

# Reading Alexander the Great in Medieval Bohemia: A Moralistic Example and a Functional Label<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

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During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the figure of Alexander the Great and the stories associated with him became a stable part of the Bohemian literary landscape. Here, he represented a great ruler and conqueror, as well as a reminder of the transience of worldly glory and the need for humility. The study focuses on the role of Alexander's figure in different literary contexts and how the reading and use of the character have shifted according to the changing political and social situation.

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The story of Alexander the Great belonged to the most well known in the Middle Ages, recounted across Europe and Asia in many versions and languages. However, its reception varied in its effects across geographies, languages, and cultures within this space. Literary works with Alexandrian motifs were not part of the required knowledge of a medieval scholar, but they became exceptionally popular, widespread, and well known. Alexander's medieval popularity was based not only on historiographical works and epic adaptations of his life; his figure also permeated other genres. In medieval biblical exegesis, for example, Alexander's reign was associated with the exposition of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the prophecy of Daniel (Dn 2,29–45). He also left a significant mark on medieval apocalyptic literature as the one to imprison the tribes of Gog and Magog, playing an essential role in the prophesized end of days.

Alexander the Great entered many literary genres, in part thanks to his ability to be an example, both positive and negative. He can be found in a wide range of stories that carry easily understandable messages. Their comprehension was conditioned to a significant extent by the fact that the basic contours of, or stories about, Alexander

were widely known through the circulation of extensive biographical texts (Bridges; Cary; Zuwiyya). For a medieval reader, the dominant association with Alexander was certainly glory, world domination, and adventure, but also paganism contrasted with Christianity. These characteristics connected the most well-known stories about Alexander and offer a basis for the interpretation of those not as widely circulated among readers and listeners. Within this framework, Alexander's character was a connection and, simultaneously, an interpretive key that ensured that the individual stories had a common and easily communicable message. Even seemingly simple stories as we know them from the collections of medieval exempla, if they featured Alexander and thus became part of the whole of the Alexander narratives, gained more attractiveness for the medieval reader or listener. This fact was well known to those who took up the Alexander's figure in the Middle Ages and continued to use it in their works.

This study will focus on the dissemination and transformation of Alexander and Alexandrian narratives in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Bohemia, which include extensive biographical narratives and shorter literary forms, exempla and minor stories featuring Alexander. In this study, we will concentrate primarily on the last group. We will also discuss the role that Alexander and his stories occupied in literary representations of social, political, and general cultural changes in medieval Bohemia, the alterations in their readings, and the transformation of Alexander as a literary figure.<sup>2</sup> We will analyse the Alexandrian texts from several perspectives: we will focus on the replication of the model of the instructed ruler and sage based on the paradigmatic model of Aristotle and Alexander, and we will trace the motif of impermanence and its representations in high medieval Bohemian literature; an essential question for us will also be how the dynamic confessional and social changes in fifteenth-century Bohemia were projected onto the reading of Alexander's stories.

2. The most recent overview of writings about Alexander the Great in medieval Bohemia is given by Adde-Vomáčka.

## I. Alexander in Bohemia

The fame of Alexander the Great spread in medieval Bohemia through several works. Large-scale epic compositions represent the dominant form of dissemination of Alexander the Great's stories, primarily Latin renderings, which had their basis in the *Historia de preliis* by Archpresbyter Leo of Naples from the tenth century and Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*, written in the twelfth century. In Bohemia,

the *Historia de preliis* was copied in two later versions from the twelfth–thirteenth centuries (I<sup>2</sup>, I<sup>3</sup>; Vidmanová, “Latinská historie”). Bohemian copies of these two versions are known mainly from manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The spread and copying of these canonical works also included their specific processing, in particular their simplification. An example is the *Prague epitome*, a simplified version of I<sup>2</sup> preserved in a Prague manuscript dated to the late fourteenth century (Magoun). A rich source of stories from Alexander’s life independent of the *Historia de preliis* is the *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX* by Valerius Maximus, an author living in the first century CE, whose texts were very popular in fourteenth-century Bohemia.

Besides the generally well-known texts, which were read in Latin, stories about Alexander are related to the beginnings of the Czech literature, for they began to be translated into and adapted in the vernacular languages in the Czech milieu from the thirteenth century. Walter of Châtillon’s poem was a seminal influence in Bohemia at this time. His *Alexandreis* was translated into Czech at the end of the thirteenth century, leading to the Old Czech *Alexandreida* in verse. The same model served as the basis for the German verse work *Alexandreis*, written by poet Ulrich of Etzenbach.

The Old Czech verse *Alexandreida*, preserved only in extensive fragments, describes the life and adventures of Alexander of Macedonia, depicting him as a defender of the social order, as well as collecting the advice the great thinker Aristotle gave his royal pupil. Here we learn how the medieval poet imagined this chivalrous and heroic sovereign as being more than the values that previous literary versions ascribed to Alexander, for elements of individual works of medieval political philosophy appear here as well. For example, Aristotle advises Alexander in the *Alexandreida* to surround himself with distinguished nobles and to exclude commoners from his closest circles in order to be a fair judge; to appear often in front of his subjects; to be generous with them; not to excessively indulge in worldly pleasures; and in his final counsel, implores his pupil to show mercy (Vážný, 37–40). Although the Bohemian author followed the Latin poem of Walter of Châtillon, he worked largely independently. He enriched the narrative with many direct speeches, added Bohemian references and, above all, the Christian and chivalric concept of the king and his court, which was meant to consist of noble men loyal to the king. This concept wholly corresponded to the environment of Ottokar II of Bohemia’s court (1253–1278) and the later court

3. Research on the Old Czech *Alexandridea* was last summarized by František Svejkský in the introduction to *Vážený* 7–28.

of his son Wenceslas II (1278–1305). However, interpretation of the work is complicated by the fact that only about a third of the text has survived, and then only incompletely.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, a Middle High German version of the *Alexandreis* was created by Ulrich of Etzenbach at the royal court in Prague, which was similarly extensive. It also includes many updates and localizations conditioned by the court of Ottokar II of Bohemia, as it was completed shortly after his death. Although Ulrich primarily worked with Walter's version of Alexander's life, he did include compositions and passages inspired by the *Historia de preliis* in its I<sup>2</sup> version (Bok 77–97). An Old Czech prose version of the *Historia de preliis* (Vidmanová, "Nejstarší" 134–36; Solomon 7–19; Antonín, 164–68) is dated a century later. It is based on the youngest Latin version, known as I<sup>3</sup> (Steffens). Compared with the other two versions of this composition, the Latin I<sup>3</sup> and the Old Czech translation show a great intent to moralize the stories. Humility, penitence, and a personification of transience were added to heroism and glory, a narrative that received a widespread response in both high medieval Bohemia and beyond. The tendency to emphasize repentance and humility, including that of Alexander, who served as a proxy-symbol of a great ruler, corresponds to the high medieval emphasis on human nature, emotionality, and, with it, suffering, which appears both in Christological representations and in the newly defined ideal of the ruler, as seen, for example, in the stylization of the French king Louis IX and, in the Czech environment, of Wenceslas II, as created by his historiographers (Le Goff 624–34; Mowbray 13–42).

Alexander became well known among the medieval public in ways other than epic texts. One was the fictional letter from Aristotle to Alexander the Great that was known under various names, most often as the *Secretum secretorum*. This text became extremely popular in the Middle Ages and was distributed in many copies (for the Czech lands alone, we have more than 60 copies of the entire text or parts of it). In the form of an epistle, Aristotle gives his noble pupil instructions on how to govern correctly, how to take care of his body to keep it healthy and in good condition, and how to cure human diseases. He also reveals secrets from philosophy and natural sciences, including magical practices and alchemy. However, the origins of the text, which claims Aristotle as its author, do not go back to Greece but rather to two Arabic versions dating back to the tenth century (Ryan and Schmitt; Williams; Gaullier-Bougassas, Bridges, and Tilliette; Cermanová, 179–213; Cermanová, Svátek, Žůrek, and

Bažant). The text was first partially translated into Latin by John of Seville in 1120 (Forster 18–19), and a translation of the entire text was then done by Philip of Tripoli in 1232 (Burnett). The interconnectedness of the Alexandrian textual corpus is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that some of the above-mentioned pieces of advice of Aristotle to Alexander which were contained in the Old Czech *Alexandreis* were inspired, at least in part, by the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* (Cermanová, Svátek, Žůrek, and Bažant 514).

## II. Exemplarity

Alexander the Great appears in more than fifty individual stories (*exempla*) that were read in medieval Bohemia (Dvořák 58–63). This testifies to the exceptional popularity and function of this character, as well as the variety of topics associated with him. This is especially true of literary output focused on lessons and the moralistic cultivation of readers and listeners, even the most dignified. The reservoir of exempla was supplied by collections, whether they were ensembles assembled purely as a means of gathering these small stories together (such as the *Gesta Romanorum*) or works written with a different intention, into which, however, a large number of exemplary narratives were inserted (for example, Cessolis's *Liber de moribus* and its Old Czech adaptation). Works containing exempla influenced one another and frequently shared the same stories.

The texts we will examine are those that primarily dealt with another topic but include fragments of Alexandrian stories, allude to them, or use examples and short narratives associated with Alexander and his life. While these stories are firmly anchored in the epic master narrative of the famous pagan king, they better enable us to explore the transformations and shifts in the meaning and function of Alexandrian motifs. As with other compact narratives that created the literary landscape of medieval Bohemia, both Latin and vernacular, Alexandrian themes were also part of a mutually interconnected whole: individual texts were linked by motifs and often by entire narratives that travelled between literary works. One story or motif could thus enter several texts as an integral part of them. Older Alexandrian narratives, or more specifically their fragments, are placed into new (con)texts and new literary forms, giving them a new and updated reading. We will focus on texts where Alexander is not the main topic. Instead, the focus is on the writings concerning the functioning of medieval society,

in order to examine questions associated with the fragmentation of the Alexandrian story and the reuse of individual parts in a modified context. The authors placed several smaller stories and examples with Alexander as the main hero in the texts we will consider. However, Alexander is a substitute for a medieval sovereign in these cases.

To begin with, let us mention the *Liber de moribus hominum et officii nobilium sive super ludum scaccorum* (“Book of the customs of men and the duties of nobles or the Book of chess”) by the Dominican Jacobus de Cessolis, and the *Breviloquium de virtutibus antiquorum principum et philosophorum* (“Brief speech on the virtues of ancient rulers and philosophers”) by the Franciscan John of Wales. We are considering the Central European version of John’s work, which was preserved in many manuscripts in the libraries in the region and subsequently received two Old Czech translations. We should also mention the *De vita et moribus philosophorum antiquorum*, a work attributed in the Middle Ages to Walter Burley.<sup>4</sup> Collections of exempla, such as the *Gesta Romanorum*, are another valuable source. The *Liber de moribus*, *Secretum secretorum*, *Breviloquium*, *De vita et moribus*, and *Gesta Romanorum* are texts that were used as sources of lessons, stories, and quotations. These works were often read, listened to, copied, and translated in the Czech lands during the fourteenth century, as can be attested by a large number of extant medieval manuscript copies. They also frequently received new versions in Central Europe, both in Latin and the vernacular. It was not exceptional for stories with Alexander as the main protagonist to be added to these new Central European versions.

These writings, partly composed of individual stories, were often interconnected, not only by direct textual quotations but also by the character and intention of their writing. Moreover, they were connected by appearing together within individual manuscript codices. The listed works, including Cessolis’s *Liber de moribus* and, to a certain extent, the *Secretum secretorum*, characterized the use of the ancient material in the form of individual stories. They also have a common tendency toward a moralizing interpretation of society. These texts presented retold stories of European history and mythology, which they used to teach moral lessons. For scholars and students, and perhaps even more so for preachers, they provided a handy reservoir of wisdom narratives and instruction that they could quote in their further work without wading through extensive volumes that often required specialized academic expertise.

The connection between these texts is neither readily apparent

4. The specific redactions of the work were studied by Vidmanová, “Die mittelalterliche Gesellschaft”. She supposes that this is the proof that Jacobus de Cessolis used the passages about chess in the original *Breviloquium* because of the dominant survival of the Central European version in Bohemian manuscripts. The characteristic chess passages were added to the second redaction of the *Breviloquium* from Jacobus’s text, as convincingly shown in the study by Küenzlen, Kalning, and Plessow. For the edition of the chess passages, see 79–89. This version can be generally dated, on the basis of surviving manuscripts, to the last quarter of the fourteenth century. For comparison with Old Czech translations, see Šimek *Staročeský* 1–13.

nor accidental, as is shown by their complicated interconnectedness, which is also evident in their Central European and vernacular versions. The Central European redaction of the *Breviloquium* takes extensive passages from Jacobus's *Liber de moribus* when it tells the story of the origin of the game of chess. The Old Czech version of pseudo-Burley's *De vita et moribus* borrows the entire chess passage from the *Breviloquium*, but this story actually originated in Jacobus de Cessolis. The Old Czech rendering of the *Liber de moribus* adapts fairly extensive selections from the *Secretum secretorum* without following Cessolis's Latin source. The *Gesta Romanorum* takes several exempla from Jacobus's treatise on chess (Žůrek, "Chess"). Finally, let us recall that the texts mentioned above were not only connected in the Central European area in way that has been described, even if the link between them was indeed very strong here. Examples can also be found in Western Europe: for example, Geoffrey of Waterford, who translated the *Secretum secretorum* into French, incorporated long passages from John of Wales's *Breviloquium* into his translation of the *Secretum*.

### Instructing the King

The Czech adaptation of Jacobus de Cessolis's text about chess that circulated in Europe in the original Latin under the name *Liber de moribus hominum* also advised on good governance. The Czech version under the name *Kniežky o šašiech* ("Books of chess") survived in a single manuscript that does not reveal its author. However, it has been assumed to have been written by an educated layman and diligent translator from Latin, Tomáš Štítný of Štítné, since the discovery of the manuscript by Ferdinand Menčík in 1879, mainly on the basis of textual correspondences with other Štítný's translations (Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 5293, f. 290r–311r; Menčík; Gebauer 64–65). In his translation, Štítný made significant changes and shifts compared with the Latin original. When Štítný speaks of the king chess-piece, he enumerates different qualities than Cessolis and denounces other weaknesses. The topics selected for emphasis reflect the historical situation in Bohemia at the end of the fourteenth century under Wenceslas IV, a ruler whom even contemporary sources associated with irascibility and debauchery. It is notable that this criticism of the king is found in a vernacular work (Nederman; Rychterová 165–67). It is therefore significant that in describing the chess king, Štítný mentions the deficiencies in be-

haviour that contemporaries attributed to King Wenceslas. He calls on the sovereign to not be controlled by animalistic instincts, drunkenness, and fornication, and to resist wicked advisers and flatterers.

To, že ten král, ješto šach sluje, by jako člověk, napomíná krále, aby člověkem se pomněl a neměl hlupé zvěři, němé tváři nerozomné obyčeje maje, ale aby užíval smyslu a rozumu člověčieho, krotě v sobě zvieřecie neřádne žádosti a dětinné obyčeje. É, kam král zajde, dá li nad sebu ukrutnosti, smilstvu, opilstvu a dětinné mysli panovati! Nebude li zpósobné mysli, kam jej od spravedlnosti zavedú jeho pochlebníci, stojec po svém, aby jim i cizie dával, sirotčie a lidí prostých! I diet písmo: “Běda zemi, v kteréž král dietě jest a jejiež kniežata ráno jedie a stojie po opilstvu!” Neb opilý ten jsa, ten nebude.

(The fact that the chess king is made to look like a human being reminds the king to behave like a human being and abandon all the habits of unwise animals, unthinking inarticulate beasts, and to use human thinking and reason, restraining the sinful animal desires and childish habits in himself. Why, what can a king achieve if he gives himself over to cruelty, fornication, drinking, and childish thought? Unless he is of a capable mind, how far from righteousness his flatterers can take him, insisting that he give them other people’s, orphans’, and common folk’s property! Scripture itself says, “Woe betide a country whose king is a child and whose princes get up in the morning to eat after a drinking binge!” For he who is drunk will perish.) (Šimek Tomáš Štíttný 361–62)<sup>5</sup>

5. All quotations from the sources have been translated into English by the authors of this paper.

Štíttný’s adaptation of the Book of chess represents a work intended to instruct the king, and his advice had a clear recipient: the ruling Bohemian king, Wenceslas IV. It is noteworthy that in the chapter about the king, Štíttný (contrary to Cessolis) takes topics and sentences from the *Secretum secretorum*. Each of these is counsel meant for the king (the king should not talk extensively; emphasizing the king’s wisdom comes from having God in his heart, in his mouth, and in his actions; the third points out the necessity of keeping secrets), and each one is styled as though Aristotle were advising Alexander: “Učilť jest mistr Aristotileš Alexandra” (Master Aristotle taught Alexander) (Šimek Tomáš Štíttný 363, 368, 381; cf. Steele 41,



6. The reference in the part concerning the king's piety does not exactly correspond with the pseudo-Aristotelian original.

47, 49).<sup>6</sup> It is Štítný who brings Aristotle into the text; Cessolis does not include this name. At least in the chapter about the king in chess, Štítný puts himself into the role of Aristotle: the sage scholar offering the sovereign advice about proper behaviour. In this text, Alexander is not a role model for readers in his behaviour but the recipient of advice written in the book. Like Alexander accepting advice from Aristotle, other kings and noblemen do not have to be ashamed of taking advice from scholars. That is the message to be spread among readers at the royal court of Wenceslas IV, who needed good advice to improve his governance.

Alexander the Great is part of many exempla in the original work by Jacobus de Cessolis, largely compiled using shorter stories based on ancient history. In his work on the Old Czech version of the text about chess, Štítný omitted a significant number of exempla where Alexander had appeared. On the other hand, he added many new stories where Alexander was mentioned as well (Žůrek, "Křesťanské" 131–33). In other cases, he slightly changed the existing exemplum to shift its message, e.g. the story where an imprisoned pirate chides Alexander for doing the same thing as him. Paradoxically, Alexander does it to a more considerable extent; while in the case of the pirate, it is theft, with Alexander, it is governance.

Byl jeden popaden, ješto lúpil na moři, a přiveden byl před Alexandra krále. A když jemu vece Alexander: "Pročs lúpil, nedada pokoje na moři lidem?", a ten směle vece proti králi: "A proč ty lúpeš nedáš pokoje všemu světu? Že já jednu lodi vezmu, nazýváš mě lúpežníkem, a že ty s vojskem jezdeš lúpiš, ciesar sloveš! Byť se mně štěstie obrátilo, já bych byl dobrý; ale čím tobě více jde pod ruku, tys vždy hoří." Aj, kakút jest řeč tak veliký král strpěl, a řekl tomu: "Chciť tvú chudobu proměnit, aby svú zlostí štěstie nevinil." I nadal jeho, že jemu nebylo třeba lúpiti.

(They seized one [pirate] who marauded on the sea and brought him before King Alexander. When Alexander asked him: "Why did you maraud and not leave people on the sea alone?", he replied boldly to the king: "Why do you maraud and not leave the whole world alone? You call me a marauder for taking one ship, yet you call yourself an emperor for riding with an army and marauding! I might become better if I had a turn of fortune, but you are worse, the more you get

your hands on.” Oh, what words the great king put up with, only to reply: “I am going to change your poverty, so you that do not blame fortune out of your wickedness.” And he donated to him, so that he no longer needed to maraud.)

(Šimek *Tomáš Štíttný* 387)

7. Again, the jab was aimed at Wencelas IV, who was widely known to be hot-tempered, as can be seen from the listed passages from Štíttný or the opening passage of the contemporary *Chronicon veteris collegiati Pragensis*, where the king is described with the words “rex iratus”; Černá, Čornej, and Klosová 79.

8. “Ex quo patet, quod iustitia debet esse regum in possidendo. Item debet esse in eis patientia in sustinendo iustas increpationes. Item benevolentia benefaciendo eis, qui iste arguunt.” (“This implies that kings are to be just in possession. Also, they should have the patience to endure the just reproofs. Also, they should have goodwill to treat well those who justly rebuke them.”) Anežka Vidmanová compared these passages; “Osservazioni” 39.

9. Vidmanová, “Osservazioni” 39: “Unde patet, quod in principibus debet esse paciencia iustas increpaciones sustinendo, et benevolentia sit apud illos, qui eos iuste arguunt.” (“This implies that rulers should have the patience to endure the just reproofs and the goodwill with those who rebuke them justly and reward them generously with property.”)

10. Brno, Moravská zemská knihovna, Mk 46, f. 42v: “Explicit liber Aristotelis de moralibus dominorum, qui liber alio nomine appellatur Secretum secretorum, finitus in octava katerine Anno d. M<sup>o</sup>cccc<sup>o</sup>ii<sup>o</sup>.” (“Here ends Aristotle’s book on the manners of lords, otherwise called the Secret of secrets, which was finished on the eighth day after St. Catherine in the year of Lord 1402.”)

In Jacobus de Cessolis’s version, the story should show the king being just, which is why it is in the chapter about the chess king. Štíttný put the story in the chapter about the rook, which for him represented a royal official (Köpke 4). The official should be patient in the face of criticism, which is also true of the king, further emphasized by a quote from Seneca. In this particular story, Alexander is not just because he corrects the pirate, as was the case in the original, but he is patient chiefly because he calmly listened to the pirate’s insolent reply.<sup>7</sup> The entire story is introduced by saying that patience is the virtue of great kings: “I králi velicí chválu mají, že sú taková utrhanie neb káranie strpievali” (“Even great kings are praised for tolerating such slander or rebukes”) (Šimek *Tomáš Štíttný* 387).

In this case, Štíttný may have been inspired by the *Breviloquium de virtutibus antiquorum principum* by John of Wales, who also included the same story. It is very possible that he had access to its Central European version. The emphasis on patience in the interpretation of the exemplum about Alexander and the pirate is part of a Latin *Breviloquium* that was reworked in Central Europe at the end of the fourteenth century. In the original version, Alexander’s reaction was understood primarily as proof of justice, which was said to be natural for the sovereign;<sup>8</sup> patience is only secondary here. The new version of the *Breviloquium*, just like Štíttný, explicitly accentuates the king’s patience in the first place.<sup>9</sup> In his version of the treatise about chess, Štíttný moved the exemplum with the pirate and Alexander into a chapter where he wanted to discuss this virtue.

Many similar short narratives where Alexander appears can be found in medieval codices. We can return to the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum*, more precisely one of its Bohemian copies (the manuscript held by the Moravská zemská knihovna in Brno, Mk 46), for another example. This one includes a copy of the *Secretum secretorum* that was completed around 1402 according to the colophon.<sup>10</sup> The *Secretum* (f. 25r–42v) is copied in the translation of Philip of Tripoli. The prologue and the state and health science parts from the *Secretum* are included in this manuscript copy. The end of the copy is incomplete in comparison with the ‘canonical’ version. Some parts have been omitted, and some are listed in a different order. At the

end, there is a call for Alexander to listen to the stars and astronomers in all things. Here is where the copy departs from the original *Secretum*, but not with Alexandrian stories, as it continues with the short description of a miracle (a later rubric labels it as the *Miraculum alium legitur de Allexandro*). This is a short narrative about how Alexander climbed the city walls after conquering a city, amazed that all the houses were the same height and size. After it was explained to him that the homes were the same because people are equal, Alexander gave them a reprieve and withdrew. Another short Alexandrian episode tells of a military leader in a pagan cemetery which his fellow-believers wanted to protect with their lives. For their loyalty, Alexander gave them the same reprieve. Finally, it is written that Alexander did not want any servants that would not correct him. This topic resonates strongly within the *Secretum*, although not exactly with the advice given. An interesting detail of several of these Alexandrian short narratives is the double use of the Czech word *lhota* (“grace period”): “Alexander dedit eis lhotam” (“Alexander gave them a *lhota*”) – the stories where Alexander is the hero are directly connected with the medieval meaning of the economic-political concept of *lhota*, which was used as a tool in the period of colonization (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) to settle and rule an area more easily. On his campaigns (captured in literary form), Alexander witnessed many new and strange things that he did not know, but he regularly reacted wisely to them. This approach was also included in manuscript Mk 46: Alexander wonders at an unknown order or behaviour, accepts it, and reacts by incorporating it as something new, which was the concept of *lhota* in the Middle Ages.

If we take a closer look at the codices that contained Cessolis’s *Liber de moribus*, we often find similar works bound together, including the pseudo-Burley *De vita et moribus philosophorum antiquorum*; in fact, it is the work together with which Cessolis’s text was most often copied in Central Europe (Plessow 248). The *De vita et moribus*, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, was previously attributed to Walter Burley, the English philosopher and author of the famous commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*. Today, it is believed that *De vita et moribus* was written by an unknown author in northern Italy (Grignaschi). This was a very popular text that survives in about 270 manuscripts, with about forty in Czech libraries or in manuscripts that have a Bohemian origin. The texts have a simple structure: the work is comprised of more or less concise biographies of ancient Greek and Roman scholars. It is possible to imagine the use

11. See Praha, NK ČR, IV C 1; Praha, NK ČR, VIII A 25; Praha, Knihovna Národního muzea [hereafter KNM], XIII F 8; Wien, Schottenstift-Bibliothek, 353. See also Vidmanová, “La formation”.

of such a text in an educational environment, but it was also certainly a source of illustrative stories read in other milieus (see Copeland). The text was copied many times, and it was reworked and simplified in Central Europe. The central European version was created in the fourteenth century, as documented by the oldest surviving manuscripts.<sup>11</sup> While the original text represented a simplified discussion of the history of ancient philosophy, the Central European version is more of a list of terms for students or a repository of stories from the lives of philosophers and their best-known statements. The number of people introduced was reduced to 77 from 131, however the author omitted some characters but added others, including Alexander the Great, who was not a philosopher. Alexander’s biography, which was added to the Central European version immediately following Aristotle, is a compilation of available sources of information about the ancient ruler. Its author used a version of the *Historia de preliis* version I<sup>3</sup> as a source but also utilized the Latin version of the originally Arabic *Liber philosophorum moralium antiquorum* attributed to John of Procida. Most of the narrative was taken from here, supplemented by several stories from Jacobus de Cessolis’s text about chess. This is also true of passages listed as excerpts from Valerius Maximus, which are quoted throughout Jacobus’s text (Vidmanová, “La formation” 266–67). This description of Alexander is also part of the Czech translation of the Central European version of *De vita et moribus*, which might be dated to the end of the fourteenth century (i.e. Praha, Národní knihovna České Republiky [hereafter NK ČR], XIX B 9, with Alexander’s biography on f. 27r–33r; or Praha, NK ČR, XVII E 14, Alexander on f. 197r–204v). In contrast to other texts about Alexander created in medieval Bohemia, the author does not discuss the transience of worldly glory, even in the parts about Alexander’s death.

The literary figure of a scholar instructing a monarch (Alexander) enters into discourses other than those of government. The physician John Hacke of Göttingen stylizes his discussion of poisons (*Epistola de cautela a venenis*) dedicated to the Czech king John of Luxembourg in this way. Not only does the text appear in the form of a letter to his king, but he also specifically refers to advice given to Alexander by Aristotle in the *Secretum secretorum*. In the opening list of authorities, John of Hacke explicitly names Aristotle’s book for Alexander of Macedonia: “Pater philosophie Aristoteles librum De regimine principum edidit Alexandro” (“The father of philosophy Aristotle edited the book De regimine principum for Alexander”) (Říhová 78). He then borrows a story about an Indian girl filled with

poisons from the *Secretum* a few paragraphs later:

Sic enim Aristoteles, ut scribit in libro De secretis secretorum, Alexandrum precavit a veneno illius puelle venustissime, tamen venenose utpote in naturam serpentis converse, ipsi Alexandro a regina Yndie transmissa causa amicitie cum multis enceniis et donis venustis.

(For just in this way Aristotle, as he writes in his book, *Secretum secretorum*, warned Alexander against the poison served by that maiden, beautiful indeed, but a poisoner, whom the queen of India sent to Alexander himself with many presents and beautiful gifts in token of friendship; but she seemed to have transformed herself into the nature of a poisonous serpent.) (Říhová 82–83; cf. Steele 60)<sup>12</sup>

12. The English translation is ours.

This story was part of the original Arabic variant translated into Latin by Philip of Tripoli. It tells of a girl from India that Alexander received as a gift from the mother of the Indian monarch. The girl had been fed poison her entire life, and she was so filled with it that her essence changed into a poisonous snake and physical contact with her was deadly. The story ends with Aristotle exhorting Alexander to protect his soul and not give in to the temptations of the world of the flesh. The *Secretum* was not the only Arabian text that included the Poison Maiden story. We can also find it in *Turba philosophorum*, one of the fundamental texts of medieval Arabic alchemy from around 900, which was translated into Latin in the twelfth century (see Plessner, “The Place”; Plessner, “Natural Sciences”). The story was also taken from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* by other authors, such as the previously mentioned John of Wales, who used it in his *Compendiloquium de vitis illustrium philosophorum*.<sup>13</sup> As has been said, this story spread throughout Europe both on its own and in association with the *Secretum secretorum*. This was a welcome tool for John Hacke, who used the reference to the famous text to point out the dangers of poisons. He also used the model situation of a scholar advising a ruler by letter, reproducing the paradigmatic pair we know from the *Secretum*. In a verbatim reproduction of Aristotle’s appeal to Alexander, John Hacke calls on King John to be on guard for deadly poisons: “Cave, cave mortifera venena!” (“Guard yourself, guard against deadly poisons!”).<sup>14</sup> The Poison Maiden story, which was part of copies of the *Secretum*, also appeared independently as a curiosity copied out of interest. For example, we can

13. See also Williams 251, note 293.

14. Říhová 82. Cf. Steele 59.

find a copy in a manuscript at the Wrocław University Library (Wrocław, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, I Q<sub>310</sub>, f. 139v), where the story of the Indian girl filled with poison was added to a copy of fasting sermons by Jacobus de Voragine. The scribe seemingly suspended his copying of the sermons to make a note of the story quickly. The scribe probably did not take the story from the *Secretum secretorum*, as the matches are largely on the level of content, but from Albertus Magnus, who himself took inspiration from the pseudo-Aristotelian work many times (Stadler 553).

The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV (1346-78), and the Czech king, his son Wenceslas IV of Luxembourg (1378-1419), were addressed directly in works that used Alexandrian motifs and quotes from Alexandrian literature. Some of these works demonstrably took inspiration from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum*. Besides the previously mentioned examples, we can also list the mirror for princes attributed to Charles IV. Formally, these are two letters (the shorter one from the prince and a longer answer from the ruler). The author, probably the humanist Niccolò Beccari, who was active at the Luxembourg court in Tangermünde and later in Prague, sought a mental foundation and basis for his claims among ancient authorities. He found great inspiration in Francesco Petrarca's *De avaritia vitanda* (1358), which he quotes extensively in passages that praise the ruler's generosity and reject avarice toward the court and subjects. The author combines quotes from Petrarca's works with parts of the *Secretum secretorum* in these passages. From the *Secretum* he took a passage distinguishing types of monarchs according to their generosity or avarice toward themselves and their subjects. While the pseudo-Aristotelian text identifies four types, "quatuor sunt reges" ("there are four kings"), the mirror for princes in question works with three types:

Quare ut scias, cuius mores vitamque fugere debeas aut sequi, tripartitam illam distinctionem regum, inter ea que Aristotelis secreta nominantur insertam, digne tibi distribuendum putavimus in hoc loco. (Steinherz 49; cf. Steele 42-43)

(Therefore, in order that you may know what morals and life you should avoid or adhere to, we have thought it appropriate to lay out for you in this place the threefold distinction of kings contained in the works called Secrets by Aristotle.)

Another example of the popularity of the *Secretum secretorum* in terms of Aristotle instructing Alexander is seen in the *Tractatus de habilitate temporis ad processum versus Italiam*. This text was written for Charles IV between 1376–1378 by an Italian humanist whose identity is the subject of historiographical debate. In this work, conceived as an appeal to the emperor, in which he exhorts the monarch to the third Roman campaign, the author explicitly relied many times on the authority of the writings of the *Secretum secretorum*. He also openly cites verses from the *Alexandreis* by Walter of Châtillon. The work under discussion includes the story of how Alexander joins a banquet in Darius's house in disguise and steals dishes saying that that is a custom at Alexander's court. This exemplum with its reminder of the need for rulers to be generous was part of the *Historia de preliis*, but it was also added to many medieval works (Schmugge).

We can also see reminders of Alexander the Great in works associated with Wenceslas IV. We have already discussed Štítný's work on chess. However, it should be noted that Alexander is a fundamental "hero" of the *Bellifortis* military handbook by Konrad Kyeser of Eichstätt, who completed his work at the Prague court after 1400 (Krása 56). The popularity of reading about Alexander in the vernacular at the Prague court was confirmed by Queen Sophia of Bavaria (+1428), whose estate included a biography of Alexander written in Czech, which is certainly the Old Czech translation of the *Historia de preliis* that has survived in five manuscripts.<sup>15</sup>

15. Vítovský 56: "Item ain puch in pirket von des grossen Alexander leben pehemisch geschriben" ("Also one parchment book about the life of Alexander the Great written in Czech.")

## Transience of worldly glory

If we read the Old Czech adaptation of the Latin prose *Historia de preliis* (redaction I<sup>3</sup>), we find a passage at the end that describes how Demosthenes composed the epitaph for Alexander's grave. The main topic of this passage is the need to scorn all worldly property and glory: the higher a person rises, the deeper they fall. Alexander, who was preordained to rule the world, found his end in a small, inhospitable grave. He himself says in this work:

Vše sem bral, smrt mě vzela, jenž všechno béře. [ ... ] Svět mi dosti nebyl se všech stran k chycení, již sem chycen a krátký mě hrnec drží. [ ... ] Čím více vstupuješ na najvyššie, v hlubokost spadneš. Spatř mé biedné tělo, jemužto bieše všechno povolno, a již mě krátký a úzký sudček v úzkém miestě drží. Proč mužské přirozenie raduje se, bera se vzhuo-

ru, poňavadž jest z útlého stvořeno, zveličeného sprvu počátka, potom pytel smrdutý a naposledy pokrm črvuom.

(I have taken everything, death has taken me, which takes everything [ ... ] It was not enough for me to grasp the world from all sides, I am already caught, and a small vessel holds me. [ ... ] The higher you climb, the deeper you fall. Look at my wretched body, to which everything has been subordinated, already held in a tight place by a small and narrow vessel. Why does mankind rejoice when it rises upward, for it is made of a frail foundation, then excellent, then a sack of stink, and lastly, a meal for worms.) (Kolár and Nedvěďová 141; cf. Steffens 204–07)<sup>16</sup>

16. The specifics of the Bohemian reception of the Latin text was described by Vidmanová, “Latinská historie” 266.

The theme of the transience of worldly glory was an essential topic for sermons and moralistic literature in the high Middle Ages (Ariés; Vovelle; Warda). It is also commonplace in stories about Alexander. The perception of Alexander as an ambivalent personality and the critical emphasis on his worldly pride can already be found in some ancient authors from whose works medieval authors could have taken inspiration (Stoneman).

Focusing on a relevant part of the Alexandrian story, we will now observe how this motif was used in Bohemia from the fourteenth century onward. Both the Latin Bohemian version of the *Gesta Romanorum* and its Old Czech adaptation present several stories where the main character is Alexander the Great: one is about the deadly basilisk in a city that Alexander had put under siege. The moralistic message added to the story is clear: it is a warning of pride and an appeal to humility. Elsewhere, Alexander’s death is the topic when the central message of the story and the explanation is the transience and futility of worldly glory: “Včera Alexandrovi nestačil všechn svět, dnes dosti má na dvú loktú nebo na třech země” (“Yesterday the whole world was not enough for Alexander; today two or three cubits of land are enough for him”) (Šimek *Příběhy* 39). A similar exemplum can be found in the *Summa recreatorum*, which was compiled from an eclectic mix of prose texts, verses, and even medicinal advice for the distinguished entertainment of the Luxembourg court (Vidmanová, “Summa”). The fourth of the five books that make up the *Summa recreatorum* is comprised of amusing and instructive stories and poems. This part is divided into two halves, as the author writes in the introduction – one prose and one verse. The opening included in the passage about chess (taken from Cessolis’s *Liber de*



17. See, for example, the manuscript Praha, NK ČR, I E 22, where the chess passage and the first *historia* can be found on f. 74rb–75ra and end with the words “Qui sine fine in virtutibus vivit et regnat.” (“Who lived and reigned without end in virtue.”)

18. See the fifth book Praha, NK ČR, I E 22, f. 105va–116ra.

*moribus*) is a moralizing reminder to any ruler that they can reform themselves if they try to understand how human society and the differentiation of societal roles should function.<sup>17</sup> The entire fifth book is conceived as a mirror for princes (“Quintus tractatus est de virtutibus exemplorum et regencium legalibus”) divided into four parts that gradually discuss cardinal virtues (*iustitia*, *prudencia*, *fortitudo*, *temperancia*).<sup>18</sup> The author explicitly refers to the *Secretum secretorum* among the quoted ancient and medieval authorities in the fifth book (Vidmanová, “Antika” 144). However, given the method of the author of this work, it is not improbable that he took the reference from another medieval work; he may have worked with some Aristotelian *florilegium*.

In the fifth book of the *Summa recreatorum*, we find an epitaph from Alexander’s tombstone. The epitaph adapts ancient verses by Valerius Maximus:

Quam frivola gaudia mundi! / Quam rerum fugitivus honor,  
quam nomen inane! / Magnus in exemplo est. Cui non  
suffecerat orbis, / sufficit exciso defossa marmore terra, /  
quinque pedum fabricata domus, / qua nobile corpus exiguo  
requievit humo. (Praha, NK ČR, I E 22, f. 110v)

(Frivolous are the joys of the world, / riches fade, as does the  
sound of a name. / The Great man is the example. The world  
was not enough for him. / Now he is contented with earth,  
with a marble headstone on top, / a house of five feet, where  
his distinguished body rests / in a bit of soil.)

19. The use of these particular verses from Walter’s *Alexandreis* for royal epitaphs has a larger tradition in Europe. The same verses can be found, for example, on the tomb of Henry II at Fontevraud. Cf. Sargent-Baur 15.

20. The verses “Magnus in exemplo est, cui non suffecerat orbis, sufficit exciso defossa marmore terra, quinque pedum fabricata domus, quam nobile corpus exigua requiescit humo” are taken from Walter’s *Alexandreis* 10.448–51. See Colker 273. The other part, “En ego, qui totum mundum certamine vici / dictus Alexander, vincor in hora brevi”, is taken from *Historia de preliis* I<sup>3</sup>, Steffens 204–05.

It was Jan Hus who applied the same verses dealing with the theme of Alexander’s death and transience in his sermon in memory of the anniversary of Charles IV’s death on November 29, 1409.<sup>19</sup> He used the example of Alexander’s death to show that even the greatest glory cannot protect a person from death, and worldly fame and majesty make the end miserable (Vidmanová *Positiones* 125). This part of Hus’s text is a combination of verses drawn from both *Historia de preliis* and Walter’s *Alexandreis*. In addition to these two works, Hus also acknowledges drawing on the work of Peter Alfonsi, specifically his twelfth-century collection *Disciplina clericalis* (Hilka and Söderhjelm 44–45).<sup>20</sup> Jan Hus included the same verses, translated into Czech, a few years later in his *Výklady* (“Expositions”), specifically in the *Výklad delší na desatero přikázanie* (“Longer exposition on the Ten Commandments”). When he reaches the question of futility

and transience, he first asks the question: “Co platno člověku, ač vešken svět zíšťe a své duši uškodí?” (“What does it value for a man to gain the whole world if he harms his soul?”). He answers this eternal question by recalling the death of Alexander: “A by Alexander, jenž jest vešken svět pod sě byl podbojoval, by mohl mluviti mrtev, mohl by řeci: ‘Aj, toť já, jenž vešken svět válkú sem přemohl, Alexander řečený, přemožen sem v hodinu krátkú!’” (“And if Alexander, who has subdued the whole world under his power, could speak when dead, he would say ‘Behold, I, called Alexander, who have conquered the whole world by military force, I am conquered in a short time!’”) (Daňhelka 324–325; cf. Vidmanová, “Staročeské pokusy”).

The same Latin hexametric verses can also be found in the Strahov Library codex DN IV 2/f. This copy of the *Secretum secretorum* dated to the fifteenth century is written on two gatherings, bound probably later into the manuscript. The last folio (23r) is followed by an entry written by the same hand, which brings the aforementioned hexameters that deal with Alexander’s death and the transition from worldly glory to posthumous nothingness (“En ego, qui totum mundum certamine vici...”). We already encountered these verses above in Jan Hus’s sermon from 1409 and his *Longer exposition on the Ten Commandments*. This moralistic story about the passing of Alexander resonated strongly in the Middle Ages, and the Czech medieval environment was no exception. It created its referential framework, the message of which was used by learned preachers and intellectuals who leveraged the emblematic character of Alexander to point out the transience of life and the futility of worldly pride.

### III. New reading of old texts

The Kingdom of Bohemia was a land of great intellectual boom and political and confessional changes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as was reflected in the production of literary texts that included the newly engaging discourse about political philosophy and religious polemics. During the Hussite wars and confessional controversies, the Bohemian royal throne remained vacant when Sigismund was rejected as the legitimate monarch (1420–36); the situation was repeated in 1438–48, during the childhood of his grandson, Ladislav the Posthumous, and ended with the election of King George of Poděbrady (1458–71). The traditional dynastic principle was abandoned, and in the context of the texts written during the

preparations for the election of the king, the requirements imposed on the monarch were redefined. In confessionally divided Bohemia, unity of faith was one of the essential themes; nevertheless, the sovereign's virtues were also emphasized. Literature became a more social matter, which went hand-in-hand with its vernacularization, as vernacular texts were often shaped by a political or confessional programme that attempted to reach a wider audience. Among the texts written or edited in the Czech lands during the fourteenth and mainly fifteenth centuries, there are ones that are inspired by Alexandrian literature and at the same time contain elements of specific political and especially confessional involvement. We encounter works that had to develop into 'engaged readings', which means that later readings of them diverged from the author's original intention and the text took on a new political or confessional connotation.

As an example could serve the Alexander's Privilege for Slavs, very probably originally written as an educational stylistic exercise (*dictamen*; Vidmanová, "Ještě jednou"). In this text, Alexander promises "illustri prosapie Slavorum et lingue eorum" ("the glorious tribes of Slavs and their language") dominion over the area north of Italy as thanks for their loyal service. Many formal elements (the dating of the writing to Alexandria, worship of pagan gods, etc.) were intended to create an illusion of an authentic document, but the overall content suggests a literary game.

Nos Allexander Philipi regis Macedonum, hircus monarchie figuratus, Grecorum imperii inchoator, magni dei Yovis filius per Nectanabum nunciatus, allocutor Bragmanorum et arborum Solis et Lune, conculcator Persarum et Medorum regionum, dominus mundi ab ortu solis usque ad occasum, a meridie usque ad septentrionem, illustri prosapie Slavorum et lingue eorum gratiam, pacem atque salutem a nobis et successoribus nostri succedentibus nobis in gubernacione mundi. (Vidmanová, "Ještě jednou" 180)

(We, Alexander, successor to the Macedonian king Phillip, prefigured as the goat who allegorizes kingly rule, the originator of the Greek monarchy, the son of Zeus, announced by Nectanabo, interlocutor with the Brahmins and with the trees of the Sun and the Moon, suppressor of the Persians and the Medes, lord of the world from where the sun rises to where it sets, from noon to midnight, to the eminent tribe of

21. The goat is an allusion to the passage from Daniel 8,5.

the Slavs and to their language, grace, peace, and greetings from us and our successors that will follow us in ruling the world.)<sup>21</sup>

The quoted invocation summarizes the most famous motifs of Alexander's career, or rather of its literary presentation in the *Historia de preliis*. At the same time, it imitates contemporary chancery practice in issuing charters. The document was most probably created in the Slavonic Monastery in Prague during the reign of Charles IV, where the question of the Slavic origin of Czech rulers and its symbolic importance was a crucial issue, as it was in the imperial chancery. Later, this brief document was copied several times in various countries, including fifteenth-century Bohemia (Bojcov). It is natural, however, that the context of further copying and reading was different. One of the copies is preserved in a manuscript (Brno, Moravský zemský archiv, Cerr. II, n. 108, f. 10v), where it was written by the same scribe together with historical pamphlets and anti-German texts. This codex was most probably compiled during the campaign before Albrecht of Habsburg became king of Bohemia in 1437/38, after the death of Sigismund of Luxembourg. The manuscript was most likely compiled by an opponent of Albrecht's accession. The inclusion of Alexander's alleged privilege for the Slavs in this collection of texts suggests its nationalist-tinged reading and use. The text, originally written as a stylistic game and educational exercise, now becomes part of an argument in the political discourse of Hussite Bohemia. In this case, the political fiction that used Alexander's name and ancient glory easily became a subject of nationalistic differentiation in fifteenth-century interpretation.

## Solfernus

Above, we have discussed a set of advice to the monarch in which Alexander played an essential role. We now return to this theme again, using the example of the fifteenth-century Old Bohemian book *Solfernus*. A passage dealing with advice to the monarch was inserted into the opening part of this work. As we shall demonstrate, the apparent inspiration for these pieces of advice was the *Secretum secretorum* and Aristotle's instruction to Alexander. As we will show, the introduction of *Solfernus*, including the recommendation to the monarch, reflects the political and confessional reality of fifteenth-century Bohemia.

The *Solfernus* belongs to the genre of hellish trials or medieval descriptions of 'satanic trials' (Cardelle de Hartmann; Mastroberti). The

22. Barbora Hanzová, *Solfernus*, [online edition](#) (accessed on August 25, 2020).

23. The text survived in several manuscripts primarily from the second half of the fifteenth century. It is most probably a translation from Latin, but the original has not yet been found.

*Solfernus* was until recently only partially available in an edition: Tomsa 17–119; Erben 471–98; Dolenský 88–96. A new edition based on the manuscript Praha, KNM, IV E 29 has been prepared by Barbora Hanzová. See [online](#) (accessed on July 2, 2019).

*Solfernus*, which in the manuscript tradition also appears under the name *Život Adamův* (“Adam’s Life”), like other novels of its kind describes a conflict, in this case the conflict of fallen angels with God about their place in heaven.<sup>22</sup> The plot supplements the story of the creation of the world, the fall of the angels, and Adam and Eve and their stay in heaven and hell.<sup>23</sup> For us, the conflict between the forces of God and evil is not as interesting as the introduction that precedes the novel itself. This is a fragmented text where several literary traditions overlap.

The *Solfernus* incorporates the basic narrative of Christian doctrine. Even the introductory statements are anchored in Christian values: the worship of Mary is an essential motif in the story of salvation and damnation. The prologue, which includes a dedication to an unnamed king, provides advice to the ruler, specifically, how a Christian sovereign should act so that his behaviour will please God (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 67r–71r). For the Czech reader of the second half of the fifteenth century, however, the passage on the relationship between the monarch and the Church could have been very topical. The Hussite wars brought to Bohemia not only the theme of severe criticism of the corrupt Church but also confessional schism, or rather the strongly felt demand for Church unity. The sovereign should honour and favour the clerics at court, as they are the “suol zemská, soléce dobrými skutky a v dobrém potvrzující” (“salt of the earth, salting with good deeds and in goodness confirming”) (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 70r). If salt spoils, it should be discarded, which is the same way to treat wicked clergy. The king should unequivocally act against those whose teachings threaten the unity of the Church and abandon established regulations. The text here develops a motif from Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 7,15):

Také netrp žádných, jenž řádův cirkve svaté zachovati nechtěli by, neb sú ti najhorší, v ovčiem rúše chodiece, a vnitř jsúce vlci hltaví, kteřížto některé věci ustavené cirkví svatú opúšťějí a v lehkost ji berúce a svá ustavení více vážiece, skrze kteréžto mohli by s lidem svým upadnutí u veliké zlé, jenž slóve scisma, to jest oddělenie od obecné cirkve svaté, od obce věrných, aneb snad skrze jich učenie v jiný blud mohli by upadnutí.

(Also, hate anyone who will not keep the ordinances of the Holy Church, for they are the worst who walk in sheep’s clothing and inside are ravenous wolves. They forsake some

things ordained by the Holy Church and take them lightly, esteeming their own ordinances more highly, through which they might fall with their people into evil deeds, which is called schism, that is, separation from the universal Church, from the community of the faithful, or through their doctrine they might perhaps fall into other error.) (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 70r)

As the set of advice for rulers is not closely connected to the topic of *Solfernus*, we can easily surmise that this passage was more or less independent from the presumed Latin model of the Old Czech translation, and its content might well describe events in post-Hussite Bohemia, where the double faith of the Catholics and Utraquists was the lived reality. If we accept that this passage was part of the original model, it would have acquired new relevance and apt readers in the confessionally divided Czech lands of the fifteenth century. The author instructs the king not to interfere in Church matters and religious discussions on his own, and he should avoid contact with errant people: “I varuj se pilně obcovati s bludnými lidmi a poběhlými řádov svých, aby slepý slepého veda, oba v jámu upadla” (“And be careful not to keep company with those who are erring and have lost their way, lest the blind lead the blind and they both fall into the pit”) (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 70v). Suppose we accept this passage was applied to the political-confessional situation in fifteenth century Bohemia. Here, again, we see an appeal to the king to surround himself with members of a single confession, in this case Catholics. After this set of confessional advice come recommendations that are strikingly similar in content to what Aristotle advised Alexander in the *Secretum secretorum*: not to rely on his reason alone but to surround himself with reliable advisors, to beware of speaking too much in front of people, to do everything in fear of God (Steele 48–49). The impression that part of the advice to the ruler originated in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* is immediately reinforced in the next passage, in which the author of the preface reveals himself as a translator of *Solfernus* from Arabic into Latin. He was to translate the work in question for his sovereign and was well aware of the differences and shifts between the Islamic and Christian worlds and between Arabic and Latin cultures:

Tyto knihy [ ... ], přeložil sem zajisté s velikú prací z arabské řeči v latinskú a to sem k vaší cti a chvále učinil. Ale velikú proměnu mají arabští od latinníkův, neb jiný obyčej zachová-

vají v mluvení. [...] Písma zajisté svatých knih v druhých městech jinak psány mají nežli my v svém přeložení.

(These books [...] I have translated with great labour from Arabic into Latin, and this I have done for your honour and praise. But the Arabic text differs greatly from the Latin, for it retains a different manner of speaking. [...] For they have the holy books written differently from our translations in many places.) (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 70v).

A few lines below, he expands on the shift between languages and cultures when he says “má věděno býti, že nemůž tak pravě vyloženo býti v latinskú řeč, jakož tento doktor arabský popsál jest” (“It is to be known that what this Arabic scholar wrote cannot be correctly translated into Latin”) (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 71r). He also tells the story of the text that he translated from Arabic to Latin, bringing us even closer to the *Secretum*.

The text referred to in the preface to *Solfernus* was said to have been written by a certain Trigonius of Jerusalem,<sup>24</sup> originally an Arabic-writing Jew who converted to Christianity. Trigonius dedicated his work to the Bishop of Tripoli Valentinus and prefaced it with a prologue which corresponds in some striking points with the prologue with which Philip of Tripoli provided his translation of the *Secretum secretorum*.<sup>25</sup> The partial matches between the *Solfernus* prologue and that of the *Secretum* bring us to the idea that a distorted topical narrative about how the *Secretum secretorum* came to Europe can be recognized. In the case of the pseudo-Aristotelian text, this narrative was not about the creation of the text itself, but about the translation made for Bishop Guido of Valencia by Philip of Tripoli. A distant reference to a work called the *Secretum secretorum* appears once more: in the following part of the text, the author explains that he worked from books of the Bible and other scholarly works. These included a certain Klindius, where we can see a corruption of the name of the Arabic scholar al-Kindi, and Agazael, standing for al-Ghazali, who we then learn wrote a “book of secrets” (Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 71v). There is no doubt, however, that the book of secrets mentioned is the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* from which we see direct quotes in the introduction. Here, Arabic scholarship acts in a position of authority, supporting Christian stories about Creation, Adam and Eve, the angels, and heaven. All mentions of Aristotle, Alexander, and the Greek origin of the “book of secrets” disappear in this context, and the author of the *Solfernus* seeks inspiration in the world of Arabic scholarship.

24. He is listed as Frigonius in some manuscripts. Compare Barbora Hanzová's editorial note.

25. Praha, KNM, IV E 29, f. 71r. Cf. Steele 25: “Domino suo excellentissimo in cultu religionis Christiane strenuissimo Guidoni Vere de Valencia, civitatis metropolis glorioso pontifici, Philippus suorum minimus clericorum seipsum et devocionis obsequium. Quantum Luna ceteris stellis est lucidior, et Solis radius luciditate Lune fulgencior: tantum ingenii vestri claritudo, vestreque sciencie profunditas cunctos citra mare modernos in literatura exuberat, tam barbaros quam Latinos. Nec est aliquis sane mentis qui huic sciencie valeat refragari.” (“To his most excellent lord Guido, originally of Valence, most strenuous in the cultivation of the Christian religion, glorious pontiff of the city of Tripoli, from Philip, the least of his clerics, in the service of devotion. As much as the moon is brighter than the stars, and the sun's ray shines brighter still than the moon, so the clarity of your genius and the depth of your knowledge in letters exceeds that of all contemporaries on this side of the sea, whether natives or Latins. Nor is there anyone of sane mind who would be able to oppose this knowledge.”) On the reading “Guidoni vere de Valencia”, we follow Williams 360.

As we have just seen, the author of the introduction to the Old Czech *Solfernus* appeals to his king to honour God and care for the unity of the faith. To support his arguments, he uses quotations from the *Secretum secretorum*, although he does not acknowledge his source. The unity of faith as a task for a successful ruler administering a thriving kingdom was an essential topic in didactic and instructional literature (in Czech) in the second half of the fifteenth century. This was also true of the text written by the Catholic convert Pavel Židek for the Czech king George of Poděbrady under the title *Spravovna*.<sup>26</sup> He completed this work in 1471, thus in a similar atmosphere to that which accompanied the creation of the surviving copies of the *Solfernus*. Židek's *Spravovna*, as we will see, takes significant inspiration from the text of the *Secretum secretorum*, both in the form of advice from a wise man to his king and in the content.

26. M. Pavla Židka *Spravovna*. A new edition from Tereza Hejdová is available [online](#) (accessed on September 11, 2020). For the most recent work on the *Spravovna*, see Žůrek “Konvertiten” 246–66. For the royal ideal according to Pavel Židek, see Grygiel 336–38.

## Spravovna

In the *Spravovna* (“Instruction for Governance”), Židek/the scholar gives advice to King George of Poděbrady/the ruler, in many places taking words from the *Secretum secretorum*, leveraging the authority of Aristotle's relationship to Alexander. The idea of the unity of faith as a task for a successful sovereign administering a thriving kingdom was one of the chief lines of thinking in the *Spravovna*. In the *Spravovna*, Židek exhorts the king to “restore the Bohemian land”, preferably by converting to Catholicism and abolishing the double faith. Židek mimics the pseudo-Aristotelian text to a great extent, both formally and in terms of content. In the introduction, he even expresses faith that the *Spravovna* will be “more useful than Aristotle's [advice] to Alexander” for King George (Tobolka 4). Židek referred to the *Secretum* while writing the *Spravovna* and presented text taken from it with the words “as Aristotle told Alexander”. In such cases, he added advice to the *Spravovna* in the name of the ancient philosopher that was taken from the pseudo-Aristotelian text: George, just like Alexander, should not excessively love carnal pleasures; he should care for his good reputation and hold celebrations for his subjects, but not get drunk with them; he should be a generous and just ruler; and he should consult an astrologer about all his actions. Židek also took health and medicine advice from the *Secretum*. Perhaps even more relevant to us now are the counsels that take the authority of Aristotle's and Alexander's names but are not to be found in the *Secretum* text and do not reflect the context of the pagan, i.e. Greek and Arab, world ei-



ther. We can also find appeals that are anchored from their very foundation in the historical situation in Bohemia in the second half of the fifteenth century. According to Žídek, the ruler should build and improve churches throughout the country. He also puts into Aristotle's mouth the advice that the ruler should ensure, "všady po všech kostelech bohóm slávu činiti a dieky" ("celebrating gods in all temples and thank them") (Tobolka 14). In order to respect the law of God, the king is to ensure unity in the divine service. Using the power of Aristotle's authority, Žídek polemicizes against radical Utraquists who do not acknowledge any binding authority other than the Bible:

I protož aby Vaše Jasnost věděla, co jest zákon Božie, ne to, co bludný lid praví, že by byla sama biblí nebo samo čtenie, ale všecko písmo na ni doktoruov svatých a práva duchovní otcov svatých, totiž decret a decretales, agenda v kostelech a pontifical; neb sama biblí nenie dostatečna cierkev svatú spravovati.

(And therefore, so that Your Highness knows what God's law is, it is not what the heretics say – that it is only the Bible or only the Gospels – but all the writings on it made by holy doctors and the ecclesiastical law of the Holy Fathers, that is the decret and the decretals, the church agenda and the pontifical. Because the Bible itself is not sufficient to rule the Holy Church.) (Tobolka 18)

Care of the churches, maintenance of the unity of the faith, and appeals for the observance of a uniform liturgy are usual and hardly surprising parts of royal duties. However, in the context of confessionally divided Bohemia, they take on a higher relevance and become part of a vibrant dialogue. This particular case is a clear response by the Catholic side to Utraquist practice. Completed at the beginning of the 1470s, the *Spravovna* is a political pamphlet that supports the Catholic camp in its positions and demands toward the monarch. It intentionally adopts the form of an Aristotelian–Alexandrian dialogue of a scholar with a ruler as known, for example, from the *Secretum secretorum*.

## Conclusion

Jan Hus, a famous Prague intellectual and preacher, apparently had various elaborations of Alexander the Great's stories in his library. When he wrote his writings, in which he worked with Alexander mo-

tifs, he deliberately combined various sources of the Alexander textual corpus. He did so to show his scholarship and familiarity with contemporary trends in Bohemian literacy. It is evident from the preserved literary sources that the stories of Alexander the Great undoubtedly belonged to the trending themes.

In the Middle Ages, Alexander the Great was a representative figure as a great ruler and conqueror, and a reminder of the transience of worldly glory and the need for humility. After Alexander's figure was transposed into the Christian value system, it became an appeal to Christian contempt for the material world and a model of Christian virtues. We witnessed the placing of allusions to Alexander's death into the funeral sermon given by the archbishop of Prague after the end of Charles IV, just as Jan Hus used this motif explicitly in a sermon in memory of the same emperor some years later. In general, contemplating Alexander's death was an effective *memento mori* with the same intention as the medieval dance of death.

In a different context, Alexander appears as a figure in texts whose primary purpose is to instruct the ruler, both in good government and proper living. In such cases, the form of a dialogue between the scholar and the monarch is often reproduced, with one instructing the other; the dialogue also might have been transformed into a monologic instruction of the king by the scholar. The pair of the instructing sage and the monarch being instructed is naturally a reference to the paradigmatic pair of Aristotle and Alexander.

The contextualized use of Alexandrian stories goes hand-in-hand with the general cultural and historical development of the region. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the character of Alexander and the stories associated with him became a stable part of the Bohemian literary landscape. Nevertheless, their reading and use gradually changed during the fifteenth century. Literature was written not just in Latin but also in the vernacular, which gives greater space for creativity and a shift away from the canonical versions of the narrative (in the case of translations or adaptations), which gave them greater potential to be updated for the contemporary political context. For example, Cessolis's preacher's manual *Liber de moribus*, in the verbal adaptation by Tomáš Štítný, became a mirror for the princes, thus fulfilling the intention of an allegorical treatise on government which was partly aimed at Wenceslas IV. Alexandrian stories were often incorporated into polemic discourses in various forms. In the fifteenth century, we find Alexander's name in the context of very timely religious discussions. According to the testimony of extant sources, it

was mainly Catholic authors who, in the confessional-political polemics in Hussite and early post-Hussite Bohemia, supported their positions by referring to Alexander's name and authority. This was the case even though Catholic and Utraquist proponents came from the same cultural background and underwent a similar education.

Often, only the basic contours remain from the original Alexandrian narrative, which has been filled with new content corresponding to the contemporary political and confessional situation, or rather its tensions. Various fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Bohemian literary contexts where Alexander appeared clearly demonstrate what a useful figure he was. It was possible to functionally use him as more than just a moralistic example. The duo of Aristotle and Alexander had a great deal of identification potential, which was exploited by medieval authors when they wanted to camouflage their criticism and instruct their rulers.

Alexander the Great was not an unknown figure in medieval Bohemia. However, we have to ask ourselves a question in conclusion: was there one Alexander or many, whose character changed according to the needs of the moment and the narrative context? Alexander's name functioned as a label that linked medieval narratives, however long and for whatever purpose they were intended, to the significant corpus of Alexandrian texts. Meanwhile, Alexander's actual fate, the details of the Alexandrian romances, could only remain hinted at in the background. The mere name of Alexander was enough to change the reading of the medieval story and its attractiveness. It was not always the same person that stood behind the label of Alexander's name. What did not change and remained constant regardless of the changing literary context was the image of the great king. His specific deeds and character, however, could vary. The ambivalence of Alexander's character made him a universal figure applicable in various medieval narrative situations and contexts.

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