

## Roman Interpretation

James Rives

In the second half of his *Germania*, a short treatise on the lands and peoples that bordered the Roman empire to the northeast, the Roman historian Tacitus provides a concise catalogue of the various individual tribes that inhabited the region. In some cases he does no more than provide a name and a location, but more often he includes some snippet of information as well. The following passage is in some ways typical.

In the land of the Nahanarvali is displayed a grove long held in awe. A priest in woman's dress presides, but the gods they speak of in Roman translation as Castor and Pollux: that is the essence of this divine power; the actual name is the Alci. There are no images, no trace of foreign superstition, yet they are worshipped as young men and brothers.<sup>1</sup> (Tacitus, *Germania* 43.3).

Like much in the *Germania*, this passage is deceptive. On the surface, it conveys in a straightforward manner a simple, if intriguing, piece of information. But if we probe beneath the surface, we find that complexities abound. How did Tacitus come to be aware of this at all? By what paths was this information transmitted from the land of the Nahanarvali to the historian writing in Rome? It is impossible to give a definite answer to this question, although we can make some reasonable guesses. But there is one aspect of this transmission of which we can be certain: it involved at least one stage of translation. The Nahanarvali were culturally and linguistically removed from the Romans, as well as geographically; hence this apparently simple fact about their culture had to be translated into terms that would have been understandable to Romans. This is a process to which Tacitus explicitly calls our attention when he notes that the identification of their gods as Castor and Pollux is a 'Roman translation'. Who was responsible for this translation, and on what basis was it made?

Using this passage as a point of departure, I will in this paper reflect on the processes whereby Greeks and Roman encountered and interpreted the religious traditions of neighbouring peoples, particularly the deities that these peoples worshipped. For the sake of convenience, I will deal first with the practical issues of the transmission of information, and then with the issue of linguistic and cultural translation; in practice, of course, the two processes were simultaneous. With the former issue, I will focus specifically on the passage at hand, but with the latter I will range more widely.

### I

---

<sup>1</sup> Apud Nahanarvalos antiquae religionis lucus ostenditur. Praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant. Ea vis numini, nomen Alcis. Nulla simulacra, nullum peregrinae superstitionis vestigium; ut fratres tamen, ut iuvenes venerantur.

How did Tacitus come by this bit of information? It was certainly not something that he knew at first hand. Any direct contact that Tacitus may have with the peoples of Germania would have been in the Rhineland, far from the region in which he locates the Nahhanarvali.<sup>2</sup> As with virtually all the material in his treatise, he almost certainly found this fact in a written source. Although it is impossible to identify any of his sources with any precision, there is some slight reason to think that in this case he was using a Greek source, perhaps a specialist geographical or ethnographic treatise.<sup>3</sup> But this only sets the problem back a stage: how did this information come to be in this hypothetical Greek source in the first place?

Tacitus identifies the Nahhanarvali as subgrouping of the Lugii, whom he seems to locate in the region of Silesia.<sup>4</sup> Now this is not how Tacitus himself puts it; what he says is that they live beyond (*ultra*) a mountain range inhabited by a number of small tribes, who themselves are behind (*retro*) the Marcomanni and Quadi (*Germ.* 43. 1-2). A striking aspect of Tacitus' account of the Germanic tribes is that his method of locating them geographically is always relational, rather than absolute: he consistently describes any given tribe as being 'behind' or 'next to' or 'beyond' another tribe. This procedure stems not so much from a personal stylistic choice as from the fact that he and his contemporaries tended to comprehend geographical space in terms of itineraries rather than maps. That is, rather than envisioning a certain location as a dot or a field on a two-dimensional diagram, they seem more often to have understood it in terms of verbal lists and directions.<sup>5</sup> As a result, it seems likely that Tacitus' location of various tribes is a reflection of the routes along which people actually moved. From the Roman point of view, then, the Lugii were not so much 'in Silesia' as two stages beyond the Marcomanni and Quadi, the peoples that lived adjacent to the empire in what is now the Czech Republic. Interactions with neighbouring peoples like the Marcomanni and Quadi were varied and numerous, so that information about them could enter into the common pool of Graeco-Roman knowledge by any number of routes. Interactions with more distant peoples like the Nahhanarvali, however, were much more limited, and there were relatively few channels through which information might be transmitted.

There are in effect only two possible ways that this fact about the Nahhanarvali could have reached Tacitus' source: either it was mediated by the other Germanic tribes who lived closer to the empire, or it was brought back by someone who travelled from the empire into the land of the Nahhanarvali. Although the former cannot be excluded, the latter seems to me more likely (as well as more in keeping with the subject of this

---

<sup>2</sup> No positive evidence suggests that Tacitus was ever in this region, but he was absent from Rome for four years after his praetorship in 88 CE (*Tac. Agr.* 45. 5), most likely as a legionary commander, and some scholars have speculated that he may have held this command with one of the Rhine legions.

<sup>3</sup> On Tacitus' sources, see in general Rives 1999: 58-60. A Greek source is suggested by some of the forms in which the names of other tribes associated with the Nahhanarvali are transmitted (at *Germ.* 43. 2): 'Helveconas' seems to be a Greek rather than a Latin accusative, and the alternative spellings of 'Lygii/Ligii/Legii' and 'Helysii/Helisii' suggest an original Greek upsilon. For speculation on the specific nature of this hypothetical source, see below n. XXX.

<sup>4</sup> The alternative form 'Nahhanarvali' is equally well attested in the manuscripts, so that it is difficult to choose between them.

<sup>5</sup> See in general Sundwall 1996, Mattern 1999: 27-9 and 39-43.

seminar). As it happens, we know that in the first century CE people from the empire did regularly travel through this region. The only luxury good that northern Europe provided the people of the Roman empire was the amber that is found in relative abundance on the south-eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. This distant region was connected with the empire by several well-established trade routes, of which the most important passed precisely through the area of Silesia. Since we know that merchants drew up descriptive itineraries of such trade routes, and sometimes even included in them various tidbits of ethnographic observation, it is not impossible that Tacitus might have consulted a subliterate work of this sort. Alternatively, a Greek geographer might have obtained this information directly from a merchant, whose oral lore he incorporated into his treatise.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the specific details might have been, we can be fairly certain that the information about this cult went through a complex process of transmission on its way from the grove of the Naharvali to the page of Tacitus. This process determined the form in which we encounter this fact today. One aspect of this is its isolated and abstract quality. We may assume that each person in the chain of transmission that I have proposed (the traveller, the Greek compiler, Tacitus himself) included in his account only a selection of the data available to him, those that for whatever reason seemed most interesting, and that as a result all contextual information about this people was stripped away. But without any context in the wider culture of the Naharvali, the account of their cult becomes simply a *curio*, a 'fun fact' whose appeal lies in its very lack of wider significance.<sup>7</sup>

But the process of transmission not only stripped this fact of its cultural significance; it also shaped its content. Here we may consider in particular Tacitus' statement that 'a priest in woman's dress presides' (*praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu*). The specific form of this statement is due to Tacitus himself, who chose the particular words with which he conveyed the information. But Tacitus' word-choice conceals as much as it reveals. What precisely did he mean by *ornatus*? In other works he uses this word sometimes with particular reference to clothing (e.g., *Hist.* 2.20.1), sometimes to clothing and jewellery (e.g., *Ann.* 13.13.4), sometimes to clothing and other equipment (e.g., *Hist.* 5.22.2). If his source had a more precise description, Tacitus chose to make it more vague; his interests, after all, were not those of a modern anthropologist. Consequently, we have no idea of what particular elements of the priest's appearance were distinctive or, for that matter, in what particular way they were distinctive. Did the Naharvali themselves interpret these distinctive elements as feminine? Or was it instead our hypothetical amber merchant, who, seeing a priest in an unusual get-up, decided that to him it looked like women's dress? Or did the merchant describe the garb more precisely, leaving Tacitus (or his source) to interpret it in gendered terms? These questions cannot be answered. The most we can say is that someone observed some

---

<sup>6</sup> On the amber route, see Rives 1999: 318-19. The *Periplus Maris Erythraeae* provides an extant example of an itinerary written for and presumably by merchants; see further Casson 1989. For geographers consulting merchants, note Marinus of Tyre, who seems according to Ptolemy to have talked directly to men who had sailed the trade routes to India (*Geography* 1. 7 and 9).

<sup>7</sup> In this respect it resembles the items collected by the ancient paradoxographers, whose purpose was primarily to create a sense of wonder in their readers; for a concise introduction to this genre, see Hansen 1996: 2-11.

distinctive elements in the garb of the Naharvalan priest and that someone (not necessarily the same someone) interpreted these as feminine.

## II

I elaborate on the complexities involved in interpreting Tacitus' description of the priest because we need to keep them in mind when we turn to my main topic, the processes whereby people of Roman culture identified the gods worshipped in other cultures. As I noted above, Tacitus himself, although ignoring issues of interpretation with respect to the feminine garb of the priest, calls attention to them in his identification of the deities. In this case, he does transmit the native view, at least to the extent of noting that the native name for these deities is the Alci. He also stresses that their identification as Castor and Pollux results from a process of 'Roman translation'. He even notes the basis on which 'Alci' was translated as 'Castor and Pollux': the fact that the gods are worshipped as young men and brothers.

Who actually did the translating is unclear; Tacitus says only that 'they speak' (*memorant*) of the gods in this way. Some have taken the subject of this verb to be the Naharvali themselves.<sup>8</sup> But for historical reasons this hypothesis seems to me highly improbable. Although it is likely enough that some members of the tribes bordering on the empire learned enough of the Latin language and of Roman culture to interpret their own customs and traditions in Roman terms, that is much less likely to have been true of more remote tribes. Moreover, Tacitus, like other Roman historians, very commonly uses undefined third-person plural verbs simply to mean 'people say'. It is thus more likely that the translating was done by someone from the Graeco-Roman world, such as our hypothetical amber merchant: he recognized that the gods whom the Naharvali called the Alci were the ones that he in his language called Castor and Pollux, and so he translated accordingly.

This practice of translating divine names was very common in the Roman world, and modern scholarship has borrowed the phrase *interpretatio Romana* from this passage of Tacitus as a convenient label for it; the term *interpretatio Graeca* has been invented to provide a comparable label for the use of Greek divine names.<sup>9</sup> We can trace this practice back to the very beginnings of the historical period. In the Greek world, the historian Herodotus, working in the latter half of the fifth century BCE, provides many explicit examples, some of which I will discuss below, but we can discover its traces already in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE).<sup>10</sup> The familiar equivalences between Greek and Latin divine names are also of very ancient, so that, for example, the Roman goddess Diana was identified with the Greek Artemis as early as the sixth century BCE (Price 1999: 145). These translations became so thoroughly established that the traditional

---

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Nock 1972 [1952]: 752: 'Now it is conspicuous that Tacitus uses the phrase to describe what the Naharvali said about their gods; it was they who of their own initiative called them Castor and Pollux'.

<sup>9</sup> The classic treatments are Richter 1906 and Wissowa 1916-19. Recent discussions include J.-L. Girard 1980, Webster 1995, Graf 2005 [1998], Spickermann 2001, and Ando 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Graf 2005 [1998]: 869-70 points out that Hesiod's use of the ancient Near Eastern succession myth presupposes an identification of Ouranos with Anu, Kronos with Enki/Kumarbi, and Zeus with Marduk/the Hittite Weather God.

myths and iconography of most major deities in Rome were almost entirely Greek in origin. In fact, it was not until the 19th century that people started to reflect on the fact that these equivalences of Greek and Latin divine names actually were translations, and accordingly tried for the first time to isolate 'Roman religion' as a distinct tradition.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the habit of using Latin rather than Greek divine names in English had become so ingrained that as late as the 1950s translators of Acts still thought it appropriate to render the name of the great goddess of Ephesus as 'Diana'.<sup>12</sup>

Most modern definitions of *interpretatio Romana* are similar to the one offered by Greg Woolf: 'the assertion of some form of equivalence between a foreign god and a Roman one'.<sup>13</sup> Definitions like this provide perfectly adequate descriptions of the phenomenon. But we should note that in one respect Woolf's definition is the precise inverse of Tacitus' account: Woolf talks about two separate deities who are equated, whereas Tacitus speaks of only one deity (or in this case one pair of deities) whose name among the Nahanarvali is different from that among Romans. Underlying these different ways of describing the situation are two sets of profoundly different assumptions. Tacitus seems to assume that there really was a divine power that took the form of young men and brothers, and that their existence is simply a fact of nature, like a mountain or a tree or an animal. Consequently, for Tacitus the process is precisely one of translation, just as he says.<sup>14</sup> On its own, the foreign name of a deity, just like any other foreign word, is meaningless; but once a Latin-speaking traveller like our amber merchant understands to which deity it refers, just as when he understands to what object or concept a foreign word refers, he can grasp its meaning and so supply the Latin equivalent.<sup>15</sup> Woolf, in contrast, seems to assume that these deities do not actually exist, or at least not in the way that mountains and trees and animals do, but that they are instead cultural constructed abstractions. Hence there is a need for an equation, an identification between two things that are not in fact identical.

Now it is of course not my purpose here to fault Woolf's assumptions, with which I am myself in perfect agreement, or to argue that Tacitus' understanding of the phenomenon is somehow better or more accurate. It is rather simply to point out that their assumptions are in fact different, and that we need always to be aware of this. In discussing the phenomenon of *interpretatio Romana* we must be careful not to confuse the way that contemporary actors viewed the situation with the way we view it, or, to use

---

<sup>11</sup> The pivotal work was J. A. Hartung, *Die Religion der Römer nach den Quellen dargestellt* (1836); see further Scheid 2003 [1998] 6-8 and, in more detail, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> The New English Bible, first published in 1961; see Acts 19: 23-41.

<sup>13</sup> Woolf 1998: 214. Cf. Graf 2005 [1998] 869: 'the identification of a foreign divinity with a member of the indigenous pantheon'.

<sup>14</sup> *Interpretatio* and its cognates derive from the noun *interpres*, which in the earliest extant Latin texts has the meaning 'agent, go-between' (*OLD interpres* s.v. 1). The word group generally has the meaning of 'explanation, interpretation', but with reference to languages in particular it regularly has the sense 'translation': see *OLD interpres* s.v. 4, *interpretatio* s.v. 5, *interpretor* s.v. 6. Cf. Nock 1972 [1952]: 752: '*interpretatio Romana* . . . was just what *interpretatio* means, "translation"—the use of Latin terms for the gods as for any other data of experience'.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Linforth 1926: 11: '[Just] as *hudor* and *aqua* mean the same thing, so that a Greek uses the word *hudor* when writing Greek and a Roman *aqua* when writing Latin, so Zeus and Amon mean the same thing, and Herodotus, writing in Greek, naturally uses Zeus'.

more technical lingo, to conflate etic and emic analysis.<sup>16</sup> From our perspective, *interpretatio* is above all a cultural issue; from the ancient perspective, I would suggest, it was above all a theological issue.

Let us try to reimagine the situation from the ancient perspective. We should begin with the assumption that the gods are real forces that manifest themselves in the world and can have a significant impact on people's lives; they thus need to be acknowledged and worshipped. These forces are not only multiple but also multiform, existing in an almost limitless profusion and variety: some quite restricted (geographically and otherwise), others universal. The human response to these forces, the names given to them and the types of worship accorded to them, vary from culture to culture, in the same way that other human responses to the natural world vary. Accordingly, when a traveller encountered an unfamiliar people who worshipped a deity with a meaningless name, he had to decide whether the deity in question was genuinely unfamiliar, one not previously known under another name, or rather in fact a familiar deity who was being worshipped under a strange name and in strange ways.

If the traveller decided that a particular deity was actually a previously unknown one, his only option for naming that deity, since no other name was available, was to accept the local name. In the same way, Latin-speakers adopted other foreign words when there was no precise equivalent in Latin.<sup>17</sup> Hence we encounter a number of deities in the Roman world who were worshipped under foreign names. Some of these were adopted at such an early date that it is easy to forget that their names are actually borrowings from another language: Hercules (Greek Hêraklês), Apollo (Greek Apollôn), Aesculapius (Greek Asklêpios), and even Castor and Pollux themselves (Greek Kastôr and Polydeukês). More noticeable are non-Greek divine names: the Egyptian Isis and Osiris, the Gaulish Epona. In all these cases, it seems, a consensus developed that the deity was not already being worshipped under a Roman name, with the result that the foreign name was adopted along with the worship itself.

If, on the other hand, the traveller decided that the deity in question was one with whom he was already familiar, then the normal practice was to translate the native name by the more familiar Roman name. As I noted above, in the Greek world we have explicit evidence for this practice already in the fifth century BCE. For example:

These are the only gods [the Scythians] worship: Hestia above all, and also Zeus and Gê (believing Gê to be the wife of Zeus), and in second place Apollo, Aphrodite Ourania, Herakles, and Ares. All the Scythians worship these gods, but the Royal Scythians also offer sacrifice to Poseidon. In the Scythian language Hestia is named Tabiti [ὀνομάζονται

---

<sup>16</sup> For a concise discussion of these terms, see Harris 1979: 32-41.

<sup>17</sup> As with divine names, however, the practice was not common. Tacitus, for example, records very few native words in the *Germania*: *barditus* for a king of war-cry (3. 1), *framea* for a distinctive type of short spear (6. 1, 11. 6, 14. 4), *glesum* as the word for amber (45. 4); of these, only *framea* seems to have been adopted into more general use (e.g., Juv. 13. 79, Gell. 10. 25. 2). An intriguing example of such a borrowing is the Gaulish word *cervesa*, 'beer', denoting a drink alien to Graeco-Roman tradition, which apparently became naturalized in the popular Latin spoken in Gaul (e.g. *CIL* 13. 10018 (7); cf. *cervesarius* in *CIL* 13. 10012. 7 and 11318) and was preserved in the Spanish *cerveza*.

δὲ Σκυθιστὶ Ἰστίη μὲν Ταβιτί], Zeus (quite correctly, in my opinion) is called Papaïos, Gê Api, Apollo Oitosyrus, Aphrodite Ourania Argimpasa, Poseidon Thagimasadas. (Hdt. 4.59.1)

Herodotus' assumptions here are very clear: he first enumerates the gods whom the Scythians worship, and only then, as a sort of addendum, provides the names that the Scythians give them: the deities are who they are, although their names vary. Here is another example, this time from a Roman author:

Of the gods, [the Gauls] worship Mercury above all. There are numerous images of this god, they speak of him as the founder of all skills and the guide of roads and routes, they regard him as having very great power over financial profits and trade. In second place they worship Apollo, Mars, Jupiter, and Minerva, and they have more or less the same view of these deities as other peoples have: that Apollo drives away illnesses, that Minerva institutes arts and crafts, that Jupiter has the rule of the gods, that Mars regulates wars. (Caes. *BG* 6.17.1-2)

Caesar is careful to point out that the Gauls were just as aware of these gods as other people, and had the same understanding of their functions and powers; as a consequence, there was no need for him to provide their Gaulish names. He could of course have done so merely as a matter of curiosity, just as he could have noted the Gaulish words for 'horse' or 'river'. But from his perspective this information would have added nothing to his account: why use a barbarian word when a perfectly good Latin equivalent existed? For Caesar as for Herodotus, it seems, describing the deities worshipped by a foreign people was simply an issue of translation.

### III

But translation of course is never simple. A glance at the epigraphic record indicates that the situation was more complex than Caesar's confident account of the chief gods of the Gauls would suggest. It is true, for example, that the relative frequency of Mercury in inscriptions from Gaul is much higher than for any other part of the western empire, a fact that apparently corroborates Caesar's observation about the importance of that god (MacMullen 1981: 6). But 'Mercury' in these inscriptions is often not simply 'Mercury'. Instead, to note only a readily available selection, we find Mercury Clavariates (*ILS* 4599), Mercury Dumiates (*ILS* 4600), Mercury Iovantucarus (*ILS* 4601), Mercury Magniacus Vellaunus (*ILS* 4601), Mercury Moccus (*ILS* 4603), Mercury Vassocaletes (*ILS* 4604), and Mercury Visucius (*ILS* 4605). In all these examples the second element is a local name for the god the Romans called Mercury. Some of them at times appear on their own: on a site near modern Heidelberg, for example, a man dedicated a shrine to Visucius (*ILS* 4607), and another man near Stuttgart made a dedication to Mercury Visucius and Sancta Visucia (*ILS* 4608).

Variety such as this suggests at the very least that Caesar's account greatly simplifies a much more complex situation: it was not simply a matter of translating a single Gaulish name with the Roman divine name 'Mercury', but rather of translating

numerous Gaulish names with a single Roman name. Moreover, the use of the Roman translation did not apparently preclude the simultaneous use of the native original; rather, the two names could be joined together into a single appellation. What sort of thinking underlay practices such as these? The authors of what has quickly become a standard work on Roman religion helpfully sketch out some of the complexities involved.

In most cases . . . we have only the record of a mixed divine *name*; we can only guess what that name meant, which deity (Roman or native) was uppermost in the minds of the worshippers, or whether the two had merged into a new composite whole (a process often now referred to as 'syncretism'); we do not know, in other words, how far the process was an aspect of Roman take-over (and ultimately obliteration) of native deities, how far a mutually respectful union of two divine powers, or how far it was a minimal, resistant and token incorporation of Roman imperial paraphernalia on the part of the provincials. (Beard, North, and Price 1998: 317)

In short, the existence of these double names indicates that the process of *interpretatio* was a complex one that could result in a whole range of possible outcomes. I would suggest that contemporary actors were in fact keenly aware of the complexity of the process, much more so than the passages from Caesar and Herodotus quoted above might suggest. But I would also argue that, again, their understanding of this complexity took a very different form from that of modern scholars.

Like Woolf, Beard, North, and Price tacitly accept that these deities did not actually exist, but were instead cultural constructs. Consequently, a deity worshipped in one culture is by definition not the same as a deity worshipped in another. Although they may share a greater or lesser number of similar traits, they cannot in fact be identical: Mercury is by definition not the same as Visucius, Diana not the same as Artemis. Accordingly, any equation between two gods from different cultures was bound to be inexact, with something always lost in translation. In recent years, as scholars of the Roman world have become more sensitive to issues of cultural power, they have also come to emphasize that the translation of divine names was never a neutral process, but inevitably involved some degree of cultural transformation and even, at times, cultural violence. From this point of view, the complexity of *interpretatio Romana* is cultural, and the main challenge for modern scholars, as Beard, North, and Price point out, is to assess the underlying issues of cultural identity involved in the naming of deities.

As I've already argued, however, contemporary actors had a very different set of assumptions. Although the existence of two different cults in two different cultures might in fact mean the existence of two different deities, that was by no means certain; it could just as easily turn out that both cults were directed towards the same deity. The existence of the gods was independent of the cultural response to them. But there is another difference as well. The analysis of Beard, North, and Price seems to imply that the deities of the ancient world were discrete and consistent, that there was 'a' Roman deity and 'a' native deity that must in some way be combined or associated. But this was by no means the case. Diana may not have been the same as Artemis, but then Artemis herself was not always the same. In the mainstream Greek tradition, Artemis was

normally depicted as a young woman, a hunter, with bow and arrows, skirt hitched up, accompanied by hounds. In Ephesus, however, Artemis was depicted in a completely different way: in a rigid hieratic pose, arms extended, wearing a long and elaborately panelled skirt, her torso covered in those famous but puzzling protuberances. Hence, depending on the context, it might be important to distinguish her as Artemis Ephesia, Artemis of Ephesus. This goddess was indeed Artemis, but a specific Artemis.

The practice of combining the name of a major Greek or Roman god with a specific epithet was thus by no means limited to cases of *interpretatio Romana*, but was instead both ancient and widespread throughout the Graeco-Roman world. It was in fact the most common way for someone to indicate that he or she had in mind a specific version of a more general deity. But what does it actually mean to say that someone worshipped 'a specific version' of 'a more general deity'? Again, it is tempting to interpret the situation in cultural terms, to see in the name 'Artemis Ephesia' no more than an acknowledgement that the cult of Artemis in Ephesus was not precisely the same as that anywhere else. Yet some evidence suggests that there was more to it than this. Suetonius, for example, relates that when Augustus, in thanksgiving for a narrow escape from a stroke of lightning, dedicated a shrine to Jupiter Tonans ('the Thunderer') on the Capitol in Rome and began to frequent it, he dreamed that Jupiter Capitolinus complained to him about losing worshippers; Augustus responded that he had placed Jupiter Tonans there as the other god's doorkeeper, and subsequently installed a doorbell on the gable of the new shrine (Suet. *Aug.* 91. 2; cf. 29. 3). This anecdote, which is probably genuine, suggests that Augustus perceived Jupiter Tonans and Jupiter Capitolinus as in some sense distinct gods, distinct enough that the latter could resent the former, and not merely as a single god to whom different temples had been dedicated. At the same time, however, the use of the name 'Jupiter' in both cases implies that on another level he also thought of them as the same god.

This ability to conceive of a given deity as simultaneously single and multiple is one of those characteristics of polytheistic traditions that is very difficult for those of us raised in monotheistic traditions to grasp. But it was clearly central to the ancient understanding of the gods, and has important implications for the issue at hand. When we look at Mercury and Visucius, we see two different gods; their identification, therefore, must logically mean that the person making the identification really had in mind the one or the other or some sort of fusion of the two. But contemporary actors, it seems, did not feel obliged to analyze the situation in such rigidly logical terms. Taking it for granted that a deity could have multiple and distinct forms and yet at the same time constitute a unity, they might well conclude that Visucius was indeed Mercury, and yet not precisely the same Mercury they knew from Roman tradition.

Two examples may help to illustrate this. One is another Suetonian anecdote about Augustus, this time meant to document his respect for foreign cults that were ancient and established. 'He was initiated at Athens, and when later on in Rome he presided over a court case concerning the privileges of the priests of Attic Ceres [*de privilegio sacerdotum Atticae Cereris*] and certain matters concerning the mysteries came up, he dismissed his advisors and the onlookers and heard the disputants in private'. (Suet. *Aug.* 93). Suetonius' point is that Augustus was scrupulous in maintaining the required secrecy of the Eleusinian mysteries. As was appropriate for someone writing in Latin, he gives the goddess of Eleusis the name Ceres; at the same time, however, he

carefully distinguishes her from the Ceres worshipped in Rome by giving her the specific epithet 'Attic'. Hence, just as he indicates the identity of the goddess, he also stresses her different forms. The other example comes from Lucian. The Celts, he says, give Herakles the name 'Ogmios' in their local language (τὸν Ἡρακλέα οἱ Κελτοὶ Ὀγμιον ὀνομάζουσι φωνῇ τῇ ἐπιχωρίῳ), and they represent him in a most peculiar fashion: wearing the lion skin and holding a club and a bow, as do the Greeks, but as an old man, leading a crowd of men who are bound to him by chains extending from their ears to his mouth. According to Lucian, a local informant explains to him that the Celts, unlike the Greeks, associate eloquence not with Hermes but with Herakles, because the most powerful of skills should belong to the most powerful of gods; they represent that skill by the chains, and depict him as elderly since eloquence increases with age (Lucian *Herakles* 1-6). Regardless of whether or not this anecdote is true in the sense of being an actual experience of Lucian's, it reveals very effectively the cultural assumption that I want to stress here: Lucian and his Celtic acquaintance seem willing to agree that Ogmios in some way is the same god as Herakles, but at the same time that in other ways they are sharply distinct.

The complexities that contemporaries actors would have encountered in the process of *interpretatio* were thus not cultural, but rather theological. The gods were understood to be not only multiple but also multiform, so that they could simultaneously be both the same and different. For this reason, the question whether an unfamiliar deity was different from or the same as a deity already known was immensely complicated, and might allow for a variety of competing answers. We may consider in more detail some of the issues that contributed to this theological complexity.

#### IV

As the multiple translations of 'Mercury' in Gaul indicate, determining the correct translation of a divine name was by no means a straightforward business. A traveller would have to take into account the salient characteristics of the unfamiliar deity (gender, 'age', area of power, attributes, and so forth), and then attempt to match these up with those of a deity already known. In the case of the Alci, our hypothetical amber merchant had it pretty easy: there was only one pair of deities that fit the description. But if one encountered, say, a female deity with power over fertility and the natural world and whose varied attributes could be connected with those of a number of Graeco-Roman goddesses, the problem could be much more complex. Not surprisingly, different travellers might reach different conclusions. Nor did the problem lie only in trying to match up of a set of divine characteristics from one culture with that from another. As we have seen, major deities within a culture also exhibit a degree of fluidity, so that it might, for example, be easier to identify a foreign goddess as Artemis of Ephesus than as another form of Artemis. Consequently, the process of *interpretatio* was hardly ever straightforward and uncontested. In some cases, standard translations did emerge, and could become so generally accepted that the very fact of the translation could be forgotten; as I noted above, this is the case with the equivalences between Greek and Roman deities. But in other cases, even with well-known deities, a standard translation remained elusive.

Here, for example, is Lucian's account of the cult statue of the great goddess worshipped at Hierapolis in northern Syria: 'The image of Hera exhibits a multiform appearance to the person who looks on it; for while taken as a whole she is certainly Hera, she also has something of Athena, Aphrodite, Selene, Rhea, Artemis, Nemesis and the Fates' (Lucian, *De Dea Syria* 32). Evidently, the multiple attributes of this goddess made it difficult to identify her securely with any one Greek goddess, so that the question of how best to translate her name was never firmly resolved. Lucian, as we see, is quite insistent on 'Hera', as befitting a goddess regarded as the Queen of Heaven. But others preferred 'Aphrodite', which is the name commonly found in inscriptions, often with the distinguishing epithet 'Ourania', 'the Heavenly'. Indeed, many Greek writers seem to treat 'the Heavenly Aphrodite' as a distinct goddess, so that Herodotus, for example, translates the name of the Scythian goddess Argimpasa not simply as 'Aphrodite' but quite specifically as 'Aphrodite Ourania'. Some people responded to this uncertainty by hedging their bets, as did Plutarch, who simply describes her as the goddess whom some call Aphrodite and other call Hera (*Crassus* 17.6). Others abandoned any attempt at translation altogether and simply referred to her as 'the Syrian Goddess'. One option that does not seem to have had much appeal, however, was to adopt her Semitic name of Atargatis, which is found only rarely in Greek or Latin sources.

The problems of translating a divine name might encompass not only the question of determining which Greek or Roman name was the best match, but even that of deciding whether the deity was actually a new one or one already known under another name. As we have just seen, not only was it unresolved whether 'Hera' or 'Aphrodite' provided the best translation of 'Atargatis', but also whether the name should be translated at all. In other words, there seems to have been no consensus whether the Syrian goddess was merely a particular form of Hera or Aphrodite, or a separate goddess altogether. We can observe a similar vacillation within a single author in Herodotus' account of the Egyptian gods. In most cases, he uses the Greek translation of divine names, as we would expect, and so refers without qualification to Aphrodite or Zeus or Apollo or Leto. But he will occasionally inform the reader of the Egyptian equivalent: thus Amun is the Egyptian name for Zeus (2.4.52), Mendes for Pan (2.46.4), Apollo for Horus and Artemis for Bubastis (2.156.5). Similarly, on more than one occasion he notes that Isis is Demeter (2.59.2 and 2.156.5) and Osiris is Dionysos (2.42.2 and 2.144.2). Yet in only one passage does he actually refer to her without further ado as Demeter (2.122-3). He more commonly uses the Egyptian name Isis, with or without the Greek translation, and at one point even says that, according to the Egyptians, Apollo and Artemis are the children of Isis and Dionysos: the contrast here between the original Egyptian name 'Isis' and the others given in Greek translation is striking (2.156.5; cf. 2.42.2, 2.176.2, 4.186.2). Herodotus' mixed usage, I think, suggests some sense that already in his time the name 'Isis' had a particular meaning that the Greek translation 'Demeter' did not convey or, in other words, that he regarded Isis as a distinct enough form of Demeter that it seemed proper to use her distinctive name. As the cult of Isis became increasingly well-established in the Greek world, its adherents effectively turned the tables by claiming that 'Isis' was in fact the true and original name of the goddess, and that her names among other peoples, including 'Demeter', were simply local alternatives. In this way the initial process of *interpretatio* helped pave the way for the complex theological syncretism that developed in the Hellenistic and imperial periods.

As the number of identifications between the deities of different cultural and linguistic areas increased, some people came to believe that not only were the same deities worshipped under different names, but that in some cases different deities were worshipped under the same names. Herodotus provides one of the earliest examples of this idea in his discussion of the Egyptian Herakles.

I was told that this Herakles was one of the twelve gods. Of the other Herakles, with whom the Greeks are familiar, I could get no information anywhere in Egypt. . . . To satisfy my wish to get the best information I possibly could on this subject, I made a voyage to Tyre in Phoenicia, because I had heard that there was a temple there, of great sanctity, dedicated to Herakles. . . . [The priests] said that the temple was as ancient as Tyre itself, and that Tyre had already stood for two thousand three hundred years. . . . I also saw another temple there, dedicated to the Thasian Herakles, and I also went to Thasos, where I found a temple of Herakles built by the Phoenicians who settled there after they had sailed in search of Europa. Even this was five generations before Herakles the son of Amphitryon made his appearance in Greece. The result of these researches is plain proof that the worship of Herakles is very ancient; and I think that the wisest course is taken by those Greeks who maintain a double cult of this deity, with two temples, in one of which they worship him as Olympian and divine, and in the other pay him such honour as is due to a hero. (Hdt. 2. 43-4, trans. de Sélincourt 1996)

A modern scholar would see this as a problem of cultural translation. Herodotus' Egyptians were actually talking about their god Chonsu, the Tyrians were talking about their god Melqart, and the Thasian god was probably in origin a local pre-Greek deity.<sup>18</sup> Although each of these varied figures were identified with the Greek Herakles on the basis of a few shared characteristics, they were naturally different enough that anyone who paused to reflect would, like Herodotus, be struck by the disparity between them. But although Herodotus did indeed see the problem very clearly, he understood it in theological rather than cultural terms, and his solution was a cultic one: the best response, he concludes, is to worship Herakles with a two-fold cult that would acknowledge his two-fold identity.

The sorts of discrepancies that caught Herodotus' attention with respect to Herakles existed in the case of other deities as well. As Greek scholarship developed in the Hellenistic period, with its tendencies to compile, catalogue, and correlate variant traditions, analyses of the sort that Herodotus pioneered became more elaborate and more precise. In the mid-first century BCE, for example, Diodorus Siculus asserted that there were three distinct bearers of the name 'Herakles': the first, born in Egypt, had conquered much of the world and set up the famous pillar in North Africa; the second was one of the Idaean Dactyls of Crete, who founded the Olympic Games; the third was the son of Zeus and Alkmene who performed the twelve labours and set up the pillar in Europe; it was this third Herakles to whom, over time, the deeds of his homonymous predecessors were assigned (Diod. Sic. 3.74.4-5). Analyses like these apparently culminated in a now-lost

---

<sup>18</sup> On these identifications, see Lloyd 1976: 2. 194-5, 205-6, and 208-11.

Hellenistic work used by Cicero and other later writers that enumerated no fewer than six different Herakleses as well as four Hephaistoses, five Hermeses, three Asklepioses, four Apollos, three Artemises, five Dionysoses, four Aphrodites, five Athenas, and three Eroses.<sup>19</sup>

Although works of scholarship like this were no doubt known to only a relatively few people, I would suggest that they were a product of the same fundamental outlook that our hypothetical amber merchant would also have shared: the gods were not easily pinned down. The difficulties involved in identifying a deity might have been particularly acute when one was trying to translate the name of a deity worshipped by another people, but they were by no means peculiar to that context.

## V

I close with some brief reflections on the role of *interpretatio Romana* in the religious history of the Roman empire. As I noted above, some recent scholars have analyzed the process in terms of cultural imperialism, and have accordingly interpreted it as an expression, and even an embodiment, of Roman power. For example, Webster (1995: 160) asserts that 'deity naming, and deity syncretism, are manifestations of power. Syncretism . . . reflects a cultural arrogance—the belief that all gods are all really the same as one's own—but this arrogance is not naive. Foreign gods were not simply viewed in terms of the Roman pantheon—they were converted to it by force'. It is not my point that analyses like this are wrong. The translation of the foreign name of a deity could indeed have significant cultural implications, especially when the translation began to displace the original, and it would be difficult to deny that this was an effect of Roman power.

But I would argue that this sort of analysis fails to take into account the theological complexity of *interpretatio Romana* as it was in fact practiced. The widespread perception of the gods as fluid and multiform meant that issues of translation were not reducible to simple equations in the form 'X = Y'. Although someone like our amber merchant might have translated the 'Alci' of the Nahanarvali into the 'Castor and Pollux' of the Romans, this did not mean that the Nahanarvalan Castor and Pollux could not retain a distinctive identity. Because people recognized that the gods were fluid and multiform, they were able to entertain multiple translations and multiple identifications. To say, then, that the Romans saw the gods worshipped by other people as, in most cases, the same gods that they themselves worshipped does not mean that they converted them by force; so fluid a conception of the divine world would not often have allowed for the sort of rigid impositions that Webster seems to envision.

At the same time, we should not mistake the Romans' belief that the gods were the same everywhere as a form of religious toleration. Although the gods might be the same, the human response to them varied, and it is quite clear that the Romans did not regard all forms of cult as equal. On the contrary, human sacrifice was barbaric, something to be suppressed; the Egyptian custom of depicting the gods in mixed animal-human form was absurd and disgraceful; the practices of the Jews were puzzling or disgusting. It was not so much that the Romans were tolerant of other religions as that

---

<sup>19</sup> Cic. *De nat. deor.* 3. 42 and 55-60; for discussion, see F. Girard 1983.

they did not really conceive of other 'religions' at all. *Interpretatio Romana* was simply the transformation of this fundamental principle into action.

### References

- Ando, C. 2005. '*Interpretatio Romana*'. *CP* 100: 41-51.
- Beard, M., J. North, and S. Price. 1998. *Religions of Rome. Vol. 1: A History*. Cambridge.
- Casson, L. 1989. *The Periplus Maris Erythraeae: Text with Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. Princeton.
- Girard, F. 1983. 'Probabilisme, théologie et religion: Le catalogue des dieux hononymes dans le *De natura deorum* de Cicéron (III, 42 et 53-60)'. In H. Zehnacker and G. Hentz, eds., *Hommages à Robert Schilling*. Paris. 117-26.
- Girard, J.-L. 1980. 'Interpretatio romana: questions historiques et problèmes de méthode'. *RHPPhR* 60 : 21-7.
- Graf, F. 2005 [1998]. 'Interpretatio, II: Religion'. In *Brill's New Pauly* 6: 869-71. First published in German in *Der Neue Pauly* 5: 1042-3.
- Hansen, W. 1996. *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels*. Exeter.
- Harris, M. W. 1980 [1979]. *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*. New York.
- Linforth, I. M. 1926. 'Greek Gods and Foreign Gods in Herodotus', *University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 9: 1-25.
- Lloyd, A. B. 1976. *Herodotus Book II: Commentary 1-98*. Leiden.
- MacMullen, R. 1981. *Paganism in the Roman Empire*. New Haven, CN.
- Mattern, S. P. 1999. *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate*. Berkeley.
- Nock, A. D. 1972 [1952]. 'The Roman Army and the Roman Religious Year'. In his *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Z. Stewart. Oxford. 2. 736-90. First published in *HTR* 45 (1952) 186-252.
- Price, S. 1999. *Religions of the Ancient Greeks*. Cambridge.

- Richter, F. 1906. *De deorum barbarorum interpretatione Romana quaestiones selectae*. Halle.
- Rives, J. B. 1999. *Tacitus: Germania*. Oxford.
- Scheid, J. 1987. 'Polytheism Impossible, or, The Empty Gods: Reasons behind a Void in the History of Roman Religion'. In F. Schmidt, ed., *The Inconceivable Polytheism (History and Anthropology 3)*. Paris. 303-25.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003 [1998]. *An Introduction to Roman Religion*. Bloomington IN. First published as *La religion de romains* (Paris 1998).
- de Sélincourt, A., trans. 1996. *Herodotus: The Histories*. Rev. with introduction and notes by J. M. Marincola. Harmondsworth.
- Spickermann, W. 2001. '*Interpretatio Romana?* Zeugnisse der Religion der Römern, Kelten und Germanen im Rheingebiet bis zum Ende des Bataveraufstandes'. In D. Hopp and C. Trümpfer, eds., *Die frühe römische Kaiserzeit im Ruhrgebiet*. Essen. 94-106.
- Sundwall, G. A. 1996. 'Ammianus Geographicus'. *AJP* 117: 619-43.
- Webster, J. 1995. '*Interpretatio*: Roman Word Power and the Celtic Gods'. *Britannia* 26: 153-61.
- Wissowa, G. 1916-19. '*Interpretatio Romana*: Römische Götter im Barbarenlande'. *ARW* 19: 1-49.
- Woolf, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*. Cambridge.