

FROM DEMOTIC TO GREEK :
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON ANCIENT TRANSLATION
BASED ON THE READING OF P.OXY. XI 1381

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Very few of the many texts that were translated from Demotic into Greek in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods in Egypt seem to display the paleographical features that characterize professionally produced copies of literary works. In addition, the preservation of very few papyri for each translation – if not only of one papyrus, the most common scenario – may lead us to wonder whether any translation was ever made with the goal of serving as a model for umpteen copies. The reasons for producing Greek translations of Demotic texts are still unknown, and so is the identity of those producing these translations as well as their intended audience.

Despite the large amount that must inevitably have been lost, the many translations preserved testify to the variety of topics and genres covered. They range from religious hymns to astrological texts and legal documents. Among them are also literary texts such as the *Dream of Nektanebos* and the *Oracle of the Potter*, as well as texts of more complex definition such as the *Myth of the Sun's Eye*.

Professional copyists seem to have hardly any involvement in the production of some of the fragments of translations still extant, and their texts do not display the usual paleographical features of professionally produced copies. The handwriting displays none of the regularity and correct spelling of bookhands, mistakes are frequent and the writing is often graceless if not downright coarse. The second century BC passage of the Greek translation of the *Dream of Nektanebos* is not only preserved along with texts written by Apollonios, the *katochos* of the Serapeum in Memphis, but was copied down by Apollonios himself¹. Unfortunately, the fact that we know the identity of the person who copied our text does not mean that we know who translated it².

The same informality of Apollonios' copy is displayed by the cursive hand of other translations of literary texts like the copy of the *Oracle of the Potter* preserved in Oxford, which was written in a quickly drafted cursive³. An equally quick hand was at work in P.Reiner G 19813, another one of the major sources for the *Oracle*; but the other major source for this text, P.Graf 29787, is written in a very regular hand that even bears the mark of the work of a corrector. Corrections, however, are fairly large and unseemly, a feature that would speak against a professional copying context. While all three papyri have variously been dated to the second century AD, the number of copies and their having been copied by different hands might suggest that this text enjoyed a rather wide diffusion.

Once we move to translations of more technical texts, such as legal texts, the informality of private reproduction gives way to the standard hand and conventions in use among the field's practitioners. The fragments of the Greek translation of the legal code of Hermopolis West are written in a careful hand similar to the hand of many other legal texts and therefore suggest a production connected with the same legal professionals that would have drafted legal documents in Greek⁴. However, the rich and complex tradition of this text seems to suggest that it was the object of great interest – a feature that sets it even further apart from the other translations considered, in addition to the obvious differences connected with its technical nature⁵.

¹ UPZ I 81.

² See Wilcken in UPZ I 81; Perry (1966); Koenen (1985).

³ P.Oxy. XXII 2332.

⁴ P.Oxy. XLVI 3285.

⁵ See Stadler (2004) 185.

The varying distribution of literacy and education in Demotic and Greek throughout the Ptolemaic and Roman periods can help us formulate some hypotheses about the production of these translations⁶. The slow changes that led the Greek language to replace Demotic in the large output of the local bureaucracy, and soon thereafter in the education of the upper classes, seems to have played a great role within these processes. However, these changes still do not suggest any reason why anyone would want to translate a literary text and shoulder all the time-consuming and painstaking work that is needed in this undertaking.

While the individuals involved in the translation of our texts are tantalizingly close – and attempts to figure out who they were have been made, such as the work undertaken by Philippe Derchain on the author of the Papyrus Jumilhac – we still cannot get as close to them as we would like⁷. Some clues about their identity have already been gathered from the material features of the papyri they wrote, from their hand – often lacking the refinement of a professional copyist's – and even from their preference for a rush instead of a reed as early as the Ptolemaic period, elements that have already been studied⁸. As much as they can vaguely suggest personal preferences and professional affiliations, or the lack thereof, they are still not enough to satisfy our curiosity.

Some texts might seem to suggest something more about our elusive translators ; the choice of the word « suggest » is intentional, since these texts require a careful interpretation. A papyrus from the second century AD containing a hymn to Asclepius-Imouthes, P.Oxy. XI 1381, is precisely such a text. This papyrus has aroused considerable interest as the presentations by other contributors to this conference easily attest⁹. In this contribution, it is my intention to focus primarily on the statements it contains with regard to the activity of the first person narrator as translator. Although this text is clearly not the narration of personal experiences, it nevertheless contains some interesting passages about the difficult task of the translator, his continuous struggle against fears of inadequacy and the weariness that soon sets in after the beginning of his frequently daunting task.

In P.Oxy. XI 1381, 36–40 translation comes across as a fairly ordinary activity, a labor, a cause of fatigue and even exhaustion : ἐν μέσῃ ῥεύων τῇ γραφῇ | ἐπεσχέθην τὴν προθυμίαν | τῷ τῆς ἱστορίας [τω] μεγέθει, | δ[ι]ότι ἔξω ἐλεῖν ἔμελλο[ν] ἀϋτήν. « (...) having reached the middle of the writing process, I have been held back in my zeal by the enormity of the narration because I was on the point of making it public. »

His work as translator comes across as just that, work ; and just as any other kind of work, it comes across as something likely to be postponed. In the case of our speaker, the translation had been postponed for three years already before his mother came down with the fever that set in motion the events leading to the resolution of this impasse and that include the vision of Asclepius. That our author should have procrastinated for so long is interesting. As he is ready to admit, he was struggling with shame at his inability to complete his work (44), and he was not unaware that the god might become upset with him (46).

One can imagine the turn that events take soon after this point. Asclepius becomes, if not upset, certainly impatient, and he reminds our protagonist of his obligations. While performing a sacrifice to thank the god for his mother's healing, our speaker feels a sudden pain in his side, an event that makes him even more aware of his old debt. The language used to express this commitment is interesting. Our author speaks of τῷ προκαθωμολογη-

⁶ See Depauw (1997) 22–26.

⁷ See Derchain (1990).

⁸ See Thompson (1994) 74 ; Tait (1988) ; Clarysse (1993) ; Menci (2003).

⁹ A very interesting reading of P.Oxy. XI 1381 has been offered by Franziska Naether and Heinz-Josef Thissen ; see their contribution in this volume. H.-J. Thissen has long been engaged with this text and very kindly gave me access to his forthcoming « Lost in Translation ? Von Übersetzungen und Übersetzern ».

μένω διαπορεῖν « being at fault with regards to what had been agreed upon » (156–157), a language that occurs in business transactions. However, as one is reminded by many instances, promises made to the gods had indeed to be honored.

In contrast with this precise recalling of an agreement made, the direct address to Asclepius and the renewed promise to complete his work takes the form of an invocation to the god, inclusive of his address as δέσποτα « master », and of a long address with all the features of a prayer (160–202).

If the protagonist of this papyrus has any kindred souls, these are to be found in individuals like Aelius Aristides, another tormented worshipper whose writing career – in the second century AD – had also been dictated by Asclepius¹⁰. His concern with the accurate recording of his dreams, along with respect for any other injunction of the god, as well as his later professional choices, are all expressions of his boundless faith in Asclepius.

The translator of P.Oxy. XI 1381 also shares the anxieties of Aelius Aristides ; in both cases these are connected with their writing skills. Is this simply false modesty in the case of our translator ? For when it comes to method, his statements demonstrate a certain easy-going approach in his dealings with the original text (174–185)¹¹ : καὶ ἐν τῇ ὅλῃ | γραφῇ τ[ὸ] μὲν ὑστερον προσεπλήρωσα, τὸ δὲ περ[ί]σσειον ἀφείλον, διήγημα δὲ | που μακρολογούμ[ε]νο[ν] | συντόμως ἐλάλησα | καὶ ἀλλαττόλογο[ν μῦθ]ον | ἅπαξ ἔφρασα ὅθην, [δέσ]ποτα, | κατὰ τὴν σὴν εὐμ[ένει]αν | ἀλλ' οὐ κατὰ τὴν ἐμ[ὴν φρ]όνησιν τετελεσιουργ[ῆ]σθαι | τεκμαίρομαι τὴν β[ί]βλον. « In the entire writing I have filled up what was less prominent, while I also got rid of what was superfluous ; I have narrated concisely what had been said with plenty of words and I have simplified a story that could lend itself to more than one reading. Lord, I bear witness that the book has been completed because of your benevolence and not my plan. »

If our author has any doubts about his own skills, his readiness to intervene in the text seems to suggest the exact opposite. As practiced according to his statement, translation is a very free recreation of a text into a new language. Not surprisingly, this is also what transpires from the translations still preserved – in particular the comparison of Demotic and Greek fragments of the *Myth of the Sun's Eye*¹².

On the other hand, whether these statements are to be taken seriously or as simple words dictated by the occasion, his respect for Imouthes-Asclepius and his uncertainties about his ability to put into words his divine features seem to have been quite strong. As he clearly states, it is precisely on the god that he relied for a satisfactory completion of his translation. As had become clear also in the earlier sections of his long memoir, it is precisely the idea of divinity that lent itself badly to being translated (40–42). Words inspired by the god cannot be rendered by an uninspired translator, and therefore our translator is also forced to ask the god to inspire him as well.

His vocabulary betrays a certain education in Greek letters, the rhetorical kind of education that could be expected from an educated Egyptian of this period. Several terms are used to refer to the text itself as well as to the writing process. While the book is usually referred to by the term βίβλος, occasionally defined as sacred, the word γραφή is normally used with reference to writing and the writing process. The word διήγημα is used to refer to the tale narrated in the book, and the same applies to ἱστορία. Significantly, our first-person narrator makes use of the word ἐρμηνεία to refer to his activity of translator.

A later passage of P.Oxy. XI 1381 contains an important detail that deserves attention. After enumerating some of the benefits of the present translation, our speaker focuses on a single benefit (198–202) : (...) Ἐλλην[ί]c δὲ | π[ᾶ]σα γλῶσσα τὴν σὴν λαλ[η]σε[ι] ἱστορίαν

¹⁰ See Petsalis-Diomidis (2010) 122.

¹¹ See Quack (2003) 330.

¹² See Signoretti (2010).

κ[αί] πᾶς | Ἐλ[λ]ην ἀνὴρ τὸν τ[ο]ῦ Φθᾶ | σεβήσεται Ἴμού[θ]ην. « (...) every Greek tongue shall tell your story and each Greek shall worship Imouthes, son of Ptah. »

As far as we know, this translation had a very limited circulation that would exclude the existence of a large audience, an interesting fact that clashes with the expectations of the author. More interesting, however, is the use of *Hellen* in this context. The use of this term is an element that cannot be taken into consideration without a preliminary assessment of the time at which the translation was made. If we accept at face value the statement at the beginning of the fragment about the role played by Nectanebos in setting in motion the events preceding the composition of this translation, then the term has to be taken as a reference to Greeks living in Egypt right before the beginning of the Ptolemaic period¹³. Indeed Greek would have been their native language, and a translation would have been necessary for most of them to understand even the simplest narrative in Egyptian. However, if we see in the reference to Nectanebos the application of a simple *topos* and we accept a later date of composition, then the word *Hellen* has to be understood as a reference to the ability to speak Greek, and possibly as an intentional hint of a complete rhetorical education that would set apart the educated from everyone else. If this is the case, then the use of the term *Hellen* is revealing of the way educated Egyptians thought of themselves. Translating into Greek, just as identifying oneself as a *Hellen*, would then also take the function of affirming a specific kind of education, social class, and, more generally, identity¹⁴.

When we go back to consider P.Oxy. XI 1381 from the point of view of the concerns that motivated this inquiry, namely the investigation of the supposed motives behind the production of a translation in the second century BC, we can only acknowledge that some of the main questions are still left unanswered. Despite his extensive narration on the ups and downs of his long acquaintance with the text, our translator never tells us about the decision itself to undertake it. Had he been requested to complete this translation in the same way in which Nechautis had been ordered to provide help in assessing the number of deserters? No mention of the Pharaoh is ever made during the long years of inactivity of our translator, and no official obligation ever seems to bring him back to his undertaking.

Despite the fact that a private and personal sense of obligation seems to be the only motive, we have no mention of an event or a motive that would have inspired such a promise, at least in the columns preserved. The only possible explanation behind the choice to undertake a translation seems to come from a very careful consideration of the kind of act of dedication to a deity that it would constitute. In the words of our translator (194–198), other gifts only last for a short time, but a translation is a dedication that will last for ever and inspire immortal gratitude on the part of the god.

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¹³ Among the various scholars of this text, Quack (2003) 330 does not choose to doubt the reference to Nectanebos as a reliable indication of the date of composition of the translation.

¹⁴ See Bowman (2007) ; Parsons (2007) 137.

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