

**“Who Began This Art? From Whence Did It Emerge?”:  
A Hermetic Frame Story on the Origins of Alchemy  
in Pseudo-Ibn Waḥshīya’s *The Book of the Ziziphus  
Tree of the Furthest Boundary*\***

“¿Quién empezó este arte y de dónde viene?”  
Una historia enmarcada sobre los orígenes de  
la alquimia en el *Libro del árbol de ziziphus de los más  
lejanos confines* de Pseudo-Ibn Waḥshīya

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This paper explores the context of a Hermetic frame story in the pseudepigraphical alchemical treatise *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree of the Furthest Boundary* (*Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā*). The treatise is attributed to a prominent figure in the Arabic occult sciences, Abū Bakr b. Waḥshīya (fl. first half of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century). It was written in the form of a dialogue between the protagonist, Ibn Waḥshīya, and an alchemist from the Islamic West, al-Maghribī al-Qamarī. The last section of the introductory dialogue between these two characters consists of a frame story on the origins of alchemy and a legend of discovery (*Fundlegende*) that introduces a cosmogony and an allegorical depiction of the process of transmutation. Both the frame story and the legend of discovery abound in Hermetic motifs and *topoi* known from other Greek and

Este trabajo explora el contexto de una historia enmarcada del hermetismo en el tratado alquímico pseudoepigráfico de *El libro del árbol de ziziphus de los más lejanos confines* (*Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā*). El tratado, que se atribuye a una de las figuras más prominentes de las ciencias árabes ocultas, Abū Bakr b. Waḥshīya (primera mitad del siglo IV/X), está escrito en forma de diálogo entre el protagonista, Ibn Waḥshīya y un alquimista del Occidente islámico, al-Maghribī al-Qamarī. La última sección del diálogo introductorio entre estos dos personajes se compone de una historia marco sobre los orígenes de la alquimia y la leyenda de su descubrimiento (*Fundlegende*) que presenta un texto con una cosmogonía y una representación alegórica del proceso de transmutación. Tanto en la historia enmarcada como en la leyenda del descubrimiento abun-

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Arabic alchemical treatises. The exposition of the different prevailing theories on the beginnings of alchemy reflects, moreover, historical phenomena, such as the Graeco-Arabic translation movement and the *shu'ūbīya* controversy. Consistent with the literary tradition of the Arabic *Hermetica*, Ancient Egypt emerges in this treatise as the cradle of alchemy; however, I suggest that more than merely literary convention, such evocations express a genuine fascination with Ancient Egypt and its surviving material culture. In this respect, the little-known genre of Arabic books on hidden treasure might shed new light on common Hermetic narratives and their circulation in Arabic occult literature.

*Key words:* Ibn Waḥshīya; Origins of Alchemy; Hermetic Frame Story; Legend of Discovery.

dan tópicos y motivos herméticos conocidos en otros tratados alquímicos griegos y árabes. La exposición de las diferentes teorías prevalecientes sobre los orígenes de la alquimia refleja, además, fenómenos históricos de la civilización islámica pre-moderna, tales como el movimiento de traducción greco-árabe y la controversia de la *shu'ūbīya*. Como es propio en la tradición literaria de la *Hermetica* árabe, Egipto aparece en este tratado como la cuna de la alquimia, pero el autor de este artículo sostiene que la fascinación por Egipto y su cultura material no son una mera convención literaria. En este sentido, el casi desconocido género de libros árabes sobre el tesoro escondido podría arrojar nueva luz sobre narrativas herméticas comunes y su circulación en el Islam medieval.

*Palabras clave:* Ibn Waḥshīya; orígenes de la alquimia; historia marco del hermetismo; leyenda del descubrimiento.

## Introduction

Mais en a-t-il été de même pour l'homme ancien?  
Ne voyait-il là, également, que fiction pure?

André-Jean Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, I, 309.

An interesting phenomenon in Arabic alchemical literature constitute narratives on the origins of alchemy. While Arab and Arabic-writing alchemists acknowledged their discipline's foreign and pre-Islamic origin, the exact circumstances of its genesis remained one of its many mysteries.<sup>1</sup> Already the etymology of the Arabic denomination *kīmiyā'* posed a riddle to the authors; some opted for a Persian origin while others favoured a Hebrew or Greek etymology.<sup>2</sup> The actual meaning and origin of this word is still under debate today. Its derivation from

<sup>1</sup> For several competing theories on the origins of alchemy, see Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, pp. 351-352 (English trans.: vol. 2, pp. 843-845). The exact circumstances of the emergence of Arabic alchemy remain unknown to date. See Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Ullmann, "al-Kīmiyā'", p. 110.

the Syriac *kīmīyā*, which in its turn goes back to the Greek *χυμεία* or *χημεία*, “the art of casting or alloying metals”, is one of the more convincing hypotheses.<sup>3</sup> Besides these etymological considerations, various theories and myths regarding the early history of this mysterious science circulated among the practitioners of “the art” (*al-ṣan‘a*).<sup>4</sup>

An intriguing passage on the origins of alchemy is contained in a treatise attributed to the renowned author of occult literature Abū Bakr Ibn Waḥshīya (fl. first half of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>5</sup> This short work bears the title *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree of the Furthest Boundary* (*Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā*).<sup>6</sup> It belongs to the Egyptian-Hermetic branch of Arabic alchemical literature. These texts are characterised by references to the late antique syncretistic deity Hermes Trismegistus, believed to be an incarnation of Thot, the ibis- or baboon-headed Ancient Egyptian god of writing, magic and science.<sup>7</sup> Hermes appears already as author in the Greek alchemical corpus.<sup>8</sup> In the later Arabic tradition, he became known as *Harmis*, *Harmīs*, *Hirmis* or *Hirmīs al-muthallath*

<sup>3</sup> Ullmann, “al-Kīmiyā”, p. 110 and Ullmann, *Wörterbuch*, s. v. كيمياء. Gotthard Strohmaier proposes a different etymology in his article in the present volume.

<sup>4</sup> Similar etiological narratives are found in treatises on Arabic medicine. Sonja Brentjes analysed an account on the origins of medicine in Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a’s (d. 1269/70) *‘Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’* (“Sources of News on the Classes of Physicians”), see Brentjes, “Narratives of Knowledge in Islamic Societies”; Arab authors frequently used *‘ilm al-ṣan‘a* (“the science of the art”), or just simply *al-ṣan‘a* (“the art”), to designate alchemy. Cf. Ullmann, “al-Kīmiyā”, p. 110; Ullmann, *Wörterbuch*, s. v. كيمياء; Sezgin, *GAS*, vol. 4, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> On the life and works of this mysterious author, see Fahd, “Ibn Wahshiyya”, pp. 963-965.

<sup>6</sup> *Sidrat al-muntahā* is mentioned twice in the Qur’ān, see Q 53:14 u. 16. It plays a role in the later legend of Muḥammad’s night journey (*isrā’*) and his ascension to heaven (*mi‘rāj*). See Rippin, “Sidrat al-Muntahā”. The present author published recently an edition and German translation of this treatise. See Braun, *Das Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā des Pseudo-Ibn Waḥshīya*.

<sup>7</sup> The classification of Arabic Hermetic treatises is still a matter of controversy. In 1944, Louis Massignon provided an extensive list of all known Arabic Hermetic writings (see Massignon, “Appendice III”, in Festugière, *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, pp. 344-400). He even included Gnostic, Neoplatonic or magical works that are not attributed to Hermes such as Ibn Waḥshīya’s *Nabatean Agriculture* or the *Picatrix* (*Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*). Martin Plessner argued that a salient characteristic of Arabic Hermetic literature is its revelatory character (Plessner, “Hermes Trismegistus”, p. 48.), whereas Manfred Ullmann considers only works attributed directly to Hermes as Hermetic (Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 370).

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, “A Survey of Greek Alchemy”, pp. 116-117; Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, pp. 165-166.

*bi-l-ḥikma* (“the thrice great in wisdom”). The earliest account on the life of this enigmatic figure provides the astrologer Abū Ma‘shar (d. 272/886) in his *Kitāb al-Ulūf* (“The Book of the Thousands”). In this short narrative, preserved in the works of later authors, Abū Ma‘shar divides Hermes into three individuals. The first Hermes lived before the flood and constructed the pyramids and temples (*barābī*) in Egypt. He is identified with the prophet Idrīs or Akhnūkh (Enoch). The second Hermes lived in Babylonia after the flood and studied medicine, philosophy and arithmetic. The third lived in the “city of Egypt” (*Miṣr*) and wrote books on alchemy. He is very likely identical with Hermes of the late antique *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>9</sup>

The Baghdadi book trader Ibn al-Nadīm, in contrast, provides a slightly different account on Hermes in his book catalogue *Kitāb al-Fihrist* (completed in 377/987-8). He only deals with Hermes the Babylonian who later moved to Egypt and dedicated himself to the art of alchemy. He is said to have written a number of books on this art.<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm mentions the titles of 13 books that Hermes apparently wrote on alchemy.<sup>11</sup> Some of these works, however, deal with magic and not alchemy.<sup>12</sup> The number of the preserved Hermetic works, fragments and scattered aphorisms on alchemy still needs to be determined, but there must have been more treatises in circulation than Ibn al-Nadīm’s modest list would suggest.<sup>13</sup>

In Pseudo-Ibn Waḥshīya’s *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree of the Furthest Boundary*, Hermes is not presented as the author of alchemical literature but as the translator and transmitter of ancient alchemical lore. The treatise illustrates his role as “founding father” or “reviver” of alchemy and, thereby, seems to respond to a pressing concern among the author’s contemporaries: the question on alchemy’s obscure origins.

<sup>9</sup> Pingree, *Thousands*, pp. 14-18. For further sources, see Plessner, “Hermes Trismegistus and Arab Science”; pp. 51-53; Plessner, “Hirmis”, p. 463. Kevin van Bladel has shown that Abū Ma‘shar relied for the story of the three Hermes on late antique and early Arabic elements, see van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, pp. 138-163. On the late antique Hermes, see Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, pp. 351-352 (English trans.: vol. 2, pp. 843-845).

<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 353 (English trans.: vol. 2, p. 848).

<sup>12</sup> See Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 165; Sezgin, *GAS*, vol. 4, pp. 38-41.

## 1. The Manuscript

The only textual witness of this alchemical treatise is the composite manuscript (*majmū‘a*) Gotha 1162.<sup>14</sup> The German orientalist and explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (d. 1811) acquired the manuscript in 1809 in Cairo.<sup>15</sup> Seetzen resided between May 1807 and March 1809 in Cairo and Lower Egypt, where he collected manuscripts, various antiquities, Pharaonic relics, “objets d’arts” and *mirabilia*.<sup>16</sup> The manuscript transmitting Pseudo-Ibn Waḥshīya’s treatise comprises 24 folia (20.5x15 cm) written in an ordinary and mostly legible *naskhī*-script. The treatise ends on folio 21r, followed by recipes for the production of dyes and inks. It was copied by the Egyptian Copt Yūḥannā b. ‘Ubayr Abū l-Faraj al-Manfalūfī on Thursday, 15 Rabī‘ al-Ākhir 1000, which corresponds to 1 February 1592. The whole manuscript is bound in a modern European binding.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Authorship

According to the introduction and the colophon of the manuscript, *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* was written by Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Ibn Waḥshīya al-Nabaṭī.<sup>18</sup> Ibn Waḥshīya gained renown as the author of the *Nabatean Agriculture* (*al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭīya*), an agronomical treatise with various magical and astrological passages.<sup>19</sup> This treatise must have enjoyed great popularity given the large number of extant manuscripts and quotations from it found in later works.<sup>20</sup> In the preface to the *Nabatean Agriculture*, Ibn Waḥshīya claims to have translated this work from “Old Syriac” (*al-Suryānīya al-qadīma*), which he later defines as the language of the Nabateans (*lughat al-*

<sup>14</sup> Pertsch, *Die orientalischen Handschriften*, vol. 2, pp. 375-376.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. his note on MS Gotha 1162, fol. 1r: “Kahira 1809 No. 1552”.

<sup>16</sup> Wallenstein, “Ich habe mehr gefunden”, pp. 65-76.

<sup>17</sup> For the description of the manuscript, see Braun, *Das Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā des Pseudo-Ibn Waḥshīya*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> On Ibn Waḥshīya, see Fahd, “Ibn Waḥshīya”, pp. 963-965.

<sup>19</sup> Fahd published an excellent edition of this voluminous work; see Ibn Waḥshīya, *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭīya*. For the latest study of this work, see Hāmeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, pp. 440, notes 2 and 442.

*Nabaṭ*). The term ‘Nabatean’ in this context designates the (pre-Islamic) rural population of Iraq (*nabaṭ al-‘Irāq*), not the inhabitants of the Jordanian city of Petra who were known in Arabic as *nabaṭ al-Shām*.<sup>21</sup> Later Orientalists, however, proved that Ibn Waḥshīya’s claim to have translated directly from Old Babylonian sources was spurious.<sup>22</sup>

The Arabic sources tell us little about the mysterious figure of Ibn Waḥshīya. Besides his agronomical treatise, he is credited with various works on magic, astrology and alchemy.<sup>23</sup> Although works on alchemy by Ibn Waḥshīya do exist, *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* seems to belong to the widespread phenomenon of pseudepigraphical writings in Arabic alchemy.<sup>24</sup> Ibn Waḥshīya’s authorship of *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* can be considered doubtful since the treatise lacks any references to ‘Nabatean’ lore, a peculiar characteristic pertaining to most of Ibn Waḥshīya’s works.<sup>25</sup> In the *Nabataean Agriculture*, for example, Ibn Waḥshīya emphasises the superiority of the Old Babylonian civilization, whereas the author of *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* presents Ancient Egypt as the cradle of sciences.

### 3. The Possible Date of the Treatise

The manuscript was copied at the end of the sixteenth century. The date of composition of the actual treatise, however, remains unknown. Manfred Ullmann has argued that the phenomenon of pseudepigrapha prevailed especially in the early phase of Arabic alchemy.<sup>26</sup> The treatise’s esoteric nature and its attribution to an author who is said to have lived around the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century suggests that it might have been written not long after Ibn Waḥshīya’s presumed lifetime.

<sup>21</sup> On this distinction, see Fahd, “Nabaṭ”.

<sup>22</sup> On the controversy provoked by the *Nabatean Agriculture*, see Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans*, pp. 3-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, vol. 1, pp. 311-312 and 358 (English trans.: vol. 2, pp. 731-732 and 863-864).

<sup>24</sup> For his alchemical works, see Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, pp. 209-210; Sezgin, *GAS*, vol. 4, pp. 282-283.

<sup>25</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 442.

<sup>26</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 151.

#### 4. The Title of the Treatise

The title of the treatise refers to the “Ziziphus Tree of the Furthest Boundary”, a tree mentioned in the *sūrat al-najm* (“The Star”, Q 53).<sup>27</sup> In the Islamic tradition it marks the end of the seventh heaven and represents a boundary that God’s creation cannot transgress.<sup>28</sup> In this treatise the Ziziphus Tree of the Furthest Boundary stands at the very beginning of a cosmogony. After the tree has existed for 70,000 years, it gazes upon God and combusts. The world then comes into being out of its floating ashes. This process concludes with the creation of the human being. The treatise later reveals that the elixir required for the transmutation of base metals into gold exists in the human body.

The idea of a tree standing at the apex of a pyramid-shaped mountain of created worlds can be found in ancient Sumerian mythology, and it seems to have influenced the Islamic tradition on *sidrat al-muntahā*. In Ṣūfī allegorical interpretation of Muḥammad’s ascension to heaven (*mi’rāj*), *sidrat al-muntahā* symbolises the highest point the mystic can attain through knowledge, beyond which lies true experience. The title therefore seems to imply the notion of an epistemological quest toward the boundaries of alchemical wisdom.<sup>29</sup>

#### 5. The Structure of the Treatise

*The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* is structured as follows:

(1) Ibn Waḥshīya presents the strategies of the earlier sages (fols 1v-2v; ed. Braun, pp. 60-61).

Ibn Waḥshīya sets out the earlier sages’ strategies for transmitting their wisdom and keeping it secret from the common people (*al-‘amma*).

<sup>27</sup> Q 53:14 and 16. *Sidrat al-muntahā* is often incorrectly rendered as the “Lote Tree of the Furthest Boundary”. The term *sidr*, however, designates a shrub or tree of the genus *Ziziphus*. It seems likely that the Qur’ānic text refers to its tallest representative, the Christ’s-thorn (*ziziphus spina christi*), cf. Kruk, “Sidr”; Provençal, *The Arabic Plant Names*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>28</sup> Rippin, “Sidrat al-Muntahā”. On the interpretation by Muslim exegetes, cf. Forster, *Methoden*.

<sup>29</sup> Rippin, “Sidrat al-Muntahā”. The Ziziphus tree is also regarded as a holy tree in popular belief, see Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich, *Volksglaube*, vol. 1, p. 20.

(2) Ibn Waḥshīya encounters al-Maghribī al-Qamarī (fol. 2v; ed. Braun, p. 61).

An encounter follows between the protagonist and a foreigner (*al-gharīb*) from the Islamic West (*al-gharb*), who is later introduced as al-Maghribī al-Qamarī. The author plays here with the consonantal root *gh-r-b*, which bears the meaning “strange, curious” as well as “west”. The name of this alchemist literally translates as “the Maghrebi, the Lunarian” and appears to be fictional. The *nisba* al-Qamarī probably refers to the frequently used *Deckname* “the moon” (*al-qamar*) for silver in Arabic alchemy.<sup>30</sup> The exact circumstances of this encounter – the place, time and occasion – remain unspecified.

(3) Demonstration of the similarities between alchemy and the doctrines and rituals of the different religious communities (fols 2v-4r; ed. Braun, pp. 61-65).

A dialogue between Ibn Waḥshīya and the foreigner ensues.<sup>31</sup> Al-Maghribī begins to demonstrate the similarities between alchemy and the various rituals and doctrines of several religious communities. He equates, for example, the Hindu ritual of burning the dead with the alchemical process of separating the primary substance into single compounds (*tafṣīl*). The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, according to al-Maghribī, refers to the importance of the soul (*nafs*), the spirit (*rūḥ*) and the body (*jasad*) for the alchemical process, while the Islamic doctrine of unity (*tawḥīd*) alludes to the single source of the alchemical process and its single result. A similar narrative is transmitted in the epistle *Risālat Bayān tafṣīq al-adyān wa-tafarru‘ al-‘ibādāt wa-l-diyānāt wa-l-i‘tiqādāt* (“Epistle on the Illustration of the Separation of Religions and the Ramification of the Worships, Religions, and Belief Systems”).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Siggel, *Decknamen*, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> Ruska argues that the dialogue form in Arabic alchemical treatises imitates the conversations on alchemy between master and disciple, cf. Ruska, *Turba Philosophorum*, p. 19. However, it seems more likely that this literary strategy to convey alchemical knowledge imitates late antique role models, in particular Greek treatises on alchemy. See Forster, *Wissensvermittlung im Gespräch*, p. 8. Forster analyses in her study dialogues in Arabic Classical literature, including the conversation between Ibn Waḥshīya and al-Maghribī al-Qamarī in *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree*. On dialogues in Greek alchemical literature, see Berthelot, *Anciens Alchimistes Grecs*, vol. 2, pp. 56-69, vol. 3, pp. 289-299; Hallum, *Zosimus Arabus*, p. 242, note 1.

<sup>32</sup> This treatise is transmitted in MSS Gotha 1257,8 (fols 87a-94b), Dublin, Chester Beatty 3231,3 (fols 20-28), Cairo, Nūr al-Dīn Bey Muṣṭafā (see Ruska and Hartner, “Katalog”, p. 235-236, VI 5). Cf. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 163.



The epistle is attributed to Zosimus, who is said in the *Risālat Bayān tafriq al-adyān* to be of Jewish descent. The text claims that Adam took with him in his expulsion from Paradise a variety of books on astrology, medicine, magic and the production of gold and silver. He bequeathed his wisdom to his son Seth, who bequeathed it to Idrīs (Hermes). Engraved into clay, wood and stone tablets, this knowledge survived the Flood. The Persians, Indians, Šābians, Manicheans and Christians subsequently transformed these ante-diluvian sciences into their different religious systems by mistake.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, the Persians adore fire and the Indians water.<sup>34</sup> The *Risālat Bayān tafriq al-adyān* and the *Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā* both claim that the doctrines and rituals of the different religious communities allude in disguised form to alchemical processes and basic principles of this ‘divine’ art.

(4) Al-Maghribī al-Qamarī enumerates different theories on the origins of alchemy (fols 4v-6r; ed. Braun, pp. 65-68).

Being asked by Ibn Waḥshīya about the origins of alchemy, al-Maghribī enumerates ten different theories on the beginnings of this occult science.<sup>35</sup> He finally presents his reasons for believing that Egypt is the cradle of alchemy since all the books he has consulted are of Egyptian origin. He contends that alchemical books in other languages are merely translations.

(5) Al-Maghribī al-Qamarī relates a legend of discovery revolving around an enigmatic book in Memphis (fols 6v-7r; ed. Braun, pp. 68-69).

In support of his assertion he refers to the discovery of a book on the occult sciences in Memphis, the former capital of the Egyptian Old Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> The book was written in hieroglyphic script and only the sage Hermes was able to read and understand its contents. It dealt with

<sup>33</sup> The transmission of anti-diluvian sciences plays an important role in the Arabic tradition on Hermes, see van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, pp. 121-23.

<sup>34</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> The number ten was very likely chosen on purpose. In Pythagorean numerology, the power of the number ten is based on the role of the tetrad. If one adds up the numbers up to 4 (thus 1, 2, 3, and 4), the result will be 10. See Sallis, *The Figure of Nature*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>36</sup> In the Arabic tradition, Memphis was identified as the first settlement and as the capital of post-diluvian Egypt, see Haarmann, “Manf”, p. 411.

<sup>37</sup> The Persian loanword *nīranj* designates operations of white magic, such as prestidigitation, the creation of illusions and sleight-of-hand performances, see Fahd, “Nīrandj”, and Burnett, “Nīranj”.

the talismanic art, alchemy, magic, *nīranjāt* and other occult sciences.<sup>37</sup>

(6) Al-Maghribī hands over a Coptic translation of the book to Ibn Waḥshīya (fol. 7r; ed. Braun, p. 69).

After this legend of discovery, al-Maghribī reveals that he once knew a sheikh who possessed a Coptic translation and commentary of this book. Its translation was known as *The Book Containing the Complete Wisdom* (*al-kitāb al-ḥāwī li-l-ḥikma kullihā*). Al-Maghribī admits that the sheikh gave him the book and hands it over to Ibn Waḥshīya, obliging him to keep its contents secret. When the latter opens it, he finds it already translated into Arabic.

(7) Reproduction of the book's section on alchemy (fols. 7r-16v; ed. Braun, pp. 69-83).

The book's section on alchemy is then reproduced. This text forms the second, perhaps older, layer of the work. It contains a cosmogony and an obscure allegorical description of the transmutation of the base metal into gold. First the text describes the creation of the world out of the ashes of *sidrat al-muntahā*, the "Ziziphus tree of the Furthest Boundary". It follows a competition for precedence between the soul (*al-naḥs*) and the intellect (*al-'aql*), in the aftermath of which the intellect creates the human being. After God instructs the intellect on the "one thing in the human being", the intellect transmutes the base metal into silver and gold with the help of this "elixir". The reproduction of the book's section on alchemy closes with an enumeration of the elixir's benefits, such as its usefulness as a panacea and an exhortation to keep this knowledge secret.

(8) Ibn Waḥshīya returns the book (fols 16v-17r; ed. Braun, pp. 84).

The frame story recommences. Ibn Waḥshīya returns the book to al-Maghribī after reading and copying it.

(9) Discussion of the book's section on alchemy ensues (fols 17r-21v; ed. Braun, pp. 84-93).

The treatise concludes with a final discussion between Ibn Waḥshīya and al-Maghribī al-Qamarī on the book's section on alchemy.

## 6. The Hermetic Frame Story on the Origins of Arabic Alchemy

Part of the introductory dialogue in *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* consists of a Hermetic frame story on the origins of alchemy followed by a legend of discovery. Julius Ruska labelled such narratives "liter-

arisches Rankenwerk”, implying the additional and fictional character of such stories and their lesser relevance for the study of Arabic alchemy.<sup>38</sup> However, despite the absence of reliable information on alchemical doctrines and practices, these texts offer valuable insights into the authors’ strategies for investing their works with authority and shed light on concerns and expectations of their readers. It is therefore regrettable that origin narratives did not attract much scholarly attention yet.<sup>39</sup>

The Hermetic frame story in *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* commences with Ibn Waḥshīya questioning al-Maghribī al-Qamarī about the beginnings of alchemy: “Who began this art (*al-ṣan‘a*)? From whence did it emerge? Which community (*umma*) invented it and sought to bring it into being (*istajarrahā*), if it was indeed brought forth through the intellect and through the reasoning by analogy (*qiyās*)? And if it was other than that, from which location had it begun to appear and to which community (*umma*) and [5r] to which generation did it appear at the beginning?”<sup>40</sup> Thereupon al-Maghribī presents ten theories on the emergence of alchemy. Some of these have antecedents in the late antique literary tradition, while others reflect the ideas of later Arab and Arabic-writing alchemists:

(1) God taught the subject to Adam.

One group claimed that God the Sublime taught it (*‘allamahā*) to Adam, peace be upon him, when He expelled him from Paradise. He taught it to him while he was still in Paradise, teaching him what kind of sin would befall him. When he descended to the earth and his progeny increased, he taught it to his son Seth, and Seth taught it to his son, until it [i.e. alchemy] appeared.<sup>41</sup>

Adam was already part of the alchemical imagery in Hellenistic Egypt. The Greek alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis (fl. end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) believed that the name of Adam

<sup>38</sup> Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina*, p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Brentjes, “Narratives of Knowledge in Islamic Societies”, p. 76. Brentjes’s analysis of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi‘a’s account on the origins of medicine yielded some interesting results. Another short investigation of narratives on the origins of medicine provides Keren Abbou HersHKovitz in her PhD thesis. See Abbou HersHKovitz, *The Historiography of Science*.

<sup>40</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fols 4v, l. 15 - 5r, l. 1.; ed. Braun, p. 65, ll. 7-9

<sup>41</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5r, ll. 2-6; ed. Braun, p. 65, ll. 11-13.

<sup>42</sup> Berthelot, *Anciens Alchimistes Grecs*, vol. 3, p. 95 and 223. Cf. Patai, *Jewish Alchemists*, pp. 18-20. Patai’s work contains a number of inaccuracies. It should be used with caution.

symbolised the four elements.<sup>42</sup> In Islamic times, Adam became the subject of various legends and myths.<sup>43</sup> According to the astrologer Abū Ma‘shar (d. 272/886), he was the grandfather of the first of the three Hermes and taught him the hours of day and night.<sup>44</sup> Besides the *Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā*, a Jewish-Gnostic treatise also ascribes the revelation of alchemy to Adam. This work stipulates that alchemy is as old as the world and that the genealogy of alchemists begins with Adam.<sup>45</sup> As noted above, the *Risālat Bayān tafriq al-adyān* reports that Adam received books on astrology, medicine, magic and alchemy before he was expelled from Paradise. Moreover, the Egyptian alchemist Ibn Umayl (fl. 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century) claims that alchemy was revealed to Adam and Seth.<sup>46</sup> According to a list of alchemists attributed to the Umayyad prince Khālīd b. Yazīd (d. c. 85/704), Seth, the son of Adam, was the first to whom God revealed alchemy.<sup>47</sup> Ibn Waḥshīya’s treatise on ancient and magical alphabets refers to the transmission of secret knowledge from Adam through Seth down to Idrīs.<sup>48</sup>

(2) God revealed alchemy to Idrīs (=Hermes).

Another group argued that God, He is mighty and sublime, revealed it (*awḥāhā*) to Idrīs, who is Hermes in the language of the Ancient Greeks. [He revealed it to him] so that he could make use of it for his worldly existence and as a protection granted by God the Sublime to protect him from unclean profits and the commoner’s disgraceful ways of living. A group claimed nothing more than having learned it [i.e. alchemy] from him, and that he composed books on it and referred to it in symbolic language out of his desire that – after his own lifetime – it should reach the wise men of great intellect who would be striving for it.<sup>49</sup>

Idrīs is a Qur’ānic prophet identified in the Muslim tradition with the biblical Enoch and, at the same time, with Hermes Trismegistus.

<sup>43</sup> See for example Schöck, *Adam im Islam*.

<sup>44</sup> Plessner, “Hermes Trismegistus”, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 187.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Umayl, *Three Arabic treatises*, p. 103. Cf. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 234.

<sup>47</sup> Ruska, “Ein dem Chalid ibn Jazid zugeschriebenes Verzeichnis”, p. 294. The idea of a succession of prophets to whom alchemy was revealed reminds one of the successive prophetic revelations which Muḥammad, the ‘seal of the Prophets’ (*khātam al-nabīyīn*), brings to an end. On this concept, see the recent study by Uri Rubin, ‘The Seal of the Prophets’. On the Umayyad prince’s relationship with alchemy, see below.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Waḥshīya, *Ancient Alphabets*, p. 29 (English trans.).

<sup>49</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5r, ll. 6-10; ed. Braun, p. 65, ll. 13-16.

He was regarded as an initiator in many fields; for example, he is referred to as the first astrologer, the first who carried out *jihād*, the inventor of geomancy and the *zā'iraja*, a popular divinatory technique.<sup>50</sup> Enoch, too, is described in apocalyptic writings as the first transmitter of heavenly knowledge to mankind.<sup>51</sup> In the Jewish Enochian tradition, he is very often represented as a sage preoccupied with primeval knowledge and as an expert in celestial mysteries.<sup>52</sup>

In the list of alchemists attributed to the Umayyad prince Khālīd b. Yazīd, Idrīs is identified with Enoch. In this account, he is the second person to whom God revealed alchemy.<sup>53</sup> In *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree*, the reference to Idrīs (=Hermes) as the founder of alchemy foreshadows the ensuing legend of discovery in which Hermes is said to have been the only one able to read an enigmatic book on the occult sciences discovered in Memphis.

(3) God taught it to the prophet Abraham.

Others argued that God the Sublime taught it to Abraham, peace be upon him, making him its first practitioner. From him it arose.<sup>54</sup>

The pseudepigraphical list of Khālīd b. Yazīd records Abraham (Ibrāhīm) as the fourth prophet to whom alchemy was revealed.<sup>55</sup> I am not aware of any Arabic treatises on alchemy attributed to him.

(4) The Babylonian sorcerers invented alchemy.

One group argued that the Babylonian sorcerers (*al-saḥara*) invented it and brought it into being. They say that not only are they called Nabataens (*al-nabaṭ*) because of their invention (*istinbāt*) of the occult sciences (*al-'ulūm al-ghāmiḍa*), but that they originated all the sciences and useful arts and disseminated them.<sup>56</sup>

The theory that the pre-Islamic inhabitants of Iraq (*al-nabaṭ*) invented alchemy is connected with the fact that the root *n-b-ṭ* in the tenth verb form (*istanbaṭa*) bears the meaning “to invent”. It is surprising that the passage does not refer to the purported author and protagonist of this treatise, Ibn Waḥshīya, the self-styled authority in the field of

<sup>50</sup> Erder, “Idrīs”; Vajda, “Idrīs”.

<sup>51</sup> Erder, “Idrīs”.

<sup>52</sup> Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, pp. 46-50.

<sup>53</sup> Ruska, “Ein dem Chalid ibn Jazid zugeschriebenes Verzeichnis”, p. 294.

<sup>54</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5r, ll. 10-11; ed. Braun, p. 65, ll. 16-17.

<sup>55</sup> Ruska, “Ein dem Chalid ibn Jazid zugeschriebenes Verzeichnis”, p. 294.

<sup>56</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5r, ll. 11-14; ed. Braun, pp. 65, l. 17 - 66, l. 1.

translations from the “Nabatean language” (*al-nabaṭī*) into Arabic. Even more so as the introduction of the *Nabatean Agriculture* uses the same *figura etymologica* to praise the Nabateans’ abilities: “[...] they could comprehend useful and recondite sciences (*al-‘ulūm al-nāfi‘a al-ghāmida*) and discover (*istinbāṭ*) what other nations (*umam*) were unable to.”<sup>57</sup> This absence is further evidence of the pseudepigraphical character of this treatise.

Babylon was considered the cradle of magic in the Islamic tradition.<sup>58</sup> The tales of the Arabian Nights, for example, refer at various times to Babylon as the home of both the magical arts and the jinn.<sup>59</sup> A work which seems to belong to Ibn Waḥshīya’s genuine writings deals with the magic of the Nabateans (*Kitāb Siḥr an-Nabaṭ*).<sup>60</sup> While earlier scholars had rejected any attempt to locate the origins of alchemy in Babylonia, Matteo Martelli and Maddalena Rumor have recently shown on the basis of Akkadian sources that a cultural and technical exchange between the Near Eastern tradition and Egypt must have taken place.<sup>61</sup>

(5) The Ancient Egyptian Priests were the inventors of alchemy.

Others claim that those who brought it forth were the Ancient Egyptian priests (*kahana Miṣr min al-qibṭ*). I mean the books of the Ancients on it [i.e. alchemy].<sup>62</sup>

According to the historiographer al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), the Ancient Egyptians had been idolaters in former times and were skilled in the sciences of magic, the talismanic art and alchemy.<sup>63</sup> In the legendary history of Ancient Egypt *Akhbār al-zamān*, falsely attributed to the historian al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956), the pyramids were built by the Ancient Egyptian rulers as treasuries for their wealth and as places to practice

<sup>57</sup> Ibn Waḥshiyya, *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭīya*, p. 5 (English trans. Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans*, p. 94).

<sup>58</sup> On the perception of Babylon in Arabic geographical literature, see Janssen, *Bābil, the City of Witchcraft and Wine*.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Rescher, “Studien über den Inhalt”, p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> Ḥājji Khalīfa, *Kashf al-zunūn*, vol. 2, col. 1424.

<sup>61</sup> Martelli and Rumor, “Near Eastern Origins”. For Darmstaedter’s and Ruska’s rejection of such hypothesis, see Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 146, note 4, and p. 148, note 3.

<sup>62</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5r, ll. 14-15; ed. Braun, p. 66, ll. 1-2; The Arabic term *al-qibṭ* usually designates Egypt’s Coptic minority. It is used, furthermore, to refer to the Ancient Egyptians. See El-Daly, *Egyptology*, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Geschichte der Copten*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>64</sup> Ps-al-Mas‘ūdī, *Akhbār al-zamān*, p. 171.

alchemy.<sup>64</sup> The book trader Ibn al-Nadīm cites a book on Ancient Egypt according to which the Ancient Egyptian temples (*barābī*) were “[...] structures of different types, in which there are places for grinding and pulverizing, dissolving, congealing and distillation, which shows that they were used for the art of alchemy”.<sup>65</sup> A dialogue on alchemy between the king Damūmā and Egyptian temple guardians (*aṣḥāb al-barābī*) is extant.<sup>66</sup>

(6) The Persian wise men were the originators of alchemy.

Others, in turn, argue that those who began with it were the Persian wise men (*al-‘uqalā’ min al-Furs*). For this reason, they prided themselves above all other communities (*jamī’ al-umam*), subjugated kings and conquered countries. They were the richest community (*umma*) in silver and gold so that eventually all the kings of the earth were below them. Proverbs on the wealth of their possessions continue to be cited.<sup>67</sup>

Arabic alchemical treatises have been attributed to Persian authors, including Mani (d. 274 CE), the founder of Manichaeism, and the sage Ostanēs.<sup>68</sup> The author of *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* also refers in this passage to the *shu’ūbīya* controversy in which non-Arab members of early Islamic society challenged Arab claims for supremacy and hegemony. This debate erupted in the second/eighth century and reached its peak in the third/ninth century. Most of the proponents were of Persian descent.<sup>69</sup>

(7) The Ancient Greek philosophers invented alchemy.

Others claim that those who brought it into being were the philosophers of Ancient Greece (*falāsifa al-Yūnān*), who through their profound reasoning and excellent intellectual capacities brought forth those occult sciences that were deemed difficult [to understand]. They come to this conclusion from the fact that no other community (*umma*) has what they have especially not in medical practice. They say: “This art is a kind of medicine and the practitioners of the science of medicine are the practitioners of it [i.e. alchemy].”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 353 (English trans.: vol. 2, p. 847).

<sup>66</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 180.

<sup>67</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fols. 5r, l. 15 - 5v, l. 1; ed. Braun, p. 66, ll. 2-5.

<sup>68</sup> On the Persian alchemists, see Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, pp. 183-186.

<sup>69</sup> For *shu’ūbī* tendencies, see, amongst others, Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 101-146, 147-176, and 177-218; Gibb, *Studies*, pp. 62-73; Mottahedeh, “The Shu’ūbīyah controversy”.

<sup>70</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5v, ll. 2-5; ed. Braun, p. 66, ll. 6-9.

The prominent role of Greek philosophers in Arabic alchemy, above all Socrates and Aristotle, need not be reiterated here. A well-known example of the veneration of the Greek philosophers in Arabic alchemy is the *Turba Philosophorum*, an Arabic treatise in which Anaximander, Empedocles, Xenophanes, and others present their philosophical doctrines.<sup>71</sup>

One would have expected al-Maghribī to refer in this passage to the legend surrounding the Umayyad prince Khālid b. Yazīd. The latter was said to have ordered the translation of Greek books on alchemy, astrology and other sciences into Arabic.<sup>72</sup> However, al-Maghribī alludes in the course of his discussion with Ibn Waḥshīya on the truthfulness of these etiological accounts to the Graeco-Arabic translation movement during which a substantial part of the Greek medical canon was introduced into Islamic civilisation.<sup>73</sup> He claims that the Arabic books on medicine were all translated from the Greek.<sup>74</sup>

(8) Alchemy originated with the Indian astrologers.

One group claims that the Indian astrologers (*munajjimīn min al-Hind*) brought it forth through their sharp intellectual capacities and powerful mental acuteness. This is because it [i.e. alchemy] is an art under the influence of astrology ('*ilm al-nujūm*'), and it is called 'Sister of [the Science of] the Stars and Medicine' (*ukht al-nujūm wa-l-tibb*). That it should have emerged in India is more appropriate because of the excellence of their talented men and the sharpness of their minds.<sup>75</sup>

A figure named Ṭumṭum al-Hindī was regarded in Arabic occult literature as an authority on the sciences of astrology, alchemy and geomancy.<sup>76</sup> Juliane Müller recently published an edition of an Arabic dialogue on alchemy between Aristotle and the Indian Yūhīn.<sup>77</sup>

(9) Alchemy was discovered in an old temple.

One group claimed that it [i.e. alchemical knowledge] was discovered in an old temple dedicated to Romanus in a book written in an old language, and that

<sup>71</sup> Rudolph, "Christliche Theologie".

<sup>72</sup> Manfred Ullmann showed that this report is a later fabrication, see Ullmann, "Ḥālid ibn Yazīd". On Khālid b. Yazīd's preoccupation with alchemy, see also Martelli and Bacchi, "Il principe Hālid bin Yazīd".

<sup>73</sup> Gutas, *Greek Thought*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>74</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fols. 6r, l. 16 - 6v, l. 1; ed. Braun, p. 68, ll. 1-4.

<sup>75</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5v, ll. 5-8; ed. Braun, p. 66, ll. 9-11.

<sup>76</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, pp. 187 and 298-299; Klein-Franke, "The Geomancy of Aḥmad b. 'Alī Zunbul".

<sup>77</sup> Müller, *Zwei arabische Dialoge*.



Romanus, after he had informed this city [of this discovery], deposited the book in a chamber in this same temple. [They claim] that its origin was nothing more than what was derived from this book. Thereafter, it circulated among the common people.<sup>78</sup>

The penultimate theory on the origins of alchemy offered by al-Maghribī is that it was discovered in a book in an old language (*bi-lughā qadīma*) in an old temple (*haykal qadīm*) dedicated to “Rūmānus”(?). Such “legends of discovery” (*Fundlegenden*) are a common feature of alchemical literature. In many treatises, alchemical knowledge is claimed to have been discovered in a book once hidden in a sepulchre, underground vault or temple.<sup>79</sup> For example, the *Sirr al-khalīqa* by Apollonius of Tyana (Bālīnūs or Balīnās), a sort of commentary to the text of the emerald tablet, was claimed to have been found in an underground vault in Tyana under the statue of Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>80</sup> The Hermetic *Epistle on the Secret* (*Risālat al-Sirr*) was said to have been found in a vault in Akhmīm next to the corpse of a woman.<sup>81</sup> The *Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā* provides another legend of discovery after the presentation of the different theories on alchemy’s origins (see below).

#### (10) The magicians of Yemen invented alchemy.

One group claimed that the sorcerers of Yemen (*saḥara al-Yaman*) brought it forth and that in Yemen man after man and woman after woman continue to appear who can predict the future (*yatakahhanūna*), provide information about invisible things (*fa-yukhbirūna bi-l-ghuyūb*) and offer knowledge of what will be. Wondrous miracles arise from this. They predict with the innermost part of their hearts. The secrets are hidden from them, [but] they predict about them. They say [i.e. the aforementioned group] that they predicted it [i.e. alchemy] and that they brought it forth, taught it and put it into practice. They say that the proof of the truth of this is that one can hardly comprehend it [i.e. alchemy] without [the gift of] soothsaying and the ability of always predicting what will be, as a result of one’s natural disposition, not through the method of mathematics.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5v, ll. 8-11; ed. Braun, p. 66, ll. 11-13

<sup>79</sup> Ingolf Vereno provides an overview of the variants of this Hermetic *topos*, cf. Vereno, *Studien*, pp. 257-59.

<sup>80</sup> Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 172; Weisser, “Hellenistische Offenbarungsmotive”.

<sup>81</sup> Vereno, *Studien*, p. 137, l. 6 (Arabic text).

<sup>82</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 5v, ll. 11-17; ed. Braun, p. 66, ll. 13-19.

The Yemen usually plays no role in Arabic alchemy. According to Ibn al-Nadīm, the legendary figure Ḥarbī the Ḥimyarite was also an alchemist.<sup>83</sup> He is cited more than once in the *Corpus Jābirianum*.<sup>84</sup>

After the exposition of the various theories on the origins of alchemy, al-Maghribī argues that alchemy must have emerged in Egypt. He presents in the following an account of the discovery of an enigmatic book in Memphis (*Manf*).<sup>85</sup> The inhabitants of this area discovered it but were unable to read it. They believed it to be written either in the Himyaritic language (*lughat Ḥimyar*) or in the Ancient Egyptian languages no longer in use (*lughā min lughāt al-qibṭ al-matrūka*).<sup>86</sup> Only the sage Hermes was able to read it and understand its content. From the description of the script one can conclude that the book was written in hieroglyphics, but the author must have had only a superficial knowledge of this writing system since he notes that the script comprised images of all the terrestrial animals, fish and birds. References to ancient or foreign languages are common in Arabic occult literature, such as “Ancient Syriac” (*al-Suryānīya al-qadīma*) in the *Nabatean Agriculture* by the supposed author of this treatise Ibn Waḥshīya, or “Ancient” and “Byzantine Greek” in the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Sirr al-asrār*.<sup>87</sup> Consistently, the “old language” motif requires the mention of a “translation” into Arabic. Al-Maghribī goes on to say that his sheikh obtained a translation and commentary in the “language of the Copts” (*bi-lughat al-qibṭ*). Only later, when Ibn Waḥshīya receives from al-Maghribī this translation and opens it, does he perceive that it has been already translated into Arabic.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, vol. 1, p. 353 (English trans.: vol. 2, p. 850).

<sup>84</sup> Kraus, *Jābir*, vol. 2, p. 261, note 2.

<sup>85</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fols 6v, ll. 2 16; ed. Braun, p. 68, ll. 7-18. The ruins of Memphis are located several miles south of Cairo. Various rumours and legends on this ancient site circulated in Islamic times, see Haarmann, “Manf”.

<sup>86</sup> The Himyaritic script is a Hermetic motif. The *Epistle of Hermes Būdāshūrdī* refers to a man from Ḥimyar knowledgeable in the “Musnad-scripts” (*masānīd*), cf. Vereno, *Studien*, p. 137, ll. 11-12 (Arabic text).

<sup>87</sup> For “Ancient Syriac”, see Ibn Waḥshīya, *al-Filāḥa al-nabaṭīyya*, p. 5 (English trans.: Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans*, pp. 93-94). For the translation from “Ancient” and “Byzantine” Greek, treated as two distinct languages in the *Sirr al-asrār*, see Forster, *Das Geheimnis*, p. 53.

<sup>88</sup> MS Gotha 1162, fol. 7r, ll. 12-13; ed. Braun, p. 69, ll. 13-14.

## Concluding Remarks

Since it is not possible to provide an exhaustive analysis of this etiological account within the confines of this paper, I will limit myself to highlighting some of its salient characteristics. The Hermetic frame story in the *Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā* presents ten different opinions on the origins of alchemy. According to the treatise, some argued that it began as a divine revelation to prophets, while others asserted that it was invented by mankind, respectively by particular pre-Islamic professional and social groups learned in philosophy and the occult sciences or dedicated to the worship of pagan deities.<sup>89</sup> Still others believed that alchemical knowledge was discovered in an old temple. Ultimately, al-Maghribī argues in favour of Egypt as the land where alchemy first emerged. He relates a legend of discovery about an enigmatic book in Memphis which only Hermes was able to read. Translations of this text emerged subsequently and must have circulated widely, since al-Maghribī obtained a copy of this book from his sheikh. He presents it to Ibn Waḥshīya who reproduces its content.

The frame story and the subsequent legend of discovery are an elaborate literary means of presenting the alchemical knowledge in this treatise as “Ancient Egyptian wisdom” revealed by Hermes Trismegistus. In this aspect the treatise clearly follows the late antique Hermetic tradition. The divine revelation of alchemy or the discovery of books on this occult science was already claimed in the Greek alchemical corpus, and even older literary models in Roman, Greek and even Ancient Egyptian literature can be identified.<sup>90</sup>

Authors employed such narratives presumably out of a desire to invest their treatises with authority and legitimacy. This is achieved through the false attribution of works to fictional or historical authorities and also through an emphasis on divine revelation and/or narratives relating the discovery of ancient books or tablets in vaults, tombs

<sup>89</sup> The revelation of alchemy and other arts by angels is quite prominent in the Enochian tradition. See Martelli and Rumor, “Near Eastern Origins”, pp. 39-40. Further investigation into similar accounts in earlier traditions will certainly reveal interesting parallels.

<sup>90</sup> Lindsay, *Origins*, pp. 39-42; Ruska, “Quelques problèmes”, p. 161; Hammer-Jensen, *Die älteste Alchymie*, p. 77; Weisser, “Hellenistische Offenbarungsmotive”; Speyer, *Bücherfunde*, pp. 77-80.

or temples. This literary strategy flatters the reader as a member of a small and elite group who can be assumed to possess such exclusive wisdom.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the elaborate origin narrative in *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree* very likely responded to a common desire among readers of alchemical literature, that is to say their wish to learn more about the very beginnings of this ancient science.<sup>92</sup>

Although the late antique Hermetic tradition and the expectations of the prospective readers certainly played a predominant role in the inclusion of such narratives in Arabic alchemical treatises, I would argue that the discovery of books and tablets in vaults, sepulchres and temples expresses moreover the authors' fascination with Ancient Egypt.<sup>93</sup> Arabic books on hidden treasure, a lesser-known genre of Arabic occult literature, bear some similarities to Arabic alchemical treatises in this respect.<sup>94</sup> These texts describe hidden treasure in ancient sites, temples, tombs and other architectural structures in Egypt and sometimes in Syria. The unearthed riches can consist of elixirs for the process of transmutation but also of books on wisdom. The former owners, the ancient rulers and kings, were thought to have entrusted these riches to treasure-guarding spirits or to have protected them with talismans or deadly traps. In *The Book of the Ziziphus Tree*, the mutual relationship between these two genres is expressed indirectly when Ibn Waḥshīya presents the early sages' strategies to conceal their wisdom.

Since they were not able to express and reveal completely [the knowledge] they possessed, they pointed to it in symbolic language and concealed it [in books written] in precise language and occult meanings; in this manner, it would enjoy the status of precious treasures which the kings entrusted to the bowels of the earth and equipped with talismans and different kinds of artifices, preventing all mankind

<sup>91</sup> Isabel Toral-Niehoff compares such attempts to promote books with marketing strategies that seek to generate demand by limiting the product ("Verknappungsstrategie"), cf. Toral-Niehoff, "Geheimes Wissen", p. 196.

<sup>92</sup> A similar concern must have prevailed among those interested in the Arabic medical profession. See Brentjes, "Narratives of Knowledge in Islamic Societies".

<sup>93</sup> On the perception of Ancient Egypt in Islam, see amongst others Haarmann, "Pharaonic Egypt" and Haarmann, "Das pharaonische Ägypten". Okasha El-Daly, *Egyptology*, presents a survey on Arabic material dealing with Ancient Egypt.

<sup>94</sup> The Arab Egyptologist Aḥmad Kamāl published in 1907 an edition and French translation of three manuscripts on hidden treasure, cf. Kamāl, *Kitāb al-Durr al-maknūz*. Okasha El-Daly provides a short overview of the genre, see El-Daly, *Egyptology*, pp. 36-42. Mark F. Pettigrew analysed some aspects of the *Kitāb al-Durr al-maknūz* in his unpublished PhD thesis "The Wonders of the Ancients".

in general from attaining them, apart from those who resembled themselves [i.e. the kings] in terms of strength and excellence of work.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the author of the treatise compares the attempts of the wise men to prevent the unworthy from attaining their occult wisdom with the strategies of kings who protected their treasures from intruders by storing them underground. While the first used symbolic language to conceal the meaning of their words, the latter applied talismans and artifices to protect their riches. Whereas the *Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā* claims to reveal the sages' safeguarded wisdom to the reader, the Arabic books on hidden treasure promise to reveal the kings' riches and the necessary magical rituals to obtain them. Both alchemy and treasure hunting offer the prospect of becoming rich easily, and, interestingly, both genres have a strong focus on Egypt and a predilection for ancient monuments, temples and tombs. Little is yet known about the exact circumstances of the production of Arabic alchemical texts or Hermetic literature in general; a closer examination of related texts and genres will certainly provide new insights into the historical context of these works.

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