
The Attitude of the Medieval Latin Translators towards the Arabic Sciences by José Martínez Gázquez

Micrologus' Library 75. Florence: SISMEL—Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2016. Pp. 213. ISBN 978–88–8450–694–8. Paper €48.00

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Martínez Gázquez's book is dedicated to the Arabic-into-Latin translation movement, one of the most intriguing medieval intellectual phenomena. Even if some isolated translations were realized by the 10th century, it is in the 12th century that a translation 'movement' arose, made by dozens of translators who went to Spain and Southern Italy to make available to the Latins 'the knowledge of the Arabs'. This process found its main development in the Iberian Peninsula—the geographical space on which this volume is focused.

The phenomenon of Arabic-into-Latin translations, an object of conspicuous interest in recent times, had pivotal effects on medieval and early modern scientific speculation. On the one hand, the arrival of a new scientific and philosophical corpus widely opened the Latin gaze to new fields of knowledge, providing its debates with new texts, theories, problems, and approaches that would completely reshape medieval culture in general. On the other hand, the translations also excited mixed and often opposed feelings. The eagerness of the translators and the first scholars receiving these doctrines was often counterbalanced by criticism and suspicion about the infidel authors, their theories, and the 'new' sciences that emerged from the arrival of texts whose disciplines, such as alchemy, were completely unknown to the Latins. Thus, the phenomenon of these translations was marked by antithetical perspectives, thus following the history of medieval Aristotelianism through the condemnations of 1210 and 1277.

Readers in search of a comprehensive study of the complexities of the Arabic-into-Latin translation movement will find Martínez Gázquez's book surprising. It is both less than that and—above all—more. Indeed, the author's approach is extremely peculiar: rather than analyze the activities of the translators and their scientific context, Martínez Gázquez gives the very translators,

philosophers, and commentators leave to speak. The book is an anthology of fascinating excerpts from the prologues and dedicatory letters preceding the translated texts. There, the translators were free to express their points of view and their feelings about the revolutionary work that they were undertaking in order to renovate Latin science and philosophy. At the same time, this anthology gathers other kinds of texts related to the translation movement: historical accounts of the presence of Islam in Spain and the multicultural context of Toledo, the capital of Castile, as well as texts witnessing criticism against the translators and Muslim people in general. From this perspective, then, Martínez Gázquez's book is a precious and original contribution, a handy instrument of both reference and divulgation, comprehensible to a scholarly as well as to a non-specialist public.

However, all good things come with a price. In the case of this brilliant collection of historical witnesses, that price is the absence of a systematic discussion of the so-called 'translation movement'—the bigger picture in which the textual witnesses presented by Martínez Gázquez are historical instantiations. The reader might be somewhat disoriented by the rapid succession of excerpts and texts, each one briefly presented and preceded by a possibly too-concise general introduction, the short length of which entails some superficiality in the approach to the manifold problems and complexities of the Arabic-into-Latin movement (a limit which is mirrored by the out-of-date bibliography of scholarly studies).

Nonetheless, Martínez Gázquez's work is sublime and far-reaching. Its usefulness is particularly evident in the structure of the book, which comprises five interconnected thematic sections. After a general introduction, Martínez Gázquez focuses on the translators (§2: 'The Translations from Arabic to Latin'), presenting 40 excerpts from the prologues and dedicatory letters of works by translators and medieval scholars. From Alvaro of Cordoba (ninth century), to William of Conches and Dominicus Gundissalinus (12th century), up to Ramon Llull and Arnald of Vilanova (13th century), the sources gathered leave the reader with a taste of the sparkling context in which the translations were realized. Especially remarkable is the choice to center the reader's attention on the translators' consideration of Latin culture (characterized by a decaying backwardness) and the science of 'the Arabs', whose 'vases of gold and silver'—following Augustine's theory of the sacred theft, a *topos* at that time—had to be taken over by the Latins in order to

establish a new foundation of Christian science. These texts are joined in §6 ('Castilian Texts') by further accounts of the key role played by the Arabic translations in a later period of Spanish history. Martínez Gázquez, indeed, presents interesting excerpts, in both Spanish and Latin, from the court of Alfonso X, the Wise, as well as by John of Capua, Jiménez de Cisneros, and Miguel de Cervantes, making clear that, while the apex of the translation movement was reached at the end of the 12th century, its effects and general curiosity about Arabic knowledge did not disappear from Iberian society.

Sections 3 and 5 of Martínez Gázquez's book describe, from two slightly different perspectives bearing on the socio-cultural peculiarities of the geographical context in which the translators operated, the Iberian Peninsula. Section 3, 'The Importance of Spain', presents some historical documents witnessing the relevance of the peninsula for the establishment of this translating effort. Indeed, the Iberian Peninsula—and for similar reasons, the other locus of the Arabic-into-Latin translations, Southern Italy—was characterized as a cross-cultural melting pot. This multicultural society is one of the key factors explaining the emergence of the translation movement in the 12th century, when the Latin kingdoms of the peninsula hosted many Islamic and Jewish learned people fleeing from the 'Almohad revolution' in al-Andalus. Many of these refugees arrived in Toledo, the Castilian capital, to which is dedicated §5 of the book ('Toledo, the Medieval City of Knowledge'). Since the Christian conquest of that town in 1085, Toledo became one of the most relevant economic and political centers of the peninsula. In the second half of the 12th century, the town also became the main center of the translation movement. It is in Toledo, in fact, that the three most important medieval translators from Arabic into Latin—Gerard of Cremona, Dominicus Gundissalinus, and Michael Scot—worked on hundreds of scientific and philosophical writings. Martínez Gázquez provides the reader with an enveloping series of texts witnessing the cultural splendor of Toledo, the town which, supposedly, Daniel of Morley preferred to Paris for the study of the Arabic science held there (an account that is, to be sure, extremely problematic). To these texts, the author also adds further interesting documents witnessing a 'different' Toledo, such as that given by Cesarius of Heisterbach, who refers to an imaginative story about the 'school of necromancy' there.

Finally, §3 ('Criticism of the Translation Process') offers important excerpts witnessing the other face of the Latin attitude toward the Arabic translations,

in a sort of counterbalance to the perception given throughout the other sections. The author presents some examples of harsh criticism against both the translations—here the reader can find Roger Bacon’s passionate attacks against the errors made by the translators—and the persistence of Islamic people in the peninsula. This latter aspect would lead to one of the most reprehensible pages in the history of Spain: the banishment of Jewish and Islamic people at the end of the Middle Ages and into the early modern period.

Martínez Gázquez’s *The Attitude of the Medieval Latin Translators towards the Arabic Sciences*, therefore, offers a vivid description of the translators’ self-understanding and their social and cultural framework. It is a precious book—a handy item for intriguing reading as well as for postgraduate teaching. At the same time, it is for the reader, whether a specialist in medieval studies or someone interested in the overall process of the cross-cultural dissemination of knowledge, an invitation to problematize the *vulgata*—in both its ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ narratives—regarding the relationship among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Middle Ages, and to go back to the texts, letting the medieval authors start a dialogue with us.