and Castalian Language gained greater importance. ("Toledo School of Translators", 2022).

## **2. Decline of the Toledo School of Translators and aftermath**

The Toledo School of Translators, a pivotal intellectual hub during the 12th and 13th centuries, played a crucial role in the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to Christian Europe. The decline of this institution was influenced by a confluence of political, cultural, and institutional factors. This analysis will delve into these factors, supported by academic sources, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind the school's eventual end.

The Toledo School of Translators was established in the wake of Alfonso VI's capture of Toledo in 1085. This event marked the beginning of a significant cultural and intellectual exchange between the Islamic and Christian worlds. Under the leadership of Archbishop Raymond of Toledo, the school became a center for translating important works from Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek into Latin and later into Castilian. These translations included philosophical, scientific, and medical texts, many of which had been lost to the Christian world since the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

The political dynamics in medieval Spain significantly impacted the Toledo School of Translators. The Reconquista, the Christian campaign to reclaim territories from Muslim rule, changed the political landscape and the priorities of the ruling Christian kingdoms. As Christian forces expanded their territories, the initial urgency and support for translation efforts diminished. According to Charles Burnett, "The coherence of the Arabic-Latin translation program in Toledo in the 12th century was largely due to the efforts of a few dedicated scholars and supportive political conditions" (Burnett, 2001, p. 253).

The shifting priorities of subsequent rulers also played a role. While Alfonso VI and Archbishop Raymond were committed to fostering intellectual exchanges, later rulers were more focused on military conquests and consolidating their political power. This shift in focus led to a decrease in institutional support for the translation activities in Toledo. Shaykha Jum'a emphasizes, "The role of the Toledo School in transmitting Arabic scientific knowledge to Europe was foundational, but without sustained political support, its activities began to wane" (Jum'a, 1994, p. 36).

The rise of new intellectual centers in Europe further contributed to the decline of the Toledo School of Translators. By the 13th century, cities like Florence and Paris began to attract scholars with the promise of better patronage and academic environments. The Medici family's support in Florence, for example, provided a fertile ground for scholarly activities, drawing many intellectuals who had previously worked in Toledo.

The Mongol destruction of Baghdad's library in 1258 also shifted the center of knowledge dissemination back to Europe, reducing Toledo's role as a hub for translations. As a result, scholars who had been drawn to Toledo for its vibrant intellectual environment began to seek opportunities elsewhere. Levi-Provencal notes, "The rise of new intellectual centers in Europe, particularly in Italy, attracted many scholars away from Toledo, leading to its decline as a premier center for translations" (Levi-Provencal, 1990, p. 120).

The translation activities at the Toledo School significantly decreased after the death of key figures like Archbishop Raymond of Toledo. Raymond's leadership and vision had been instrumental in establishing and maintaining the school's activities. After his death, there was a noticeable decrease in translation efforts. Charles Burnett highlights, "After the death of Archbishop Raymond, the translating activity in Toledo decreased considerably, although it continued into the next century" (Burnett, 2001, p. 253).

This transitional period saw fewer new translations and a shift in focus as scholars began to relocate to other parts of Europe where they found better support and opportunities. The lack of a central figure to champion the cause of translations contributed to the gradual decline of the school's activities.

While King Alfonso X the Wise continued to support translation efforts in the 13th century, promoting translations into Castilian to make knowledge more accessible, this was not enough to sustain the school's earlier momentum. Alfonso's efforts to translate texts into Castilian instead of Latin aimed to make these works more accessible to a broader audience. According to Shaykha Jum'a, "By insisting that the texts be 'llanos de entender' ('easy to understand'), Alfonso X ensured that the translated works would reach a much wider audience, both within Spain and in other European countries" (Jum'a, 1994, p. 37).

However, the lack of a formal institutional structure meant that once key patrons and scholars moved on, there was no mechanism to maintain the school's activities at the same level. Bernard Reilly discusses this in the context of Alfonso VII's reign, noting that the shifting political priorities and the lack of continuous support led to the decline of such intellectual endeavors (Reilly, 2003, p. 497).

Despite its decline, the Toledo School of Translators had a lasting impact on European intellectual history. The translations produced in Toledo played a crucial role in the transmission of knowledge from the Islamic world to Christian Europe, laying the groundwork for the Renaissance. Many of the translated works, including those of Aristotle, Avicenna, and Ptolemy, became foundational texts in European universities.

The work of the Toledo School also contributed to the development of the Spanish language. By translating texts into Castilian, the school helped to elevate the status of the vernacular language, which later became the standard language of Spain. Shaykha Jum'a points out, "The translations into Castilian not only made these works accessible to a wider audience but also contributed to the development of the Spanish language" (Jum'a, 1994, p. 37).

The decline of the Toledo School of Translators was the result of a combination of political changes, the emergence of new intellectual centers, a decrease in translation activities, and the lack of institutional continuity. The political shifts brought about by the Reconquista, the rise of new intellectual hubs in Europe, and the death of key figures all contributed to the gradual cessation of the school's activities. Despite its eventual decline, the Toledo School's contributions to European intellectual history remain significant, highlighting the importance of cross-cultural exchanges in the development of knowledge.

### 3. Importance of the Toledo School of Translators from the perspective of the translation history

The main reason behind the importance of the Toledo School of Translators from the perspective of translation history is the fact that it shaped the understanding of the translation's role in the process of 'history writing'. Thanks to the efforts of the members of the school, modern people are familiar with the ancient philosophical works like those of Plato and Aristoteles, which have an undeniably profound influence on modern philosophy. Moreover, it helped Europe for getting rid of the chains of the Scholastic thought and dogmas of Christianity and provided a suitable environment for the development of positive science, which made it superior among the other civilizations of the world.

Yet another importance of the Toledo School of Translators for translation history is translation archeology. Because, when the methods applied by the members of the school are studied, researchers of the translation history can achieve the idea of how translation activities carried on between the 12th and the 13th history.

It is official that, works translated by the members of the Toledo School of Translators were translated over and over again after the termination of the school by the end of the 13th Century since they are all classics for not only the historians or philosophers but also researchers from several different branches of science. Thus, it is undeniable that the methods utilized by the Toledo School of Translators inspired contemporary translators and researchers of translation history.

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