

KNOWLEDGE AND ATTAINMENTS  
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

In a book which appeared some thirty years ago under the title: *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, our learned friend Taha Husein put forward a seductive thesis which was as hard to accept *in toto* as it was to reject: the relation of the culture, literature and science of his country to the West, or more exactly to that Mediterranean culture which is the meeting-point of East and West. Ancient Egypt, the Hellenistic, even the Arab and the Moslem, all subscribed to this "Mediterraneanism," to coin a phrase, instead of being linked purely and simply to the East, where a scholarly and traditional attitude delighted in classifying it. This abrupt turn to the West is quite justified as far as the Hellenistic period of the country is concerned; but with regard to the Egypt of the Pharaohs, the Fatimids and the Mamelukes, and without under-estimating its ties with the other Mediterranean countries, one cannot overlook all the aspects which linked it to the Near East, to Babylonian Mesopotamia, to the Arabia of

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Mahomet, and to the Persia of the Abbassids. But the merit of this paradoxical book, as is often the case in Taha Husein's work, is its vigorous insistence, albeit in a manner which is too rigid and exaggerated, on this undeniable fact: the unity of Mediterranean culture in Antiquity and even in the Middle Ages, although this is contrary to the opinions of Henri Pirenne, which, beyond the differences of religious creed and political allegiance, of language and custom, touches the intellectual heart of man, touches, as it were, his mental predicaments, touches a common spiritual patrimony. More than in literature and art, this "common" quality (or community) is well illustrated in the appreciation of knowledge, in the study and elaboration of knowledge down the centuries.

*In principio*, knowledge took birth in the East, in the Land of the Two Rivers, and still further east: of this there is no doubt. Later, however, and by channels which it is still hard to define accurately, it overflowed on to the shores of the Mediterranean, where, in Greece, it underwent an unparalleled new burst of life and bloom. Although it held its torch towards the west, by way of Rome, immortal Greece later paid the bulk of her debt to the East with the science and philosophy of Hellenism, in which the East could recognise some part of its own heritage, animated and enriched by the genius of the Hellenes. It is this part of the classical heritage, as one well knows, which was first and foremost revived in the Moslem culture of the Abbassid period, and which constituted its most precious legacy to posterity. And this is why, by the intermediary first of the Syrians and then of the Arabs, Christians and Moslems, the surge of this current from Persia and Mesopotamia once again changes direction and flows back towards the waters of the same Mediterranean which had previously been so favourable to its blossoming.

The late Middle Ages see two sources of this Graeco-oriental heritage being kindled at opposite ends of the Mediterranean: Byzantium and Moslem Spain; the latter precisely asking Byzantium for the texts and monuments of ancient knowledge (it suffices to think of the lot of the Graeco-Arab Dioscorides of the 10th century), and gathering in the Far West of Europe the manuscript treasures which are to dazzle the whole of Europe with a new light. Likewise one could not omit mentioning, for the centuries

preceding the 11th century, the part played by Fatimid Egypt, with its motley, heterodox culture (lamentably later almost exterminated by the Sunnite reaction under the Aiyoubids and the Mamelukes), which borrowed so extensively from the scientific and pseudo-scientific heritage of late Antiquity. This Fatimid culture and knowledge which is in the process of being re-pieced and re-examined, certainly played an eminent part in the diffusion of "Mediterranean" knowledge (that is: Graeco-Hellenistic-Arab). The offspring of the great Egyptian scholars—mathematicians, physicians and doctors—, who are most brilliantly represented by Ibn al-Haitham (a Persian by birth who lived and worked in the Fatimid environment), bear witness to the value of this centre of scientific and technical radiation which is what Egypt was in the days of its heterodox Califs—the brightest days of Mediterranean Islam.

This Moslem knowledge (medicine, astronomy, astrology, mathematics) which cloaked and developed a classical heritage in the language of the Koran, was soon to reveal its whole wealth to the Latin West. The pioneer of this communication was first and foremost Constantine the African, an 11th Maghreb Moslem, who spent the last days of his life as a Benedictine monk in the monastery of Montecassino. It is thanks to this mysterious man with his dual faith, his dual tongues and his dual cultures, that Arab medical science, in turn observing some of the leftovers of Greek science, appeared for the first time in Italy: one is absolutely obliged to link his work which was carried out in Campania in the latter half of the 11th century, with the flowering of the medical school at Salerno, which, in the same century, reached its zenith and overlapped this Arab science with what had been directly handed down to it by the classical heritage, by Byzantium and the Latin tradition, uninterrupted throughout the late Middle Ages. Leaving aside the problem of the paternity of the writings of Constantine (who has, in fact, been wrongly considered as a shameless plagiarist), he takes the credit for being the first to spread the news of the great Moslem scientific tradition to the centre of the Mediterranean and of Christianity; and at this moment this tradition extended from Persia to Maghreb and Spain. And precisely there, in the Iberian peninsula, what had been the isolated work of this scholar and a few disciples between Montecassino and Salerno, became, in

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the 12th century, the magnificent team-work of the school of Toledo, which revealed to the Christian Western world the treasures of Graeco-Arab science and philosophy.

And so what came to pass in the ancient Visigoth capital on the banks of the Tagus, which, after three and a half centuries of Moslem domination Alphonsus VI had just handed over to Christianity, is one of the most triumphant pages of the cultural history of Europe and the whole Mediterranean, because it was a question, precisely, of a Mediterranean heritage which was at once classical and oriental. If the old conception of a translators' "School" or "College" at Toledo, organised by the Archbishop don Raimond, can be disregarded from now on, it is still certain that a company of scholars from all corners of Europe carried out their work there freely during the 12th century, making available to the West, by their translations, the science and philosophy of the Arabs, and sometimes going as far back as their Greek models. The names of Adelard of Bath, Hermann Dalmate, Domenico Gundisalvi, John of Seville, Mark of Toledo and many others form an honours-list which is dazzlingly topped by the great Gherardo da Cremona: a citizen of Lombardy whose passion for Antiquity drew him as far as Toledo, and who, during decades of intense study and work, secured for his own thirst for knowledge and for posterity the master-pieces of Ptolemy and Avicenna, Euclid and Galen, al-Kindi and Alfraganus, and many other ancient scholars and philosophers of the mediaeval East who, from that time onwards, ceased to be mere names for the Western world and became texts, ideas and systems which our own Middle Ages studied passionately in turn.

The philosophy and science of the 13th century—the time when Dante's thought and learning took shape—are completely imbued with this Arab heritage; his Aristotle is partly (let us not forget that Byzantium always affirmed a direct contact with the original Greeks) of Arab origin, and his great Moslem commentator, Averroes, whom St. Thomas refuted while still graciously receiving many of his viewpoints and speculative methods, was an Arab. This triumph of Arab science in the Latin West resounded throughout the 13th and 14th centuries, and brought about Petrarch's reaction in the name of Latinity and orthodoxy which seemed to him to be equally threatened. But this is not the place to pursue the fates of this eastern science

and philosophies through to the centuries of our Renaissance, with the former giving way to the new experimental science of the West, and the latter surviving in the form of Latin Averroism right up to the dawning of our modern times.

To return to the Middle Ages, however, and to that superb flourish and circulation of cultural wealth which they enjoyed after the year 1,000, we must not forget another foyer and laboratory for these exchanges which blossomed in Sicily in its political, social and cultural Golden Age. Suffice it to recall (so as not to repeat things which are common knowledge) the interpenetration of the three cultures—Greek, Latin and Arab—which reigned in Sicily during the Norman period, and the scientific fruits which this syncretism bore. This is the age of the Sicilian translations from the Greek and Arabic, when Admiral Eugenio translated Ptolemy's *Optic* into Latin from the Arabic original and Henri Aristippus translated Plato's *Phaedon* directly from the Greek; when Edrisi, the Moroccan *sharif*, gathers, in the shadow of the throne of Roger, the material of his *Geography* and precedes it with an introduction which is a complete hymn to the infidel scholar king; forgetting, in the face of science, all differences of creed and culture. This semi-classical, semi-Arab science extends from the Hautevilles to the Hohenstaufens, in this cultural atmosphere which we shall henceforth and thanks to the work of Amari, of Haskins, the late De Stefano and Miss Jamison know better than we still know the Toledo environment—this is certainly harder to study exhaustively by virtue of the host of personalities there and the wide variety of relevant material. Lastly, then, let us encompass in a glance this periplus of the sciences and cultures along the shores of the sea which the Romans used proudly to call *mare nostrum*, a label which we can well accept without any imperialist conceit if we think rather of the immaterial empire of the spirit: when the lights of Antiquity were dowsed over this sea, pinpricks of light remained behind there or were re-kindled *ex novo*, glowing like lighthouses in the darkness of the Middle Ages; first of all, Byzantium, the link which connects most directly this whole new world with the old, vanished one; and then Damascus and Cairo (once, alas, the light of Alexandria had disappeared), the two Mediterranean centres of the Islam Renaissance; in the far west, Cordoba, the Alexandria of the

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West, proud in the consciousness of its rekindled torch; and from Cordoba to Toledo, from Toledo to the Sevilla of Alphonsus X, to Paris, to Bologna, to the Florence of Dante, to the Padua of Petrarch and Giotto and the Averroist masters. Such are the routes of the mind through the mediaeval millenary, above the ravages of war and the rivers of blood. As we have the experience of such horrors in ourselves, as we live under the dagger of awful threats, let us take some heart and hope from this illustration which shows us how the imperishable wealth of the spirit floats to safety and is broadcast to other generations beyond the floods.