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HIST 226

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Illustrations in “The Translation of the Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros”

Primary sources are highly regarded as valuable tools for historical understanding, allowing us to connect directly to the time and place in which history is being documented rather than viewing these events through the lens of another thinker. However, when encountering the barriers of translation and artistic cultural context, what qualifies a source as truly “primary?” When it comes to reading translated sources, it is hard to know what is being lost. “The Translation of the Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros” offers readers visual sources alongside the translated text in the form of illustrations that have accompanied four different manuscripts of this text across centuries. The presence of the images alongside the text prompts the question: is there a difference in the “reliability” or “authenticity” of an image as compared to a translated text? We can view images directly as the artist created them, without the translation into another language that text requires. However, the meanings communicated in illustration cannot always be fully understood from the image in isolation, especially when the illustration comes from an artistic culture different than that of the viewer.

For example, take Plate 16 from the text. The top panel in the plate illustrates the scene in which the character of “the Black man,” Petros’ jailer, tries to burn her at the stake for refusing his advances. The bottom panel, directly below, illustrates Petros joined by an angel of God who holds up a sword to protect her from her captor.¹ From these images, we learn similar

¹ Wendy Laura Belcher, Michael Kleiner, and Galawdewos, “The Translation of the Life-Struggles of Walatta Petros (Gädlä Wälättä Petros)” in *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 163.

information to what we learn in the text; Petros is vulnerable, afraid, and in danger when she is tied to the stake, but the angel of God saves her from the situation, leaving “the Black man [...] shocked and scared.”² At first glance, we have access to the general ideas of the illustration; however, the introduction provides us with more information, with which we can analyze the image for meanings that are better communicated in the illustration than in the text.

Belcher’s “Introduction” contains some key information that can be used to better understand the illustration in Plate 16. Belcher explains that it is important to keep in mind Ethiopian artistic conventions when examining the images, and lays out several that may be helpful to Western readers. In particular relevance to Plate 16, we learn that the size of characters does not communicate their age or literal height, but instead denotes their rank or status.³ The phenomenon of character size is notable in Plate 16: in the first panel, Petros and the man are the same size, while in the second panel, the man has noticeably shrunk. The text describes the man as “shocked and scared,” “chastened”, and afraid of Petros⁴, but the image communicates the change in the man in a more evocative way; with the arrival of the angel, we can see his very rank and status in relation to Petros has decreased. While he is capable of posing a threat to her in the first panel, in which they are the same size, in the second panel it is clear that he is now incapable of causing harm to her. It is also interesting to note that Petros is the same size as the angel of God who has appeared; knowing this detail helps us understand just how highly Petros is considered as a religious figure. She is drawn as the same size as an angel sent directly from God, putting her in the ranks of the supernatural and holy. The text describes the angel as “by her side”⁵, but does not draw any direct comparison between the two that would prompt readers to

² Belcher et al., 162.

³ Wendy Laura Belcher, “Introduction to the Text in *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 42.

⁴ Belcher et al., 162.

⁵ Belcher et al., 162.

understand the angel as a kind of equal to her; rather, with an understanding of the significance of size in the illustration, we can understand just how much power Petros gains as a female religious figure.

It is evident that, as a primary source, illustrations hold value and can provide additional information alongside a text. However, these illustrations require secondary sources to understand their full context. With this in mind, are illustrations really less “translated” than text is- and what do we risk when relying on secondary sources for the information crucial to our understanding of the image?

Works Cited

- Belcher, Wendy Laura, WENDY LAURA BELCHER, MICHAEL KLEINER, and GALAWDEWOS. "Introduction to the Text." In *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, 1–48. Princeton University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77932.8>.
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