

SLAVIC-BALTIC SPACE THROUGH THE PRISM OF MAGIC BOOKS

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Abstract: In the Slavic culture, one of the remarkable places as a monument of literary texts and traditional folk knowledge was occupied by manuscripts and books which belonged to the category of forbidden (by church) literature, to the so called false, black or renounced books. Today, they are generally referred to as magical books and represent special section of superstitious and divination books.

The main problem in exploring of magical books of ancient Slavs is the absence of the so-called primary sources, and only the late, fragmented and highly subjective sources of medieval census-takers and chroniclers are available, therefore in the study we have to face the inconsistencies in some details or even distortions and mistakes.

The main part of works related to this topic is borrowings from other cultures, but later, when they began to be considered as “their own”, they did not cease to be influenced by local folk traditions and continued to fulfil their goals and functions.

The most interesting variant is represented by ancient Russian magic books borrowed from the early Middle Ages up to the last centuries and influenced both from the south and the west. Parallels in other cultures indicate the existence of archetypal texts containing certain rules concerning key points.

The article offers to review the history of some magical books that reached the Russians through the southern Slavs and the Baltic regions.

Keywords: Baltic space, Magic books, Russian, South Slavs

In the Slavic culture, one of the remarkable places as a monument of folk writings / literary texts and traditional folk knowledge was occupied by books and manuscripts from the category of the forbidden (by church) literature, the so called false, black or renounced books. Nowadays, those books are generally referred to as magical books and represent the special section of superstitious and divination books. The study of those manuscripts and books is of considerable historical interest and lets us to determine the originality of the ancient Slavic and Russian culture.

Scholars of the past centuries have explored this topic and scientific field. In the middle of the 19th century N. S. Tikhonravov (1863: I-X), the researcher of the “Monuments of renounced Russian literature”, singled out a hundred titles of books belonging to the category of magic books referring to the incompleteness of the list he presented.

The magic book as an object of investigation still has no precise and clear definition. In modern consciousness, the magic book unites a number of publications on magic, fortune telling, mythology, esotericism, healing, religion. For example,

in the category “Magic Book” is mentioned the following list of publications: books on witchcraft, shamanism, black magic (necromancy, spoiling), love magic (love spells and charms), various healing methods and practices or folk medicine, astrology, yoga, reiki, qigong, Ayurveda, Feng Shu, textbooks and self-taught books on magic, hypnosis, ways of divination, collections of conspiracies, spells, esoteric literature, Tarot books and Tarot cards, Runes, etc. (Moskvina 2011: 99).

If we talk about the magic book in the past, first of all, we have to keep in mind the fortune-telling / divination itself which certainly represented a very important and significant part of any culture. As William F. Ryan (1999: Introduction) notes, there was a long, rich, and interesting tradition of magic, fortune-telling and popular beliefs in Russia, more so than in other countries of Europe.

Using the term “magic books”, it should be noted that this study refers to those books only that were directly or indirectly related to the Slavic and Baltic historical and cultural phenomena. In fact, this literature is very rich and huge and the available sources are often mixed, complemented, or contradict with each other. Many of them represent compilation works which are associated with several books from different countries, languages, and various historical

periods, and they are composed into one. Or, it may be that the parts of one book are published as separate books and distributed among the people. And not one of them is called directly as a fortune-telling book but instead represents a set of folk knowledge and observations on all natural and life phenomena. And even if some of them are considered as “pure” Russian works, almost in every case, they are fully or partially borrowed and consist of translation works with additions, reinterpretations adapted to local traditions and concepts that by this way could be easily learned, spread quickly, and be used in practice.

The First Sources

According to the researchers, the Slavic magical tradition arose as a result of the folk processing of the ancient knowledge of the pagan Slavic magicians. Part of the magic of the Slavs was influenced by the European tradition, but most of the original ways of Slavic sorcery / witchcraft / charming practice came “from within”, as a heritage of the pagan Slavic past. Unlike the European magic, the Slavic magic was almost always a purely intuitive phenomenon, with the practitioner having a special natural gift and knowledge in this domain.

Perhaps one of the discovered ancient written sources, which affirm this phenomenon as a fortune-telling among the Slavs, is connected with the Bulgarian “monk-protagonist” named Chernorizets Hrabr (maybe this is only the pseudonym of the writer). In the Slavic studies, Hrabr is one of the most significant writers and generally considered as one of the most interesting scribes of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, who worked at the Preslavskaya book school in the late 9th – early 10th centuries. In his “Story on Writings”, he writes: “In earlier times, the Slavic people did not have any letters, but they read on lines and cuts, they also *told fortune*, being pagans. Later, being baptised, they attempted to write the Slavic speech without dispensation in Roman and Greek” (Deryagin). But this source does not mean that the ancient Slavs had their own fortune-telling books or some other written methods of divination. We know very well, by the casual and immediate fortune-telling, one can quickly draw symbols on the ground or on any other flatness and conduct a ritual of divination which is also practiced today.

The fortune telling came to the Eastern Slavs along with Christianity on a ground slightly touched by the culture of the ancient world and medieval Europe, but which contained ready-made elements for perception. The church

itself preferred not to pursue the Christian fortune telling, at first, finding in it a good tool for expelling pagan fortune telling. Thus, Christianity itself was a factor that tolerated, preserved (albeit in a peculiar way) the old and ancient Oriental traditions. Relations with the East, the influence of the antiquated world that was obsolete, only supported and revitalised this connection. This, together with later conditions caused the new influence of the East on Western Europe and Byzantium. As it can be seen, the ground for the experience of these ancient Oriental beliefs in fortune-telling has been constantly “refreshed” and “renewed” by new tributaries; on this base, “the old pagan fortune-telling did not die and had not been stopped, but it was only dressed in a different form, sometimes modifying it, sometimes hiding under it” (Speranskiy 1899: 6–7). Or

in spite of the insistence and prospections of its advanced representatives, Christianity took on the old heritage, dressed it in a Christian shell and banished from it a purely pagan element: pagan divination became a Christian fortune telling and could not be eradicated among the lower and middle classes of Christianized society, and even more among the newly converted ones. In the latter, Christian fortune telling was more easily instilled and rooted, that it became instead of their own pagan fortune telling (ibid.: 2).

A hundred years after the Christianisation, there was already the first news of Christian fortune-telling in Russia (i.e. in the Ancient Rus’). This fortune-telling bears all the features of ordinary, widespread, and generally accepted divination in Europe. For example, the first fortune-telling monument can be identified from “The Testament / Instructions by Vladimir Monomakh” from 1096 (or 1099), where the first testimony of Christian fortune-telling is given and in which is written, when He (i.e. Vladimir Monomakh) having received the news, He decided to open the psalter “for a good luck” and read the verses that had fallen to him from the psalm. But in this case, Monomakh was not the first one who came to mind “to look in the future” by this way: he used the custom of seeking solution for own doubt on the psalter that had been pre-existing for many centuries (Morgun 2011). The Psalter was the most popular book, outranking even The Gospel (which is not easily understandable for ordinary people). For an ordinary Christian, the Psalter had combined everything that a common person needed: a moral code in which he saw a book of prophetic, a poetic book with lyricism and artistic images, and the folk knowledge what

was clear and understandable. And the psalter was one of the largest sources of church service, which let it to be superb and manipulative and to be tolerant with those who were telling fortune on the psalter.

The first books (here we mean not only the magical books) began to appear in the Ancient Rus' from the time of Christianisation which were from Byzantium, and this occurred primarily through the South Slavic peoples, where the translations of religious, pseudo-religious, philosophical and other learnings, teachings, knowledge were already spread much wider. The books of this period amount to quite a large number and their flow would have continued, if not for the events of subsequent centuries.

It is entirely possible that this situation might have improved had it not been for the Mongol-Tatar invasion in the thirteenth century which completed the disintegration of the Kievan state of dynastically linked principalities after a decline which had begun in the twelfth century. Although there was some subsequent infusion of new translated literature from Bulgaria in the fourteenth century and from Serbia in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the literary sources of scientific and pseudo-scientific ideas were still for the most part low-brow Byzantine until the late fifteenth century, and the Russian culture can still be characterized as medieval (with some oriental elements) up to the end of the seventeenth century (Ryan 1999: 10).

The subsequent period is noticeable because of the South Slavic peoples that played an important role in the distribution of books. The books, translated into their languages, began to reach the Russians and were translated into Russian.

Influences from Western Europe and Role of Baltic Region

From the Middle Ages, “new knowledge” began to spread from Western Europe through the Baltic region, namely The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and partly through the West Slavic peoples.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries Byzantine encyclopedic tradition was supplemented by other texts from non-Byzantine sources. The greater part of this new material comes from the corpus of translations from Hebrew which was apparently made in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania,

most probably in its Belorussian territory, and which has often been associated with the sect of Judaizers which flourished in Novgorod and Moscow at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Ryan 1999: 16).

Influence and impact from the West began around the 15th century, although the origins of this phenomenon are rooted in the century before. In the fourteenth century, the “Bulgarian Judaizers” denied church authority, communion, icons and priests. By the verdict of the church council this heresy was destroyed, and the Jews of Bulgaria were deprived of the right to own immovable property (Kaufman 2012). But the teachings and ideology of this movement had spread to other regions of Europe and through them overtook the Russians. The propagator of this ideology was a certain missionary named Zachary Scara (or Scarius, Zakharya Evrein, Zakharya-Skarya Zhidovin) who belonged to the Jewish Karaite sect, which had a wide network of organizations in Europe and the Middle East; Lithuania was a powerful centre of Karaite. In 1471, Z. Scara arrived from Lithuania to Novgorod and brought the “Books on the Secret Sciences”, which included books on mysticism, astrology, cabbalism, etc. The teachings of the Judaizers included elements of Western European rationalism and religious reformism. Zachary Scara was highly educated and possessed incredible abilities, so he managed to persuade even the highest rank of the Church officials in his teachings and to convert them into his faith, i.e. into Protestantism and Socinianism (antitrinitarians). Socinianism was mostly widespread and compared to other countries, appeared earlier in the Polish State (Rzeczpospolita Polska) – the Confederation of the Kingdom of Poland and The Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The main centre of Socinianism was the city of Rakov / Rakaw (now: Pakaŭ in Belorussia). In 1602, a beautiful school was founded here, in which up to 1,000 young schoolboys of various faiths studied. There was also a printing house. The followers of this sect belonged to members of the noble Lithuanian clans. Subsequently, some of them even became atheists. Over time, the Socinians began to be persecuted, and the Seimas’ decree of 1660 was followed by completely banishing them from the country, the Polish State. Some of them moved to Transylvania, and the others moved to Silesia, Brandenburg and Prussia.

Exceptional popularity throughout medieval Europe had “Secretum Secretorum” (in Russian it is also known under the title “Taynaya Taynykh” or for the Old Russian version, under the title “Aristotelian Gate” (“Aristotelevy

vrata”)). This work goes back to the Arabic original of the 8th – 9th centuries and is a collection of worldly instructions on various issues – from politics to alchemy, which were allegedly taught by Aristotle to his disciple Alexander of Macedon. Some features of the Old Russian version of the monument let us to associate it with a translation made by the medieval author al-Harizi in the 12th – 13th centuries, although the translation does not give the exact date. The language data indicate that the translation was carried out in Western Rus’. The translator apparently was not fluent in the language into which he translated a very complex and versatile work, so in some cases the text is hopelessly corrupted. The closest thing to the transcript of the translation is the list of the Vilnius Public Library or the Vilnius manuscript, according to which the “Secretum Secretorum” was published in Russian.

One of the most popular and the largest divinatory treatise was a three-part book “Raffles”, based both on astrology and on Kabbalah. In fact, in Kabbalah, figures and letters are assigned a mysterious meaning, from combinations of which they try to find the revelation and explanation of the past and the prediction of the future. The main Raffles’ figure is divided into 12 schemes and additional 4, which deal with the influence of stars on the fortune of human life (Afanasjev 1869: 605). It is assumed that its authorship can also be associated with al-Harizi. “Raffles” was known in the Old Russia at the end of the 15th century. It contains a divination drawing. Its translation was made in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This book survived the defeat of heresy and in 1579 was re-published by the Pskov scribe Ivan Rykov, who made an impressive contribution of his own. Furthermore, it was subjected to processing and significant Russification (Turilov & Cherezov 1989: 283). It should be noted that translations of parts of Raffles are available in many languages, so researchers must pay attention to where, by whom and how the translation was made. For example, the meaning of each of the 16 figures was interpreted depending on the order (what is named as “house”) in which it is located, with the first 12 “houses” characterising various aspects of life, and the last four “houses” were supposed to give a more general assessment of the future. Here, it was allowed to divine in various ways: with the help of geomantic figures; the expanded form of the “court” was not always taken. It was possible to divine on one figure. In particular, by this way, the divination is conducted according to the Serbian book. According to one figure, this fortune-telling is also known in the Russian manuscript. The second part of the book of Raffles containing questions

and possible answers to them can also be used in simplified divination by one figure. The comparison of Russian names of geomantic figures with names in the Serbian Divination shows that the main significance of the figures was stable, but the names of the figures in the Serbian fortune-telling practice do not reveal traces of a direct genetic connection with the Russians and represent a completely independent version of them. Or, in one version, some details are missing and the logical connection in divination is interrupted. An elementary operation of the even-number type, which underlies geomancy, lets for various ways of its implementation. In the Serbian “Divination by Samuel”, the geomantic figures are formed on the basis of bibliomania and the numerical value of letters. Fortune-telling counters and beans were extremely popular in Russia during all centuries.

In some manuscripts, both a guide for compilation of geomantic figures and an indication of favourable and unfavourable days for divination are placed before the text. Available sources of information enables us to outline the history of divination in Russia, the principles of which are set forth in the book of Raffles and were widespread in Europe in the Middle Ages. This divination practice likely appeared in Russia in the general stream of fortune-telling literature associated with the heresy of the “Judaizers”. Like other books of this kind, Raffles have traces of the West-Russian origin; there are also traces of the eastern source. The drawing on the frames of the Radzivilovski Chronicle (discovered in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by commander Janusz Radziwill in the 17th century) reflects a developed form of fortune-telling associated with astrology. In the middle of the 16th century, after the condemnation of the book “Raffles” by the famous Clergy of the Cathedral Church Stoglavny Sobor of 1551, this chronicle got a new processing by an author, resulting in a Christian, in this case i.e. Orthodox, character.

It is well known that the church compiled resolutions of church and secular laws for the management, which had different names like “code”, “nomokanon”, etc., which included moral and ethical norms of behaviour and moral texts. For example, in 1274, at the church cathedral in Vladimir, Metropolitan Kirill proposed the following texts as a guide for the management of the church: the Kormchaya (кормчая: Church-Slavic кормчий, Old-Slavonic крьмъчии – ‘helmsman’) Book, Pidalion (Greek Πηδαλίων – ‘aft paddle, helm, handle fed or steering wheel’), or Nomokanon (Greek νόμος – ‘law’, κανών – ‘canon, rule’) translated from Greek into Church Slavonic around 1225 in Serbia (Speranskiy

1908: 52–53). Since such works were written or composed by the representatives of the church – because they were the only literates – it is understandable that all the teachings and knowledge of a non-Christian character were subjected not only to harsh criticism, but also to destruction. In this regard, special lists or indices of forbidden and black books were created, the list included all literature which somehow did not follow the church canons. The Old Russian lists were compiled on the basis of Byzantine, South Slavic texts, and from the 17th century, only the “purely Russian” list of the “Kirillov book” (1644) was published since by that time, a large body of published works already existed in Russian.

The main share of books and publications of the magic literature consist of translational products up to the 17th century; of course, they were subjected to significant processing, supplemented by new facts and received a local spirit and colour, and by this way, they became easily perceivable and understandable to readers and users where they had been translated and published.

The presence of all possible variants and parallels makes it difficult to study this phenomenon, but at the same time “similar parallels and reconstructions testify not so much to the closeness of different traditions or their common origin as to the existence of a number of archetypal ritual sacral texts containing certain formulas concerning the key moments of mythopoietic cosmogony, cosmology and anthropology” (Mikhaylov 2017: 292).

Till nowadays, this phenomenon is a relatively unexplored domain and requires scrupulous study of each original source and the subsequent versions both individually and as a unique cultural heritage in general and this will allow to trace their history of development and formation.

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