

# Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

*Thinking in Many Tongues*

*Edited by*

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## “Faithful” and “Unfaithful” Translations

*The Greco-Latin Tradition in Jerome’s Letter to Pammachius (395/396 CE)*

*Filippomaria Pontani*

Despite its early, continuous, and fruitful contacts with neighboring cultures (one need just think of the Oriental influence on the Homeric epics), ancient Greek civilization was remarkably reluctant vis-à-vis the idea of translating literary works from foreign languages: virtually no instances are known from the archaic and Classical period (8th–5th c. BCE; a possible exception is Hanno’s *Periplous*, from the Phoenician), and even in Hellenistic times we can hardly find any examples of true linguistic appropriation beyond the gigantic and by all means exceptional enterprise of the Septuagint at Alexandria (see Chapter 4.3; Herennios Philo in the first century BCE translated some of Sanchuniathon’s mythical tales, again from the Phoenician).

In Roman times (1st c. BCE–4th c. CE), Latin was taught in schools of the Eastern part of the empire, but beyond some official inscriptions and some isolated cases of Virgilian translations attested in scholastic papyri (Virgil and some works of Cicero may indeed have been translated in full into Greek), throughout Greece, Egypt, Anatolia, and the Near East the dominant language of the cultivated elite remained Greek. In Late Antiquity, while the role of Latin even as an administrative language rapidly decreased (esp. during the fifth century), Greek translations were produced of some works of the Latin Church Fathers, and of Justinian’s *Corpus Iuris*; but it was not before the ripe Byzantine age (13th–14th c.) that scholars such as Maximos Planudes and Demetrios Kydones attempted to translate into Greek substantial parts of the Latin literary heritage (Cicero, Ovid, Boethius, Augustine etc.).

On the other hand, translation from Greek played a substantial role in the shaping of Latin culture, not only because the first known work of Latin literature was a version of the *Odyssey* (Livius Andronicus, 3rd c. BCE), but chiefly because virtually all Latin genres, from theater to epigram, from epic to lyric poetry, from historiography to rhetoric, were inspired by and modelled after Greek prototypes. Since the second century BCE, the Roman elite (as opposed to the Greek one, even under Roman rule) always regarded bilingualism as essential, and translation as a substantial act in the formation and the *otium* of an accomplished intellectual.<sup>1</sup> This kind of translation—known as *vertere*—

not only enriched the vocabulary and the conceptual span of Latin language, but also implied a tendency towards the emulation rather than the faithful rendering of the source text.

The most influential and theoretically most explicit evidence for Latin translations of Greek literary works comes from Cicero (1st c. BCE), who tackled works of Plato, Demosthenes and Aratos, and also developed the most interesting, if not systematic, reflection on the topic: he insisted that translation from Greek was not only a stylistic aid, but also a sort of civic obligation for Latin men of letters. In several statements (some of which are quoted in Jerome's letter), Cicero insisted that the goal of literary translation (as opposed to a merely "technical" *ad verbum* translation, which he conceived of and indeed sometimes produced himself, but deemed often incapable of rendering even the bare meaning of the original) was not a word-for-word transposition of the single words,<sup>2</sup> but rather a stylistically refined enterprise, oriented on the target language. This stance will be followed by most later Latin writers, from Quintilian to Gellius and beyond.

In Late Antiquity, translation from Greek into Latin embraced scientific, narrative, and philosophical prose, and in Christian times also theological and liturgical writings (Church Fathers, hagiographies etc.). The style of these translations slowly evolved, so that the "free" rendering propounded by Cicero was gradually flanked by a more careful and respectful technique, which shaped Latin language and syntax by depriving it of its literary embellishments and by transforming it into a *Wissenschaftssprache* (which it was to remain for centuries). We occasionally encounter statements that justify this choice, and overtly conceive their mission as a divulgation of a foreign text rather than a feat of stylistic and rhetorical *aemulatio*: if in technical texts this could prove sometimes useful, in hagiographical and liturgical texts it could prevent the

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- 1 See Pliny the Younger (first–second century CE, Rome), *Letter* 7.9.3–4, translated in McElduff, *Roman Theories of Translation*, 174: "The most useful activity and one which many people suggest is to translate (*vertere*) from Greek into Latin or from Latin into Greek. This form of exercise produces ownership (*proprietas*) and brilliance in language—and by imitating the best writers you gain a like ability for invention. And also, what has escaped someone who is only reading, cannot flee the grasp of someone translating. In this way understanding and judgment is acquired. It doesn't harm, after you have read through something sufficiently to keep its main argument in your mind, to write as if in competition with it, and then compare your efforts with the original and consider carefully where your version is better or worse."
  - 2 Cicero, *On Moral Ends* 3.15, translated in McElduff, *Roman Theories of Translation*, 115: "It is not necessary to squeeze out [a translation] word by word, as ineloquent interpreters do, when there is a more familiar word conveying the same meaning. Indeed, I usually use several words to expose what is expressed in Greek by one, if I am unable to do anything else."



risks of haeretical misunderstandings, though it could also occasionally obfuscate the meaning, as some translators overtly state.<sup>3</sup>

Most important in the frame of late antique culture was the activity of two outstanding translators of Christian works (both biblical and Patristic), namely Rufinus of Aquileia and above all the Church Father Jerome (both 4th/5th c. CE): the latter’s epistle to his old friend Pammachius—also known by the title of *Liber de optimo genere interpretandi* (“On the best type of translation”)—is probably the most advanced theoretical reflection on translation from the ancient world, both for what it says and for the sources it quotes in support of its arguments.

Written in 395/396, the letter is above all a defense from the attacks levelled against Jerome by anonymous critics (we deduce that foremost amongst them was his former friend Rufinus) with respect to alleged mistakes in his translation of an epistle of Epiphanius of Salamis (4th c. CE). After claiming that his translation was not intended for public circulation and had therefore been unduly stolen, Jerome insists that in refraining from a dull and literal version he had simply followed the traditional method of translation (so-called *ad sensum*), consecrated by a long tradition stretching from Cicero down to his own day (these are chapters 5–6, reproduced below). Jerome also claims that this method—as long as it does not significantly alter the meaning of the source text<sup>4</sup>—is by far the best, with the only exception of the Holy Scriptures, for which a literal translation (*verbum de verbo*, a locution that will become standard down to the present day for describing this kind of translation) recommends itself because it can help avoid dangerous misunderstandings. The latter principle, however, is often disregarded by Jerome himself in his capacity as a translator of the Bible; and, as he argues in his letter to Pammachius, this ideal had been legitimately violated not only by the authors of the New Testament (who often quote biblical passages rather freely), but also, for instance, by the translators of the Septuagint.

3 Marius Mercator, preface to the translations of Nestorius’s sermons (early fifth century, Rome): “In these sermons I have attempted to translate word for word, as best I could, so that I may not later appear as a forger rather than a true translator. Therefore I beg your pardon, pious reader, if the style is less eloquent, or if your ear will be struck by the strangeness of words chosen throughout the text: I have preferred to expose myself to the tongues of critics rather than to stray far from the task of expressing the truth of meanings, in which lies the danger of falsehood.” Eduard Schwartz, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, 1.5, 29, my translation.

4 See also Jerome, *Letter 84.11 to Pammachius and Oceanus, sub fine* (400 CE, Rome): “To change something from the Greek is not the work of translation, but of destruction [*non est vertentis, sed evertentis*], and to express the Greek word by word is not the work of someone who would like to conserve the charm of the speech”; my translation.

### Latin Text

Jerome, *Letter 57*, §§ 5–6, excerpted from *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi epistulae. Pars I: epistulae I–LXX*, ed. Isidorus Hilberg, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 54, (1910; repr., Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 508–551.

- 57.5 Ego enim non solum fateor, sed libera uoce profiteor me in interpretatione Graecorum absque scripturis sanctis, ubi et uerborum ordo mysterium est, non uerbum e uerbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu. habeoque huius rei magistrum Tullium, qui Protagoram Platonis et Oeconomicum Xenofontis et Aeschini et Demosthenis duas contra se orationes pulcherrimas transtulit. quanta in illis praetermiserit, quanta addiderit, quanta mutauerit, ut proprietates alterius linguae suis proprietatibus explicaret, non est huius temporis dicere. sufficit mihi ipsa translatoris auctoritas, qui ita in prologo earundem orationum locutus est [Cicero, *de optimo genere oratorum* 13–14]: “putaui mihi suscipiendum laborem utilem studiosis, mihi quidem ipsi non necessarium. conuerti enim ex Atticis duorum eloquentissimorum nobilissimas orationes inter seque contrarias, Aeschini et Demosthenis, nec conuerti ut interpres, sed ut orator, sententiis isdem et earum formis tam quam figuris, uerbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis. in quibus non pro uerbo uerbum necesse habui reddere, sed genus omnium uerborum uimque seruaui. non enim me ea adnumerare lectori putaui oportere, sed tamquam adpendere.”

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5 Jerome notoriously translated the Old Testament in Latin (the so-called *Vulgata*), and in his numerous exegetical works on the various books of the Bible he often comes back on the mystic purport of every single word in the holy scripture. It should be stressed, however, that both in his praxis as a translator and in some other theoretical statements, Jerome insisted on a much freer approach to the version of the Bible.

6 Marcus Tullius Cicero (first century BCE), one of the greatest Roman orators and intellectuals, translated several works of Attic writers, notably the philosopher Plato (fifth century BCE), the historian Xenophon, and the two orators—rival to each other—Aeschines and Demosthenes (fourth century BCE). In other works, Jerome quotes (and occasionally criticizes) Cicero's translations (none of which extant to the present day), which shows that he was familiar with them and by and large consented with their theoretical approach to translation, though remaining in practice slightly more faithful than Cicero to his models.

### English Translation

Adapted from St. Jerome, *Letters and Select Works*, trans. William H. Fremantle (New York, 1893), 117–118.

For I myself not only admit but proclaim with free voice that in translating Greek authors (with the exception of the holy scriptures, where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word.<sup>5</sup> My teacher in this course of action is Tullius [Cicero], who has translated Plato’s *Protagoras*, Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, and the two magnificent orations which Aeschines and Demosthenes have delivered against each other.<sup>6</sup> This is not the time to indicate how much he omitted, how much he added and altered in those texts in order to explain the idioms of another tongue through those of his own. I shall content myself with the authority of the translator, who has spoken as follows in the prologue to the orations:<sup>7</sup> “I have thought it right to embark on a labour useful for scholars, albeit not necessary for myself. I have namely translated the most noble speeches (one delivered against the other) of the two most eloquent Attic orators, Aeschines and Demosthenes; and I have not rendered them as a translator but as an orator, keeping the same sense and the figures of speech and thought, but altering the words to suit our own usage. I have thought I should not give back to the reader the same number of words, but—so to speak—the same weight.” And again at the close of his treatise he

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7 All we have of Cicero’s translations of the orations by Aeschines and Demosthenes (*Against Ctesiphon* and *On the Crown* respectively, both delivered at Athens in 330 BCE) is the preface, known in manuscripts as *De optimo genere oratorum* (On the best kind of orators): Jerome quotes some paragraphs of this text, namely those devoted to the issue of literary translation, insisting particularly on Cicero’s claim to have translated not as a *Dolmetscher* (*interpreter*), but as an orator dealing with fellow orators, and thus refraining from using odd calques or words not familiar to the usage of the target language. Furthermore, when Jerome speaks of the *proprieties* of each language, he must also have in mind the case of the Bible, and particularly the idioms of Hebrew that made their way into the Greek of the Septuagint, and finally into the later Latin versions.

rursumque in calce sermonis [23]: “quorum ego,” ait, “orationes si, ut spero, ita expressero uirtutibus utens illorum omnibus, id est sententiis et earum figuris et rerum ordine, uerba persequens eatenus, ut ea non abhorreant a more nostro, quae si e Graecis omnia conuersa non erunt, tamen, ut generis eiusdem sint, elaborauimus” (et cetera). sed et Horatius, uir acutus et doctus, hoc idem in *Arte poetica* erudito interpreti praecipit [Horace, *Ars Poetica* 133–134]: “nec uerbum uerbo curabis reddere fidus interpres.” Terentius Menandrum, Plautus et Caecilius ueteres comicos interpretati sunt: numquid haerent in uerbis ac non decorem magis et elegantiam in translatione conseruant? quam uos ueritatem interpretationis, hanc eruditi *κακοζήλιαν* nuncupant.

unde et ego doctus a talibus ante annos circiter uiginti et simili tunc quoque errore deceptus, certe hoc mihi a uobis obiciendum nesciens, cum Eusebii *χρονικὸν* in Latinum uerterem, tali inter cetera praefatione usus sum [Eus. *chronicon*, p. 1.8 Schoene]: “difficile est alienas lineas insequentem non alicubi excidere, arduum, ut, quae in alia lingua bene dicta sunt, eundem decorem in translatione conseruent. significatum est aliquid unius uerbi proprietate: non habeo meum, quo id efferam, et, dum quaero implere sententiam, longo ambitu uix breuis uiae spatia consummo. accedunt hyperbatorum anfractus, dissimilitudines casuum, uarietates figurarum, ipsum postremo suum et, ut ita dicam, uernaculum linguae genus: si ad uerbum interpretor, absurde resonant; si ob necessitatem aliquid in ordine, in sermone mutauero, ab interpretis uidebor officio recessisse.” et post multa, quae nunc persequi otiosum est, etiam hoc addidi: “quodsi cui non uidetur linguae gratiam interpretatione mutari, Homerum ad uerbum exprimat in Latinum—plus aliquid dicam—, eundem sua in lingua prosae uerbis interpretetur: uidebit ordinem ridiculum et poetam eloquentissimum uix loquentem.”

8 The great Latin poet Horace (first century BCE) wrote amongst other things the *Ars poetica*, an epistle in verse concerning style, elegance, literary genres and the debt of Rome towards the Greek heritage: the lines quoted here describe in a short *gnome* the task of the ideal translator.

9 Jerome refers to the Latin translations of Greek comedy (Plautus, Terentius, and Caecilius Statius, third and second century BCE; their Greek models are Menander [fourth century BCE], and the *veteres comici*—perhaps Aristophanes and his colleagues are intended), which numbered to the first literary achievements of Latin literature and were “recreations” rather than faithful translations—this is meant by the idea of *vertere*. The technical term *kakozelia* belongs to rhetorical vocabulary.

says: “If, as I hope, I have been able to render their speeches by employing all their merits, that is, the ideas, the figures and the general arrangement, and following the actual wording only so far as it did not deviate from our taste, even if not all the words will result translated from the Greek, we have tried our best to make them appear of the same style.” Horace too, such an acute and knowledgeable author, in his *Art of Poetry* gives the same prescription to the learned translator:<sup>8</sup> “You will not care to render word for word, as a faithful translator.” Terence has translated Menander, while Plautus and Cæcilius the old comic poets: do they ever stick at words, or don’t they rather preserve in their versions the beauty and elegance of the original? What you call exact interpretation, the learned term it *kakozelia* [pedantry].<sup>9</sup> About twenty years ago, as I translated Eusebius’s *Chronicon* into Latin, instructed by such teachers and deceived by such an “error” (I could not guess that you would soon reproach me precisely this), I wrote in my preface, amongst other things:<sup>10</sup> “It is hard, when following lines traced by others, not to diverge from them in some places, and it is difficult that what has been said perfectly in one language may preserve the same elegance in another. Something has been expressed appropriately by one specific word: I have no word of mine to express this, and trying to complete the sentence, I make a long detour covering with difficulties a short distance. To this must be added the windings of hyperbata, the differences in the use of cases, the diversity of the rhetorical figures, and finally the peculiar and, so to speak, inbred character of the language: if I render word for word, the words will sound absurd; if, compelled by necessity, I alter anything in the order or wording, I shall seem to have departed from the translator’s duty.” And after many considerations, which it would be tedious to follow out here, I added: “If anyone does not believe that the beauty of a language is transformed by translation, let him render Homer word for word into Latin—I shall say more, let him translate Homer in his language in prose, and he will see the ridiculous style and the most eloquent of poets scarcely able to speak.”

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10 Jerome translated the *Chronicon* of Eusebius during his stay in Constantinople in 380/81. This passage of the preface echoes several ideas and terms used by Quintilian, especially as far as rhetorical figures and stylistic peculiarities are concerned. When talking of the pedestrian translation of Homer’s epics, he might be thinking of Attius Labeo; a version of Homer in inadequate Latin prose was to be realized many centuries later (ca. 1366) by the Greco-Calabrian scholar Leonzio Pilato at the request of Petrarch and Boccaccio: Leonzio’s achievement was to mark the “return” of Homer to the West after centuries of neglect.

57.6 Uerum ne meorum parua sit auctoritas—quamquam hoc tantum probare uoluerim, me semper ab adulescentia non uerba, sed sententias transtulisse—qualis super hoc genere praefatiuncula sit, in libro, quo beati Antonii uita describitur, ipsius lectione cognosce [Euagrius Ponticus, *in vitam S. Antonii, Patrologia Latina*, 26.834]: “ex alia in aliam linguam ad uerbum expressa translatio sensus operit et ueluti laeto gramine sata strangulat. dum enim casibus et figuris seruit oratio, quod breui poterat indicare sermone, longo ambitu circumacta uix explicat. hoc igitur ego uitans ita beatum Antonium te petente transposui, ut nihil desit ex sensu, cum aliquid desit ex uerbis. alii syllabas aucupentur et litteras, tu quaere sententias.” dies me deficiet, si omnium, qui ad sensum interpretati sunt, testimonia replicauero. sufficit in praesenti nominasse Hilarium confessorem, qui homilias in Iob et in psalmos tractatus plurimos in Latinum uertit e Graeco nec adsedit litterae dormitanti et putida rusticorum interpretatione se torsit, sed quasi captiuos sensus in suam linguam uictoris iure transposuit.

But in order to prevent the authority of my writings from being inadequate (though I only wanted to demonstrate that since my youth I have always translated meanings rather than words), learn what says the book carrying the life of St. Antony, and read its preface on this topic:<sup>11</sup> “A word-for-word translation from one language into another conceals the sense, and chokes the fields with luxuriant grass. If it follows slavishly the cases and the figures, it fails to explain by a long circumlocution what it could have signified by means of a short sentence. In order to avoid this fault, I have translated at your request the life of St. Antony in such a way that nothing may lack in the sense, even if something lacks in the words. Let others hunt for syllables and letters: you will look for meanings.” 57.6

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11 Evagrius of Antioch's translation of this *Life of Antony*, commanded by and dedicated to Innocentius presbyter († 373), replaced an earlier version that has been handed down to us anonymously. The metaphor of the choked fields comes from Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria* 8, pro. 23), who applies it to style in general.

## Abbreviations

pro. prohoemium/prooemium

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