



Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"

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Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo

Dipartimento di Scienze Umane e Sociali

Patrocinio della Società Italiana per lo Studio del Pensiero Medievale (SISPM)

ELISIR MERCURIALI E IMMORTALITÀ

Capitoli per una storia dell'alchimia nell'Eurasia antica



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Palazzo du Mésnil, via Chiatamone 61-62, Napoli

a cura di

GIACOMELLA OROFINO, AMNERIS ROSELLI, ANTONELLA SANNINO

 **Biopharma**


HOTEL NAPLES
★★★★



Matteo Martelli (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)

*Dyeing practice and theory in Graeco-Egyptian alchemy
(Teoria e pratica tintoria nell'alchimia greco-egiziana)*

Graeco-Egyptian alchemy encompasses a wide set of dyeing techniques aimed at changing the colour of various base materials, namely metals, stones, and wool.

My paper will focus on dyeing techniques applied on metals, whose centrality in alchemy is strongly emphasized by Zosimus of Panopolis (late 3th-early 4th century AD). The analysis of two unedited passages preserved by the Syriac tradition will allow us to better understand the theoretical principles guiding Zosimus' practice. Such a practice, in fact, was based on a specific classification of the employed substances, among which mercury was credited to have a particular 'nature.' Zosimus deeply investigates such a nature, discusses its interaction with the other substances, and reveals thus some important principles that may explain the chromatic transformations undergone by base metals.



Antonella Straface (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

*The esoteric alchemy in the Ismaili tradition: meanings and connotations
(L’esoterismo alchemico nella tradizione ismailita: valenze e connotazioni)*

The Ismailis, one of the most important “unorthodox” group of Shiite affiliation, professed a doctrine centred on the figure of the imam, whose role was considered essential to achieve salvation. Since the imam was considered as the guardian of the secret hidden in the Scripture, he was charged with the practice of ta’wīl. This spiritual exegesis of the Scripture involved a transformation aimed at the purification of the soul and at the revealing of Truth, that lay hidden in the ceremonies and practices of the official religion.

The esoteric nature of these teachings should have stimulated in the Ismaili circles interest in alchemy that seemed to offer the necessary means to achieve this purpose of salvation.

The present paper aims at examining some passages of a treatise dating back to the formative period of Ismailism, the Kitāb Shajarat al-Yaqīn (The Book of the tree of certainty [of faith], IX -X / III -IV). In particular, the study will focus on the “esoteric” readings of two basic formulas of the Islamic religion (basmala and shahāda) that were interpreted in the light of an esoteric alchemy, in accordance with a doctrine that, like the Ismaili one, aimed to a spiritual transformation in order to achieve a soteriological purpose.



Gabriele Ferrario (Cambridge University Library)

Ebrei e alchimia nel medioevo: una relazione controversa

(Jews and Alchemy in the Middle Ages: a controversial relationship)

The nature of the relationship between Jewish people and alchemy has often been a matter of debate. On the one hand, alchemical literature by non-Jews is rich in references to the Jewish people as the original depositaries of the secrets of alchemical arts; on the other hand, only a small number of original alchemical works by Jews have come down to us and some scholars have argued for a lack of Jewish interest in alchemy. In my paper, I address this problem by providing a critical overview of the known sources regarding the relationship between Jews and alchemy during the Middle Ages, and offer the results of my recent research on the alchemical fragments from Cairo Genizah. The alchemical fragments of the Cairo Genizah constitute a significant – and yet unexploited – source for our understanding of alchemy as practiced by Jews in medieval Islamic lands.



Giancarlo Lacerenza (Università di Napoli “L'Orientale”)

Ya'aqov Anatoli the Alchemist: Verifying a Tradition

(Ya'aqov Anatoli alchimista: analisi di una tradizione)

In various texts dealing with the history of Alchemy in the Medieval West, as well in some studies on the history of Jewish Philosophy, it is often repeated that the translator, physician and philosopher Jacob (Ya-'aqov) Anatoli (Marseille 1194 - ? 1246/1247) probably worked as an alchemist at the court of Emperor Frederick II.

This reputation derives from a passage of the *Ars alchemie* by the renowned Michael Scot – who acted as astrologer for the emperor – in which mention is made to a magister Iacob iudeus, seen at work on metals in an alchemical process that Scot had learned and then successfully repeated several times.

Since it has been well established, long time ago, that Scot and Anatoli had worked together, in the same context, sharing their knowledges and expertises in Naples and elsewhere, it seemed obvious to identify the magister Iacob with Jacob Anatoli.

This study aims to demonstrate how such identification is lacking of any serious foundations, and that various different explanations can be offered for the magister Iacob quoted in the *Ars alchemie*.

Moreover, I will introduce a coeval document – published years ago, but overlooked and apparently unnoticed by scholars up to these days – demonstrating that in the same years in which both Scot and Anatoli worked in Naples, in this same town lived another magister, who acted as personal physician of Frederick II, who was called, as well, Ya'aqov.



Laurence Wuidar (Bologna-Bruxelles) - **Antonella Sannino** (Università di Napoli“L’Orientale”)

Sonic Elixir, Immortality, and Music from the Middle Ages to Modernity (Elisir sonoro, immortalità e musica tra Medioevo e Rinascimento)

Aim of this paper is to trace the relationship between Alchemy and Music, focusing on the themes of elixir and immortality in some texts of Medieval and early Modern philosophy.

Laurence Wuidar. *Introduction.*

Pythagorean, Platonic and Christian philosophy of music deals with its medical and theological dimensions: music was considered as a medicine for the soul and a reproduction of the immutable celestial universe. These may be the basis to consider music in its relationship with immortality and with the alchemical search for immortality. A second way to approach this subject is the long tradition of music as *ars combinatoria*: music plays with the four elements (air, fire, water, earth as soprano, alto, tenor and bass) to generate harmony and to transform the body – made up by the well tempered four elements – and soul, as alchemy transmuting heavy metal in gold. To reconstruct the framework of the relationship between art of sounds and art of metal (at a material and symbolic level) offers the background to understand the various examples proposed in this talk.

Antonella Sannino. *Middle Ages examples.*

The case of Guilelmus Alverniensis (1180-1249) provides the appropriate subject matter for the present instance. As part of natural philosophy, alchemy is regarded as an art able to produce material transformation, also known by elixir of life or elixir of immortality. As part of a higher level of understanding, music is regarded as an art ca-



pable of intuiting cosmic harmony, namely the Music of the Spheres, and sometimes imitating their sounds. Examples of the power of music on the soul (by bringing joy to hearts, cure for melancholia, sleeplessness) and its medical means are provided as well. Starting from the fourteenth century, musical instruments begin to appear in pictures of alchemical laboratories. However, real alchemical music is extremely rare, *En pulcher lapis* being one of few and most interesting examples I would like to present here briefly. Finally, some iconographic representations accordingly enable us to focus on the main analogies and differences between Medieval tradition and Modern philosophy.

Laurence Wuidar. *Renaissance and Modern examples.*

Philosophical and alchemical writings, engravings, letters, composition and musical theory are testimonies of a long tradition of the relationship between music and alchemy spread all around Europe.

4. Concert *Sonic Elisir*

Clavicembalo: **Concetta Soldi** (Napoli)

Violoncello: **Chiara Mallozzi** (Napoli)

Tenore: **Alessandro Franzese** (Napoli)



Dagmar Wujastyk (University of Zurich- URPP Asia and Europe)

Staying young and living forever? Rejuvenation therapies in Indian alchemical and pharmaceutical traditions

My presentation will be about elixirs for restoring youth and potions for immortality in Indian medicine and alchemy. The earliest recipes for rejuvenation and life-prolonging elixirs in Indian medical literature are found in the oldest Sanskrit medical treatises known to us at present, the Carakasamhitā (Caraka's Collection) and the Suśrutasaṃhitā (Suśruta's Collection), which date back about 2000 years. In these and in later works, rejuvenation therapy (*rasāyana*) is presented as one of eight formal disciplines of Indian medicine. *Rasāyana* sections in Sanskrit medical works describe the preparation and application of tonics for restoring health, stopping and even reversing the aging process, generally improving physical appearance and significantly increasing lifespan. Some elixirs are purported to bestow supernatural powers on the consumer, while others are presented as effective medicines against specific diseases.

I will present and discuss *rasāyana* recipes selected from a range of medical and alchemical works, examining key ingredients, the methods used for their preparation and the reasons given for their application. I will explore the differences between *rasāyana* formulations in the medical works and alchemical treatises, and, given the diversity of ingredients and the range of applications, I will in particular ask what makes a *rasāyana* a *rasāyana*.



Fabrizia Baldissera (Università di Firenze)

Rasāyana in some kāvyā and kathā texts

This study explores the different perceptions of rasāyana theories and practices in a few kāvyā texts, dating from the seventh to the eleventh centuries C.E., as well as the import of some stories found in the eleventh century Kathāsaritsāgara. One of the *kāvyā* texts, in particular, seems to be imbued of lunar overtones, that actually help to acquire immortality.



Carmen Simioli (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

The Pernicious crow (bya rog gdud) and the Starry Jasmine (skar ma kun da)
(The Mercurial Elixir according to the Tibetan Alchemical and Medical Traditions)

Among the variety of longevity and rejuvenating practices belonging to the Tibetan medical and alchemical traditions, the production of the black mercurial medicine, otherwise called *tsothel (btso thal)*, is one the most intriguing. The purification of mercury, which nowadays represents a symbol of the refinement of Tibetan pharmacy, can be traced back to some esoteric teachings that were handed down within an uninterrupted lineages of lamas and realized yogins. This study is based on the analysis of Tibetan alchemical sources that are included into the Tibetan Buddhist Canon and into some of the most important Tibetan medical collections. A very brief overview will present the intellectual and religious dimensions as well as the different classes of the Tibetan alchemical practices and the therapeutical use of mercury. The core part of the paper will be devoted to the gold making practice (*gser 'gyur*) and to the obtainment of the mercurial elixir (*dngul chu'I bcud len grub pa*) as described by the *Nectar that transmutes into Gold (Gser 'gyur rtsi)*, *The Universal Lord's Elixir that, Dispelling All the Diseases, Promotes Physical Strength (Thams cad kyi dbang phyug gi bcud len nad thams 'joms shing lus stobs rgyas par byas pa)*, *the Treatise on the Mercurial Elixir (Dngul chu grub pa'i bstan bcos)* and the *Compendium on the Transmutation into Gold (Gser 'gyur bstan bcos bsdus pa)*, two Indian treatises that were translated from Sanskrit by Orgyenpa Rinchen Pel (O rgyan pa rin chen dpal, 1229/30-1309) and that influenced the Tibetan iatrochemistry of fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.



Fabrizio Pregadio (Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg)
Inner Gods and Elixirs: On the Origins of Daoist Internal Alchemy (Neidan)

Daoist alchemy is divided into two main branches. The first branch, known as External Alchemy (Waidan), is based on compounding elixirs through the heating of natural substances in a crucible. The second branch, known as Internal Alchemy (Neidan), aims to produce the elixir within the alchemist's person, using the primary components of the cosmos and the human being as ingredients. While Internal Alchemy has often been described as a transposition of External Alchemy to an inner plane, a more important role in its origins was played by the early Daoist practices based on the visualization of the inner gods that inhabit the main loci of the human body. Among other features shared by the two traditions, the main element of continuity is the image of the Infant, or Red Child (chizi), who in the visualization practices is regarded the "true self" of the practitioner, and in Internal Alchemy is said to be the elixir itself. In this talk, I will look at examples of the images of the Infant in Daoist meditation and Internal Alchemy, and will try to define their main analogies and differences.



Chiara Crisciani (Università di Pavia)

Elixir's alchemy

L'alchimia della lunga vita (secc. XIV-XV)

The relationships between medicine and alchemy are defined since the advent of alchemy in the West as a completely new research. A very interesting case of this intersection is the development of the elixir alchemy during the fourteenth century. This “medical alchemy” is rooted in Roger Bacon's innovative view on alchemy, as regards both its practical and theoretical sides; thus, Bacon firmly held that alchemy could restore health producing good remedies and promote long life (*prolongatio vitae*).

In fact, in the Latin world starting from the thirteenth century, physicians, natural philosophers, theologians, and then alchemists were very interested in prolongevity. After examining the main ways in which this research developed and the concept of radical moisture (which becomes the pivotal focus of this research for many scholars), the intervention will focus on alchemical doctrines and procedures of ps. Llull (Testamentum) and later alchemists or physician-alchemists of the fifteenth century, who were engaged in the search for that 'universal medicine' able to defeat any disease and prolong life of man.



Carmela Giordano (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

Planetary and textual alchemies in a German iatromathematical Book of the 15.th century

(Alchimie planetarie e testuali in un libro iatromatematico tedesco del XV secolo)

The tradition of an astrological, medical, mathematical compilation, better known as ‘Iatromathematical Book’, reaches its top with the Codex Schürstab (Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, ms. 54), a fine and precious example of illustrated, miscellaneous book, written on commission of Erasmus Schürstab, member of the high bourgeoisie of the 15th century Nürnberg. The textual tradition behind this codex, however, begins more than 100 years before. It puts together texts of various ages and from different sources, whose translations from Latin into High Middle German belong more or less to the same time, the half of XV century. It’s not easy to investigate the sources of most of the texts of this compilation, because of the thick entanglement of their contents and the typical – almost alchemical – proceeding of the anonymous author/s. It’s however clear that the aim of the anonymous compiler was to provide the reader (a scientist, a doctor or a housekeeper) with a manual of more or less daily knowledge of planets, calendars (with the computistic tables of Jakob von Gmünden), zodiac and human complexions and – in a little later version – of some medical treatments, such as bleeding.

This contribute aims – through a general description of the contents of the textual tradition of the astrologic-medical book by the example of the Codex Schürstab – to show the composition of this text which, despite the different sources and the diverse kind of topics treated, receives year after year an harmonious aspect and an homogeneous appearance and reveals a logical process from the planets to the complexions of human beings whose character is influenced by the stars (as perfectly underli-



ned by the title given to the facsimile edition of G. Keil a.o. “Vom Einfluss der Gestirne auf die Gesundheit und den Charakter des Menschen”). An alchemical process, we would say, that finds the climax in the treatise of the four elements and gives space to the properly medical treatise of the book, that is the little bleeding book (*Aderlaßbüchlein*). By the help of examples from one of the most important identified source of the *Iatromathematical Book*, the German *Lucidarius*, it will be shown how a text was cut off the model and put in the compilation with very little modifications, or entangled with other texts from which the compiler took only few information, or taken only as an introduction to a new theme. Finally, it will be given a glance to the rich iconographical apparatus of the *Codex Schürstab*, above all in regards to the illustrations of the four temperaments and their relation with the written text.



Mariassunta Picardi (Università di Napoli“L’Orientale”)
The Alchemy of Light between Arcan Wisdom and Modern Science
(L’alchimia della luce tra sapienza arcana e scienza moderna)

The present study concerns the intermingling between alchemy, optics, and astrology in Elizabethan England showing how John Dee (1527-1608), one of the shrewdest men of science of the time, was led to read alchemy in terms of an *astronomia inferior*, founding the practice of the alchemist on astrology. The interplay between astrology and alchemy implies that the production of the philosopher's stone depends on the physical and astrological knowledge that Dee intends to deepen and improve with the help of the mathematical principles of optics and the outcomes of the new scientific studies of magnetic phenomena. The result is an alchemy of light that emerges as a hybrid mixture of science and magic, mysticism and experimentalism, magical thinking and scientific rationality within a research that aims to renew knowledge, by reevaluating its operational and practical purposes. It is also proposed the hypothesis that the research conducted by Dee on the philosopher's stone has medico-pharmacological purposes and is oriented to investigate the possibility of producing the panacea for every illness as an experience capable of providing a solution to disease and human drama. The hypothesis is stated in the light of alchemical traditions favored by Dee and of the exploration of the spiritual world that characterizes the mystical quest of the last years of his life.



Carmen Metta (Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”)

Immortality and Ausdruckslosigkeit. The mythical experience of the object in German contemporary philosophy

(Immortalità e Ausdruckslosigkeit. L'esperienza mitica dell'oggetto nella filosofia tedesca contemporanea)

Whereas the concept of immortality entails the intuitive apprehension of the other's life, but this latter is knowable throughout its works only, the account of “expressionless” may be understood as the mythical character of an object no longer symbolic, significative or, in the strict sense, cultural, and therefore capable of awakening the mythical power of things. In Heidegger's review (1928) of Cassirer's (1925) is a move beyond Cassirer's acceptance of mana as well as an anticipation of the third volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Phenomenology of Knowledge* (1929), in that the originary phenomenon of mana, of the power of things, turns out to be the critical power of the truth concealed in every work, the power to experience the duration of life in a torso, a ruin or what Benjamin, in his *Goethe's Elective Affinities* (1921/1922), calls *Elpis* after Goethe's Orphic word, “the lost opportunity” as the hope for eternity taking shape in the falling star, the end of which none can see.

