What's Lost & Found in Translations of a Babylonian Astronomical Procedure

The art, skill, and craft of translation have played a crucial role in the interpretation of Babylonian scientific texts since the very beginnings of the field. The debates between Unguru (1975), van der Waerden (1976), and Freudenthal (1977) highlighted how translators inserted modern biases and procedures into ancient mathematical practices through algebraic translations. While the value of all the different styles of translation advocated for in those papers is now generally accepted in the field, scholars have still attempted new styles of reinterpretation. Ritter (2004) and Imhausen (2002) have pioneered an algorithmic interpretation that stands somewhere between a standard rhetorical translation and a completely algebraic one. Yet with so much intervention necessary for the production of these algorithmic forms, many suggest that the resulting algorithms are less translation than they are interpretation.

This presentation collects a number of different translation styles of a specific Babylonian astronomical procedure, ranging from photos and line drawings to prose, algebraic, and algorithmic interpretations. The goal of the collection is to examine what is lost and gained in the different presentation styles, from specific linguistic choices that speak to how scientific cultures viewed specific mathematical operations to underlying logic buried in verbal instantiation. By walking through a case study of how information and organization are preserved or altered in the different styles, this presentation will attempt to address the incompleteness of individual translation methods. It will highlight the role of the translator in the production of different translations and ultimately argue that algorithmic interpretation can indeed be considered a type of translation.

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