



Efrosin's Tale of Solomon and Kitovras | ѿ Китоврасѣ ѿ палей

Text Information

Author | Efrosin

Language | Russian variant of Old Church Slavonic

Period | 15th Century

Genre | Philosophical Tale

Source | Russian National Library, Kirillo-Belozerskii Monastery, Efrosin Manuscripts, No. 11/1088, no. 262

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/efrosin_solomon_kitovras/

Transcription, translation, and introduction by Vito S. Acosta.

Introduction to the Text & Source

"The Tale of Solomon and Kitovras" is part of a collection compiled by the priest-monk Efrosin of the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery (St. Cyril of Beloozero's Monastery) in the late 15th century CE. The monastery is located north of Moscow and originally functioned as a place of exile for elites and clergymen in disgrace. In 1446 CE, Grand Prince Vasily II came to the monastery, where the Father Superior, Tryphon, absolved him from the oath he had taken not to fight for the Muscovite throne. Following Vasily's victory in the Muscovite Civil War, the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery was granted special status and received an inflow of generous donations. The monastery became a place of broad intellectual activities and its prestige within the Muscovite state made it an attractive place for monks. It retained its high status through the reign of Grand Prince Ivan III (r. 1462-1505 CE) during which Efrosin composed the present text.

The manuscript, a book of encyclopedic content that includes writings from the *Paleia*, was part of Efrosin's personal notebooks and may have been used for pedagogical purposes. It is absent from the book catalogue of the monastery's library, which suggests that it was likely kept in Efrosin's own cell. The book is thick but compact, approximately 14 x 10 cm and covered in leather bindings.

Efrosin is one of the most remarkable men of letters of the Grand Duchy of Moscow but information about him is sparse. One of the few references to him outside his own notebooks mentions that he departed the monastery for over a year. In addition to religious texts, Efrosin's collections include subjects such as geography, history, medicine, astronomy, and lexicography, and this breadth is representative of an encyclopedic trend in writings of the period. (See also Efrosin's version of the "Tale of Dracula" in this sourcebook.) While Efrosin appears to have been in good standing with the Church, he did have a particular interest in texts, such as this story, which had been denounced as "false" or "of little use." Of the texts he copied, he edited many to his own liking, with revisions, additions, and personal notes. In rewriting the texts in this manner, Efrosin often provided his own interpretations, thus creating original versions.

Efrosin's creative synopsis of the "Tale of Solomon and Kitovras" is an original version of a longer tale which Efrosin had copied as part of the "Judgements of Solomon" cycle found in the *Paleia*, a major Old Russian interpretative text that retells much of the Old Testament with apocryphal additions and comments. Based on the image of the biblical king renowned for his wisdom and portrayed as a great holder of knowledge, tales of King Solomon formed a genre with a storied tradition that became a hallmark of Slavic Orthodox literary culture. Legends of Kitovras, a Slavic derivative of "Centaur," occupy an important place in this tradition. Efrosin's version takes considerable liberty with the tale and includes themes not present in his source, which he himself copied and included in the same book.

In the source version, Solomon captures Kitovras to help him with the construction of the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem. While held in captivity, Kitovras exhibits the ability to know the fates of several people. He tells Solomon how to obtain the Shamir stone needed to build the temple and stays with him through its completion. When Solomon doubts Kitovras' strength, Kitovras throws him to the edge of the promised land. Upon his return, Solomon orders sixty bodyguards around his bed for protection against Kitovras.



In his edition, Efrosin added, for example, a description of the beast, but gave him cow legs instead of the horse legs depicted in the miniature drawn by the icon-painter Ephraim Trebes in section 127 of the same manuscript and in Nicetas of Heracleia's commentary on Achilles and the Centaur, copied in the Kirillov *Mythographer*. The dialogue and Kitovras's response to Solomon that, "Best of all is one's own freedom," is also Efrosin's personal addition, and a deliberate choice for emphasis. Specialists have suggested that this line can be read in the context of the trend for monks, like Efrosin, to leave the monastery for extended periods of time, thereby living with a sense of independence that is reflected in the writings of the period as a whole. The modifications and additions that Efrosin made to the dialogue between Solomon and Kitovras and to the plot itself thus make his retelling stand out among other versions of this classic tale.

About this Edition

My translation generally follows the grammar of the original. For the transcription, I have attempted to reproduce the graphic form of the text as it is preserved in the manuscript, without introducing modern punctuation. For example, I have retained the abbreviated forms indicated by a titlo (¨). I decided to retain a limited number of diacritic signs, which in most cases are aspiration signs (') over a vowel at the beginning of a word or following another vowel. The principal modification in my transcription is the addition of spaces between words. I am deeply indebted to Professor Julia Verkholtantsev, my instructor of Old Church Slavonic at the University of Pennsylvania, for her generous guidance in this project.

Further Reading

Likhachev, D. S., and Lev Aleksandrovich Dmitriev. *A History of Russian Literature, 11th-17th Centuries: A Textbook*. Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1989.

- *Situates the Tale, discussed on pages 323-324, in the context of the Russian literary tradition.*

Lur'e [Luria], Jakov S. "Une légende inconnue de Salomon et Kitovras dans un manuscrit du XVe siècle." *Revue des études slaves* 43:1/4 (1964): 7-11.

- *Translation, transcription, and discussion in French of Efrosin's short retelling of the tale.*

Prokhorov, Gelian Mikhailovich. "Skazaniye o Solomone i Kitovrase." <http://www.infolib.info/rliit/drl/solomon.html>.

- *Transcription and Russian translation of the source version Efrosin had copied from the Paleia.*

Romanchuk, Robert. *Byzantine Hermeneutics and Pedagogy in the Russian North*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007.

- *Context for the intellectual milieu at the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery. See especially Chapter 4, pages 202-210, where Romanchuk discusses Efrosin's editions of the Solomon and Kitovras tales.*

Russian National Library. "Euphrosynus Manuscripts - Fifteenth-Century Miscellanies of the 'Leonardo Da Vinci of Ancient Russia.'" <https://expositions.nlr.ru/EfrosinManuscripts/eng/>.

- *Critical background information in both English and Russian from the Russian National Library, host of the Efrosin manuscripts.*



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Китоврасѣ ѣсть звѣрь борзѣ соломонѣ мрѣѣ³ хитростію изымалѣ ѣго. станѣ чаѣчь⁵ ѧ ноги коровѣи. рекше басна⁶ женоу во оухѣ носилѣ. тоу хитростію іа⁷ ѣго. жена ѣго сказала юноши любовникоу своѣмоу, такѣ. ѿбѣхиди днѣмѣ да ноцѣю много земель. да приходити к нѣкоѣмоу мѣстоу на нем же двѣ кладаѣ. ѿн же тѣ испиваѣтъ ѿбѣ кладаѣ издоушасѣ. соломон же велѣлѣ налити и⁸х ѣдинѣ вина. ѧ други медуу. ѿн же тѣ ѿбѣ кладаѣ прискоча испилѣ. тоуто ѣго пѣаного съ сна поймали и сковали крѣпко. сила бо в немѣ была велика. и привели ко црѣю соломону. црѣ въпросилѣ ѣго. что ѣсть оузорочнѣе во свѣтѣ семѣ. ѿн же рѣе всего ѣсть лоучши своя вола. двѣе крапоуасѣ и все переломалѣ : и поскочилѣ на свою волю, глѣют ѣго іако црѣвѣ снѣ двѣдовѣ :

On Kitovras,¹ from the *Paleia*²

Kitovras is a swift beast. Solomon⁴ the Wise caught him with a trick. His upper body is of a man and his legs are of a cow. Legend has it that he carried his wife in his ear. With the following trick they seized him. His wife⁸ explained to a lad, her young lover: "He goes day and night across numerous lands and reaches a certain place at which there are two wells. Exhausted, he drinks from both these wells." Solomon ordered that one be filled with wine and the other with mead.⁹ Leaping, Kitovras drank from both wells. Just then, with him drunk and drowsy, they took and fettered him tightly, as the strength in him was immense. And they brought him to King Solomon. The King asked him: "What is most beautiful in this world?" He replied: "Best of all is one's own freedom." Stirring forthwith, he broke everything into pieces and leapt to his own freedom. It is said that he is the son of a king, King David.¹⁰

Critical Notes

- 1 'Kitovras' is a Slavic derivative of 'Centaur.'
- 2 A major Old Russian interpretative text that retells much of the Old Testament with apocryphal additions and comments.
- 3 This is a mistake for мрѣѣ, from the adjective мрѣѣ, meaning 'wise.'
- 4 This is the biblical figure, King Solomon.
- 5 челоуечѣ
- 6 баснаѣ
- 7 аи
- 8 The wife of Kitovras.
- 9 Fermented honey.
- 10 This would make Kitovras the brother of King Solomon.