THE CRITICAL EDITION OF ARISTOTLE’S *DE ANIMALIBUS*
IN THE ARABIC-LATIN TRANSLATION OF MICHAEL SCOT.
ITS PURPOSE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

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Summary

Historians of science and other scientists need to have access to scholarly editions of important literary witnesses to developments which they study. Without such editions, all kinds of linguistic and content-related problems in the Nachleben of, for instance, Aristotle’s work will remain unsolved, or conclusions will be drawn on the basis of incorrect data.

The intensive work that is necessary to realize such editions requires much specialist expertise and patience. Moreover, this expertise must be preserved and passed on. To this end governments and subsidizing institutions need to provide funding on a permanent basis.

The historical importance of Michael Scot’s Arabic-Latin translation of Aristotle’s zoological works is evident, in view of its extensive use in the Middle Ages. The basic manuscript for the edition is MS Vaticanus Chisianus E. VIII 251, which was probably a presentation copy for the Emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen and which must have been produced during Scot’s lifetime (ca. 1220). The often incorrect or inaccurate way Scot’s translation is quoted from in many scientific books and articles shows how vitally important a critical edition of this work is.

In 1996 an international workshop was organized at the De Wulf-Mansion Centre in Louvain on ‘the tradition of Aristotle’s *De historia animalium* (‘History of animals’), Aristotle’s general zoology. It was followed in 1997 by an international colloquium on ‘Aristotle’s animals in the Middle Ages and Renaissance’, the proceedings of which appeared in 1999.1 One of the outcomes of these meetings was the astonishing fact that, whenever Aristotle’s biology was cited during the Middle Ages and even during a large part of the Renaissance, the citations invariably continued to derive from the Arabic-Latin translation of Michael Scot—which has been preserved in the large number of over 62 manuscripts—and hardly ever from the

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1 Carlos Steel, Guy Guldentops, Pieter Beullens eds., *Aristotle’s Animals in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia I, XXVII (Leuven 1999).
later Graeco-Latin translation of William of Moerbeke, although the latter was certainly much more accurate and available in a good many copies as well.

The most conscientious medieval scholars used the text of Scot to read on quickly in the extensive text of nineteen books (in Moerbeke's case the text even numbered twenty-one books, since his translation also contained the two treatises on the movement and progression of animals which were unknown and untranslated in the Arabic tradition), whereas they used Moerbeke's Latin translation when a more precise rendering of the Greek text was desired. Evidence of this practice can be found in an extant manuscript containing Moerbeke's translation, written between the lines of Scot's translation. This translation of Scot proved to be enduringly popular, and the main reason for its undiminished appeal, despite the availability of Moerbeke's translation from the Greek, must have been that Scot wrote an extremely lucid and smoothly readable Latin. In Scot's rendering, the reader was spared many underlying translation problems, whereas Moerbeke's accurate literal translation required much more time and effort on the part of the reader.

'In fact', it was equally said in the Preface to the proceedings of 1999, 'zoology remained for centuries a science based on texts, a corpus of commentaries on the Philosopher's books'. Citations from Scot's translation emerge in numerous scholastic works, encyclopedias—for instance of Arnoldus Saxo and Thomas of Cantimpré—and commentaries—for instance by Albertus the Great and Peter of Spain. His translation permeated scholastic philosophy, theology (Thomas Aquinas), epistemology, anthropology and moralizing literature. The most important Jewish authors based their knowledge of Peripatetic zoology on the Arabic and Arabic-Latin tradition. Scot's text was even transformed into widespread florilegia, which enabled a greater number of users to access the contents of this lengthy and therefore very expensive work. Citing the Preface again: 'It becomes clear in how many different ways Aristotle's books on animals fertilized the cultural life of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Thus, it is no exaggeration to claim that without the zoological doctrine of the Philosopher our culture would have lacked a great deal of its scientific realism and of its humanistic wealth'.

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3 Kues, Bibliothek des Hospitals 205 (AJ 843).