

“DIVINE ART”

ALCHEMY IN LATE ANCIENT EGYPT: SOURCES – AGENTS – CONTEXTS – CONCEPTS – ÉPISTÉMÈ – PATHS OF KNOWLEDGE

Venue: -1.2057 – Time: Tuesday 12.00-2.00 p.m. – Start: Tuesday 21 October – Credit Points: 5

Exposé

Since the 1st century CE, written texts attest to a novel approach to domains of knowledge which up to then had been part of specialized crafts and merely oral transmission. Different genres of technical texts, such as treatise, dialogue, recipe collection, bear evidence for an emerging *theoretical* interest in the imitation of valuable materials, notably gold, silver, purple, and precious stones, and more generally, in the effects and changes exerted by substances on substances. The texts describe technical procedures and appliances to induce such effects and interpret them in terms and categories of natural philosophy and religion. Their theorizing approach seems to have been based on empirical insight gained from a “laboratory” practice. This emerging science, in the earliest (Greek) texts called “Divine” or “Sacred art” (θεία / ἱερὰ τέχνη *theía / hierà téchnē*), in later Arabic texts and the Latin tradition derived therefrom also known as الكيمياء *alkīmyā* / *alc(h)imia*, has close conceptual and historical connections to Egypt.

Egypt is indeed the most salient “*mnemotope*” mapped in the collective memory of alchemical traditions from their beginnings. Already the earliest alchemical texts, starting with the *Four Books* of Pseudo-Demokritos (1st c. C.E.), place themselves in the setting of Egyptian temples, and Egypt’s role as the cradle of alchemy maintains a topos in alchemical narratives throughout Arabic, Latin, and early modern vernacular traditions.

Greek and Coptic papyri from Egypt are indeed among the earliest extant material witnesses to alchemy. The most ancient ones of them, two Greek papyrus codices of the 3rd / 4th c. C.E., were found in Western Thebes together with Demotic and Greek magical manuscripts. They attest to Roman Egypt as an actual habitat of early alchemical practice and text production. The original designation “divine (or: sacred) art” has been associated by scholars with workshops of late Egyptian temples, their technical skills, technological knowledge, and natural-theological lore. Zosimos, the first practitioner and theoretician of the “divine art” traceable as a historical individual, lived around 300 C.E. in the Upper Egyptian town of Panopolis (Achmīm) which kept its importance as a center of alchemy until Islamic times. The earliest extant manuscripts testifying to Arabic alchemy, written (notably in Coptic, not Arabic) around 900 C.E., supposedly come from the vicinity of Achmīm.

The **Lecture** will be combined out of lectured chapters and readings of Greek, Coptic, and Arabic texts (in English translation). Dealing with alchemy in Egypt in (long) late antiquity (1st millennium CE), it will address questions, such as: What can be gained from late Egyptian and Greek sources about the origins of alchemy in Egypt? From what contexts come alchemical texts in the 1st millennium CE, and what do they tell us about the different milieus and professional backgrounds of their protagonists? What technical procedures and appliances, what repertoires of substances are emerging from the texts, and what insight into the underlying concepts, categories, and contemporary ‘épistémè’ can be gained therefrom? And last, but not least: what traditions are traceable in the Coptic alchemical texts, and what paths of knowledge can be reconstructed, based on their contents and their linguistic features?

Introduction

MARTELLI, Matteo 2024. “Alchemy”, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.260>

PRINCIPE, Lawrence M. 2013. *The Secrets of Alchemy*. Chicago UP, 1-50.

RICHTER, Tonio Sebastian 2019. „Alchemy, Late Antiquity”, in: *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Oxford.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah30529>