

Wisdom is out there! Roger Bacon and the epistemic reconstruction of lost books and missed knowledge

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DURING THE LATIN MIDDLE AGES, translations of scientific and philosophical texts from Greek and Arabic into Latin crucially contributed to cause the Aristotelian shift that characterised the Scholastic tradition up to the seventeenth century. These translations also fostered an idealistic conception about the “knowledge of the others” (ancient sages and Islamicate thinkers alike) that needed be retrieved and implemented in Latin Christendom. A philosopher and scientist from the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon was an enthusiastic and omnivorous reader and a harsh critic of how the translators often rendered the original texts into Latin. He daringly proposed a reform of Latin knowledge which included the study of foreign languages as necessary instrument to proper understand sacred, philosophical, and scientific texts. Engaging with the lines of Bacon’s attitude towards Greek and Islamicate wisdom, my talk expands on a specific aspect: Bacon’s description of the epistemic treasures that science and philosophy still had to offer to the Latinate debate. In particular, I will focus on Bacon’s treatment of Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā, examining how Bacon reconstructs the list of works that these thinkers had authored yet were not available to the Latins (nor existing, in most cases). In this context, I will discuss how such beliefs impacted on Bacon’s own interpretation of both philosophers, with curious and relevant outcomes in the intellectual history of the Latin Middle Ages.