

7. From India to Spain - “Calila and Dimna” (1251)

If you search for “Calila y Dimna” on the Internet, you will find many Web sites related to the story. A large number of documents on Spanish classical literature, which used to be very difficult to obtain, can now be downloaded in an instant. The advance of modern science and technology and the huge volume of information are impressive and simply overwhelming.



【Picture 1: Santa Sofia, Istanbul】

In order to understand the process of how the story was developed and spread, it is necessary to go back in history and to cross the fields of language and culture of the East and the West. The original text is a Sanskrit allegory “Pañcatantra” written in Kashmir in northern India in the 3rd century. In the middle of 8th century it was translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa. According to the Japanese translation (Kikuchi, 1978), in response to the king’s order, a Persian doctor went to India, copied the story with great difficulty, and brought it back to his country. This original text in Arabic has been lost, and the oldest document is a manuscript copy that now belongs to the church of St. Sofia (picture 1) in Istanbul, Turkey.

This work was also introduced into Spain through translated versions in Arabic and Hebrew. It was Prince Alfonso of the kingdom of Castilla, the future Alfonso X (reigned 1252-1284), who ordered the translation from Arabic into Spanish in 1251. In other words, five centuries had passed after the first translation



【Picture 2: Monasterio de El Escorial】

into Arabic. This manuscript copy in Spanish is preserved at Monasterio de El Escorial (picture 2) in the suburbs of Madrid.

The composition of this work itself is quite extensive. “Calila and

Dimna” in the title are the names of two wolves that appear in Chapter 1. Through the whole volume, many other animals come into play and use their wisdom to tackle various situations they face. Short stories are incorporated to show morality and precepts for living, and other stories are also inserted into these short stories, making layers of stories.¹

¹ Manuscript copy from the 14th century (A. Galmés, 1956).
Reprinted in 1980 (González Ollé, 1980).