

Book Review/ Kitap Tanıtımı

Violet Moller, 2019, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities*, London: Picador, 2019.

Sevket Hylton Akyildiz*

(ORCID: 0000-0001-9545-4432)

Makale Gönderim Tarihi
04.12.2021

Makale Kabul Tarihi
27.12.2021

Violet Moller's *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities* is a history of ideas study that examines the efforts of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Humanist scholars to understand ancient Greek and Egyptian science, mathematics, and medicine. Moller comprehensively explains how the works of Euclid, Ptolemy, and Galen were transmitted, lost, and rediscovered in the medieval and early modern era across six Mediterranean cities and Baghdad from the moment of their production until about 1500 CE.

The *Map of Knowledge* shows us how the Muslim Arabs expanded their territories during the 7th century and absorbed peoples from the Byzantine, Egyptian, and Persian empires. Likewise, these societies and cultures influenced the growing Muslim Abbasid empire (750-1258 CE). Other influences on Arab-Muslim civilisation were Hindu-Arabic numerals and Chinese sciences, including papermaking and gunpowder. Initially, the Arab Muslims sought knowledge that would enable them to understand astronomical and astrological data (for prayer purposes) and medical science (for practical reasons). However, in time, the quest for knowledge expanded to meet the complex needs of a developing society. So, the Muslim elites and academics turned to ancient Greek books covering engineering, architecture, urban planning, military technology, agriculture, and water management. They built libraries

* PhD., SOAS, University of London Languages and Cultures Department, United Kingdom. sevket.akyildiz1@gmail.com.

and universities to house and transmit knowledge. Importantly, they did not solely copy knowledge from the past; rather, old knowledge was used to help generate new knowledge (p. 88).

A similar story occurred in those border areas where Muslims and Christians shared encounters. For instance, in Al-Andalus/Spain and Sicily, Italy, in this case, Christian and (in Palermo, Renaissance-Humanist thinkers) either borrowed Arabic translations of Euclid, Ptolemy, and Galen and the Arabic intellectuals or sought the original Greek language versions to translate into Latin. In the last example, this quest for the original Greek source, and Islamophobia, is the reason why the Muslim civilisational influence on modern science and mathematics was conveniently 'forgotten' in Europe for many centuries.

The book contains eight chapters, with six focused upon Mediterranean cities and one in modern-day Iraq. Chapter one, 'The Great Vanishing', analyses the decline of pagan Rome and Greece, the rise of Christian societies in Europe and the Mediterranean and the resulting marginalisation of ancient Greek and Egyptian knowledge, libraries and 'classical education'. It resulted in fewer people reading manuscripts and public libraries closing; while natural pests and disasters diminished the number of documents accessible. What survived was held by the elites or the Church. Chapter two, 'Alexandria', investigates a city founded around 300 BCE in Egypt that '*Has always been the ultimate symbol scholarly endeavour*' (p. 31), writes Moller. Euclid's life and works are summarised, in particular the importance of the mathematical work, *The Elements*. Likewise, Ptolemy's life and intellectual production are outlined in his book, *Mathematical Syntaxis* (or *the Greatest Compilation, Al-Majisti, The Almagest*). Lastly, Galen's life and works are described, including his numerous medical works and how these sources survived in Syria and Persia.

Chapter three, 'Baghdad' notes that during the 8th and 9th centuries, this Abbasid-ruled city was '*at the peak of its golden age*' (p. 61). Its rulers Al-Mansur (714-775 CE), Harun Al-Rashid (763-809 CE), and Al-Ma'mun (786-833 CE) sponsored scholarship, libraries and the recovery and translation of ancient Greek scientific manuscripts. Baghdad was a multicultural and generally tolerant city that '*attracted the greatest minds of the day, and who, through a combination of*

wealth, enlightenment, curiosity and ambition, propelled human knowledge forward (p. 61). Other topics include papermaking, bookbinding, public libraries, and book shops. Moller highlights the importance of learning and scholarship: *'there were over 5,000 Muslim authors writing by the end of the eleventh century'* (p. 75).

Chapter four, 'Cordoba', in Al-Andalus, like Baghdad, was a multicultural environment that saw its socio-political elites, from the 9th century onwards, promote learning, scholars, private and public libraries, and the acquisition and translation of ancient Greek knowledge, book production, calligraphy, and higher education (for those able to access it) (pp. 114-117). They *'went back to Ptolemy to study, challenge and correct his work, and they made use of ideas from Indian mathematics and from Euclid's Elements to produce their own contributions to the gradual process of assessment and improvement that drives scientific research'* (p. 120). Moller states that after the Catholic conquest of Al-Andalus, in the year 1499 CE, the *'cleric Cardinal Ximenez de Cisneros'* had burnt *'in the region of two million books—a "cultural holocaust"'* (p. 133). Chapter five, 'Toledo', was an important city where the transmission of scientific knowledge between the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian societies took place. Here *'Latin versions of Khwarizmi's book on arithmetic helped to spread the decimal system in Europe'* (p. 159). Notwithstanding, Moller clarifies the shift in attitudes towards Arabic sources and the quest for ancient Greek sources: *'This interested attitude was characteristic of European scholars in the twelfth century, but it did not last. By the time of the Renaissance, the Muslim scholars who had made such an enormous contribution were being obscured by an obsessive reverence for ancient Greek sources'* (p. 161).

Chapter six, 'Salerno', in Italy during the 10th century, had a medical 'school' was operational in the city. The arrival in the mid-11th century of a North African merchant – either Muslim or Christian – went on to help improve the medical and hospital service in the city. Medical books from the Arabic world and ancient Greek sources were acquired and translated into Latin, and Graeco-Arabic concepts were formulated. Interestingly, the masses relied upon herbal medicines. Chapter seven, 'Palermo', in Sicily, under the Arabs and Normans, was a multicultural

society that sponsored Ancient Greek and Arab knowledge and translation into Latin. A similar picture emerges in Chapter eight, 'Venice'; nevertheless, ancient Greek sources replaced Arabic translations as the primary document source. The rise of the printing press in the city helped disseminate scientific knowledge throughout Europe. The concluding chapter, '1500 and Beyond', discusses the legacy of science and scholarship in Europe. The *Map of Knowledge* is written in clear English and would be suitable for undergraduate students and readers interested in the history of learning cultures and the transmission of knowledge in the context of world civilisation.