AVERROES’ COMMENTARY ON ARISTOTLE’S
DE GENERATIONE ANIMALIUM AND ITS USE IN
TWO THIRTEENTH-CENTURY HEBREW ENCYCLOPEDIAS

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1. Introduction

Among Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle’s works the Kitāb al-hayawān (De animalibus), the commentary on Aristotle’s zoology, is one of the least studied. Averroes completed it in November 1169 (safar 565) in Seville after he had left Cordoba. The text contains De partibus animalium and De generatione animalium. Averroes, however, did not use these names, adopting instead the numbering into Books XI–XIX, as was common in the Arabic zoological tradition. Books I–X, covering the Historia animalium were not commented upon by Averroes.1

Averroes’ Kitāb al-hayawān belongs to the commentaries that have not been preserved in the original Arabic; it is extant only in the Hebrew and Latin translations. If it is true that the Latin version is based on the Hebrew one, as is commonly assumed, the Hebrew translation is the earliest complete testimony of Averroes’ zoology. This translation was made by Jacob ibn Machir in 1302 and later served as the basis of Gersonides’ super-commentary on De animalibus (1323). However, before the Arabic text had been translated into Hebrew, the commentary was already made accessible to Jewish scholars in Christian lands through the surveys provided by two thirteenth-century Hebrew authors, namely Judah ha-Cohen in his Midrash ha-hokhmah (Hebrew version c. 1247) and Shemtov ibn Falaquera in his De’ot ha-filosofim (c. 1260).2 In both


2 On these and other encyclopedic texts see S. Harvey (ed.), The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy (Dordrecht, 2000) and the literature mentioned in the ‘Selected Bibliography,’ pp. 520–21.
'encyclopedias' a section on zoology is found within the framework of a survey of Aristotelian natural philosophy, a survey for which Averroes’ commentaries are the most important sources. While Judah ha-Cohen’s survey can be called an excerpt, Falaquera’s is far more extensive and contains passages that are literal or almost literal translations of the Averroian texts. Through these encyclopedias Jewish savants who did not read Arabic could familiarize themselves with Aristotelian natural philosophy as read by Averroes at a time when only a few of his commentaries in this field were available in Hebrew translation. The aim of this paper is to discuss some features of Averroes’ procedure as a commentator in De generatione animalium and to examine how the Hebrew encyclopedists in turn transmit his commentary. To this end, I shall select a few topics from Books XV and XIX.

Before investigating these questions, however, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss the category to which this commentary belongs: that of the Epitomes or that of the Middle Commentaries. The Kitāb al-hayawān is the only commentary that Averroes has written on Aristotle’s zoology. Steinschneider tended to consider it to be an Epitome, but it looks more like a Middle Commentary. Not only is it considerably longer than Averroes’ other Epitomes, but it also follows the Aristotelian text closer than the Epitomes do. The title of the Hebrew translation is Sefer ba’alei hayyim, which does not disclose very much. The colophon starts with the words: ‘completed is the be’ur of all the scientific portions of these books’. The term be’ur may render the Arabic talkhīs, but it is more likely that its meaning here is explanation or ‘exposition’ in general, since Averroes’ use of the term is not consistent. The Latin translation refers to the commentary as a paraphrasis. In several Hebrew manuscripts our text is grouped with other commentaries by Averroes. However, no evidence can be deduced from these manuscripts with respect to

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5 M. Steinschneider, Die hebräischen Übersetzungen und die Juden als Dolmetscher (Graz, 1956), p. 144 n. 229.

6 Ms. Paris BN heb 956, fol. 485r.