
*Rosetta* **12.5**: 51-57.

Snell-Hornby has noted that ‘it has for centuries been taken for granted that translation merely takes place between languages’.\(^1\) But for some time now, the term ‘translation’ is no longer used only in its narrow traditional meaning, i.e. as a communication from one language to another without changing the meaning of the communicated text, but it also constantly appears in a considerably wider philosophical sense to denote the interaction of cultures, the transfer of cultural experience, the concern with cultural border, the articulation of liminal experience, and intercultural understanding.\(^2\) The etymological meaning of ‘translation’ (from Latin *translatio* - ‘transfer to another’, 'carrying across' – fully comprehends this broader idea of ‘cultural transfer’. The contemporary cultural theory, therefore, deals with the relationship between the conditions of knowledge production in one given culture, and the way knowledge from a different cultural setting is relocated and reinterpreted according to the conditions in which this knowledge is produced.\(^3\) The linguistic translation is used as a tool or metaphor in analysing the transformation in cultures.

This study will explore how the aspects from the 'Cultural Translation' theory - partly grown out of the Translation Studies and employing methodologies that draw upon research in linguistic and comparative literature\(^4\) - can be organised into a historical research framework that could then be used to analyse the modes in which Babylonian scientific and religious knowledge became incorporated into the Greco-

\(^2\) Rüdiger and Gross 2009: ix.
\(^3\) Carbonell 1996: 80.
\(^4\) Bassnett 2007: 13. The idea of translation as a cross-cultural event first appeared in Hönig and Kussmaul (1982), Reiss and Vermeer (1984) and Holz-Mänttäri (1984). Although, as Carbonell Cortes (2006: 47) has more recently pointed out, even thirty years later ‘we do not have as yet a comprehensive theory that explains how cultural translation works.’
Roman system. Its prime focus is, however, directed to the theory and practice of determining forces that exerted an active influence on the reading of one culture within another.

From the historical perspective, the theory of cultural translation and the question of translatability in general have so far only been examined by Jan Assmann in a short article entitled ‘Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability’, published in 1996. Assmann’s theory was used and elaborated by Martin Smith, whose book God in Translation was published in 2008 and in addition to examining in much more detail the deities in the cross-cultural discourse of the Biblical world by observing how the language and categories for translation of divinity in one culture were borrowed and used by another, also approached his study as a translation of ancient culture into the modern western world, as a mediation between the antiquity and the present. Assmann's and Smith's cultural translation of divinity can indeed be seen as a precursor to the general theory of cultural translation in antiquity but unfortunately it is not applicable to the study of Babylonian learning in the Greco-Roman world per se, for their work is solely focussed on the translation of gods and cannot be applied to more complex systems.

My approach lies on two simple but fundamental suppositions. First, that cultural translation sets up a relationship between four entities: (1) that which is being translated, (2) the translation itself, (3) the producer of the translation, and (4) the user of the translation. And secondly, on Peirce’s idea that everything can be viewed as a sign or text, which underpins an assumption that an entire cultural unit with all its doctrines, vocabulary, symbols and practices can be approached as a 'source text' (1) in one culture and as a deciphered and translated 'target text' (2) when transferred to another. The latter is not possible without the translator as the mediator (3) and the reader/listener as a secondary interpreter (4). There are, however, all kinds of textual and extratextual constraints, or manipulatory processes, active upon those two agents, for interpretation of a sign is always dependent upon the context and general cultural background of its reader.

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5 Peirce, manuscript no. 634, 1909: 18. For explanation see Johansen and Larsen 2002: 114.
6 Similar approach has been recently taken by Foiera (2007) in her PhD thesis on the transmission of the Soka Gakkai religion from Japan to Italy.
The translation of cultures is, first of all, deeply inscribed within the politics, the strategies of power and the mythology of stereotyping and representation of other cultures.\(^7\) It is thus closely intermeshed with power relations, and hence, in most cases with relationships of cultural inequality.\(^8\) These relationships have been examined, among others, by Carbonell-Cortes who observes that 'the history of exoticizing and anti-exoticizing translations is inscribed in a long dialectic of power and domination. A complex picture of cultural representation and misrepresentation comes to the surface in every case, challenging traditional ideas about translation'.\(^9\) Kramsch has further noted that every culture has self-created or self-perpetuating myths about themselves that override any evidence to the contrary. As the “Other” is always perceived through the perception of oneself, the distortion of the self-image results in the even more distorted image of the “Other”.\(^10\) Hence, the study into how one culture invents its myths of another is strongly needed for an understanding of how a mythical construct created through translation can acquire and retain so much power.\(^11\)

But how do those observations and theories, based mainly on the work done on colonial and post-colonial literature, apply to antiquity? In terms of stereotyping, consider, for instance, Edith Hall's admission in the preface of her highly influential *Inventing the Barbarian* that it has been written in the conviction that ethnic stereotypes, ancient and modern, through revealing almost nothing about the groups that they are intended to define, say a great deal about the community which produces them.\(^12\)

Or let us take Herodotus' *Histories* as a more general example. In order to analyse its Babylonian *logoi* from the perspective of cultural translation, one must first make an attempt of understanding the Greek cultural matrix in which the entire work is

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7 Carbonell 1996: 80.
8 Bachmann-Medick 2006: 35.
9 Carbonell Cortes 2006: 47.
11 Parker's (2008) study has shown how Roman misapprehensions of India did not let themselves to be corrected despite the availability of accurate information. The same can be observed in regard to Greek and Roman perceptions of Babylonia. Berossus' Babylônikâ contained information from genuine Mesopotamian sources and aimed to refute the inaccurate stories that were told by Greeks about Assyria and Babylonia (Drews 1965: 130) but it appears to have had 'curiously little impact' (Kuhrt 1987: 33, supported by Teixidor 1990: 68).
12 Hall 1989: ix.
embedded, recreate the 'textual grid' - the construct that reflects patterns of expectations that have been interiorised by the members of a given culture - and the 'intertext' - the dependence on previous oral and written communication. But the reading of this matrix is, naturally, as dependent on a modern student's own matrix as Herodotus' was on his 5th century BC Greek context. Or as Lateiner has noted:

...even the relativist cultural anthropologist or historian can define and judge otherness only from the standpoint of his own education and culture. Such evaluations have little worth if they are reached in a manner either condescending or unaware of a functional approach to human institutions. Yet a conscientious investigator using his own heritage as a standard by which to discuss others' success and failure, efficiency, sophistication, science, and so on can transcend parochialism.  

Putting the theory into practice is, however, hindered by the fact that the antecedents and the intellectual background of the Histories are altogether not very easy to pin down. Herodotus pursued his research in a time that saw important intellectual evolution in the fields of natural philosophy, science and argumentation but also the development of the ethnocentric and highly political 'barbarian' stereotype. Hence, it is misleading to compare Herodotus only against 'protohistorians' and 'protoethnographers'; the entire literary, and where possible also oral tradition, coupled with the historical background and possible contact points between Greek and foreign cultures, must be considered in order to attain even a partially reliable picture of the intellectual trends, prominent beliefs, prevailing stereotypes and their origins. As Thomas has already pointed out, we often 'misrepresent the Histories by seeing them primarily (or only) against the story of the development of history-writing.'

The way Herodotus, Ctesias, their predecessors and successors depicted the foreign lands and peoples was strongly influenced not just by the availability of source material and limits to their historical knowledge, but the choice and

14 Thomas 2006: 60.
15 See Thomas 2000: 2-4 for a short summary.
presentation of the subject-matter was, indeed, largely grounded on and constrained by their audiences' demands and expectations, both being partly predetermined by the then current takes on the 'barbarian' stereotype. It is thus against a politically and culturally conditioned background that all attempts to provide more or less genuine descriptions of foreign cultures, including Babylonians and Assyrians, must be analysed and assessed. Cultural translation theory is very useful in providing a framework of reference questions to such a study, although the research itself is often made difficult by the incomplete and chance preservation of the source material.
Bibliography


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