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Book Review

William F. Ryan and Moshe Taube. *The Secret of Secrets: The East Slavic Version; Introduction, Text, Annotated Translation, and Slavic Index*. Warburg Institute Studies and Texts 7. London: The Warburg Institute, 2019. 544 pages. US\$ 69.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-908-59073-2.

This impressive volume, a model of philological scholarship, brings into the academic and public domain a critical bilingual (Ruthenian-English) edition of the fifteenth-century East Slavonic version of one of the most popular works of pre-modern times, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets*, considered by members of European nobility to be the ultimate “manual of the ideal ruler.” As such, it was regarded as an indispensable item in the libraries of many men of power. Presented as an assemblage of letters purportedly written by the elderly tutor of Alexander the Great, “the great and pious philosopher Aristotle,” who, on account of his advanced age, could not accompany his ambitious pupil in his military conquests, but kept advising him remotely, through thorough epistles, how to handle matters of kingship and statecraft, government and law, public relations and ethics, warfare and “innumerable sciences.” These included physiognomy and astrology, alchemy and magic, as well as medicine and “regimen of health,” with seasonal diets, curative properties of precious stones, and onomancy.

In short, *The Secret of Secrets* – known in Arabic as *Sirr al-Asrār*, in Hebrew as *Sod ha-sodot*, in Latin as *Secretum Secretorum*, in Slavonic as *Tajna Tajnyh* (to mention just a few among the titles under which it circulated in different linguistic and cultural settings) – was supposed to be a handbook summarizing essential knowledge concerning all necessary aspects of statesmanship. The aim was to train the skills that any self-respecting sovereign was supposed to possess. Its alleged author, Aristotle, on the other hand, was portrayed in the opening passage of the composition as a holy prophet whose nature was similar to that of an angel rather than of a wise man and who – like the Biblical Elijah – was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

The very title of the composition, *The Secret of Secrets* (Slav. *Tajna Tajnyh*) betrays its somewhat esoteric character, as a florilegium of very different genres and pieces of scholastic literature, combined and adapted into a single corpus. The thematic content, however, is not arbitrary but follows a consistent logic, as explained in great detail in the volume's introduction by William F. Ryan and Moshe Taube.

As pointed out by scholars, *The Secret of Secrets* shares certain common features with the *Alexander Romance*, which was arguably the most frequently read work in its heyday apart from the Bible, and shared in its popularity. *The Secret of Secrets* thus centers first and foremost on the life and career of Alexander and the instructions he purportedly received from his teacher Aristotle, which provides a loose framework for the entire narrative. The opening arguments of the work concern advice specifically intended for Alexander and the challenges he faced as conqueror, general, and political leader. Not only would Alexander's personal ethics and decisions have to be correct, but he would have to make sure that all of his advisors, fellow soldiers, and administrators would be loyal, reliable, and competent, without having personal contact with everyone entrusted with running the new empire. The obvious solution was to engage the services of physiognomic signs as a tool for gauging character, which could then be applied to more general situations not immediately related to Alexander and his specific needs. This particular art of divination (previously discoursed in the Arabic text of al-Rāzī) already had a long and continuous history from pre-Islamic antiquity before being taken up in the *Secrets of Secrets*; once the text focused on forecasting personal character based on signs and omens (ostensibly for Alexander's purposes), it was easy to wander into related disciplines, such as alchemy and astrology, both of which are mentioned in passing. More attention, however, was then devoted by *The Secrets of Secrets* to a discipline closely related to physiognomy, namely medicine and diagnosis based upon humoral theory, with references made to Galen, Hippocrates, and Avicenna. An interesting side-issue also merited attention, namely bloodletting, which was not universally adopted as an uncontroversial treatment, as is usually thought to be the case. The narrative of *The Secrets of Secrets* then wanders somewhat far afield, quoting extracts of several medical works of Maimonides (on poisons, sexuality, and asthma) and finishing with a citation from Diogenes Laertius, finally bringing us back to Aristotle and hence coming full circle.

This brief summary of the contents hardly does justice to the immense scholarship involved in editing and translating this compendium of texts from various disciplines, which was transmitted from Arabic to Hebrew to Slavonic,

with many interpolations and variations between versions in different languages, preserved in numerous manuscript sources. The usual expectation is for such classical texts (thematically featuring Alexander the Great) to be based upon a Greek *Vorlage*, but this proves not to be the case. As the authors have convincingly shown, the Slavonic text appears to have been translated from the Hebrew (an unusual transmission), while the Hebrew was a translation from the Arabic.

The introduction by Ryan and Taube offers an impressive survey of twenty-seven Slavonic manuscripts of *Tajna ja Tajnyh* (dated to the period between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries), forty-three Hebrew manuscripts of *Sod ha-sodot* (dated to the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries), with references to seven Arabic manuscripts of *Sirr al-Asrār* (from ca. twelfth to the eighteenth centuries); it does a masterful job of explaining all aspects of the textual transmission through its various phases, although the edition looks backwards from the Slavonic text towards its predecessors.

Nothing about this text is easy to interpret. The general structure is puzzling, with its divisions into both “chapters” (Slav. *glazivny*) and “gates” (Slav. *vrata*, after Arabic *bāb*, which means both “gate/door” and “chapter”; hence the complementary title of the composition as *The Gates of Aristotle*, Slav. *Aristotelevy vrata*); furthermore, there are marginal notes dividing the text into pericopes according to days of the week, which has defied explanation (see pp. 80–81). The important feature of the text is its composite character in combining different genres (historical fiction, physiognomic signs, medical diagnoses and even prescriptions, with a smattering of astrology and alchemy, magic and onomancy) into a single narrative, as an instructive text of esoteric knowledge. The two authors, Ryan and Taube, have engaged in a great deal of detective work to explain the background and possible authorship of the text as well as to elucidate the linguistic context. First tracing the history of scholarship on the Slavonic text, the authors point out that Soviet scholars often ignored or minimized the importance of the text on ideological grounds. As for the various versions, while the Arabic original purports to be a translation from Greek via Syriac, it seems unlikely that any such *Vorlage* existed. The Arabic text was attested in shorter and longer recensions, but it was only the former which was translated into Hebrew, which became the basis for the fifteenth-century Slavonic translation (in Ruthenian, accomplished in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), with later copies made in Muscovy. There are, however, many interesting interpolations in the Slavonic text that do not appear in other versions, probably indicating that *The Secret of Secrets* was successfully domesticated for its Slavonic readership.

Moreover, Ryan and Taube have identified the author of the Slavonic translation from Hebrew as a Jew from Kiev and later Damascus, named Zecharia ben Aharon ha-Kohen, (ca. 1454 and 1485), and known to Russian sources as the astrologer and magician named Scharia (Slav. *Cxapia*), described by Josif Volockij as the instigator of the heresy of the Judaizers in Novgorod. A second figure important for the success of the translation (or its transmission) was probably Moses ben Jacob the Russian (1448–1520), a Kiev scholar of Kabbalah, exegesis, and astronomy, whose colorful career is well documented by the authors. An interesting feature of the philological practices reflected in the textual transmission of *The Secret of Secrets* in the Slavonic domain is the suggestion (carefully formulated by Taube and Ryan) that Zecharia dictated his translation orally to an unnamed Christian scribe, which would explain some interpolations in the text. This fits a general pattern of Ruthenian translations of Hebrew scientific texts during this same period for a non-Jewish readership, some of whom may have been considered to be Judaizers, a group who were persecuted as heretics. The introduction by Ryan and Taube presents a detailed and illuminating study of Judaizer literature and links with *The Secret of Secrets*.

The existence of *The Secret of Secrets* as a direct translation from Hebrew into Slavonic raises more interesting questions about other (non-scientific) texts that might possibly have been translated directly into Slavonic from a Hebrew (or Aramaic) original, without assuming the existence of a Greek *Vorlage* that so far has never been identified.

One contentious point could be taken up with the authors, who argue that, although *The Secret of Secrets* incorporates sources and citations from various esoteric disciplines, the text contains “relatively little ‘hidden’ knowledge in it, even to a medieval eye” (p. 5). The point is that in the pre-modern episteme, all technical knowledge was considered as esoteric to some extent, which meant that technical information was only intended to be shared among those with proper training and tools for interpreting and applying it, but not with laymen or the general public. Such esoteric knowledge included disciplines of various forms of divination, medicine, magic, astrology, and alchemy, all of which required special access through teaching or apprenticeships. For the general public, however, such knowledge remained “hidden” or even “secret,” which is precisely the point of the title of this work, *The Secret of Secrets*. This also explains why *The Secrets of Secrets* was included within the category of prohibited books.

Ryan and Taube have done a masterful job in producing a bilingual text edition with such extensive indices. In addition to a comprehensive bibliography

and general subject index, the authors have included a Slavic index consisting of 128 pages (pp. 380–508), cross-referencing every Slavonic word with its Hebrew counterpart and textual citations, which is in itself a monumental and industrious work of scholarship. This volume will remain the standard edition of the Slavonic version of *The Secret of Secrets*.

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