

"Azbuka znakami lits: Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Privy Chancellery Archive,"
Oxford Slavonic Papers, N. S., 10 (1977): 46-50 (plus four plates).
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*Azbuka znakami lits: Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Privy Chancellery Archive**

By DANIEL CLARKE WAUGH

IN 1713 the compiler of an inventory to the papers that remained from the Chancellery of Privy Affairs (*Prikaz tainykh del*) of Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich (reigned 1645–76) noted a file that contained among other items an '*azbuka znakami lits*' (alphabet in pictorial signs).¹ Although this file has survived to our day (it is now in the Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnikh aktov (TsGADA) in Moscow, *fond* 27, *delo* 312) and has been used by scholars, the '*azbuka*' has been ignored.² It is the purpose of this brief communication to discuss the nature and origins of this so-called 'alphabet'.

Its manuscript consists of two loose sheets, one approximately the size of a Muscovite *stolbets* (i.e. about 45 × 17 cm., and prepared by halving a full sheet of paper lengthwise) and the other of the same length but half the width. Both sheets have writing on recto and verso, the wider one containing two columns and the narrower one a single column of figures on each side (Plates I–II). A quick glance suggests that the figures are Egyptian hieroglyphs.³ My initial impression was that the hieroglyphs could well be a conglomeration of genuine and imaginary ones, not necessarily representing a coherent text. Some of

* This research was made possible by financial support from the International Research and Exchanges Board, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Russian and East European Program of the Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies at the University of Washington.

¹ See the 'Opis' delam Prikaza tainykh del 1713 goda', in *Zapiski Otdeleniya russkoi i slavyanskoi arkhologii Imperatorskogo Russkogo arkhologicheskogo obshchestva*, ii (1861), 7. The entry reads in full: 'Izobrazhenie znaka, yanzh'shtagovaya na nebesi v Vengerskoi zemle 1672 g. i znaki zh cheryami v toi zhe zemle, kotorye byli s velikiim snegom vo 181 godu, da azbuka s znakami lits.' The next line in the inventory is 'Istoki pisaniya po azbuke', presumably referring to a different item. The (on the evidence of the handwriting) seventeenth-century table of contents for the file (TsGADA, *fond* 27 (Papers of the *Prikaz tainykh del*), no. 312, f. 1), from which the inventory entry appears to have been copied, reads '*azbuka znakami lits*' for the item that concerns us here.

² For example, I. Ya. Gurylyand described and published the texts of the first two items in the file but did not mention the third (*Prikaz velikogo gosudarya tainykh del* (Yaroslavl', 1902), 380–2).

³ TsGADA, *fond* 27, no. 312, ff. 8–9. Note that f. 8^v is a copy of the top two-thirds of f. 8^r, and the left column on f. 9^v is likewise a copy of the top two-thirds of the right column on f. 9^r.

the signs have been rendered as human figures by the copyist and do not seem to coincide with known Egyptian hieroglyphic signs. Initially, then, the prospects of discovering the source for the drawings appeared to be slim.

One significant detail provided a clue as to where one might begin a search for the source. Each set of figures is enclosed in a long rectangle, at the end of which is a triangular point. The shape suggested is that of an obelisk. A search of literature pertaining to the evolution of Egyptology revealed that Egyptian obelisks had been of particular interest in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴ A number of obelisks had been transported to Europe in late Roman times; as part of the rebuilding and decoration of the Baroque era, especially in Rome under papal sponsorship, some of the long since fallen monoliths were raised in prominent locations. The interest in obelisks was connected not only with city planning and decoration: most of the obelisks bore hieroglyphic inscriptions. During the Renaissance, there had developed an increasing interest in the interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs, in part because many people felt that they had particular mystical or religious significance that might be related to the prevalent cabalistic and Hermetic theories.

In the seventeenth century a German Jesuit, Athanasius Kircher, undertook a massive scholarly project—the compilation of a complete catalogue of all known Egyptian obelisks and their inscriptions, along with an explanation of their history and an attempt at interpretation. Kircher's *magnum opus*, the three-volume *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* published in 1652–4, was indeed the most complete collection of material on Egyptian obelisks in Europe in the middle of the seventeenth century and long afterwards.⁵ Since my search in earlier publications discussing hieroglyphs and obelisks had failed to provide any clues to the origin of the drawings in Muscovy, it was logical to turn to Kircher. Moreover, since the archive of the Tsar's Privy Chancellery contained so many translations, including the other items in the file with the hieroglyphs, it seemed reasonable to look for the source in a printed book such as Kircher's, containing detailed engravings of the obelisks he described.

Among them was the famous 'Theodosian' or Hippodrome obelisk raised toward the end of the fourth century in the Constantinople Hippodrome by the order of Emperor Theodosius I and standing on the same location today in what is now called the Atmeydan or Horse Square. This monument, dating from the time of Tuthmosis III (1490–

⁴ I have relied primarily on the excellent survey by Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen, 1961), and the same author's authoritative *Obelisks in Exile*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1968–72).

⁵ Athanasii Kircheri, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus. Hoc Est Universalis Hieroglyphicae Veterum Doctrinae temporum iniuria abolitae Instauratio* . . . , 3 vols. in 4 (Rome, 1652–4). I have used the copy in Harvard University's Houghton Library.

1436 B.C.), had become an object of attention for visitors to the imperial city long before the Turkish conquest and remained so subsequently. Yet Kircher had provided the first thorough description and reasonably accurate representation of the obelisk; there appear to have been no other such depictions of it widespread in Europe before the end of the seventeenth century.⁶ As he explains, he had to write to the Imperial resident in Istanbul in order to obtain an accurate drawing from which to make an engraving. The resident turned to his Greek interpreter Panaioti Nicusio for assistance. It happened that some time earlier Nicusio had made drawings of the obelisk and its hieroglyphs 'per mia curiosità', and it was these which were sent to Kircher.⁷

Kircher's engraving (Plate III) reveals that the Theodosian obelisk was, indeed, the source for the drawings in the Tsar's archive. However, as becomes clear from a comparison of the engraving and the drawings with accurate modern representations of the obelisk, Kircher's edition could not have served as the source for the manuscript illustrations.⁸ For despite the fact that some of the hieroglyphs in the drawings are 'anthropomorphized' versions of what is actually on the obelisk, the drawings are nonetheless closer to the original than is Kircher's engraving. One additional feature of the drawings should be noted. The artist did not depict a complete side of the obelisk in one long strip, but divided each side approximately in half, surrounding each set of figures with a frame and adding a pointed tip, thus giving each half of the inscription the appearance of belonging to a distinct side of the obelisk. Perhaps this was done because drawings of two sides of the monument were not available—what we have is the complete text of the inscriptions on the north-east and south-west faces only.

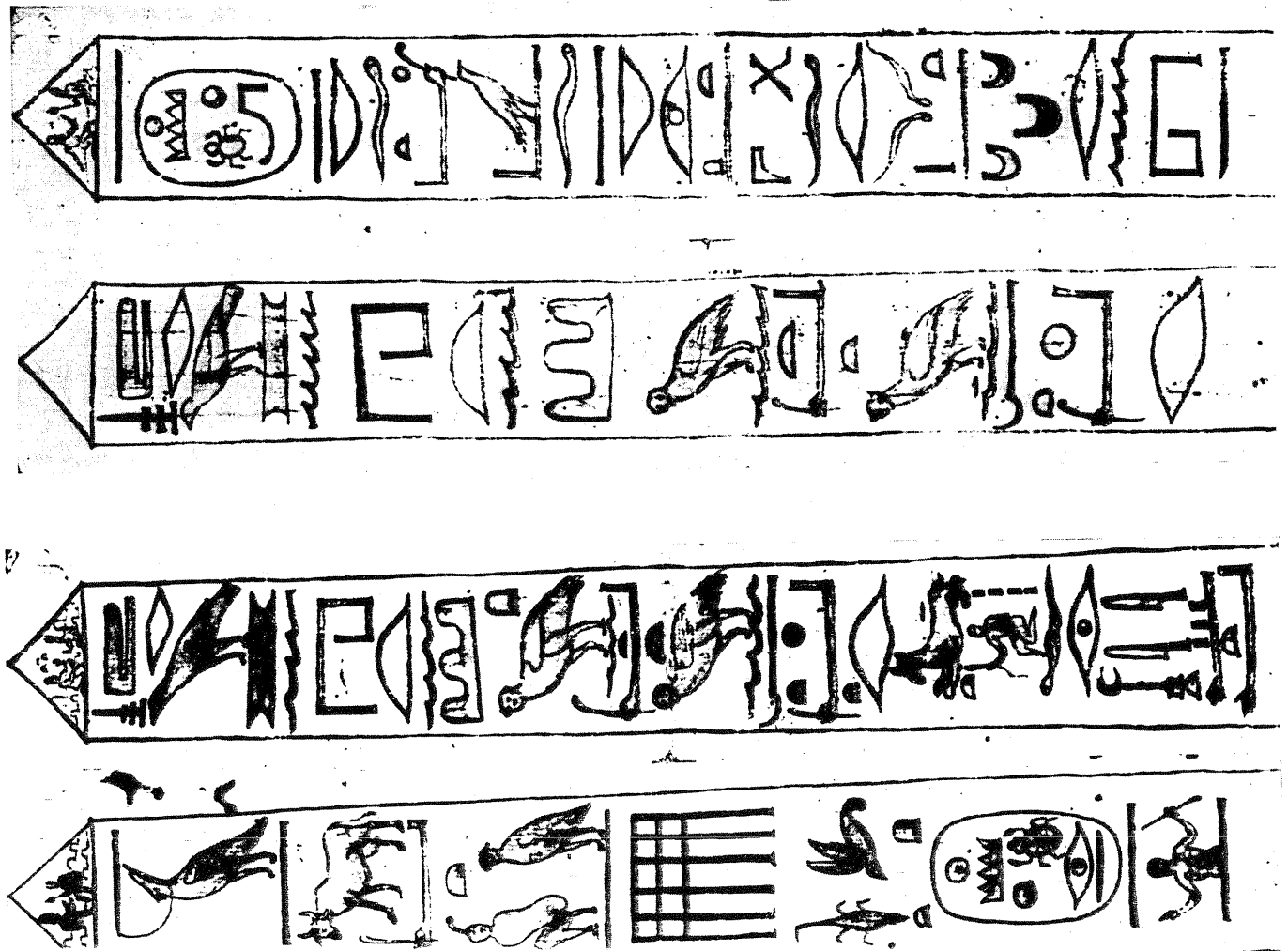
Having located the source for the drawings, our next task was to determine how they came to Moscow. Two facts derived from the manuscript provided a clue. First, the paper contains fragments of what appears to be the watermark 'three crescents'. This paper was uncommon in Muscovy but widespread in the Ottoman Empire and the

⁶ Kircher, *op. cit.* (n. 5), iii, 304–16. For the complete history of the Theodosian obelisk, see Iversen, *Obelisks* (n. 4), ii, 9–33, and Gerda Bruns, *Der Obelisk und seine Basis auf dem Hippodrom zu Konstantinopel* (Istanbuler Forschungen. Herausgegeben von der Abteilung Istanbul des Archäologischen Institutes des Deutschen Reiches, Bd. 7) (Istanbul, 1935), 1–11. While Bruns's historical excursus has been superseded by Iversen's, her book is valuable for its discussion of the inscriptions on pp. 21–9, where one finds their text in German translation, and for a variety of archaeological details.

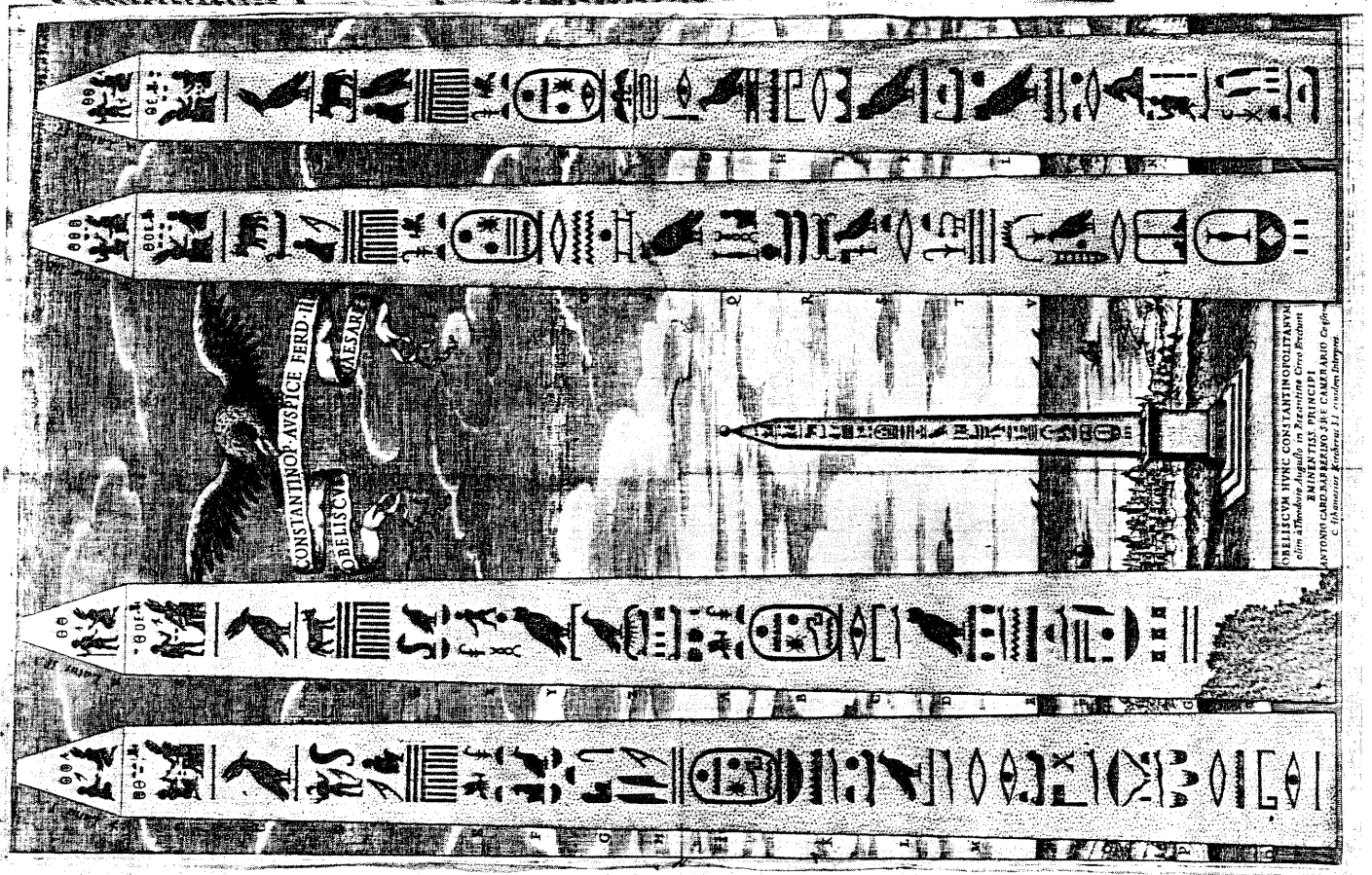
⁷ Kircher, *op. cit.* (n. 5), iii, 305.

⁸ Compare Kircher's engraving (Plate III) with the photographs in Bruns, *Der Obelisk* (for example, fig. 2 = Plate IV), which are reproduced in Iversen, *Obelisks*, ii, figs. 6–9. The clearest accurate reproductions of the inscriptions are in the magnificent portfolios of R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (Berlin, 1849–59), Abt. III, Bd. v, pl. 60. I have no evidence to suggest that Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* was known in Muscovy; for two of his works that apparently were, see A. I. Sobolevsky, *Peredovaya literatura Moskovskoi Rusi XIV–XVII vekov* (Spb., 1903), 94, 182.





II. TSGADA, fond 27, dolo 312, f. 9' and 9''



III. The Hippodrome obelisk: the engraving in Kircher's *Œdipus Aegyptiacus* (1652-4)

Caucasus.⁹ Second, there is a small Greek inscription written upside down at the top of folio 8^r (. . . $\nu\phi\lambda\lambda\alpha$).¹⁰ It seems reasonable to conclude then that the original source of the drawings was Istanbul itself, where the Phanariot Greek interpreters for foreign visitors had ample opportunity and incentive to supply curiosities—as had been done to fulfil Kircher's request. Muscovy's channels of communication with Istanbul were many—in addition to frequent diplomatic exchanges, there was active trade (much of it in Greek hands) and a steady stream of Orthodox clerics seeking alms in Muscovy. The best we can suggest regarding a date for the transmission of the drawings is the early 1670s—certainly not later than 1676, when the Privy Chancellery was closed. The file in which the hieroglyphs are found contains two other items, both dating from the early 1670s. It may be, of course, that the presence of the three items in one file is merely the work of the archivist and is not evidence for the date when the copies were received.

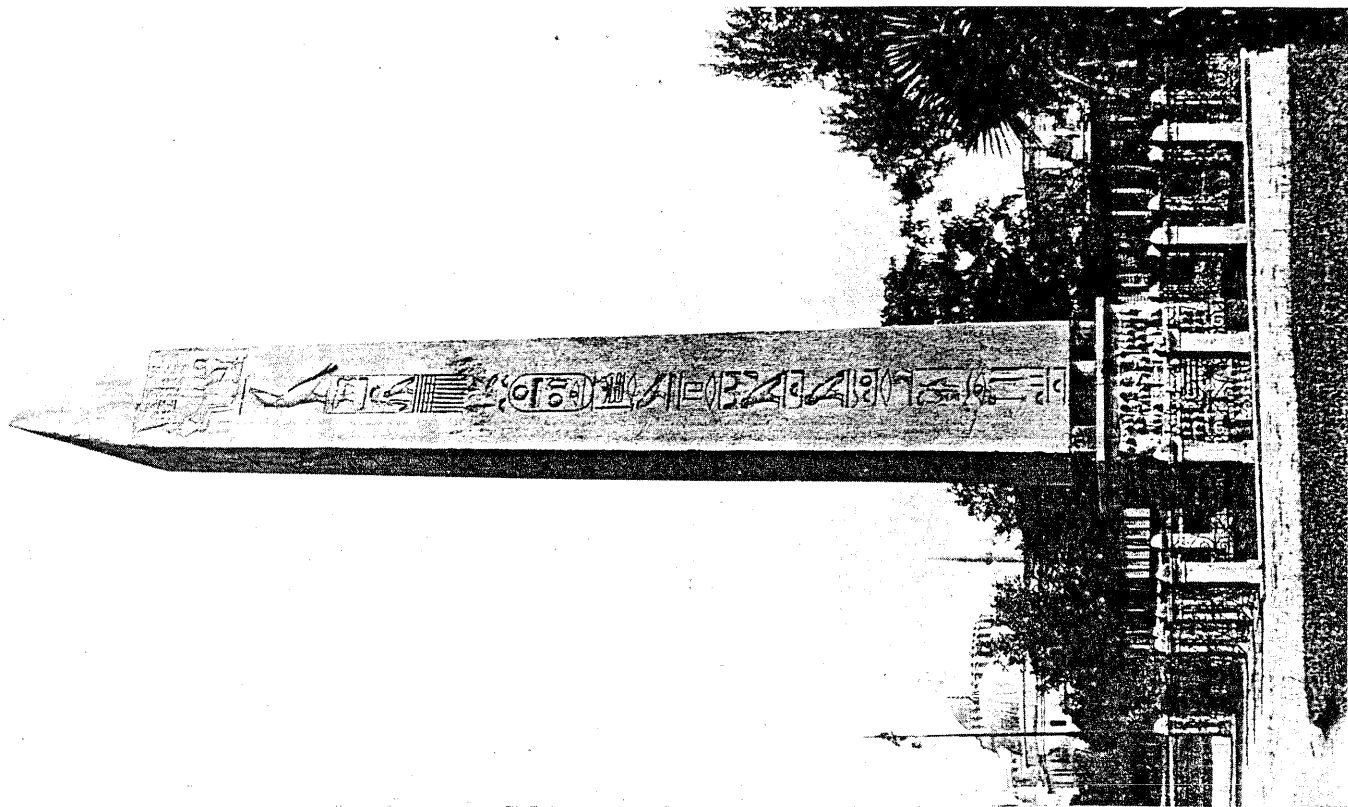
The last question we would wish to answer regarding the drawings is how they were understood in Muscovy. It is of some interest that the seventeenth-century table of contents for the file and, following that, the 1713 inventory, term the hieroglyphs an 'alphabet'. Even Kircher, who was the outstanding Egyptologist of his day, failed to understand the hieroglyphic script as an alphabet, but rather adhered to the common Renaissance view that they were mystical symbols. It would, of course, be foolish to argue that in Muscovy anyone really understood the nature of hieroglyphs; there is no basis here for talking even of the beginnings of Russian Egyptology. The designation 'alphabet' possibly resulted from the interpretation of the hieroglyphs as something akin to diplomatic cipher (*azbuka*), examples of which were in the archive of the Privy Chancellery.¹¹

The file in which the drawings are found has a common denominator that provides another explanation of the way in which Muscovites viewed the hieroglyphs. The first item in the file is a watercolour of fantastic insects which, according to the legend, appeared in Hungary during a snow storm and proceeded to devour each other. The second item, sent to Moscow by Varlaam Yasinsky, the Rector of the Kievian College, is a depiction and explanation of complex signs that purportedly appeared in the heavens over Hungary predicting the union

⁹ See R. Pataridze, 'Tre lune', *Paleografiski dzebiemi*, ii (Tbilisi, 1969), 59–102 (in Georgian with Russian summary), also V. Nikolaev, *Watermarks of the Medieval Ottoman Documents in Bulgarian Archives* (Sofia, 1954), *passim*. The watermark fragments visible in the manuscript are insufficient for dating purposes.

¹⁰ Although the first two or three letters on the microfilm I received are unclear, the inscription might be read from the original. Not knowing Greek, I was unable to provide a sufficiently accurate *de visu* copy to be of much use to Professor Pierre MacKay, who kindly deciphered what he could for me.

¹¹ A probable example is the item mentioned in n. 1 above; see also *Dela Tainogo prikaza*, i (Russkaya istoricheskaya biblioteka, 21) (Spb., 1907), col. 19.



IV. The Hippodrome obelisk, south-west face

of Poland, Muscovy, and the Habsburg Empire to defeat the Turks.¹² In each case, the compiler of the table of contents for the file termed the items depicted 'znaki' or signs. It is understandable how in Muscovy, where tales of portents were common, and in particular at the court of Aleksey Mikhailovich, who had a personal interest in astrology, such curiosities would be appreciated.

In this connection, I believe that we can make some suggestions regarding the significance of the hieroglyphs for the study of Muscovite court culture. By themselves they are no more than curiosities. However, they are important if seen as one of many items of evidence that could provide us with a better picture than we have had previously of Muscovite cultural development in the seventeenth century. For it seems to me that the papers formerly housed in the archive of Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich's Privy Chancellery contain a great deal that is little known but worthy of study. That chancellery served as an instrument for the Tsar to effect his will in matters he considered to be particularly deserving of his personal attention. As one can see from the inventories drawn up after the Tsar died, the Privy Chancellery archive contained, among other things, the Tsar's personal papers and a variety of material which was intended to keep him both informed and amused.¹³ There were numerous books and pamphlets, some of them translated from foreign sources, there was a long run of the translated news compilations known as *kurantyi*, there were instructions to the Tsar's English agent, John Hebdon, and much more. It is only by analysing carefully the contents of this archive—not merely by looking at the inventories but also by trying to locate the sources for individual items—that we will enlarge our picture of the ruler whose inquisitiveness has been likened to that of his more famous son, Peter the Great, and at whose court were sown the seeds of the cultural transformation that was to grow in subsequent decades.¹⁴

¹² For description and publication of the texts, see n. 2; see also Sobolevsky, *Perenoiaya literatura* (n. 8), 247–8. The two other pictures in the file have yet to be published. For the textual history of the explanation for the signs in the heavens, see my 'Seventeenth-century Muscovite Pamphlets with Turkish Themes: toward a Study of Muscovite Literary Culture in its European Setting' (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1972), i, 298–305.

¹³ The inventories have been published in *Dela Tsarogo prikaza*, i (n. 11) and in the book cited in n. 1. One finds a variety of interesting material about the Privy Chancellery and court culture scattered through the two basic studies of the institution, Gurlyand's *Prikaz* (n. 2), and A. I. Zaozersky, *Tsar'skaya votchina XVII veka: iz istorii khozyaistvennoi i prikaznoi politiki tsarya Aleksey Mikhailovicha*, 2 ed. (M., 1937).

¹⁴ Cf. S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriya Rossii s drevnaisikh vremen*, vi (M., 1961), 29.