

PSEUDO-ARISTOTLE, *Secret des secrets* [Secret of Secrets], anonymous translation

In French, illuminated manuscript on parchment

France (perhaps Arras or Tournai, or Paris?), c. 1300-1320

67 folios on parchment, wanting three leaves (two from the third quire and first leaf from sixth, else complete (collation i-ii⁸ iii⁸ [lacking the outermost bifolium, 1 and 8] iv-v⁸ vi⁸ [lacking one leaf, 1] vii-viii⁸ ix⁶, the last leaf blank), eighteenth-century pagination 1-132 in ink (followed here), written on 25 lines in a fine, early gothic bookhand in brown ink between 4 vertical and 25 horizontal lines ruled in brown ink (justification 125 x 83 mm.), serrated ornamental cadels at top and bottom of text frame (some in later part of book touched in red), capitals touched in red, nearly 100 two-line initials in highly burnished gold leaf on blue and pink variegated grounds touched with white penwork, frontispiece with one six-line historiated initial enclosing Aristotle kneeling before an enthroned Alexander the Great offering him the book, all before tessellated background in gold and colors (slight smudging and flaking from initial), full border of gold and colored bars enclosing geometric bosses at its corners and midpoints and terminating in gold foliage and bezants, seven small birds and a hare perched on text frame, the latter in the bas-de-page pursued by a hound as a monkey blows a hunting horn, pen trials of French words and an elaborate monogram with a human face in late sixteenth-century hand upside down on front parchment endleaf, slightly trimmed at edges with minor losses to border on frontispiece, parchment slightly cockled throughout, else fine condition. Eighteenth-century gilt-tooled red morocco over pasteboards (flowers and 's' shapes in single fillet, flower heads, compartments on spine and "CONSEILS MS IN MEMBRANIS" on spine), some small scuffs, stains and scratches, marbled doublures and paper and parchment endleaves. Dimensions 156 x 112 mm.

An early French translation, the earliest of four known manuscripts, of what has been called the "most popular book in the Middle Ages." The text is written as an extended letter from Aristotle to his Alexander the Great that offers the prince advice on how to govern and live well; the focus in this translation on the physical well-being of the ruler is notable. Of portable size, illuminated with a fine historiated initial and border by an anonymous artist in the style of Jean Pucelle, the present copy stands out in the manuscript tradition as an early and distinctive example of a popular text that was surely made for an important person.

PROVENANCE

1. Copied and illuminated in France in the early fourteenth century, c. 1300-1320.

Just where and exactly for whom this attractive small volume was made remains unclear. The frontispiece miniature follows the iconography for illuminated versions of the treatise that shows the messenger from Aristotle kneeling before an enthroned king Alexander the Great (see Williams, 2014, type 2 in the iconographic tradition). A near-contemporary copy of Philip of Tripoli's Latin translation dated 1327 and transcribed and illuminated in England for the future King Edward III (British Library, Add. MS 47680, f. 12v) depicts a more elaborate version of the scene with Alexander receiving the book from a kneeling messenger while Aristotle stands behind him. Whereas certain features of the style of our miniature and its border suggest North France/ Flanders (Arras or Tournai), there are compelling comparisons with Parisian manuscripts in the entourage of Jean Pucelle from the decade of the 1320s. Compare for example the Nativity in the Hours of Jeanne de

Navarre (Paris, BnF, MS lat. 1288, f. 114) by the Saint Louis Master (Mahiet?) with our historiated initial. Research suggests that the Saint Louis Master was actually trained in northern France before collaborating with Pucelle in the 1330s. Certainly, whatever the exact origins of the manuscript, its text and illustration alike suggest that it was made to order for a special person.

2. From the eighteenth-century English collection of David Swann, whose name was deduced by Scot McKendrick from inscriptions in British Library, Burney MSS. 13 and 216. Like those, the present manuscript has the inscription "Bibliotheca Swaniana" and a date in the early 1790s (here "1793") on the front endleaf, followed by the inscription "This Curious MS appears to be as old as the year 1300. Containing the Counsels of Aristotle to King Alexander how to govern the Persians etc with some Receipts for Preventing Disorders in his Body." Other manuscripts from the Bibliotheca Swaniana are British Library, Stowe MS 5, Add. MS 15334; Oxford, Bodleian MS Lyell 21 and Lat.th.e. 28; Durham University Library, Add. MS 754; St. Peter upon Cornhill (now on deposit as Guildhall Library), MS 4158A; Paris, BnF, n.a.l. 694 (ex Phillipps MS 23241); Livorno, Biblioteca dei Cappuccini, Ar. 8.10; N.Y, NYPL, MS 134; N.Y, Morgan Library, MS 519; Lilly Library, Ricketts MS 6; and Princeton University, MS Kane 50. Two further manuscripts were sold by Sotheby's in 1959 (26 January, lot 53 and 15 June, lot 149). The collection appears to have begun to be dispersed by the close of the eighteenth century, and the Morgan volume appeared in a London auction by King, 17 March 1799, lot 68.
3. John Towneley (1731-1813), his armorial bookplate with the number "1503" on front pastedown; his sale, Evans, 8 June 1814, lot 895.
4. Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872), his MS 252, with lion rampant ink-stamp and paper label on spine, bought from Thorpe, cat. III (1824), no. 16494, see verso of first flyleaf; by descent and then sale to the Robinson brothers in 1946 and eventually sold privately to H.P. Kraus: his cat. 153, *Bibliotheca Phillipica*, 1979, no. 34.
5. J. R. Ritman (1941–), Amsterdam, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica MS 67, with his bookplate on recto of front flyleaf; acquired from Schumann, Zurich in 1987.

TEXT

ff. 1-66v, incipit, "Cestui livre fist li tres sages phylosophes aristotes a la priere et requeste du tres puissant Roy alixandre ..."; explicit, "[...] et si vous volez vivre en tel maniere vous entenderez la renommée de vostre haut non patout le siecle. Amen."

Pseudo-Aristotle, *Secret des secrets*, anonymous French translation. Twelve different French translations and adaptations of this text are known, a number of which exist in a single manuscript; the fourteenth-century translation in this manuscript is known in just four manuscripts, of which this is the earliest (Gauillier-Bougassas, 2015; Williams, *Filosofia*, 2003, pp. 451-82).

This is one of the fundamental texts that formed the intellect of educated medieval society and one that was very widely disseminated. Whereas in 1889 Förster listed some 207 manuscripts of the Latin version of the *Secretum secretorum*, as recently as 1999, Briggs cited some 600 Latin copies, and early translations survive in almost all mainstream European vernaculars, as well as Icelandic, Gaelic, and Hebrew. Nine separate versions in English exist.

The *Secretum secretorum* is an extended letter in the *Speculum regale* or Mirror of Princes tradition, claiming to be written by Aristotle for his former pupil Alexander the Great while he was on campaign in the East. Old age and infirmity forbade Aristotle joining Alexander in the field, and so the text claims he sent this letter by messenger in his place, to offer advice on the art of government and correct royal conduct. It was not the work of Aristotle, but was part of the Aristotelian corpus from a very early date. It was most probably composed within the Arabic world sometime before the bibliographer Ibn Juljul noted it in the late tenth century, where it is known as the *Kitab Sirr al-asrār*. The Arabic text claims that it was the work of a well-known mid-ninth-century translator Yahya ibn al-Bitriq (fl. 796- 806; this attribution is probably an imposture; he also translated the medical works of Galen and Hippocrates for the second Abbasid Caliph, Al-Mansur, as well as Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*), and derived from a manuscript in Greek discovered in a Temple of Aesclepius, which was translated into Arabic for Caliph al-Ma'mūn, via an intermediary (probably Syriac) version. The story may have a kernel of truth in it, and it appears that some parts do indeed have Greek origins, but much has been added to the text by its Arabic copyists.

The awakening of Western fascination in the East which accompanied the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the establishment of translation schools in Spain, Sicily, and Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries laid the foundations for the translation of the text into Latin. It was initially introduced to the West in a partial translation known as the *Epistola Aristotelis ad Alexandrum de regimine sanitatis* by John of Seville (fl. 1133-1142), a baptized Jew who may have been a native of Toledo and who, as an early exponent of the Toledo School of Translators, translated a number of works from Arabic into Latin (see Williams, 2003, ch. 1). The complete translation into Latin was accomplished by an Italian curialist, Philip of Tripoli (fl. 1218-1269) probably for the Guido (mentioned as the patron in the text) who was bishop of Tripoli between 1228/29 and 1236/37 (Williams, 2003, ch. 2).

With its advice on the ethics and politics of governance purportedly to a ruler (Alexander) from his tutor (Aristotle), the text naturally fitted into the Mirror of Princes tradition. However, as Williams suggests, it is the teachings on other subjects adapted partly from eastern mysticism – medicine, alchemy, astrology, physiognomy, philosophy – that ensured the appeal of the *Secret of Secrets* to secular elites throughout Europe. Vernacular translations appeared within decades of the Latin, and its impact in the French courts was notably pronounced, with at least a dozen separate medieval versions in that language, ten of which are traced by Williams (in *Filosofia*, 2003, pp. 451-82).

The translation in this manuscript is anonymous, although it probably dates from the fourteenth century; its dialect includes traits found in Northern France. It has been identified in four manuscripts, of which this is certainly the earliest. The evidence of this manuscript, moreover, proves that this translation could not have originated at the court of Charles V, who was king of France from 1364-1380, as scholars once believed. The other manuscripts are Paris,

Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, MS 2872 (1350-1400), copied for Charles V; Paris, BnF, MS fr. 1088 (fifteenth century), and Lyon, BM, MS 864 (fifteenth century) (discussed in Gaullier-Bougassas, 2015, pp. 64-65, and 89-100).

The contents of this particular translation, as well as its diminutive size, are worth special note. The text has many forms in its various translations, and what it includes or excludes reveals a great deal about the tastes and concerns of the original commissioner. This version demonstrates how the *Secret des secrets* was still being read in the fourteenth-century as a scientific text. It is a very complete translation of the Latin, and one that includes most of the passages on the occult arts and alchemy.

As in all versions, this French translation opens with entreaties for Alexander to rule benevolently, to become a patron of the arts and sciences, and in the last section to choose his messengers and royal officers wisely, above all guarding against treason. The largest part of our codex, the middle section, focuses almost entirely on the physical well-being of the ruler. This is a theme throughout the entire textual tradition, but here it almost completely eclipses all others, setting aside many of the more usual fantastical metaphorical tales of the East, and instead offering advice on disorders of the "entrailles" and "estomac" (pp. 37 and 44), "le cors et tous les membres" (p. 39), the digestion (p. 41), various "aigues" or ailments (pp. 55 and 69), and the relationship between the sun and the signs of a choleric or phlegmatic disposition (p. 69). This is followed by another section on the beneficial uses of herbs, plants and vegetables (pp. 77-93), with occasional comments on their relationship with the planets and elements. In addition, this is a small pocket volume, and while its fine illumination, use of gold leaf, and high quality parchment show that it must have been made for a patron of significant wealth and influence, this is not a large deluxe manuscript for public display or recital. Instead, it must have been a personal book, containing translations of the parts of the letter of greatest concern to the commissioner and primarily read for private enjoyment and education.

ILLUSTRATION

One six-line historiated initial in the style of Jean Pucelle (fl. c. 1300-1355), Messenger from Aristotle kneeling before an enthroned Alexander the Great offering him the book, all before tessellated background in gold and colors (slight smudging and flaking from initial), full border of gold and colored bars enclosing geometric bosses at its corners and midpoints and terminating in gold foliage and bezants, seven small birds and a hare perched on text frame, the latter in the bas-de-page pursued by a hound as a monkey blows a hunting horn.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Electronic version of Robert Copland's 1528 translation of the text into English

<http://www.colourcountry.net/secretum/>

The Latin text as published as *Secreta secretorum Aristotelis* by Alessandro Achillini in 1528 (here in

a digitised copy of the book):

<http://www.e-rara.ch/zuz/content/titleinfo/1349506>

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