



A drawing of the physician and philosopher Ibn Sina, whose work on Galen and Hippocrates helped to bolster the status of humoral theory in the West.

at the eastern border and repeated invasions from the Germanic Vandals and Goths at the northern and western borders, led to the destruction of the western Roman Empire. Medieval Europe emerged as a patchwork of warring small kingdoms without the shared language, identity, or culture of the emerging Arab-Islamic world. One unifying trend did persist amid the chaos of the West, however, and that was the Christian Church. Once vilified by the Roman authorities, Christianity had grown from a small Jewish cult in the early first century to become one of the Imperial religions recognized under Emperor Constantine in 313, and in 380, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Despite the turmoil apparent at the end of the

Roman Empire, some pockets of the Greco-Roman world continued to flourish intellectually in the fifth and sixth centuries, and nowhere more so than in the north African regions. It was here that early Christian theologians and learned medical scholars produced some of the most important works of late antiquity.³⁸ At the same time, many ancient Greek texts of philosophy and medicine were translated into Latin, an important development for posterity. Latin would endure as the official language of the Church and of scholarship for the next fourteen hundred years, while knowledge of classical Greek faded almost entirely in Europe.

Nonetheless, the scale of translation work in Baghdad dwarfed that of Latin translation, and for this reason, most writings on Greek medicine that survive today were preserved from translation into Arabic rather than Latin. It bears repeating that medieval scholars did not simply “reclaim” Western scholarship from the Arab-Islamic tradition. Western medicine did not emerge as an isolated system of thought, or even as one that was particularly successful or original. In the early modern world just as in the ancient world, the Western tradition existed within, was appropriated from, and coevolved with a much broader collection of cross-cultural medical traditions.

THE GRECO-ROMAN TRADITION IN THE WEST AND “PAGAN” PHILOSOPHY IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Translation of any sort is never just a matter of exchanging words from one language with the “same” words of another. Our ways of thinking about the world are shaped by the language in which we think, and transmitting this cultural aspect of meaning is difficult work that requires considerable skill and a deep cross-cultural understanding on the part of the translator. The same might be said for other kinds of translation that require the transmission of ideas across different kinds of belief systems. For the early Christian church, for example, the most obvious models of healing came from the gospel accounts of the healing miracles of Jesus, miracles that restored the afflicted (or in the case of Lazarus, the dead) to a state of physical and spiritual “health” defined by