

# Renaissance: Islamic or Italian Precedence?

Heitor Matallo Junior

Independent Scholar, Campinas, Brazil  
Matalloheitor48@gmail.com

**How to cite this paper:** Matallo Junior, H. (2024) Renaissance: Islamic or Italian Precedence? DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.10818500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10818500)

---

## Abstract

The paper seeks to show that the period between the years 756 and 1031, a period officially recognized as the domination of the Umayyad dynasty in the Iberian Peninsula, saw the emergence of the most important movement for the recovery of classical Greek works known, and offered the foundations for the second Renaissance, the Italian. It also shows that translation is a process that can fundamentally alter original works, as they depend on the translator's interpretation, as well as the existence of equivalent words and concepts in the language to be translated. Both problems were identified in the recovery of classical Greek works by the Toledo School of Translators. The result was that Italian Renaissance was, in fact based on what had been made available by the Toledo School of Translators, which confirms the thesis that the first Renaissance was the Islamic and that the Italian Renaissance was a later movement.

## Keywords

Islamic and Italian Renaissance, Philosophy of Translation, Translation and Vocabulary issues.

---

## 1. Introduction

In a work published in 1908 by Louise Ropes Loomis, entitled *The Greek Renaissance in Italy*<sup>1</sup>, the substantive themes related to philosophical translation from one language to another were highlighted in such a way that it leads us to wonder whether what we consider as Greek philosophical literature can, in fact, be attributed to the Greeks or are inventions and opinions that were crystallized over time by translators. In this short article, Loomis discusses whether the much-vaunted recovery of Greek philosophy in the 15th century actually had the meaning and value attributed to it.

The narrative about how Greek philosophy was recovered to the West begins with the Muslim expansion towards Europe, particularly the Mediterranean region, in the 7th to 11th centuries. In 636, Muslim forces defeated the Byzantines at the Battle of Yarmouk, expanding Islamic rule into the Levant region (Syria, Jordan and Lebanon). They conquered Egypt during the years 641-642, subduing the Byzantine Empire in the region. From there they

internalized Africa, conquering the territories of the Maghreb region, today Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. They finally reached the Iberian Peninsula in 661 and, within a few years, conquered most of the region, establishing themselves in Córdoba as a caliphate in 711. They also had some presence in Sicily and parts of southern Italy.

The establishment of the Muslim Empire in the Mediterranean region created new foundations for the ancient world. After a period of internal political turmoil, the ruling Abbasid dynasty consolidated its power and established a new capital, Baghdad, in 762, overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty. The Abbasid Caliphate or Abbasid Empire was the third caliphate to succeed the Islamic prophet Muhammad. It was founded by a dynasty descended from Muhammad's uncle, Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (566–653 CE), from whom the dynasty takes its name. They ruled as caliphs from their capital, Baghdad, which became a center of science, culture and invention in what became known as the Golden Age of Islam. Baghdad, in addition to being home to several important academic institutions, including the House of Wisdom, as well as having a multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment, has acquired an international reputation as a "Center of Learning".

One of the survivors of the Umayyad family, Abd al-Rahman fled to Muslim Iberia (al-Andalus in southern Spain), where he founded the Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba in the year 661. The Umayyad dynasty established its capital in Damascus, Syria. The Caliph of the time consolidated his power after the First Islamic Civil War and established a dynasty that would last until 750, when it was definitively overthrown by the Abbasid Revolution. The founding of the Caliphate of Córdoba occurred shortly afterwards, in 756, when Abd al-Rahman I, a member of the Umayyad dynasty, escaped persecution by the Abbasids and established an independent emirate in Al-Andalus. He proclaimed himself Emir and, later Caliph, establishing the capital in Córdoba. The Umayyad dynasty ruled the Caliphate of Cordoba for nearly three centuries, from 756 to 1031.

The Caliphate of Córdoba reached its peak in the 10th century, becoming one of the largest and most advanced cities in the Islamic world at the time. However, throughout the 11th century, the Caliphate faced internal divisions, rebellions, and gradual decline. In 1031, the Caliphate of Córdoba fragmented into a series of small kingdoms known as Taifas, marking the end of centralized Umayyad power in the region. This period is often called the "Age of Taifas".

Córdoba's success as an international center came with increased urbanization, wealth, and stability during the 9th century, as well as strong support for scientific and cultural development. Scholars and scientists, using Arabic as an international language, began to examine scientific texts by Greek physicians, many of which had been collected and translated into Syriac during the sixth century, and were in the custody of the Nestorian monks, a community that was established on the border of the Byzantine and Persian empires.

One of the descendants of the founder of the Caliphate of Córdoba, Al-Rahman III (912 – 961 AD), was the great promoter of Córdoba as a center for scientific and philosophical studies. He created a library, known as the *Great Library of Córdoba*, which became one of the most important libraries of the medieval Islamic period. This library was an integral part of the Mosque-Cathedral complex of Córdoba and is believed to have housed a vast collection of manuscripts, including literary, scientific, philosophical and religious works. These manuscripts were often written in Arabic and included translated texts from diverse cultural traditions. Under the reign of Abd al-Rahman III, the library complex was known for attracting scholars, intellectuals and translators from various parts of the Islamic world. The city then became a translation center, where classical Greek and Roman works, as well as texts from diverse traditions, were translated into Arabic and preserved. It is known that the works of Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato were translated. Scientific texts by Greek, Roman, Persian and Indian authors were also translated, covering areas such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, physics and chemistry. Authors such as Hippocrates, Galen, Ptolemy and Euclid were made available, as well as literary works. It is believed that the Bible would also have been translated.

Although the dates and precise details about the specific books in the library are not known, the *Great Library of Córdoba* is often cited as an example of the intellectual and cultural wealth that flourished during the Caliphate of Córdoba in the Islamic Middle Ages. Since the 9th century, many Syriac scientists with knowledge of Arabic worked in Baghdad. They translated Greek scientific works from Syriac into Arabic, enabling Muslim scientists to assimilate this material into their practices and augment it with their own contributions. As Arab scientists traveled to Byzantium, they learned Greek and acquired copies of Greek treatises, which they translated into Arabic. The most famous of these translators was the Syriac Hunayn Ibn Ishaq (808 – 873), who translated the “Hippocratic Corpus” directly from Greek into Arabic. And this is how Greek intellectual heritage survived and could be disseminated throughout various parts of Europe.

## **2. The Islamic Renaissance**

Dimitri Gutas in his book *“Greek Thought, Arabic Culture”*<sup>ii</sup> shows that in *“the mid-eighth century to the end of the tenth, almost all non-literary and non-historical secular Greek books that were available throughout the Byzantine Empire and the East were translated into Arabic”*<sup>iii</sup>. The author also argues that the tremendous effort required to carry out such an undertaking was not the result of a ruler with good will and openness to letters, but was the result of State policy. This is how Gutas expresses himself on this topic: *“The Greek-Arabic translation movement lasted, firstly, well over two centuries; it was not an ephemeral phenomenon. Secondly, it was supported by the entire elite of Abbasid society: caliphs and princes, civil servants and military leaders, merchants and bankers, academics and scientists; it was not the pet project of any given*

*group in furthering their narrow agenda. Third, it was subsidized by an enormous expenditure of funds, both public and private; it was not an eccentric whim of a Maecenas or the affectation of some rich clients seeking to invest in a philanthropic or self-aggrandizing cause. Finally, it ended up being conducted with rigorous academic methodology and strict philological study, with precision by the famous Hunayn ibn-Ishaq and his associates, based on a sustained program that spanned generations and ultimately reflects a social and cultural attitude of the ancient Abbasid society; it was not the result of the random research interests of a few eccentric individuals who, at any time, may indulge in arcane philological practices. and textual activities that in historical terms are demonstrably irrelevant”<sup>iv</sup>.*

Córdoba, and later Toledo, were the privileged places of the Renaissance led by the Islamic world. The transformation of Toledo into an important center for the translation and transmission of Greek knowledge into Latin occurred mainly during the 12th century. The Caliphate of Córdoba collapsed during the civil war that occurred in 1009 to 1013, although it was only finally abolished in 1031 by King Alfonso VII (1105 – 1157). In the 1080s, the fragmented Muslim *Taifas* that had survived after 1031 (Almería, Arcos, Badajoz, Carmona, Granada, Moron, Valencia, Zaragoza, among others) began to face an existential threat from the Christian kingdoms to the north as Alfonso VI and later Alfonso VII of Castile increased their attacks. The *Taifa* of Toledo was finally retaken in the year 1085 by Alfonso VI.

The 12th century saw a significant increase in cultural and intellectual activity in Toledo, especially under the reign of Alfonso VI of Castile (reigned 1072–1109) and later during the reign of his grandson, Alfonso VII (reigned 1126 to 1157). These Christian rulers showed interest in the knowledge accumulated in the lands under Muslim rule, and Toledo, due to its geographic position and cultural diversity, became a key location for this exchange.

After the Castilian conquest, benefiting from a multicultural population, Toledo continued to be an important cultural center; its Arabic libraries were not looted and a translation center was established, in which books in Arabic or Hebrew would be translated into Castilian by Muslim and Jewish scholars, and from Castilian into Latin, allowing knowledge to be available for further dissemination.

Therefore, between the “12th and 14th centuries, a large and important portion of Greek philosophy and science had already been appropriated by the Arab world and was, almost in its entirety available to be translated into Latin”<sup>v</sup>. So, the rediscovery of the Greek classics in the 14th to 16th centuries in Italy was, in fact, a Second Renaissance. As Loomis mentions, “For various reasons north Italy toward the end of the fourteenth century seemed peculiarly adapted to become the seat of another classical renaissance, though of one somewhat different in character and results from that which had already run its course”<sup>vi</sup>. What is meant by “had already run its course” above is that the Islamic Renaissance, through the importation of Greek works from Mesopotamia and

the East to Al-Andalus, was what generated the revival of Greek culture in Europe. The Italian Renaissance was a reflection of this process at a literary and artistic level, which had undeniable impacts on architecture and the arts and promoted a departure from medieval artistic and intellectual traditions, introducing new styles, techniques and perspectives. However, his role as a renewer of Greek philosophical thought was limited, having been anticipated by at least two centuries by the Islamists in Córdoba and, later in Toledo, by the Spanish kings.

The Italian Renaissance was quite different from that led by the Islamic world, which was based on the recovery of Greek intellectual culture. In Italy, a new purpose was being generated, a certain meaning, a notion of beauty and refinement found in the literature of Dante (1265 – 1321), Petrarch (1304 – 1374) and Boccaccio (1313 – 1375), remembering the existence of venerable treasures that they had long been neglected by the Western world. Loomis quotes a letter written by Coluccio Salutato (1301 – 1406)<sup>vii</sup> explaining that he had found the word “*humanitas*” used by Cicero and other Romans to denote both affability and courtesy of disposition, culture and refinement of spirit, i.e. the qualities that especially distinguish man from brute animals<sup>viii</sup>.

In a certain way, the idea of “*humanitas*” was linked to being elegant, persuasive and honorable, avoiding linguistic barbarisms. Ultimately, it was linked to the idea of being enlightened and noble. As Loomis mentions, “*Such an ideal of behavior was essentially aristocratic and artificial, but it appealed to a growing appreciation of the value of form and decorum in human endeavors.*”<sup>ix</sup>

### **3. Vernacular and Interpretation in Philosophical translation**

In the medieval period, translation was a topic of interest among scholars. Saint Jerome (c. 347–420), known for his translation of the Bible into Latin, wrote extensively about the challenges and principles of translation. His work laid the foundation for many later discussions on the philosophy of translation. Saint Augustine (354–430), a prominent figure in Christian theology, also addressed the philosophy of translation and his reflections on the importance of transmitting the essence of the original text and at the same time adapting it to the public's understanding, a concept that had great importance for the topic. John of Salisbury (c. 1115–1180), a medieval scholar and bishop of Chartres, discussed translation in his work “*Metalogicon*”, emphasizing the importance of fidelity to the original text and the need for adaptability to different linguistic and cultural contexts. Finally, Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a medieval scholastic philosopher, addressed language and translation in his works, emphasizing the importance of understanding the meaning behind words and conveying the sense rather than a literal translation.

Europe did not learn about paper until the 11th and 12th centuries. Before that, scribes wrote on calfskin or papyrus. Both materials were expensive and each scribe tried to make the most of the space available to write. Some common techniques were avoiding spaces between words or minimizing the size

of letters. Many did not use commas or full stops and resorted to acronyms and abbreviations. Generally, the older the manuscripts, the more economical scribes tended to be with their writing space. However, this way of writing complicated the task of copying the text in later years.

When copying written texts, scribes often omitted letters or entire words, spelled words incorrectly, or made mistakes in grammar or syntax. Many factors were at play. Fatigue, the quality of the original text, the professionalism and literacy of the scribe influenced the result of the work. Scribes were paid well, and some rushed their projects to get paid and receive new orders. When scribes were very thrifty or had poor handwriting, errors in copying their texts were almost inevitable.

The translator often had substantive knowledge about the topic to be translated and made “corrections” to what he considered most appropriate to the topic. These were so-called “intentional errors”, where the translator modified the text according to his own interpretation. There are many examples of this type of modification, occurring in religion and philosophy. The Bible, for example, has several passages (long identified) where unintentional and other intentional errors radically modify the text.

In philosophy, an already classic example is mentioned, starring Al-Kindi, an erudite Arab, mathematician and philosopher from the Abbasid court who probably lived between 801 and 873 in Baghdad. Al-Kindi, when commenting on Aristotle's book *Metaphysics*, offers the following description, which is considered quite surprising: *“His (Aristotle's) purpose in the book called Metaphysics is to explain things that subsist without matter and, although may exist together with what has matter, they are not linked or united to matter; affirm the unity of God, the great and exalted, explain His beautiful names and that He is the causative agent of the universe, who perfects [all things], the God of the universe who rules through His perfect providence and complete wisdom”*<sup>x</sup>. This is not a description of Aristotelian metaphysics, but a completely accurate description of al-Kindi's own conception of metaphysics, which he confuses with theology.

Still in this context, I mention something that illustrates well the topic we are dealing with<sup>xi</sup>. It took more than 200 years after Aristotle's death for the Roman world to begin translating Greek philosophers into Latin. Perhaps the most interesting example to be cited is that referred to the tribune Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC), who wanted to translate into Latin the philosophical concepts of Plato, Aristotle and others, since the Roman domain already extended over a vast territory of ancient Magna Grecia. The difficulties that arose were enormous, as the Latin language lacked the necessary vocabulary to translate Greek concepts. Cicero then begins to develop a philosophical vocabulary to fill this gap and to guarantee *“Latin's right to become a philosophical language”*, as Carlos Levy<sup>xii</sup> points out. Cicero's example shows that science and philosophy need a specific vocabulary, otherwise complex thoughts cannot be expressed. The Greeks were the most important civilization when it comes to

philosophy and science and even today many words in the scientific vocabulary come from Greek, as well as many concepts that science uses every day. Studies say that 30% of words in English come from Greek and in the “*vocabulary of science and technology, the number rises to more than 90 percent*”<sup>xiii</sup>. In other words, Latin did not have adequate or sufficient vocabulary for translation, therefore they had to “latinize” Greek words. In summary, we can state that vocabulary and interpretative problems were within the main limitations of the process of transmitting Greek philosophical culture to the Latin world. Hence Louise Ropes Loomis states that she is not very sure that what we received from the Greeks was really what they wanted to transmit!

The Italian Renaissance was something very special and, we can say, quite different from the Islamic Renaissance. The Abbasid Islamic Golden Age represented the Islamic Renaissance during 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and prepared the ground for the later Italian Renaissance. However, there are many specificities in each of the two processes. In the case of the Islamic revival, in general terms, Greek works were translated into Arabic respecting a certain fidelity to the original. There are many cases, such as Al-Kindi's case with Aristotle, in which the translator gave expression to his own vision. However, in general, the concern with style did not exist, but only the need to express the authors' ideas as found in the original.

The Italian Renaissance, as Loomis<sup>xiv</sup> noted, emphasized the appreciation of the concepts of beauty and elegance and this interfered with the translation work in some cases and, in others, a rewriting of the works occurred. As the author tells us, “*the Latin translator knew that his version would be judged by contemporaries who would never read the original and would applaud his work only as it succeeded in being itself elegant and ornate after the fashion of the Latin rhetoricians. Even fellow-humanists would not be apt to apply the test of fidelity to the Greek but, like Eneas Sylvius<sup>xv</sup>, would blame the translator if he presented them with an Aristotle who was not fluent or graceful.*”<sup>xvi</sup>. The author continues expressing these concepts as follows: “*Just as in architecture, the luxuriant Roman-Corinthian was preferred to the more severe Doric, so in literature the inflated rhetoric of the late Republic and Empire, the passionate periods of Cicero and the pompous language of Livy and Sallust were more esteemed than the sobriety, lucidity and balance of the best periods of Greece.*”<sup>xvii</sup>

The Catholic Church took advantage of this tendency to aggregate ideas to reinforce its doctrine and used some luminaries to do so. Exemplary was the figure of Marsiglio Ficino (1433 – 1499), Catholic priest, philologist, and Italian Renaissance philosopher, protégé of Cosmas de Medici and his successors. He was a prominent Neoplatonist of his time, being part of the Florentine Platonic Academy, a humanist institution founded in 1459 by the patron Cosimo de Medici. At first it was a circle of friends and scholars to discuss literary topics linked to the Medici family. However, it was imitated in other cities in Italy and later in all European nations<sup>xviii</sup>.

Ficino translated Plato's works into Latin and, writing to a friend, left the following words: *"Furthermore, so that the eyes are not dazzled by the vision of this new luminary, I have composed a kind of commentary on eighteen books, in that, to the best of my ability, I explain the Platonic mysteries, paying more attention to the meaning than to the exact words. Thus, I remove the poetic veil and show that everywhere Plato's thoughts are in accordance with divine law. I believe I have not erred in saying that Providence has decreed that certain keen intellects, which give reluctant obedience to the unsupported authority of divine law, will yield now that Plato's reasoning is brought to the aid of religion."*<sup>xix</sup>

It goes without saying that such a concept of translation and presentation of Greek works would practically destroy them. However, the practical value of the language "beautification" work produced by the Greek Renaissance in Italy did not destroy Greek philosophy and literature, but made them, in a certain way, irrelevant, since what was examined in Latin was not the original translated works, but a free literary creation of Latin culture itself. As Loomis pointed out, *"The practical value of Greek in exposing errors in biblical interpretation and in waging theological controversies was only realized after knowledge of it was brought to northern Europe. The writing produced in Italy, comparable in originality and insight to Greek writing, was motivated by the tension and agitation of contemporary life and, except in superficial cases, shows little effect on the Greek Renaissance."*<sup>xx</sup>

In other words, at the time Loomis wrote his article in 1908, there were serious problems for philosophy arising from the processes of transmitting knowledge, where translation was one of the most important of them. The *Toledo School of Translators* made surprising and notable achievements in the preservation of Western culture and the Greek Renaissance. In fact, it was what gave the basis for this renaissance which, later on, could be conveniently taken advantage of (and also adulterated) to serve the purposes for which it was intended, whether in terms of acculturation or questioning religious reality and the clerical interpretation of previous culture. The Italian Renaissance was a precursor to this process and, as Loomis showed us, its relationship with the use of Greek philosophy and culture was quite restricted, limited mainly to architecture and the arts.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The issues briefly discussed here confirm our hypothesis that the true Renaissance, that one based on the recovery of Greek science and philosophy, occurred during the Golden Age of Islam, which took place in Baghdad and later in the Iberian Peninsula, especially in Al-Andalus in Spain. The recovery, conservation and translation of Greek works during the Golden Age of Islam was the true process through which the Renaissance could expand to the rest of Europe, including Italy. The Renaissance acquired distinct characteristics in each country in which it flourished.



Problems of interpretation and vernacular occurred during the transmission of knowledge in these long centuries between the dissolution of the Empire of Alexander the Great in 423 a.C. and the founding of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad in 762 a.D. Only part of the problems related to translation or vocabulary were identified in the process of translating from Greek to Syriac, from Syriac to Arabic, and finally from Arabic to Latin. The Italian Renaissance became the symbol of the Renaissance movement worldwide. However, the Islamic Renaissance was the true contributor to the transmission of Greek culture to the West. The House of Wisdom in Baghdad and the Caliphate of Córdoba were responsible for the preservation and translation of Greek cultural heritage in Europe. Later, in the 12th century, the kings of Spain contributed to keeping the tradition of Greek culture alive with the founding of the School of Translators in Toledo. The Italian Renaissance took advantage of these antecedents and flourished its art and architecture more than a hundred years later. This was, in fact, a second Renaissance, with a more artistic than philosophical focus. It cannot be denied that the flourishing of the arts in Italy reached its climax of perfection and beauty in the 16th century, but the philosophical rescue of Classical Greece was, without a doubt, the work done during the Golden Age of Islam.

---

## Notes and References

- <sup>i</sup> Loomis, L. R. The Greek Renaissance in Italy, *The American Historical Review*, Jan., 1908, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 246- 258
- <sup>ii</sup> Guta, D. (1998). *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, Routledge, NY.
- <sup>iii</sup> Guta, D. (1998). *Op. Cit.* p.1
- <sup>iv</sup> Guta, D. (1998). *Op. Cit.* P.2
- <sup>v</sup> Guta, D. (1998). *Op. Cit.*
- <sup>vi</sup> Loomis, L.R. *Op. Cit.* p. 247
- <sup>vii</sup> Born in Lucca, he graduated from the rhetorical school of Francesco Petrararch's friend, Pietro da Muglio, and became chancellor of Florence in 1375, shortly after the death of Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio.
- <sup>viii</sup> Loomis, L.R. *Op. Cit.* P. 248
- <sup>ix</sup> Loomis, L. R. *Op. Cit.* p. 249.
- <sup>x</sup> Mentioned in em <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-kindi/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Matallo Junior, H. (2023). *Relativistic Language and the Natural Philosophy Big-Bang* In [https://www.academia.edu/100763002/Relativistic\\_Language\\_and\\_the\\_Natural\\_Philosophy\\_Big\\_Bang](https://www.academia.edu/100763002/Relativistic_Language_and_the_Natural_Philosophy_Big_Bang)
- <sup>xii</sup> Lévy, C. (2021). *Cicero and the creation of a Latin philosophical vocabulary in the Cambridge companion to Cicero's philosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/e/word-origins/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Loomis, L.R. *Op. Cit.*
- <sup>xv</sup> Eneas Sylvius (1405 – 1464) was elected as Pope Pio II in 1458.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Loomis, L.R. *Op. Cit.* p.255

<sup>xvii</sup> Loomis, L.R. Op. Cit. p.255

<sup>xviii</sup> [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academia\\_Plato](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academia_Plato)

<sup>xix</sup> Loomis, L.R. Op. Cit. p.257

<sup>xx</sup> Loomis, L.R. Op. Cit. p.258