

BERAKHYAH BEN NATRONAI HA-NAKDAN, *Sefer Ko'ah ha-Avanim (On the Virtue of the Stones)*. Hebrew text and English translation. With a lexicological analysis of the Romance terminology and source study (*Études sur le judaïsme médiéval*, 40), ed., transl. and ann. by Gerrit Bos and Julia ZWINK, Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2010, ISBN 978-90-04-18310-0, pp. 187.

This book offers the first critical edition and translation of a Hebrew lapidary, *i.e.* a treatise on the virtues and effects of stones, composed by Berakhyah ben Natronai ha-Nakdan around 1300. Although the Jewish world lacked a tradition of its own on this subject, lapidary literature was widespread in medieval Europe, where lithotherapy was a common medical treatment and lapidaries as medical texts circulated in many versions, characterized by remarkable variations and contradictions.

Berakhyah, the author of the lapidary edited and translated by Gerrit Bos and Julia Zwink, was a Jewish scholar, most known as a fabulist. Very little information is available on his life and, in spite of the efforts of several scholars, few facts can be fixed beyond doubt: he lived in the 12th or 13th century in France (whether in Normandy or Provence is object of dispute) and, at a certain period, in England (some identify him with Benedictus le Puncteur of Oxford, who is remembered for a gift presented to Richard I in 1194). Neither his activity is known with greater precision: as suggested by his family name, he either could have been a punctuator (*naqdān*) of the Bible himself or he hailed from a family of punctuators.

Unlike other contemporary Jewish scholars, Berakhyah took interest in secular science and wisdom and was particularly active in transmitting foreign (*i.e.* non-Jewish) lore, literature, philosophy, and science to his coreligionists. While Abraham ibn Ezra - who probably was his fellow citizen in the 12th century Rouen - promoted Arab science, Berakhyah was concentrated on works derived from Christian sources; at the same time, he also promoted knowledge of the Jewish tradition as a Bible commentator and as a translator of difficult terms into Old French. He thus acted as a link between Christian and Jewish culture, and his lapidary must be considered in this context.

The literary production of Berakhyah comprises: *Mišlê šu'alîm* («Fox fables»), a collection of 119 fables drawing on medieval versions of Aesop; *Sefer ha-mašref* and *Sefer ha-ḥibbûr* («Compendium»), or *Musar haškel* («The discipline of wisdom»), two religious-ethical treatises summarizing Sa'adya Ga'on's *Kitāb al-amānāt wa-l-i'tiqādāt* («The book of beliefs and opinions»), whom he could access through Hebrew paraphrases; *Sefer dodî ve-neḳdî*

(«Uncle and nephew»), or *Še'elot* («Questions»), a Hebrew adaptation of the *Questiones Naturales* by Abelard of Bath; and *Sefer Ko'ah ha-Abanim* («The book of the virtue of the stones»), the work here presented.

Berakhyah's lapidary describes 72 stones arranged in alphabetical order (with the exception of the last four entries), as it was customary for this type of treatises. For each stone, a scientific description is provided along with an illustration of its medical virtues as well as the supernatural/magical ones, while astrological or allegorical connotations are left out.

A typical entry begins with the description of a stone, including its physical features and its intrinsic power, and continues with instructions for its use as a medication or as an amulet/talisman. For example: under the entry for 'ēsmraldā' «emerald» – following a description of its varieties and a myth about a people that collects the stones from the depths of the sea – it is said that «[s]omeone suffering from a hot disease [fever] or from epilepsy should wear it around his neck» and that one should not have sexual intercourse while wearing this stone, in order to keep its purity; of *aqateš* «agate» we are told that «[e]veryone who wears it with a whole heart and with true understanding will be comforted of his grief», while the ability to foretell the future is given to those who wear a 'elyôtrôpā' «bloodstone» or put a 'ênîâh «hyena-stone» under their tongue; victory over enemies in war appears to be guaranteed by 'alêqtûyaynā' and 'îrônā', with the sole inconvenience that both stones are hardly identifiable.

Many descriptions are enriched with anecdotes, which often prove particularly interesting: for example, the first entry, 'a'imant, both «magnet» and «diamond» (covered in two subentries, respectively *magnêtiš* and *diya'mant*, the latter also treated as a separate entry), contains one of the earliest references to the sailor's compass.

This work – extant in a single manuscript, which was copied in the 14th century in an Ashkenazi script in the margin of a liturgical text (Oxford Bodleian Library, Can. Or. 70, cat. Neubauer 1147, fols. 73a-80b) – was heretofore unpublished, except for a recent uncritical and faulty edition appeared anonymously in a religious publication (*Segulot ha-avanim ha-ṭovim*, Jerusalem, 2005).

The critical edition now available is based on the Hebrew text of the Oxford manuscript, emended on the basis of secondary material and presented with a parallel annotated English translation. Most noteworthy are the supplements, which account for two thirds of the volume, dealing in great detail with the issue of Berakhyah's sources and the language of his text.

The first supplement consists of a comparative table between the text of some of Berakhyah's entries and that of an anonymous translation of *De Lapi-*

dibus by Marbode de Rennes (ca.1035-1123), that appears to be a major source, even though indirectly. Written in Latin hexameters, Marbode's work was the most popular medieval lapidary (no less than 160 manuscripts survive), translated into many European languages, Hebrew included; two Hebrew translations are known and both draw on French versions of Marbode¹, with which they share some Old French terms, and not on Latin: an anonymous prose translation known from its incipit as *'Ellu šemot ha-abanîm ha-toḇîm* («These are the names of the good stones») and a verse translation by Jacob ben Reuben entitled *Sefer ha 'ošer* («The book of the wealth»).

The second supplement, prepared by Julia Zwink, contains an introduction to the language of Berakhyah's lapidary, a lexicological commentary on the Romance and Latin terms, a detailed analysis of the sources for every single entry, tables of the sources, alphabetical glossaries, a bibliography and a subject index.

The analysis of the sources shows that the text primarily consulted by Berakhyah was the Anglo-Norman Cambridge Version of Marbode, made directly from Latin and not depending on the French versions: it was probably used as source for 44 out of 72 stones. The linguistic analysis of the lexemes leads to interesting conclusions regarding Romance languages: out of 103 non-Hebrew terms, 80 are Romance (Old French or Anglo-Norman), while Latin is scantily attested, which may be surprising for a medieval scientific treatise; apparently, «*Old French as a scientific language was much more developed than it was supposed to be*».

The volume is concluded with sixteen plates featuring the complete manuscript in clear and readable photographs.

Raffaele Esposito

¹ Cfr. Gad Freudenthal – J.-M. Mandosio, «Old French into Hebrew in Twelfth-Century Tzarfat: Medieval Hebrew Versions of Marbode's Lapidary», in *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, XIV/1 (2014), pp. 11-187.