Petrus Alfonsi

Pedro Alfonso, Pierre Alphonse

**DATE OF BIRTH**  Second half of 11th century

**PLACE OF BIRTH**  Unknown

**DATE OF DEATH**  Unknown; after 1116

**PLACE OF DEATH**  Unknown

**BIOGRAPHY**
Petrus Alfonsi is one of the key actors in the transmission and assimilation of Arabic scientific, literary and religious texts and ideas to Latin Europe in the early 12th century. His impact is attested in the survival of roughly 160 manuscripts of his works, in the frequent use made of them by key authors from the 12th century to the 16th, and in their wide diffusion through early printed editions.

Petrus Alfonsi was born Moses, a Jew from al-Andalus. He was educated in Hebrew and Arabic; his writings show familiarity with the Talmud, with texts of Arabic astronomy, medicine and philosophy, and with the Arabic wisdom traditions. Moses converted to Christianity, and the first date associated with his life is that of his baptism, on June 29, 1106, in the cathedral (and former mosque) of Huesca. He explains that he took the name Petrus in honor of St Peter and Alfonsi in honor of his godfather, King Alfonso I of Aragon. This probably indicates that he played a role in Alfonso's court, perhaps as royal physician and astrologer.

At some point between 1110 and 1116 Alfonsi went to England, where he taught astronomy, and in 1116 produced his *Tabulae astronomicae* ('Astronomical tables'), a somewhat flawed Latin version of al-Khwārazmi's *Zīj al-Sindhind*, a set of astronomical tables with accompanying 'canons' or explanatory texts. Two of his students in England are known by name: Walcher of Malvern and Adelard of Bath. Walcher composed a text on how to predict eclipses, based on the teachings of Alfonsi, and Adelard revised and improved Alfonsi’s Latin version of al-Khwārazmi's text. According to one manuscript of Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis* ('Clerical instruction'), he served for a time as royal physician to King Henry I of England. Sometime in the 1120s, it seems, he was in France, as he wrote an *Epistola ad*
peripateticos in Francia (‘Letter to the peripatetics in France’), in which he complains of his lack of students, professes his expertise in the art of astronomy, and lambastes Latin intellectuals for preferring the study of grammar and logic to the ‘hard science’ of astronomy.

The works of Petrus Alfonsi provide a fascinating glimpse at how the Latin West adapted and transformed the intellectual and cultural legacy of the Arab world. The historical Alfonsi himself imported new texts and new ideas into England and France: the aphorisms and fables of the eastern Wisdom traditions, astronomical texts and knowledge, and his own interpretations of the Qur’an and Talmud suffused with Hispano-Arab religious polemics. He shaped this knowledge to fit the needs and desires of his pan-European Latin readers. His rationalistic religious disquisitions reflect the concerns of the theologians of the 12th-century renaissance, of faith seeking understanding. He passionately defended astronomy and affirmed that the study of nature could reveal God’s designs for creation. And the moral aphorisms of the Disciplina are directed to the edification of a proud new educated clerical elite.

His readers, copyists and continuers were to perpetuate the process of ‘naturalization’ of the Jewish and Arabic elements of Alfonsi’s thought, using the Dialogues to inform a new, harsher anti-Judaism, mining the Disciplina as grist for their sermon tales and instructive fables.

**MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

Primary

Petrus Alfonsi, Dialogi contra Iudeos (see list of editions and translations below)

Petrus Alfonsi, Epistola ad peripateticos in Francia, in J. Tolan, Petrus Alfonsi and his medieval readers, Gainesville FL, 1993, 163-81

Petrus Alfonsi, Disciplina clericalis, ed. A. Hilka and W. Söderhjelm, Helsinki, 1911

Secondary
