
Une conquête des savoirs. Les traductions dans l'Europe latine (fin du XIe siècle – milieu du XIIIe siècle). Actes du colloque organisé à la Fondation Singer-Polignac le jeudi 27 novembre 2008 edited by Max Lejbowicz

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This volume contains eight papers presented at a colloquium held in the autumn of 2008. The French intellectual world was still polarized by the intense polemic surrounding Sylvain Gouguenheim's *Aristote au mont Saint-Michel. Les racines grecques de l'Europe chrétienne* [2008].¹ Gouguenheim argued that the medieval Latin West did not depend on translations from the Arabic to recover knowledge of ancient Greek science and philosophy. In his view, direct transmission of Greek texts was continuous throughout the early medieval period, an exemplary instance of this direct transmission being the work of James of Venice, whose Greek-Latin rendition of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *De anima* were circulating in northern France by the middle of the 12th century, well before the Arabic-Latin translations emerged from Toledo. This, of course, is hardly new information; but Gouguenheim's thesis pressed very much deeper and touched some raw nerves. He argued that few Arabic writers of the classical period were genuinely interested in Greek learning and that, of these writers, the most important were Christians. Greek culture, he concluded, had little impact on Arab-Islamic civilization. The Arabic language, by its very structure, cannot, as he says, deal with syllogistic argument; and the Arabic concept of science is very different from the Greek one. The overall message conveyed by *Aristote au mont Saint-Michel* is that the heritage of Greek learning can never 'belong' to the Arab-Islamic world; it has always, and rightfully, been the possession of the west.

¹ [Ed] See the review by Gad Freudenthal [2009] in *Aestimatio* 6:191–193.

Gouguenheim's narrative of contested proprietorship finds an echo in the militant overtones of the title of the work under review here. Apparently, this is deliberate. In an introductory note, the organizer of the series *Rencontres Médiévales Européennes*, Monique Cazeaux, implicitly endorses Gouguenheim's position by stating her intention to take a stand against 'political correctness'. This symposium was unabashedly dedicated to treating 'les racines chrétiennes de l'Europe' and its basis in 'la transmission des savoirs et des philosophies grecs'. To return to the implications of the title: 12th-century western Europe 'conquers' the knowledge which is its rightful possession through translation, and it is not beholden to the cultures from which it translates. *Aristote au mont Saint-Michel* seems to lurk as well behind a number of the contributions. Monique Bourin's 'Le XIIe siècle féodale et florissant de l'Europe latine', for example, is a sweeping and impressionistic chronicle of Europe's 'take-off' that deploys the word 'conquest' frequently, in both the literal and the metaphorical sense; yet the author declines to commit herself on whether there is a link between this development and the burgeoning of translations.

The Gouguenheim polemic certainly haunts the discussions that followed the colloquium papers and are transcribed in this volume. But, fortunately, not all of the contributions are fixated on the controversy. Because readers of *Aestimatio* will be primarily interested in science, philosophy, and the cultural institutions and contexts that support these enterprises, I shall limit my comments to the essays dealing with these themes.

Of exceptional interest is Alexander Fidora's paper on 'Les différentes approches des traducteurs. De la perception des textes à la réception des traductions'. Fidora analyses the different approaches that characterized Greek-into-Latin, Arabic-into-Latin, and Latin-into-Hebrew translations of philosophical works in the 12th century. Two theories of translation prevailed in the Latin world up to the 12th century: Cicero set out the idea that translation should aim to be *aemulatio*—that is, that it should aspire to surpass the original; Jerome embraced this ideal, and the concomitant policy of sense-for-sense translation, but made an exception for Scripture, where even the order of the words had a meaning. The Bible's prestige lent exceptional authority to this word-for-word method, influencing the translations

of Boethius, Eriugena, and Burgundio of Pisa. As Lorenzo Minio-Paluello pointed out, the first Greek-to-Latin translations of Aristotle were highly literal and all but unreadable. Hence, while Aristotle could indeed be found at Mont-Saint-Michel, he exerted little influence. Twelfth-century Arabic-Latin translators working in the Iberian peninsula, on the other hand, returned to sense-for-sense translation. Hermann of Carinthia adopted this method, allegedly to counteract the Arabic ‘vice’ of prolixity, but in fact as a way of coping with a lack of normativity for Arabic as a source language. Translators had to focus on the meaning of the text, not the meaning of the words. For Hermann, the *fides interpretes* should concentrate on transmitting the philosophical problems and giving them the broadest possible context. Another reason for favoring paraphrase over literal translation is that translations from the Arabic were pragmatic tools for grasping the meaning of the ancient writer; they were a stopgap or intermediate stage that would, ideally, eventually lead to a better translation from the original Greek. Hence, Hermann’s sense-for-sense Arabic-Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Ethics* was not infrequently collated with Burgundio’s word-for-word Greek-Latin translation. The earliest translation from Latin into Hebrew is a version of Gundissalinus’ *Tractatus de anima* made in Catalonia or Aragon in the 12th century. The translator admits that he tried to translate Aristotle’s *De anima* but gave up and settled for Gundissalinus’ treatise instead. Here again, it is the content and not the text which is of interest. There was no investment in replicating the wording of the original because Jewish translators saw Latin culture as at best merely a useful supplement to Jewish knowledge. In the end, Fidora contests *en filigrane* the thesis of Gougenheim on the grounds that the early 12th-century Greek-to-Latin translations of Aristotle should not be compared to the Arabic-to-Latin translations, and more particularly, to the Arabic-to-Latin commentaries. It is only when the Arabic materials become available that Aristotle can be read in Latin with comprehension and taught. Translating Aristotle sense-for-sense played a major role in this process of intellectual assimilation.

Jacques Verger’s contribution on ‘Le rôle des traductions dans la naissance de l’université médiévale’ is a useful reminder that there is no clear convergence between the translation movement and the development of schools and universities. University statutes and regulations say nothing about translations, apart from sporadic acts of

censorship. Not having the resources of even the religious orders, universities never commissioned translations. Moreover, they seem to have regarded the available stock of texts as sufficient; and given that they were interested in the *sententia* and not issues of linguistic accuracy (as Fidora observed), this is understandable. Some Biblical exegetes wanted to consult the *hebraica* or *graeca veritas*; but ironically, both of these languages lay under a cloud of doctrinal suspicion that effectively blocked such initiatives.

The issue of the quality of medieval translations dominates the contributions by Jean Jolivet and Jean Celeyrette. Jolivet attributes 'Le tournant avicennien' to a brilliant act of translation on the part of either Gerard of Cremona or Gundissalinus. Rendering *huwiyya* as *essentia* took both philosophical imagination and intimate knowledge of Arabic. This Avicennan concept of *essentia*, as conveyed in the *Liber de philosophia prima*, was novel and formative for scholastic philosophy and theology. But even less sure-footed translations could alter the shape of knowledge. In a densely argued essay entitled 'Ibn al-Haytham suiveur de Ptolémée? Une thèse controversée en histoire de l'optique', Jean Celeyrette addresses the controversy over Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen)'s position on the nature of the act of vision. Did he set out to demolish Ptolemy's extramission theory or to reconcile it with the physics of Aristotle as interpreted by Alexander of Aphrodisias, which supported intromission? In terms of the Latin West, the situation is complicated by the chaotic transmission of both Ptolemy's *Optics* and Ibn al-Haytham's treatise, as neither work was available in its complete form. Moreover, the Latin version of Ibn al-Haytham omitted the first three chapters, including the crucial first chapter where the author asserts that the study of optics requires the reconciliation of both mathematical and physical approaches. In consequence, most western readers like Bacon approached Ibn al-Haytham's text as a mathematical analysis of vision, with some add-on physical theory for the sake of saving the appearances. It was *perspectiva*, not *physica*. Bacon felt free to yoke his own reading of Ibn al-Haytham to Grosseteste's Neoplatonic physics of light, and subsequent western engagement with Ibn al-Haytham revolved around the debate over Bacon's model of 'multiplication of species'. Celeyrette's essay is a model of how precise attention to the discontinuities of transmission engendered by accidents of translation

can have very significant effects on the evolution of whole domains of scientific inquiry.

On the other hand, Max Lejbowicz's paper on 'L'acculturation latine selon Platon de Tivoli' elicited some sharp comments during the post-presentation discussion, notably because it bypassed the issue of the quality of Plato's *De scientia stellarum* as a translation of al-Battānī's *Sabaeen Tables*. *De scientia stellarum* remained a popular manual until the 17th century, but was it a good translation? No attempt has been made to compare it to its Arabic original, which is available in a sound critical edition by C. A. Nallino [1899–1907]. Nallino appended his own very lucid Latin translation, so that even a non-Arabist should be able to judge how well Plato had rendered the original. Lejbowicz focuses instead on Plato's alleged collaboration with the Jewish translator and savant Abraham bar Hiyya (Savasorda). He is struck by the fact that unlike many of his predecessors, Plato does not trace the origins of astronomy back to the patriarch Abraham, even though al-Battānī was from Haran, where Abraham paused on journey from Ur to Canaan. This silence, in Lejbowicz's view, reflects Plato's appreciation that the solid achievements of Abraham bar Hiyya cast a shadow over those of the patriarch Abraham. This argument seems somewhat contrived. Furthermore, as Tony Lévy observed in the post-presentation discussion, Plato's partnership with Savasorda, once proposed by José María Millás Vallicrosa, has never been documented. Though Lejbowicz concentrates on decoding Plato's remarks on the deficiencies of the Latins in astronomy in comparison with the Greeks, Egyptians, and Arabs, translation itself only surfaces at the end of the essay. Plato borrowed Arabic vocabulary to supplement the impoverished scientific lexicon of Latin, a move which Lejbowicz explicitly terms 'la première étape d'une conquête des savoirs'. This is the only appearance of this tendentious title phrase in the body of this collection. If Lévy's doubts about the quality of Plato's translation are valid, it is a rather ironic one.

Tony Lévy himself closed the proceedings with an overview of 'Livres et cultures scientifiques dans le monde juif en Provence médiévale'. Lévy offers some important reflection on why translation movements can expire. Arabic-Hebrew translation in Provence came to an end not only because the canon was complete, but because there was no internal social or institutional infrastructure to sustain and

develop the enterprise. In consequence, scholars like Qalonymos ben Qalonymos were obliged to return to Barcelona, and then to proceed to Italy in search of further opportunities.

The essays in *Une conquête des savoirs* form a less coherent ensemble than the articles published in some recent collections, notably *Science Translated: Latin and Vernacular Translations of Scientific Treatises in Medieval Europe* edited by Michèle Goyens, Pieter de Leemans, and An Smets [2008].² The term ‘savoirs’ is very broad, and it may have been over-ambitious for a one-day symposium. Nonetheless, this volume contains some valuable contributions, notably the essays by Fidora and Celeyrette.

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² [Ed] See the review by Steven J. Livesey [2010] in *Aestimatio* 7:70–78.