

Z. Kanapatskaya. Belarusian Tatar Arabic Alphabetic Manuscripts from the end of the XVIIth to the beginning of the XIXth century from the collection of the British Library and Frantsysk Skaryna Belarusian Library in London // The Islamic Manuscript II: The Materials of the Conference to Establish The Islamic Manuscript Association, from 7-9 August 2006 at Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge.

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**Belarusian Tatar Arabic Alphabetic Manuscripts
from the middle of the XVIIIth
to the beginning of the XIXth century
from the collection of the British Library
and Frantsysk Skaryna Belarusian Library in London**

A project entitled *Belarusian Tatars Arabic Alphabetic Manuscripts from the end of the XVIIth to the beginning of the XXth century* addresses some of the issues related study, preservation, conservation and cataloguing of the immensely rich literature of Belarusian Tatars to be found in Belarus in public and private collections.

The project was conducted under the guidance of the British Academy during June 2006 in the United Kingdom.

For realization of purposes of this project it was necessary to conduct scientific research work in archives and libraries of the United Kingdom, to examine Tatars Manuscripts are kept there, to study modern methods (conservation, cataloguing, accessibility, copyright and digitization) of preservation of ancient manuscripts and also to define the role of Belarusian Tatars Manuscripts in the World Islamic Manuscripts Collection.

All known copies of the writings of the Belarusian Tatars are either in Belarus, Lithuania and Poland, and nothing was known of them until recently in the West.



Extremely important for realization of project was to visit *the British Library* and *Frantsysk Skaryna Belarusian Library* in London, where a number of Tatars manuscripts of XVIII century are kept.

One of them is a copy of Koran in Arabic with interlinear translation in Polish. It is a large book; measuring 31x19 cm. and containing 492 numbered folios (983 pages), in a leather binding with metal studs and clasps – the latter being rather an unusual feature in Muslim books. A Polish inscription in Latin



characters at the bottom of the penultimate page gives the date of writing of the book as 1725. The colophon in the Arabic characters on the same page is very faded, but it is possible to read the name of the copyist, one Bohdan ibn Sevban Asanovich. It is known that a noble Tatar family with the name of Asanovich lived in the district of Minsk. The manuscript is written in a clear hand in brown ink interspersed with lines and words in red. The First Sura is surrounded with a frame and embellished with a flowery ornament in red, black and brown. Under each horizontal line of Arabic text there is a Polish translation, aligned obliquely to the original. The notes in the margins serve as an indication of the main argument of the text. Some notes are in a

different hand and obviously of later date. The Polish language used in the translation is not free from Belarusian elements, both in the vocabulary and in the spelling. Apart from the text of the Koran the book contains a few introductory chapters, one of which is a treatise on how to prepare for the reading of the Koran.

The explanatory part of the treatise is in Belarusian, but all the prayers are in Arabic or in Turkish. There is a similar chapter, containing the prayer to be recited after the reading of the Koran, on the last page of the book.

The *Tefsir* forms part of the collection of the Frantsysk Skaryna Library in London.

The second manuscript, which belongs to the British Library (numbered OR. 13, 054), is a copy of a *Chamail*. Essentially the book is a collection of unofficial prayers, spells and pious intentions in Arabic and Turkish, with explanations in Belarusian and Polish. The third manuscript, also in the British Library (numbered OR. 13, 020), is a *Kitab* of the end of the XVIIIth – the beginning of the XIXth century. The language is Belarusian and displays characteristics of the south-western dialects. The contents of the *Kitab* are rich and varied. It begins with genealogical tables, tracing the origin of various leading Moslem personages back to Adam. The most interesting parts of the manuscript are the numerous stories, legends, apocrypha and anecdotes from various Oriental sources.

It is a small book measuring 17x10 cm. and containing 240 folios. As can be seen from the colophon on f. 228 v., it was written by Mustafa Bagdanovichin Slonim (Grodno region) in 1828. The last five folios are written in a different hand, and are presumably of a later date. Essentially the book is the collection of unofficial prayers, spells and pious intentions in Arabic and Turkish, with explanations in Belarusian and Polish. The prayers, when recited or written on a piece of paper and worn as an amulet, when reputed to have the power of curing illness or protecting a person from all kinds of misfortune.

Generally speaking, the number of Belarusian and Polish texts is comparatively small, since the greater part of the book is composed of prayers and spells in the Arabic and Turkish languages. From the orthographical point of view the *Chamail* is of considerable interest in that there is hardly a letter-form (with the possible exceptions of “ch” and “sh”) which is not used by writer.

The third manuscript, also in the British Library (numbered OR. 13, 020), is a *Kitab*. This book measures 30x19 cm. and contains 125 folios, which have been recently numbered consecutively in pencil. At least one leaf is missing after both folio 5 and folio 96, as are all the leaves after folio 125. There is no indication as to the date when the manuscript was written. The watermark on the paper is a two-headed eagle. Its exact parallel is not found in any of the current catalogues of watermarks, which have been consulted, but closely resembles other watermarks on paper widely used in Belarus in the XVIIIth century. One can therefore tentatively assume that the book was written at the end of the XVIIIth or the beginning of the XIXth century. The language of the *Kitab* is Belarusian and displays characteristics of the south-western dialects. There are a few Turkish texts with interlinear translations into Belarusian, and Arabic is used mainly in the Koranic quotations. These are always indicated by a line drawn over them, and followed by a translation. Strictly speaking there are no Polish texts, but some twenty pages are written in a mixture of Polish and Belarusian. Numerous notes in the margins serve as titles to various chapters, and summarize the main trend of the argument. The whole book was evidently compiled by the same person.



The contents of the *Kitab* are rich and varied. It begins with genealogical tables, tracing the origin of various leading Muslim personages back to Adam (f.1). Then follows chapters on the *Sūra Ya-Sīn* (*Sūra* 36), one of the most popular *sūras* of the Koran, used as a prayer for the departed (f.6). Several chapters deal with eschatological problems, which play an important role in Muslim theology.

The most interesting parts of the manuscript are the numerous stories, legends, apocrypha and anecdotes from various Oriental sources. The longest story is the *Me'radz* (*Mi'rādj*, meaning originally “ladder” or “ascent”), or account of the ascension of Muhammad to heaven and his heavenly visions, written in Turkish with interlinear Belarusian translation (f.86). Another interesting long story, written in the same variety of mixed language, is the *Story of the Prophet Jesus* (f.11).

There are a number of tales, many of which make delightful reading. A curious “medical” treatise is worth mentioning. The last chapter of the *Kitab*, the end of which are missing, is a collection of moral and religious precepts arranged in accordance with the order of letters of the Arabic alphabet.

This description is not intended to be exhaustive, but it shows that a detailed study of Belarusian manuscripts may be of considerable interest and prove to be extremely rewarding.

Enclosures:

1. The *Tefsir* from the collection of the Frantsysk Skaryna Library in London, 1725
2. The *Kitab* of the end of the XVIIIth – the beginning of the XIXth century from the collection of the British Library.

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