How similar do two texts have to be for one to be called a translation of the other? Should they be completely equivalent, in force, in meaning, and in syntax? Can the translation deviate, in linguistic form or in content, from the original, and still be a translation? The answer, for the translators and bureaucrats of early modern Russia, was that a massive degree of deviation was not only allowable, but desirable and necessary, to exist between an original and its translation. From 1534, when the low German herbal Garden of Health was translated into Church Slavonic, through a multitude of Western European pharmacopoeias, prescriptions, and specially commisioned reports, to the creation of a Russian-language version of a German pharmacy text for Peter the Great in 1698, various figures orbiting the Russian court were engaged in translating Western European medical works for the purposes of the Muscovite elite. They took primarily German and Latin works, and turned them into Slavonic texts, in the process massively altering the form and content of these texts by the re-arrangement, removal, and addition of words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters of text. This process of selection and adaptation of scientific texts mirrors a more general attitude among Russians before 1700, who were keen to select aspects of other nations’ achievements, but only piecemeal. The processes of selection and adaptation were underpinned by a fundamental confidence in the rightness of the Russian way of life: useful foreign ideas, texts, and inventions, had to be thoroughly Russianised, in part to make them truly comprehensible to a self-confident elite, but also to make them acceptable to that same elite. This paper examines these early modern medical texts in Slavonic translation to argue that early modern Russia had a firmly established practice, if not an explicitly articulated theory, of highly adaptive scientific translation fundamentally based on a pervasive attitude of cultural superiority.
Bio-bibliographical note:

Clare Griffin completed her thesis work on the seventeenth-century Russian court’s medical department and the production and translation of medical knowledge in 2013 at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. She has previously held a post as a Wellcome Trust Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, and is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, where she is completing a monograph on medical drugs in early modern Russia. She works on medicine, practical knowledge, translation, information technologies, and the global drug trade, in relation to the early modern Russian Empire.


