

Massimiliano Bampi

# I: 20 Translation Studies

## 1 Definition

The field of translation studies is a wide-ranging, strongly interdisciplinary area of research concerned with investigating the process of translation and its final product. The rising interest in medieval translation over the last twenty-five years has been partly supported by the adoption of various theoretical frameworks, developed in neighbouring disciplines as a result of fruitful discussions on the nature of translation.

## 2 State of research

In Old Norse scholarship, translated literature – viewed as an intrinsically less interesting form of textual production than original works (e.g. the ‘original’ sagas) – has resulted in translation being only sporadically represented as a research topic in international scholarship on the medieval Scandinavian world. Those few studies that were devoted to translated texts were for the most part based on a prescriptive approach, according to which the act of translation and its final result were assessed mostly in terms of how faithful the target text is to the source text (e.g. Aebischer 1956; Halvorsen 1959).

Especially during the last ten years, however, translation in the medieval North has begun to attract more attention, and recent studies are based on a descriptive approach to translation, fostered primarily by the so-called ‘Descriptive translation studies’ (Bassnett 1991; Toury 1995). During the course of the 1990s, *Descriptive Translation Studies* have indeed contributed to rethinking translation as a complex semiotic phenomenon. In this view, translation is a process that entails, to varying degrees, a rewriting of the source text, driven, in the first place, by the constraints of the target culture. In those studies that adopt this approach to investigating translated texts in the medieval North (e.g. Glauser 2005; Lodén 2012; Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2012; Marti 2013; Bampi 2014), the focus is thus on how the translated text undergoes changes that are mostly meant to adapt it to a different reception context.

Another relevant novelty in this field is the application of polysystem theory (Even-Zohar 1990) to the study of how translated texts interact with other works (both original and translated) within the literary system, both synchronically and

diachronically. Although polysystem theory's original formulation dates back to the early 1970s, its use in medieval studies is for the most part much more recent, and still scant (e.g. Bampi 2013; Pettersson 2014). Polysystem theory has mainly contributed towards drawing attention to the fact that translated literature actively takes part in the formation and subsequent development of a literary system (and, more generally, of the culture to which it belongs). Furthermore, translated texts may under certain circumstances even play an innovative role in the system, generating new original works (Even-Zohar 1990, 47). Whereas the memory-translation nexus has, in general, already attracted scholarly attention, especially with reference to modern literatures (D'Hulst and Milton 2000; Brodzki 2007; Brownlie 2016), the role of memory in translation studies on medieval Scandinavia is by and large a hitherto unploughed research ground. Textual memory in translated texts, especially in the form of intertextual references, has occasionally been touched upon in earlier scholarship. Still, the potential of using memory – especially cultural memory – as an analytical tool in approaching translational activities in the medieval North has gone mostly unnoticed in international scholarship on pre-modern Nordic material.

A partial explanation to this is that both the establishment of translation studies as an interdisciplinary field and of memory studies are to some extent recent developments in Old Norse scholarship. If memory has been a relevant research topic in medieval studies for the last twenty-five years, the discussion of its role in the Nordic world in the Middle Ages has started in fairly recent times. Furthermore, it must be observed that memory in translation studies related to other disciplines in medieval studies (e.g. the Romance world) does not seem to have attracted any scholarly attention so far. It thus seems clear that a lack of research is not directly dependent on a specific field's responsiveness to new theoretical suggestions.

### 3 Pre-modern Nordic material

The literary repertoire that translation activities from across the whole North imported from various cultures is quite broad in scope, including as it does various textual types from both the religious and the secular spheres of European culture. Among Nordic translated texts, two major categories are particularly interesting here because they are in various ways connected with cultural memory: 1) translations of historiographical works and of hagiographic literature of various origins; 2) intra-Nordic translations (i.e. translated texts based on a Nordic source).

The first type of text is highly relevant in that it contributes to importing memories from a non-Nordic context as part of a process of identity construction in which Scandinavian history is incorporated into world history. Such works as *Rómverja saga* [The Saga of the Romans], *Veraldar saga* [The Saga of the World], *Gyðinga saga* [The Saga of the Jews], *Trójumanna saga* [Saga of the Trojans], and *Breta sögur* [The Sagas of the Britons] – also known as pseudo-histories – are thus extremely interesting in this respect. As Stefanie Würth points out (2005, 163–164), “[i]n relatively massive historiographical compendia, Icelandic redactors and compilers combined material from antiquity and motifs from their own past. Thus did they manage to incorporate Iceland into world history. Icelandic chieftains claimed to be related to Norwegian kings who in turn were connected to the English crown and traced back their origins to Troy.” Thus, a memorial purpose – i.e. the creation of a shared cultural memory within the space of medieval Europe – triggers the selection and manipulation of foreign sources by way of translation. Similarly, translated hagiographic literature made an important contribution towards incorporating Nordic history into the broader context of Christian history of salvation.

Intra-Nordic translations offer a quite interesting palette of examples that help illustrate, among other things, how memory formed part of translation activities that served ideological purposes across linguistic borders. Some translations concern royal figures of the past, whose stories and adventures are recounted in Old Norwegian texts, while others deal directly with the Scandinavian past. To the first category belong, for example, two Old Swedish translations: *Karl Magnus*, an abridged version of *Karlamagnús saga* [Saga of Charlemagne, itself a translation of various *chansons de geste*] and *Didrikskrönikan* [The Chronicle of Didrik], based on *Piðreks saga af Bern* [The Saga of Piðrekr of Verona], which claims to be a translation from German sources. While both *Karlamagnús saga* and *Piðreks saga af Bern* are large compilations of heroic deeds centred around the figures of the two kings, *Piðreks saga af Bern* is particularly interesting in that it contains a memorial archive that is directly connected with medieval Scandinavia. Both works and their translations were intimately linked with royal ideology, and thus contributed towards creating a shared cultural memory that could support an ideology of this sort (Kramarz-Bein 2002).

An interesting example of the second category is the Old Swedish *Historia Sancti Olai* [The Story of St Olaus], a very condensed and selective version of the Old Icelandic *Óláfs saga helga*, which recounts the life of King Óláfr Haraldsson, the king-saint of Norway. The text was translated in all likelihood for propaganda purposes. As pointed out by Mitchell, the translator “has focused primarily on cobbling from his original the story of Swedo-Norwegian cooperation against the Danes” (Mitchell 1996, 47). *Historia sancti Olai* is thought to have been translated

at the instigation of Karl Knutsson, when he was trying to maintain an alliance with the Norwegians against Christian I of Denmark (Mitchell 1996, 47). *Historia Sancti Olai* is thus a good example of memory being part of a broader manipulative process (translation) by which memories of one's own past are appropriated from sources written in other languages, and adjusted to new needs.

## 4 Perspectives for future research

Future research in translation studies may benefit a great deal from including the notion of cultural memory as an analytical tool. Since cultural memory can be described as “as a type of memory that is collectively shared and connected to the formation of a group's self-image and identity” (Hermann 2013, 333), its use in translation studies may help reveal relevant aspects of the translation process as a whole. In particular, two interrelated sets of questions may provide a starting point for future work, namely, in which ways do the mechanisms of cultural memory: a) contribute towards selecting the literary material to be translated; and b) influence how the text is translated? Another interesting topic that future studies may tackle concerns textual memory as intertextuality in a broader sense. Moving from the assumption that any kind of writing, including translation, “is both an act of memory and a new interpretation, by which every new text is etched into memory space” (Lachmann 2008, 301) and expanding on Hermann's observation that “a text borrows and uses words and passages, themes and structures from other texts” (Hermann 2013, 335), it would be of great interest to study how translated texts interact with other forms of representation of the past (both synchronically and diachronically) to construct a shared cultural memory, both within the North and within the broader European perspective, resorting to a textual repertoire of memories and contributing to expanding it. Since polysystem theory has made clear that translation actively participates in the shaping of a literary system, the role of translated texts should thus be taken into proper consideration. The case of the Icelandic sagas is particularly interesting in this respect. If we understand them as cultural memory (Hermann 2013, 334), including the contribution made by translation to constructing an image of the past and to building up a relationship with various segments of the historical continuum (both the Nordic one and the broader framework of world history) may blaze a trail towards a better understanding of the mechanisms of cultural memory. Since memory and translation are both manipulative processes that result in the rewriting of a previous object (e.g. the past, a text), examining them, across disciplinary borders, as interrelated aspects of representation through the

medium of literature may lead to a cross-fertilisation of both fields of research, i.e. translation in memory studies and memory in translation studies.

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