

Gotha Manuscript Workshop: Alchemy in the Islamicate World

Veranstalter: Regula Forster, Asien-Orient-Institut, Universität Zürich; Seminar für Semiotik und Arabistik, Freie Universität Berlin; Forschungsbibliothek Gotha der Universität Erfurt; Projekt „Between Religion and Alchemy: The scholar Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs (d. 593/1197) as a model for an integrative Arabic literary and cultural history“, Universität Zürich

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Students of the history of sciences in the Islamic period need to review many unedited texts. This is especially true in the case of alchemy. 220 years after the modern beginning of research on alchemy in the Islamic period with De Sacy and his treatise published in 1799, many alchemical writings have still not been considered by research. The large numbers of Syriac, Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian alchemical manuscripts that have been written and copied between the 7th and the 20th century are strong proof that alchemy was a well-known and significant part of knowledge in the pre-modern Islamic world.

Fortunately, in recent years scholarship on the alchemical heritage of the Islamic period has increased significantly: now, scholars in Europe, the Middle East and North America are working on different aspects of the alchemical tradition. They try new approaches by using philological and literary-oriented, socio-historical approaches as well as the approach of the history of science. The material and codicological turn have led to a new interest in the manuscript evidence.

Yet, while the interest in European alchemy has been steady over the years, Islamic alchemy never was the sole topic of a conference or workshop. This workshop in Gotha therefore was the first specialized conference, and its importance was not only shown by its content, but even more by the achievements that have been presented by the participants.

During the workshop, fifteen scholars discussed their research topics for two days and

visited Gotha's Arabic alchemical collection in a small special excursion. This exhibition showed that the Gotha Research Library's collection should more be taken into consideration, especially by researchers in the field of occult sciences in the Islamicate traditions.

The workshop opened with a short description of the history of the oriental collection in the Gotha library. REGULA FORSTER (Zurich / Berlin) explained that even though most Gotha manuscripts in the field of alchemy are relatively young (17th–18th century, some even from the 19th century), they preserve rare texts and textual versions. In the first session, three scholars dealt with the Gotha collection. In the first lecture, Regula Forster introduced Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs and his biography and then discussed his works, especially *Shudhūr al-Dhahab* („The Splinters of Gold“), a collection of alchemical poems. She explained the stemmatological classification of more than 80 copies of *Shudhūr* with charts prepared by Svetlana Dolgusheva (Zurich). Forster also showed that without the Gotha manuscripts, the tradition of the alchemical *muwashshah* poem of Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs would be significantly reduced (by 40%).

Following Forster, RICHARD TOD (Birmingham) presented the variety of commentaries on Ibn Arfaʿ Raʿs' collection of alchemical poems with a stress on a Gotha's copies. He explained several metaphors in *Shudhūr al-Dhahab* (such as the Dragon of resurrection) that were also used in western alchemy, asking whether the work might have had some influence in the West, even though it seems like *Shudhūr* was never translated into Western languages.

In the third lecture, BINK HALLUM (London), started his discussion with Greek and Latin manuscripts of Zosimos of Panopolis' works (fl. ca 300) and then shifted to *Risāla fī Bayān Tafrīq al-Adyān*, a text attributed to Zosimos in the Islamic period, for example in the *Aqālīm al-sabʿa* of which Gotha holds a splendid illustrated copy. He then compared Gotha's manuscript of the *Risāla al-Bayān* to a copy in the Topkapı Archeology museum, showing that the Gotha version is significant and probably cannot be considered to be a simple epitome. Focusing on alchemy and religious pluralism, Hallum explained why in

this text the reader encounters a Hebrew Zosimos while in a ninth-century treatise on secret alphabets, he was called the third knowledge; furthermore, Brahmins and Jews discussing alchemy in Jerusalem fitted neatly with the picture of a poly-religious science.

The early period of Arabic alchemy was described by MARION DAPSENS (Louvain-la-Neuve) and THIJS DELVA (Leuven) in the second session. Dapsens discussed the alchemical works attributed to the Umayyad Prince Khālid b. Yazīd. She showed that the titles of these texts are varying since different titles in *Kitāb al-Fihrist* by Ibn Nadīm and in Ibn Khalikān's *Wafayāt al-A'yān* can be found. She explained in detail which works by or attributed to Khālid are extant in manuscript form, evading however the most important question, which remained unanswered: Was the historical Khālid an alchemist?

Delva presented new materials on the historicity of the figure of Jābir b. Ḥayyān al-Ṭūsī. He stressed the relationship between Jābir's writings and the milieu of the extreme Shia (*ghulāt*). In his opinion, this approach can offer a new perspective on the date of writing *Corpus Jābirianum* as a collection. Taking into account the new research on Maslama al-Qurṭubī, author of *Picatrix*, he suggested to date the Jābirian corpus before 328/940.

The third session included four lectures on „Decknamen, Terminology, and Codes“. MATTEO MARTELLI (Bologna) discussed two Syriac lexicons on alchemy. He showed that alchemical words traveled between Byzantine and Islamic countries. Therefore, encyclopedias and symbols should be considered an important genre of text beyond cultural boundaries. In addition he investigated the sources of these lexicons too. He also explained how Greek works were received in Syriac, and stressed that Syriac alchemy largely is not earlier, but simultaneously with the Arabic.

GODEFROID DE CALLATAÏ and SÉBASTIEN MOUREAU (both Louvain-la-Neuve) demonstrated the innovative character of Maslama al-Qurṭubī by examining his concept of 'code name' (code, *ramz*, pl. *rumūz*): they tried to show that Maslama

developed his own, original approach by using allonyms as a form of disclosure of knowledge.

LUTFALLAH GARI (Yanbu) clearly showed that we need to review many unpublished texts to decipher alchemical texts in the Arabic tradition as well as to understand Arabic alchemical terminology. In his lecture, he discussed some of these texts like as *al-Hudūd* and *al-Sirr al-Sār wa Sirr al-Asrār* by Jābir, the Epistle of Buṭrus of Akhmīm to his son, *al-Mudkhal al-ta'limī* and *al-Asrār* and *Sirr al-Asrār* by Rāzī, *Mafātīh al-'ulūm* by Khwārizmī, and Tughrā'ī's works as *Mafātīh al-raḥma*. In his opinion, the Epistle of Buṭrus of Akhmīm (Panopolis) is a good example in this regard because the text offers an interesting combination of Late antique, Christian, and Arabic elements.

SALAM RASSI (Oxford) introduced 'Abdīshō' bar Brīkhā (d. 718/1318), an East Syrian bishop of Sinjār (fl. 13th–14th centuries), who allegedly translated a Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise from Syriac into Arabic. Rassi covered interesting points, for example the Iranian tradition of translating alchemical texts in the Sassanid period when Yazdin (a Christian minister of the Sassanid emperor) translated an alchemical work attributed to Aristotle for an Iranian king. Furthermore, he discussed the three principles of alchemy (soul, body, and spirit) and the tradition of manuscripts moving to Benghal and India.

The fourth session discussed alchemy as a practical art and science. GABRIELE FERRARIO (Baltimore) described Jewish tradition of alchemy in medieval Cairo. He showed that in the Cairo Genizah, we find 110 alchemical fragments and documents in Judeo-Arabic letters (about 300 pages). Now this collection is mostly available in the Cambridge University Library. During the lecture Ferrario reviewed some of them and presented new evidence of theory and practice in these fragments. He emphasized that the Genizah documents are not only engaged with practical aspects – instead it seems like Jewish authors had access to the *Corpus Jābirianum*.

CHRISTOPHER BRAUN (Zurich), starting with the manuscript Gotha orient A 1162 (*Kitāb Sidrat al-Muntahā*), discussed aspects of the recipe in Arabic alchemy. He compared

alchemical recipes with those from magical treasure hunt books and used Gotha's collection to show how much genre expectations can be regarded as central.

MALIHE KARBASSIAN (Bonn) focused on *Kitāb al-Aṣnām al-sab'a*, an astrological-alchemical work attributed to Apollonius of Tyana. She discussed the different names of this text and its content and also focused on the influence of this work on four fields in Persianate world: alchemical heritage in the Islamic period, Ismā'īlī cosmology, the allegorical and mystical literature, and occult sciences. Her contribution had two interesting points: (1) her discussion about differences between original and epitome versions of *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, and (2) the Persian translations of the text dating to a time between the 14th to 19th centuries.

In the last lecture of this session, LA-HOUARI GHAZZALI (Yanbu) discussed his method and approach to establish a critical edition of *Shudhūr al-Dhahab* as a classical text of Arabic alchemy (his edition just having been published in Beirut). He stressed that the editor of a poem must not only take different copies into consideration, but also pay attention to literary features. He explained that specialized alchemical knowledge and access to manuscripts is not enough for a critical edition and that the editor also needs a solid knowledge of metric and rhetoric. To illustrate his approach, Ghazzali chose good examples and compared the Leipzig, Madrid, and Tehran manuscripts; he also showed their differences in interesting charts.

The fifth session addressed alchemy as literature and visual art. VICKY ZIEGLER (Bonn) focused on the Andalusian alchemist Maslama ibn al-Qāsim al-Qurṭubī and his „Garden of the Divine, Noble and Secret Art“ and „Boasting of Stones“. She tried to show, especially with reference to two texts from Gotha, how the dialogue genre used in her set of texts shaped the content of the texts, making these texts seem much more accessible and comprehensible than many other alchemical works.

Finally, JULIANE MÜLLER (Zurich) focused on the alchemical symbols in the manuscripts of the „Mirror of Wonders“ (*Mir'āt al-ʿajāib*) by an otherwise unknown

author, Ibn al-Muhtār (fl. between the 13th and 16th centuries). In this treatise, the narrator dreams of himself being in a desert and discovering the 'Mirror of Wonders' in a hidden room of a monastery. Müller compared its symbols in some less known manuscripts of the text from Hamburg, Oxford, Cairo, Hyderabad, Karachi, London, and Riyadh. Her interpretation of the symbols in these manuscripts showed how a textual complex can be traced through different works. She found nine symbols for the different stages of the alchemical work. She also discussed the influence of Khālid ibn Yazīd and Ibn Umayl on this text. Finally, she showed how the design of the symbolism in *Kitāb al-Aqālīm al-sab'a* by al-Sīmāwī is partly different from the original „Mirror of Wonders“.

The important result of this workshop was that we have serious gaps in research on the alchemical heritage in the Islamic period: many manuscripts are not available, a comparative research on the alchemical terminology is necessary, and the discussion on alchemy as a practical art and alchemical knowledge in its social contexts needs to be furthered.

However, this workshop offered the opportunity to discuss key questions, not only between the specialists of alchemical heritage in the Islamic period, but also with representatives of the study of European alchemy, who are very interested in closer contact with the contributors. In particular, the publication of bilingual text editions in the „Sources of Alchemy and Chemistry“ series (edited by Jennifer M. Rampling and Lawrence M. Principe, both of which have discussed in Gotha) was encouraged.

Conference Overview:

Session 1: The Gotha Collection - Manuscript Session

Regula Forster (Berlin / Zurich) / Richard Todd (Birmingham): Ibn Arfa' Ra's in Gotha

Bink Hallum (London): Zosimos of Panopolis at the Forschungsbibliothek Gotha? Or The Alchemy of Religious Pluralism: *Risāla fī Bayān Tafrīq al-Adyān*

Session 2: The Foundations of Islamicate

Alchemy

Marion Dapsens (Louvain-la-Neuve): The Works of the Prince Khālīd ibn Yazīd in Light of the Alchemical Manuscripts

Thijs Delva (Leuven): The Historicity of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān: An Overview of the External Sources

Session 3: Decknamen, Terminology, and Codes

Matteo Martelli (Bologna): Making Sense of the Alchemical Terminology: Two Syriac Dictionaries on Alchemy

Godefroid de Callataÿ / Sébastien Moureau (both Louvain-la-Neuve): In Code We Trust. The concept of *rumūz* in Andalusī Alchemical Literature and Related Texts

Lutfallah Gari (Yanbu): Deciphering Alchemical Texts: Medieval Arabic Works on Alchemical Terminology

Salam Rassi (Beirut): An Alchemical Journey from Sinjar to Delhi: The Background and Manuscript Tradition of one Pseudo-Aristotelian Epistle on the Craft

Session 4: Alchemy as a Practical Art and Science

Gabriele Ferrario (Baltimore): Alchemy in Medieval Cairo: New Evidence of Theory and Practice in the Judaeo-Arabic Fragments from the Cairo Genizah

Christopher Braun (Zurich): The Recipe in Arabic Alchemy: Some Remarks on the Alchemical Composite Manuscript Gotha Orient. A 1162

Malihe Karbassian (Bonn): *al-Aṣnām al-Sabʿa*: Its Content and Influence in Arabic and Persian Alchemical Heritage

Lahouari Ghazzali (Paris): L'édition du *Šuḍūr al-Dahab*. Méthode d'élaboration

Session 5: Alchemy as Literature and Visual Art

Vicky Ziegler (Bonn): Literary Aspects in „Garden in the Divine, Noble and Secret Art and Bragging of Stones“ by the Andalusian Alchemist Maslama ibn Qāsim al-Qurṭubī

Juliane Müller (Zurich): The Alchemical Symbols in the Manuscripts of the „Mirror of Wonders“ (*Mirʾāt al-ʿajāʾib*)

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