

Reversing Babel. Translation among the English during an Age of Conquests, c. 800 to c. 1200

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Medieval people traced the multiplicity of languages back to the story in Genesis of the tower of Babel, built by humans. God punished their arrogance by scattering them to the four winds so that each could not understand the language of his neighbour. From the sons of Noah were descended 72 peoples with 72 languages. The difficulty that English was not numbered among them was circumvented by the helpful discovery that a son of Noah, Scaef, was born on the Ark and was the ancestor of the Anglo-Saxon kings. The 72 tongues were re-united at Pentecost through the Holy Spirit, an image of which from a 10th-century Winchester Benedictional forms the cover illustration of this book. *Reversing Babel* is a history of translation in England between about 900 and about 1200. The author begins by explaining clearly what he is and is not trying to achieve. The study is of English speakers and those with whom they came into contact, not all the inhabitants of the British Isles, between the Viking invasions and the Angevin empire. The aim was to explore themes and continuities over a lengthy period, not explicitly to address language as an indication of identity, or to provide a history of languages. It was written in the belief that language provides information about the interaction between cultures in an era of conquests, Scandinavian, Norman, and, finally and more debatably, Angevin.

The first chapter addresses the question of what contemporaries understood by a language. It is pointed out that there was not much evidence of awareness of different dialects of English before the 12th century, and that many people were multilingual. The chief influences on translators in England were Jerome and Isidore rather than classical authors. So far as translation was concerned, there was a wide spectrum of practice ranging from strict verbal equivalence to a process of editing-cum-translation better expressed as rendition.

In the second chapter the discussion turns more specifically to the context in which translation occurred. First, there is the evidence of how far Scandinavian invaders, traders, and settlers understood the natives (on the whole they probably did, depending on where they lived). Then the Normans arrived. The author is rightly sceptical of attributing a straightforward transition to spoken French and written Latin as the elite languages simply to ethno-political factors. He argues that logically the Normans might have learned English more readily had not the Angevin 'conquest' occurred in 1154. The geographical extent of the Angevin 'empire' meant that French remained the language of the ruling elite and in England became the language of common law, a status it was to retain for centuries. O'Brien goes on to discuss different kinds of

communities where languages intermingled, in towns and in monasteries, and the experiences of travellers and crusaders. An intriguing perspective on languages in 12th-century Canterbury based on surviving rentals is offered.

In the third chapter the author pulls together what evidence there is about motives for translation: the need to teach basic skills in Latin, to instruct the clergy, to defend property rights, to understand the world, and to edify the laity. He discusses the ambiguities surrounding the role of patron and author, the reasons for commissioning translation and the lack of evidence of material reward.

The fourth and fifth chapters are concerned with practicalities: what do we know of the training of translators, their reference books, their advisers, and the physical setting in which they worked? In most cases the answer is 'very little' but one figure about whose sources something may be inferred is Aelfric, a monk of Cerne and then abbot of Eynsham who lived in the later 10th and early 11th centuries. It has been argued that he may well have had access to all his sources close to home. In contrast Adelard of Bath, a key figure in the transmission of Arabic texts to England in the early 12th century, may have translated them on his travels, or brought texts back to England and translated them there. On the question of working methods, O'Brien uses the example provided by Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 'F', as edited by Peter S. Baker.[\(1\)](#)

The chronicle's author, probably the cantor of Canterbury Christ Church cathedral, began work on wax or parchment scraps, then transcribed his draft onto a fair copy, thought to be the manuscript which still survives. English annals were written up in batches with gaps left for Latin translations. As later material became available, possibly when the author was away from Canterbury on business, insertions were made.

Chapter five focuses on the translator's method: how the text was established, how it was edited, and then how presented, chapter by chapter or as a continuous gloss. Words were translated either into cultural equivalents (the method most commonly used), by etymological translation, or simply by transcribing the original. Three examples are discussed to show what was changed, the 10th-century West Saxon Gospels, thought to have been the work of a team; 11th-century translations into English of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and *Vengeance of the Saviour* where the manuscript used by the translator still survives [\(2\)](#); and the late 12th- or early 13th-century French translation of part of the Old Testament where the translator offered analogous French terms for words unfamiliar in his own day. Thus for example the Philistines, the enemies of the Israelites, were explained as the *gent Sarazine*. The concluding chapter spells out the author's view in more detail that in terms of translation neither 1066 nor, as Maitland believed, the legal reforms of Henry II, were critical in establishing the special place of French in the governance of England. Instead, it is argued here, it was the accession of Henry II that was decisive. The book concludes with an appendix of translated works. In compiling a useful list of this kind, the author is careful to point out the difficulty of deciding how precisely he defined a translation for the purpose of inclusion.

By his scepticism O'Brien forces us to ponder easy assumptions about language as a marker of ethnic identity or social status. His own work on law in England after 1066, and the languages in which it was expressed, has demonstrated that the Normans were far from uninterested in the antique laws of the English. In this context it is hard to see the conquerors as mindless destroyers, especially as their translations were both translations and editions, and showed a lively interest in the original. Legal translation was not antiquarianism or an exercise in nostalgia but driven by an urgent need to understand the laws of the English. When these laws were translated, it was into Latin, not French, and it was only in the later 12th century that the status of French was enshrined as the language of common law.

If the strengths of this book lie in its chronological range and extensive reading, in other ways the limits set by the author have to some extent acted as a constraint when it comes to drawing out the wider significance of its findings. By focussing on written texts, he has not, for instance, made much use of the evidence of place and personal names to augment scanty evidence. The discussion of Northwest England (pp. 82, 84) centres on a problematic text, Gospatric's writ, which if accepted as authentic dates from the mid 11th century, yet there is much more evidence recorded in charters about the linguistic mix from the names of

places and, by the 12th century, of people. Secondly, more attention could perhaps have been given to other modes of communication, oral and visual, to amplify discussion of the circumstances in which translation was necessary. This is particularly relevant when thinking about legal proceedings, O'Brien's own field of expertise: English and French must have been spoken in court, even if the language of record was Latin. The same point is of course true of the Domesday Inquest and book. Related to this is the status of languages: if, as suggested here, the likelihood was that the Normans in England would have adopted English had it not been for the accession of the Plantagenet kings, surely the superior social prestige of French after 1066 has to be borne in mind? Here one remembers the pejorative nicknames Godric and Godgifu given to Henry I and Queen Matilda. Moreover it could be debated whether the consequences of a change of ruling dynasty in 1154 were as far-reaching as the effects of Scandinavian invasions or the Norman Conquest.

One specific question, the change in language of royal writs from English to Latin after 1066, is discussed by O'Brien, who points out that historians may have been too ready to interpret this as evidence of the downgrading of English. Yet the change raises further questions about whether the impulse to change came from royal scribes, their masters, or from beneficiaries, who wished to preserve writs in their archives. One consideration may have been that some writs, such as exemption from toll, might have had to be used in different parts of the country. The writing up of Domesday Book in Latin could have acted as a further spur to the use of Latin in other kinds of administrative records. 12th-century pipe rolls, for instance, were in Latin.

Finally, one dimension omitted here in the context of patrons, translators and texts is that of gender. Queen Adeliza of Louvain, Henry's second wife, crops up, as does Aëliz de Cundé, known to have been the patron of Sansun de Nantuil, author of the *Proverbs of Solomon*. We know next to nothing about the relationship between patrons and translators, but it is surely worth asking whether the sex of patrons influenced the choice of texts and the way they were presented. The concerns of communities of religious women, such as those at Wilton and Barking, were different from those of male communities. Whether translations were made for male or female religious, only one translator, Clemence of Barking, the author of the late 12th-century life of Saint Catherine, is known to have been a woman.

This book has many virtues. It offers what might be described as 'an historian's view of translation', in the sense that the subject crosses disciplinary boundaries. Bruce O'Brien has come to grips with a wide range of material which has often first appeared in specialist journals. He has offered a coherent overview, combining his own work on legal texts and translation with those of linguists and textual scholars. The book in many ways is a *tour de force*, ranging as it does from translations from Latin into English and French, from English into Latin, and from Arabic into Latin, including Biblical, hagiographic, historical and scientific texts. Simply by setting Aelfric alongside Adelard of Bath he makes us think about two individuals widely separated in time but engaged in similar enterprises of translation. The text is lucidly written and amply footnoted, so that the reader does not lose sight of the argument being made. It is illustrated with 29 annotated black and white illustrations plus maps and diagrams. Few historians could have written such a book, and most will learn something new. It will be required reading for students of history, literature and language.

Notes

1. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, edited Peter S. Baker (Vol. 8, Cambridge, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Saint-Omer, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 202. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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