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

There is no question that English is the lingua franca for the transfer of knowledge in the modern era. Scholars and scientists worldwide 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 Toledo 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 philosphers, but much of the context 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 vs. 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 Maria Rosa Monocci’s book about the ‘Arabicised’ Jew or Christian known as a mozárabe – one who knew Arabic and the culture – acting as informant.

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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 Christendom. 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 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 Trinitarios 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 Visigoth 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 Toledo Mudéjar or Moorish style. You also know that the church is characterised by a basilica with three naves, much like the church of San Román, erected on the former sites of a mosque and a Visigothic church.

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Scientific development.

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The inscription is a reminder of Toledo's multicultural and multilingual history. I am very grateful for the help of Mary Ellen Kerans, Dr Maria Arcas Campoy, Dr Nepton Soltani, Sami Dadi, Mariana Yousif and Ali Annane.

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Language of the people
What does this mean and what does it matter? Unlike Latin, which was a language spoken by people in all walks of life, 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. Toledoan 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

Sources / for more information:
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