

# Introduction : alchemy in the Islamicate world

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# Regula Forster and Kathrin Paasch

## Introduction: alchemy in the Islamicate world

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Alchemy was a prominent science and, as the sources seem to tell, a widely spread practical art in the Islamicate world since the eighth century up to modern times: manuscripts often date to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, attesting an interest in – at least theoretical – alchemy much later than the popular image of alchemy would suggest. Despite this obvious popularity and the enormous amount of manuscripts extant, research in this field has been very scarce for a long time, the most important contributions coming from Fuat Sezgin and Manfred Ullmann in 1971 and 1972 respectively.<sup>1</sup>

However, in recent years, the situation has changed considerably, as the interest in the so-called occult or esoteric sciences has increased substantially. Several workshops on the occult sciences in general took place which have brought forth notable publications,<sup>2</sup> and an online series of presentations of current research projects is running at the time of writing (2021).<sup>3</sup> Yet the workshop held at Gotha Research Library in 2018 was the first to focus on Islamicate alchemy, aiming to bring together a considerable number of scholars working in the field. This would have been impossible at any earlier time, as researchers working on Islamicate alchemy have been rare for decades. In 2018, however, the workshop offered a platform for very fruitful discussions among specialists.

Gotha Research Library, today a research institution of the University of Erfurt, provided the ideal location for such an endeavour. The library is among the four

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<sup>1</sup> Sezgin 1971; Ullmann 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Melvin-Koushki/Gardiner 2017; El-Bizri/Orthmann 2018; Günther/Pielow 2018; Saif 2019; Saif et al. 2021. The thematic issue of *al-Qanṭara* (Forster 2016) was not based on a workshop or conference; it may be seen as a first attempt at putting Islamicate (back then mostly: Arabic) alchemy more clearly into the focus of twenty first century's research.

<sup>3</sup> Islamic Occult Studies on the Rise, sponsored by the University of South Carolina, convened by Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Noah Gardiner.

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largest historic libraries in Germany, its collection going back to the duchy of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg. The first “Oriental” manuscripts came to Gotha shortly after the creation of the library in the second half of the seventeenth century. At first, only individual manuscripts were acquired, as booty from the wars with the Ottomans, for example, as occasional presents and donations, or during acquisitions of private libraries by theologians and scholars with an interest in oriental languages.<sup>4</sup> The small collection achieved new dimensions around 1800 during the rule of Duke Ernst II and his son August, who were avid collectors of books, manuscripts and artefacts from around the world: The physician, scholar and explorer Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1811) received financial support from the dukes when he planned a private journey to the Middle East and Arabia. In return, he was tasked to collect manuscripts and purchase interesting “products of art and nature”<sup>5</sup> for the collection. From 1802 until his mysterious death in Yemen in 1811, Seetzen travelled throughout Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula, collected knowledge, art and natural objects, charted areas and acquired a staggering 2,700 manuscripts in Arabic, Turkish and Persian that he sent to Gotha in several shipments. The duke’s interest in nature and the natural sciences may explain why the manuscripts Seetzen bought focus on the natural sciences and alchemy and why, therefore, this topic is relatively prominent in Gotha’s collection of Arabic manuscripts. Early on, this exceptional collection drew the attention of the emerging Oriental Studies: in the nineteenth century already, the director of the ducal library Wilhelm Pertsch had catalogued the Oriental manuscripts in Gotha in a seven-volume work that remains a standard reference tool for this collection (and for whoever is interested in Middle Eastern manuscripts) to this day.<sup>6</sup> In connection with Pertsch’s catalogue, the collection that grew to exceed 3,400 volumes made Gotha an internationally known research centre for Oriental studies. Gotha’s collection of Oriental manuscripts is regarded today as the third largest of its kind in Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Gotha Research Library is not just one of the many libraries that hosts a considerable number of manuscripts concerned with Islamicate alchemy, but rather one of the most important collections for the field – almost all prominent texts of Islamicate alchemy are represented with a copy. The importance of the alchemical collection is also indicated by the fact that Alfred Siggel produced a specific catalogue describing Gotha’s Arabic manuscripts on alchemy.<sup>8</sup> For this

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4 Stein 1997: 17–25.

5 See the title of Seetzen 1810.

6 Pertsch 1859–1893.

7 <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/forschungsbibliothek-gotha/sammlungen/orientalia> [9 July 2021].

8 Siggel 1950.

reason, the opportunity to organise a specialised workshop on Islamicate alchemy at Gotha Research Library was seized eagerly. The idea was to bring together scholars with different academic backgrounds and interests working on alchemy in the Islamicate world, with a special but not exclusive focus on Arabic alchemy.

The discussions and conversations at the workshop were extremely fruitful, thanks in no small part to the invaluable inputs from the specialists of Western alchemy in attendance. The close look at the originals made possible by the generous staff of Gotha Research Library was greatly appreciated by all participants.

This volume of *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques* does – due to, among other issues, the Corona pandemic of 2020/2021 – not contain all papers presented at the workshop. However, the volume clearly highlights the most vibrant of the fields of research on Islamicate alchemy.

Early Islamicate alchemy is represented in several contributions. Marion Dapsens offers an extensive catalogue of the alchemical texts attributed to the Umayyad prince Khālid b. Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiya (d. c. 85/704): Based on an in-depth study of the manuscripts, she sheds light on a hitherto not easily accessible corpus of pseud-epigraphic texts. Godefroid de Callataÿ and Sébastien Moureau discuss the use of the concept of code (*ramz*, “symbol”) in early Arabic alchemical writings, emphasising the innovative typology of *ramz* developed by Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī in his *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* (written in 339–342/950–953). A different approach to alchemical works – one anonymous, others attributed to Maslama and to al-Simāwī – is taken by Vicky Ziegler, who discusses the literary tools used by the authors for their didactic purposes.

Matteo Martelli, Gabriele Ferrario and Salam Rassi broaden the horizon: Martelli, discussing alchemical signs, loanwords and “Decknamen”, shows how Greek, Syriac, Persian and Arabic alchemical traditions were entangled and that alchemists were specialists not only in the narrow field of alchemy, but also learned in adjacent fields, such as astrology and medicine. Ferrario has unearthed rich material from the Cairo Geniza which allow new insights into “Jewish” alchemy – or rather into the fact that Jewish alchemists were very much part of a larger Arabic intellectual tradition. With Rassi’s contribution we arrive in the thirteenth century as he discusses how a Syriac bishop moved in the same literary contexts and traditions as his Muslim contemporaries and how he adapted prominent *topoi* of the Arabic tradition in his own work, stressing the multi-lingual and multi-religious make-up of the pre-modern Middle East.

Three contributions are concerned with the twelfth century Moroccan alchemist Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s and his work: Christopher Braun and Regula Forster study the extant manuscripts of his opus magnum, the alchemical *dīwān Shudhūr al-dhahab* (“The Splinters of Gold”), and show how the text was used in different milieus and

was very popular still in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As an author from the Western Arab world, Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s also seems to have authored at least one, perhaps even two or three stanzaic poems (*muwashshahāt*) on alchemy, which Regula Forster edits and discusses in her contribution. Richard Todd analyses the literary style of Ibn Arfa‘ Ra’s’s poems and how he turned classical literary imagery, especially Nuwāsian motifs, into metaphors for substances and alchemical processes, a feature that seems to have been key to the broad reception and appraisal of his work.

Finally, two contributions concentrate on manuscripts exclusively: Juliane Müller analyses an illustrated Arabic treatise about a fantastical mirror showing various alchemical symbols and its extensive manuscript tradition with divergent imagery. Christopher Braun discusses a Gotha manuscript’s interesting combination of alchemy, healing rituals and ink production; more than coincidence, this reflects a scholarly milieu concerned with more than “just” alchemy.

The workshop at Gotha Research Library would not have been possible without the generous support by the German Research Foundation, the Swiss National Science Foundation, Erfurt University and the Friends of Gotha Research Library, but even less so without the warm support by the colleagues from the Library, most notably Monika Hasenmüller, Petra Weigle and Mohammad Karimi, but also many others. For the volume, thanks are due to Freie Universität Berlin for funds for proof reading and to Isabel Garrod and Katarina Roberts for their wonderful work, to all the speakers, discussants, authors and external reviewers for their time and insights, and to the general editor of *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques*, Rafael Suter, for his patience.

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