Gerard of Cremona Encyclopedia Article

Gerard of Cremona

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Gerard of Cremona

1114-1187

Italian Scholar and Translator

Gerard of Cremona is remembered not for any original contributions to scientific knowledge, but rather for his role as a translator. Thanks to Gerard, the *Canon of Medicine* by Ibn Sina (Avicenna; 980-1037), destined to become the most important work in the medical sciences of Europe for half a millennium, made its way into Latin. A secondary effect of Gerard's work was the debate concerning the role of reason and faith, sparked in part by Avicenna's work. This would in turn help bring about the growth in scientific curiosity that characterized the late medieval period.

Though some historians would later claim that Gerard came from Carmona in Spain, he was almost certainly from Cremona, in Italy. Nonetheless, he did spend most of his adult life in and around Toledo, Spain, and one of the principal sources concerning Gerard is the *Chronicle* by Francisco Pipino (fl. 1300), a Dominican friar in Toledo.

According to Pipino, Gerard traveled to his city in pursuit of scientific knowledge. Specifically, he was fascinated by the works of the ancient astronomer Ptolemy (c. 100-170), and desired to learn Arabic so that he could translate the latter's *Almagest*. (At that point Greek copies of the *Almagest* had disappeared, and it existed only in Arabic translations.)

Though Ptolemy would later be seen to have a damaging effect on Western scholarship, in particular with his adherence to a geocentric or Earth-centered model of the universe, it was necessary for Europeans to absorb the many useful aspects of Ptolemy's work before they could outgrow it. Thanks to Gerard, this seminal text appeared for the first time in Latin, and had a monumental impact on the physical sciences in Europe in the following years.

Gerard also translated Avicenna's *Canon*, destined to become European physicians' preeminent source of knowledge on medicine until the late seventeenth century. According to Pipino, he rendered a total of 76 Arabic texts into Latin, including works on dialectic, geometry, philosophy, physics, and other sciences. Thus Gerard, who died in 1187 and was buried at the Church of St. Lucy in Cremona, played an enormous role in bringing the highly advanced learning of the Arab world to the West. This also means that he had a greater impact on the rebirth of learning, which culminated with the Renaissance, than all but a handful of much more famous men.