12.15: The Twelfth-Century Renaissance

The twelfth century in Western Europe was a time of renewed vibrancy in intellectual activity, and much of this activity centered on Europe’s towns and cities. We call this renewal of intellectual activity the Twelfth-Century Renaissance in order to separate it from both the Carolingian Renaissance of the eighth and ninth centuries and the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both monasteries and cathedrals were centers of education in Western Europe, even during the dark days of the tenth century. Over the eleventh century, thinkers in the monasteries of Western Europe had increasingly sought to apply the tools of logic (in particular Aristotelian logic) to the study of the Bible. But Western Europeans were familiar with very little of Aristotle’s work aside from a small number of logical writings that had been translated from Greek into Latin in the sixth century. The twelfth century would see a massive shift, with an immense growth of interest in philosophy on the part of those men (and a few women) who had a formal education. The spur to this interest would come from events in Southwestern Europe.

Al-Andalus had been a major source of Muslim intellectual activity. As early as the tenth century, Christian scholars, such as Gerbert of Aurillac (who eventually became Pope Sylvester II, r. 999 – 1003), had visited Muslim-ruled Spain to read the works of ancient Greek thinkers that were unavailable elsewhere in Western Europe. Gerbert’s writings show him to be particularly fascinated with Euclid, Arabic numerals, and the concept of zero.

When Toledo fell to Christian armies in 1085, its libraries became available to the larger Christian world. Muslims had translated most of the philosophy of Aristotle into Arabic in addition to writing extensive original works that engaged with the thought of Aristotle and Plato. Once these books were in Christian hands, Raymond, archbishop of Toledo (r. 1125 – 1152), set up translation teams. People who spoke Arabic and the Romance languages of Spain would first translate these books into Spanish, and these books would then be translated into Latin, which would thus make Aristotle and Ptolemy (as well as the works of Arabic philosophers) available to educated people throughout Western Europe. The availability of texts that had been largely known only by reputation to the thinkers of Western Europe spurred an intellectual revolution, as the Christian thinkers sought to understand how to reconcile an understanding of the world...
based on Christianity with the approach of the non-Christian ancient Greeks.

Such translations on the Christian/Muslim frontier continued through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Christendom thus had access to the writings of Muslim philosophers. Western Europeans read natural philosophy, such as al-Haytham’s writings on optics and the Aristotelian commentaries of Ibn Rushd (whose name they pronounced as Averroës). This movement saw the translation not only of philosophy, but also of medicine—indeed, in the Muslim world, philosophers often served as physicians—so the medical works of philosophers and physicians such as Ibn Sina (whose name Western Europeans pronounced as Avicenna) were read avidly by Christians in Western Europe.

Philosophy and medicine were not the only fields of study to receive new interest. Western Europeans were also showing a renewed interest in law. Although the kingdoms that had grown up in Western Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire had incorporated some elements of Roman Law as well as the oral law of the Germanic peoples into their legal systems, law codes were for the most part unsystematic. Starting from the eleventh century, scholars, particularly those based in the schools of Bologna, began subjecting The Justinian Code (see Chapter Seven) to intense study, using logical analysis to create a body of systematic writing on the interpretation of law. These men who studied Roman Law would often go to work for kings and emperors, with the result that much European law would often draw its inspiration from Justinian.
Most schools were still attached to cathedral churches—indeed, these schools in which medicine, law, and philosophy flourished as disciplines of study might be compared to the madrassas of the Muslim world—so the chief field of study in these schools was theology, that is, the interpretation of the Bible. And theologians increasingly drew on logical analysis and philosophy of language to understand what they believed was God’s revelation to humanity.

Eventually, many of these cathedral schools gained the right to organize as self-governing institutions. We call these institutions universities. By the end of the twelfth century, the universities of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford had become self-governing institutions and would serve as the foundation of the university system of the Western world that exists to the present day.

2 Between the sixth and eleventh centuries, a practice emerged whereby the pope would adopt a distinct name from the name he was born with upon ascension to the papacy. The practice continues to the present day.