

Session Title: Circulation And Communication Of The Chemical Knowledge In The Greek-Speaking Communities From Antiquity To The 17th Century

OPERATING IN AND THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD: READING THE ALCHEMICAL TREATISES OF STEPHANUS OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE COSMOLOGICAL-THEOLOGICAL WORKS OF JOHN PHILOPONUS SIDE BY SIDE

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Abstract

Greek alchemy presents a great deal of open questions and unresolved research problems. The puzzling multiplicity of designations (alchemist, astrologist, astronomer, medical author, Neoplatonic commentator of Aristotle) attributed to one and the same person, known as Stephanus the Alexandrian philosopher, is just one blind spot among many others, which simply remind us how far we have yet to go in order to (re)construct a comprehensive account of the emergence, and the numerous mutations, of that particular field of knowledge which has come down to us, through a certain number of monuments of discourse, under the names of “chrysopoeia”, “divine art” or plainly “philosophy”.

This paper aims at contributing to the apprehension of the historical significance that could be ascribed to certain syncretistic intellectual traditions, and social-cultural movements too, which flourished during the Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantine Era, by opening up an intertextual domain crossing the (retrospectively applied and firmly established) boundaries between theological and natural-philosophical discursive practices.

Reading one of the most influential Greek alchemical works ever, Stephanus’ nine alchemical Lectures (or seven Lessons, according to Maria Papathanassiou), side by side with John Philoponus’ *De opificio mundi*, as well as his main surviving Christological treatise (*Diaetetes*), we may re-activate a dynamic fabric of relationships between the production of knowledge concerning cosmos and that of knowledge concerning God, in the intricate knitting structure of which the poetic language and the devotional rhetoric of Stephanus the alchemist seem to perform quite different functions from those expected of elements habitually (in our own societies) regarded as merely ornamental, and as such incidental and eradicable. Stephanus’ ‘mystical chemistry’ is part of a Christian philosophy, of one of the many, actually, Christian philosophies, surfacing amid heated controversies, and only insofar as it is defined as part of such a whole alchemy can lay credible claims to being no longer a delusionary art, but a field of knowledge amenable to purposeful reflection and rational argumentation.