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Towards a Context for Ibn Umayl, Known to Chaucer as the Alchemist 'Senior'

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Abstract

This article will present what we know of the life and times of an important alchemist, Ibn Umayl. It is entitled 'Towards a Context' because I have not yet consulted a number of his treatises, which are mostly only available as manuscripts. Ibn Umayl's position in alchemy accords with Hermetic doctrines, and may have developed as a traditionalist reaction to developments in alchemy around the time of Jabir ibn Hayyan. The paper offers an overview of the influence Ibn Umayl on western literature, beginning with a quotation from *The Canterbury Tales* which shows knowledge of Ibn Umayl. The overview then goes on to look at the reception of his works in Arabic-Islamic alchemy. The last part of the paper, which makes use of published research and unpublished manuscripts, puts together what we know of his life, and places his ideas in the context of a school of thought. The writer is inclined to agree with researchers who say that Ibn Umayl was Egyptian, although the evidence is conflicting. Quoting *The Pure Pearl* and *The Silvery Water* in particular, the article emphasizes the alchemist's faithfulness to Hermetic doctrines, although in a particular, Islamic, dispensation.

Keywords. Arabic-Islamic alchemy, *The Silvery Water*, *The Pure Pearl*, Latin alchemy, *Tabula chemica*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.

Özet

Bu makale, mümkün olduğu kadarıyla, önemli bir simyacı olan İbn-i Ümeyl'in hayatını ve çevresini ele almaktadır. Çoğunlukla el yazması halinde bulunan eserlerin bazısına henüz bakamadığım için, makalemiz 'Towards a Context' olarak adlandırılmaktadır. Büyük ihtimalle, İbn-i Ümeyl'in sımyasal yaklaşımı Hermetik öğretilere uyup, Cabir İbn-i Hayyan'ın zamanında meydana gelen simyadaki değişimlere karşı gelenekçi bir reaksyon olarak tanımlanmalıdır. Başlangıç noktası Chaucer'in *The Canterbury Tales*'tan alınmış olan ve İbn-i Ümeyl'e göndermede bulunan bir alıntı olan makale, İbn-i Ümeyl'in batı edebiyatı üzerindeki etkisine

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genel bir bakışı sunmaktadır. Bu genel bakış, onun Arab-İslam simyasındaki yayılımının tarifine geçmektedir. Yayımlanmış eserlerin yanısıra, yayımlanmamış el yazmalarına da dayanan makalenin son bölümü, bildiğimiz kadarıyla simyacımızın hayatını anlatmakta, öğretilerinin belli bir okuldan kaynaklandığını düşündürmektedir. Kanıtların çelişmesine rağmen, makalenin yazarı diğer araştırmacılar gibi İbn-i Ümeyl'in bir Mısırlı olduğu kanaatındadır. Öncelikle *Dürre-i nakiyye* ile *el-Ma ül-varaki*'e göndermede bulunan makalenin, İslam çağına uygun şekillendirilmiş olması da, aynı zamanda simyacının Hermetik öğretilere sadakatını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeleri. Arab-İslami simyası, *el-Ma ül-varaki*, *Dürre-i nakiyye*, Latin simyası, *Tabula chemica*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale*.

1. Introduction

The most famous reference in literature to the author whose life-story we have taken as our subject is in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. This tale is in the form of a satirical attack on the now outmoded art of alchemy:

…Also ther was a disciple of Plato,	…There was also a disciple of Plato,
That on a tyme seyde his maister to,	Who once said to his teacher,
As [in] his book Senior wol bere witnesse,	As in his book Senior can show you,
And this was his demande in soothfastnesse:	And this, in truth, is what he asked:
"Telle me the name of the privee stoon!"	"Tell me the name of the secret stone!"
And Plato answerde unto hym anoon:	Straightaway Plato answered him:
"Take the stoon that Titanos men name."	"Take the stone that men call titanos."
"Which is that?" quod he. "Magnesia is the same,"	"Which is that?" he said. "It is magnesia,"
Seyde Plato. "Ye, sire, and is it thus?	Said Plato. "Yes, sir, and is that so?
This is *ignotum per ignotius*.	This is *ignotum per ignotius*.
What is magnesia, good sire, I yow preye?"	I would ask, good sir, what magnesia is?"
"It is a water that is maad, I seye,	"I tell you, it is a water made
Of elementes foure," quod Plato.	Of four elements," said Plato.
"Telle me the roote, good sire," quod he tho,	He then asked "Good sir, tell me the origin
"Of that water, if it be youre wil."	Of that water, if you would."
"Nay, nay," quod Plato, "certein that I nyl."	"No, no," said Plato, "I certainly will not."[1]

In this passage, towards the end of the tale, the Canon's Yeoman is trying to impress his audience of pilgrims with his knowledge of alchemical books and doctrines. Among other books he mentions 'Senior', which has long been recognised as identical with the Latin book *Tabula chemica* of a writer with the exotic-sounding name Senior Zadith.

The pupil's question relates to the philosopher's stone, the substance which the alchemist's long work with the oven, the alembic, and the vessels was designed to obtain. No clear answer concerning magnesia is given, in keeping with the alchemists' method

1 Robinson (ed.): 1933, p. 226, l. 1448–1463 (the adaptation is mine).

of explaining 'the unknown by what is more unknown' (*ignotum per ignotius*). However, its significance is clearly that it unites the four elements (earth, air, fire and water), which since Empedocles were recognised as the basis for all matter.

In the *Tabula chemica*, as part of the section entitled 'Tincture operatio', the story is told about Solomon, not Plato. Compounding this text-historical difficulty, Julius Ruska pointed out that the Arabic original mentions neither Solomon nor Plato, but Qalimus, who discourses on chalk lime (Greek: titanos) with a pupil, Runus. E. H. Duncan showed that Chaucer used a fourteenth-century manuscript in which 'Dixit Senior' is followed by the gloss 'i.[e.] Plato' (Ruska: 1937, p. 136–137; Duncan: 1968, p. 653–654).

The *Tabula chemica* was in fact none other than the book *al-Ma' al-waraqi wa-l-ard an-najmiyya* (*The Silvery Water and the Starry Earth = The Silvery Water*). This title is not found in the Latin versions, and the book was known as the 'Chemical Tablet', a reference to the description in the work of a tablet full of mysterious symbols, for *The Silvery Water* is made up of a poem about these symbols, together with a commentary on the poem. The Arab author was the tenth-century alchemist Muhammad ibn Umayl, whose presence in western literature goes back to translations made from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth century, probably in Spain. It was these translators who rendered our author's name as 'Zadith filius Hamuel, dictus Senior'.[2]

2. A Definition of Alchemy

When reading medieval works about alchemy, one soon realizes that this science meant more than vain attempts to change base metals into gold. Consider the statement of Muhammad ibn Umayl, this time from a work which was not known to western literature:

> This means whoever acquires this knowledge should separate himself from the world. This will be better for him, so that he be not compared with the ignorant who in their ignorance violate the honour of this great science which comes from the prophets, and of which the adepts are mystic saints (*wali*) and scholars (*'alim*)… (*Commentary on the Mimiyya*, unpublished, end of chapter on the third operation.)

2 See the 15th-century manuscript British Lib. Sloane 2327, f. 39–57b. See also the six editions from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. The exotic Latin name is explained as follows: 'Senior' is a translation of the Arabic 'Sheikh'. 'Zadith' was taken to be his name, but in fact it was another honorific added in some Arabic manuscripts: 'as-sadiq', meaning 'the truthful one'. This identification was made by Julius Ruska, 'Senior Zadith = Ibn Umail,' *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 31, 1928, p. 665–666. I have seen two manuscripts which give Ibn Umayl the title 'as-sadiq': the British Library *Silvery Water* epitome, in Arabic written in Hebrew letters (ms. Margoliouth 1093.1), and folio 71 of one of the Rabat Hasaniyya Library manuscripts.

Of this science, seen by our author and other alchemists as the greatest of the sciences, the ancient authority was the Egyptian priest Hermes Trismegistus, who learned it from prophets like Seth and Enoch. The passage quoted above goes on to note that the generation of sages after Hermes did not reach his heights, and they could only perform the second and third operations of the work, nevertheless their alchemy brought them great wealth.

Alchemy aspires to explain no less than the entire physical and moral world on the basis of contemplating the behaviour of matter. In another work, *The Pure Pearl*, addressed to Abu al-Hasan as-Siqili, Ibn Umayl tells his pupil:

> It begins with one, and it ends with one… If you consider all the kinds of plants, metals, animals, sky, earth, land, sea, the resurrection of the dead, and the rising to life, O Abu al-Hasan, these are all concentrated in the science of the noble work. (*The Pure Pearl*, unpublished, end of chapter one.)

This passage can be compared with the beginning of the most widely-read alchemical text, *The Emerald Tablet*, ascribed to Hermes himself, which reached the West through the Arabic tradition. Of the many English translations of this text from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, here is that of Isaac Newton:

> 'Tis true without lying, certain and most true. That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below, to do ye miracles of one thing only. And as all things have been and arose from one…[3]

A way of thinking that was essentially allegorical encouraged wide-ranging conclusions about spiritual realities on the basis of the physical world, and vice versa.

3. The Reception of Ibn Umayl in East and West

It is no exaggeration to describe Ibn Umayl as an important presence both in Arabic-Islamic and Western literature. We should not think that alchemical ideas were limited to alchemists, or writers like Chaucer who, as we have seen, read such books but had wider interests. In Islam, alchemical language is systematically used by mystical writers and poets, above all those who followed in the footsteps of Ibn 'Arabi.

3 *Tabula Smaragdina Hermetis Trismegistri Philosophorum patris*, ms. King's College, Keynes 28, 2r–v, transcribed by Betty Dobbs in *The Janus Faces of Genius* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 274. In addition to the *Tabula Smaragdina*, Newton knew the Latin version of Ibn Umayl's *al-Ma' al-waraqi*, which was translated, as *Tabula chemica*, and published in the six-volume *Theatrum chemicum* (Oberursel and Strasbourg, Lazarus Zetzner and sons, 1602–1661). Newton bought his copy of this extensive collection of alchemical works in 1669, and the volumes remain in his library in Trinity College.

Enthusiasm for 'the divine Art' is characterized by phases of revival and decline. Concerning what most directly relates to Turkey, the outstanding figure is Ali el-İzniki, also called Fazıl Ali Bey, and given the title *al-mu'allif al-jadid* ('the modern writer').[4] Ali Bey presided over a renewed passion for alchemy.[5] A glance at the catologues of alchemical manuscripts of the Ottoman period shows that his works were widely read, exceeded in popularity only by the Egyptian al-Jildaki, whom Ali Bey quotes extensively, and by Jabir ibn Hayyan.

As an authority for Ottoman alchemists, a number of the surviving manuscripts of our author were brought to Istanbul. A particularly interesting copy of *The Silvery Water*, probably from Mongol Baghdad, is in Topkapı Sarayı (ms. III. Ahmet 2075/1), dated 11 Muharram A.H. 740 (19 July 1339). It includes a fine illustration of the tablet-holding Sage, who, although unnamed, is clearly Hermes, sitting in his temple.[6]

Already in the East Ibn Umayl was recognised as representing a particular method in alchemy, identified by Isma'il at-Tinnisi as the method of Maria, Aras and Zosimos.[7] Modern scholarship has called this the 'allegorical', in contrast to the practical-experimental, branch of alchemy. This branch is strongly connected to Egypt, and it is notable that often the authors who cited Ibn Umayl directly were, or were as far as we know, from that country (Tinnis is a town in the Nile Delta). Al-Jildaki worked in Cairo in the fourteenth century, and among his works is a commentary on the 'Letter of the Sun to the Crescent Moon', the poem of Ibn Umayl mentioned above. Commentaries to this poem were also written by the Upper Egyptian Hasan 'Ali Sirdar, and by Fakhr ad-Dawla Abu Shakir an-Nasrani.

The alchemist 'Abd al-Karim ibn Yahya ar-Raba'i, known as 'al-Mukhtafi' (the Hidden One), and his teacher Abu al-Fada'il, are followers of Ibn Umayl. Al-Mukhtafi writes of *The Silvery Water* as 'the most glorious (*ajall*) of [Ibn Umayl's] three books'. The belief that Ibn Umayl's wisdom can be found in three main works goes back to Ibn Umayl himself, who writes:

4 Katip Çelebi (Hajji Khalifa), *Kashf az-zunun*, vol. 2, 1487, gives this author a death date of A.H. 1019/A.D. 1601. This does not contradict the author's own statement in *Kashf al-asrar wa-hatk al-astar*: 'God honoured me with knowledge, and made me reach [the ranks of] the ulema and the great shaykhs, during the sultanate of the second of the two Sultans Selim Khan...' (quoted in A. Iskandar, *A Descriptive List of Arabic Manuscripts at the University of California*, Leiden, Brill, 1984, p. 25).

5 See: 'Fazıl Ali Bey' article by İhsan Fazlıoğlu in *Osmanlılar Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 1, p. 441–443.

6 Persis Berlecamp, 'Painting as Persuasion: A Visual Defense of Alchemy in an Islamic Manuscript of the Mongol Period,' in *Muqarnas*, vol. 20, 2003, p. 35–59.

7 Paraphrased by Ullmann, *Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 235. I rely on Ullmann for my information about references to Ibn Umayl in later Arab-Islamic literature, unless otherwise signaled.

> If you understand these three books, I mean my book *The Book of the Key of the Great Wisdom*, *The Book of Magnesia*, in which I explained to you what magnesia is made of, and this book of mine… you will be the most learned man of your time in the knowledge of the Egyptian temples (*bi-'ilm al-barabi*).[8]

Another follower, Abu al-Qasim al-'Iraqi as-Simawi, was an extreme example of the allegorical school, and his works are replete with imitations of Egyptian hieroglyphs and other illustrations, some of which are symbols from the tablet described in *The Silvery Water*.[9]

While alchemy in the East followed its course, encountering enthusiasm from some and condemnation from others, it had by now become a matter of considerable interest in medieval Europe. New ideas from the Muslim lands stimulated scientific developments against a background of philosophical and theological controversy. It was in this context, and particularly through the translations from Arabic into Latin in twelfth and thirteenth-century Spain, that the study of alchemy was introduced into Europe.[10] *The Silvery Water* was known in Europe as 'the book of Senior' or *Tabula chemica*, while the poem 'Letter of the Sun to the Crescent Moon' is also found separately in the manuscripts, as 'Epistola solis ad lunam crescentem'. The former was the inspiration for *Aurora consurgens*, a book attributed to Thomas Aquinas. It may be that other works of our author were translated in the Middle Ages, but this has not been confirmed.[11]

We should not imagine, however, that it was a matter of course that a book in the Hermetic tradition should be translated from Arabic into Latin, as if the translation movement were merely an open invitation to all in Arab dress, be it Ibn Rushd, ar-Razi, Jabir, Galen Arabus, Ibn Sina, Aristotle Arabus, Hermes or Ibn Umayl. To quote from a leading researcher, writing about early twelfth-century enthusiasts of wisdom from the East, Hermes and astrology, like Hugo of Santalla and Robert of Chester:

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8 Stapleton/Husain, 1933, p. 31, l. 24-27. Al-Jildaki writes that the *Key of the Great Wisdom* is Ibn Umayl's main work (*Catalogus*, de Jong and de Goeje, vol. 3, p. 209, quoted in Ullmann, p. 218). The al-Mukhtafi reference to the three books is in *Siraj az-zulma*, ms. f. 90b, l. 1, while his teacher's unparalleled understanding of Ibn Umayl is mentioned in *Risalat ar-Rahawiyyat*, ms. f. 96b, l. 15.

9 Notably in *Kitab al-Aqalim as-sab'a*, ms. Brit. Lib. 1517, f. 25a, 26b. Stapleton/Husain (1933, p. 118) give details of parts of Abu al-Qasim's *'Ilm al-muktasab* which are taken from *The Silvery Water*.

10 The word alchemy (Latin: alchemia) clearly shows this Arab heritage, and the role of the Arabs in bringing the science to Europe. Arabic al-kimya' is composed of the article al- (the) and chemia (chemistry in Greek).

11 Stapleton/Husain's (1933, p. 126, fn. 2) tentative identification of Ibn Umayl's *Miftah al-hikma al-'uzma* with the *Clavis majoris sapientiae* ascribed to Artefius was shown to be incorrect by Levi della Vida (1938, p. 80–85). The medieval manuscripts of the *Tabula chemica*, quotations from the work in other writings, and a Middle Netherlands translation, are listed by Italo Ronca (1998, p. 101).

> To what extent these Latin scholars were influenced by mystical-philosophical sects already established in Jewish and Arabic circles in Spain is difficult to assess, and needs further research. The one slender testimony we have concerning the original Arabic texts of Hugo's translation strengthens the impression that the Arabic texts too were transmitted in the context of secrecy and mystery. For he writes that he found an astronomical work 'among the more secret depths of the library (*inter secretoria bibliothece penetralia*) of Rueda de Jálon, the stronghold to which the Banû Hûd escaped after the fall of their kingdom of Zaragoza in 1110. (Burnett: 2002, p. 123)

Because of the strongly gnostic character of the *Tabula chemica* and 'Epistola solis ad lunam', it is probable that they appealed to medieval alchemists outside the 'mainstream' — for it is possible to describe alchemical ideas as the mainstream approach to the theory of matter in the Middle Ages.

A new situation emerged in the Renaissance, beginning with Paracelsus in Basel, and spreading particularly to the Free Cities of Germany, where there was a violent reaction to the authority of Galen in science and the Catholic church in religion. Many of the followers of Paracelsus, in their efforts to establish the comprehensive science which their leader was believed to have revealed, were attracted to alchemical ideas. By the early seventeenth century this interest was particularly found in the Rosicrucian Order, and it is people associated with this order who provided the early printed books of Ibn Umayl: an old, undated *Tabula chemica* edition (Perna printers in Basel? 1560-1570?); the edition, based on this, which was included in volume five of the massive alchemical collection *Theatrum chemicum* (Lazarus Zetzner, Strasbourg, 1622, with later reprints); the edition, again based on the earlier editions, in the *Bibliotheca chemica* of Jean-Jaques Manget (Geneva, Chouet, 1702). Ibn Umayl's obscure method and symbolic language were a point of attraction to the Rosicrucians, as, indeed, they were to the Swiss psychologist Carl-Gustav Jung.

Having given an account of admiration for our alchemist both in east and west, this paper will now seek to go into as much detail as possible about who he was. It will also suggest the intellectual background of his ideas.

4. Notes towards a Context for Ibn Umayl

4.1. Dating on the basis of named contemporaries

Problems regarding the date and biography of Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Umayl at-Tamimi[12] were addressed by Harry E. Stapleton and Hidayat Husain in 1933. These authors were familiar with Ibn Umayl's *The Silvery Water* and *Qasida Nuniyya*. In

12 'Tamimi' refers to the Tamim tribe, one of he largest and most widely dispersed of the Arab tribes.

what follows I will present their findings, with which I generally agree, and add some information on the basis of manuscripts and works not known to them (see: Bibliography). However, there is no question that Ibn Umayl had a highly unusual mixture of beliefs, and this paper will also provide material to show just how far he was faithful to his particular Hermetic tradition. This begs the question of where these ideas came from, and at the end of the paper I will risk the hypothesis (perhaps going beyond the scholar's duty of the careful arrangement and evaluation of data) that he belonged to a school of thought which broke away from the mainstream of alchemical ideas.

Stapleton/Husain dated our author to the period A.D. 900–960 on the basis of the names of some acquaintances of Ibn Umayl. To be precise, at the beginning of *The Silvery Water* our author tells us that he visited an Egyptian temple, as he did from time to time, and he saw there the statue of a sage holding the tablet of wisdom. He mentions that he was in the company of Abu al-Qasim 'Abd ar-Rahman, the brother of Abu al-Fadl Ja'far the grammarian. Later he went to the same temple with Abu al-Husayn 'Ali ibn Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Wahid al-'Adawi. In the course of his commentary Ibn Umayl reports a discussion in the house of 'Ali ibn 'Abdullah ibn Wasif an-Nashi, 'the trinket maker' (*al-Halla*). Stapleton/Husain point out that the grammarian Abu al-Fadl and the poet an-Nashi al-Asghar are found elsewhere in Arabic literature; the former is said by Yaqut (*Irshad al-arib*, vol. 3, p. 425) to have died in A.D. 900, and the latter, Ibn Khallikan tells us (*Wafayat al-a'yan*), lived from A.D. 884/5–975 or 976/7.[13]

Looking more closely at the friendship with the poet an-Nashi, the account given by Ibn Umayl of the discussion is as follows:

> One day I visited Sheikh Abu al-Husayn ibn Wasif the Trinket Maker (God give him enduring strength) to ask after his health (*'ala sabil al-iftiqad*), and I sat down next to him. There were two men with him, one of whom I knew, and they had been speaking before I came about the (alchemical) work... Then Sheikh Abu al-Husayn, knowing that I was very fond of him, and would be pleased to help him, turned to me and asked: 'O Abu 'Abdullah, what does the sage mean when he says "take lead and what is similar to lead, and take quicksilver (*za'uuq*) and what is similar to quicksilver"? The Egyptians knew this sage's high rank in the science…' (Stapleton/Turab 'Ali: 1933, p. 41, 23–42, 3)

The group are dumbfounded when Ibn Umayl is able to expound the text as a reference to the male and female principles in matter, and then a repetition of this reference in different words. We know from the biographer and historian Ibn Khallikan that an-Nashi

13 Stapleton/Husain were on less solid ground when they went on to claim that 'Mihraris', an alchemist mentioned in the text, must be tenth-century, as a Cairo manuscript they thought was his work quotes the historian at-Tabari, who died in A.D. 923. Fuat Sezgin (GAS 4: 1971, p. 284) has dismissed this argument by pointing out, not only that Mihraris is a pre-Islamic author, but that the manuscript in Cairo is not his work, and it only includes a quotation from him.

al-Asghar, in whose house this conversation took place, was the son of an apothecary and lived mainly in Iraq and Syria (where he taught al-Mutanabbi), probably dying in Baghdad. Both Ibn Khallikan and Ahmad an-Najashi (*Rijal*) confirm that he became a notable Shiite poet and scholar of kalam.

Other associates of our author are also mentioned in his works, but these names are not known elsewhere. Specifically, *The Pure Pearl* is written for Ibn Umayl's pupil and successor, Abu al-Hasan as-Siqili, who must be seen as his closest acquaintance. This 'Sicilian' is also mentioned in the *Qasida nuniyya* as having obtained a book of alchemical images from a *Rum* monk in Upper Egypt. The introduction to the *Qasida nuniyya* also provides information about contemporaries: It was written as the result of a conversation in the house of the same Abu al-Husayn 'Ali ibn Ahmad for whom our author wrote *The Silvery Water*. Present at the time were Sa'ada ibn Turkuman as-Sa'adi, and Abu al-Qasim an-Nahawandi, who is possibly the same man as the Abu al-Qasim 'Abd ar-Rahman mentioned in *The Silvery Water*. Thus we can say that it is chiefly the connection with an-Nashi al-Asghar that confirms that Ibn Umayl lived in the tenth century.

The visit to this poet and scholar probably took place in Iraq or Syria, which should not surprise us; in *The Pure Pearl* our alchemist mentions (end of chapter nine) that 'since childhood I have been travelling on behalf of the science of the work'. He also writes (see below) of meetings with the Iraq-based Jabir. This leads us to the question of where to locate Ibn Umayl geographically.

4.2-3. Ibn Umayl's Egyptian alchemy and probable Shiite affiliation

As we saw in the quote already given, Ibn Umayl taught a wisdom which he called the 'knowledge of the Egyptian temples ('*ilm al-barabi*)'. Whether or not Ibn Umayl was born in that country, it is impossible to ignore this alchemist's strong connection to Egypt. Ibn Umayl's local references are numerous, and reveal a detailed knowledge.[14] While there is, then, no doubt that he mainly lived and worked in Egypt, there are two possible connections to North Africa mentioned in *The Pure Pearl* and *Mimiyya Commentary*: (1) Ibn Umayl, at the end of his life, only performed the work taught in the book of Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad al-Marrakushi, indicating a strong respect for this

14 Ibn Umayl speaks of the revelatory discovery of the Sage and his tablet during the visit to the temple at the known site of 'Joseph's Prison' in Busir, Saqqara, mentioned above. His experience was no doubt coloured by the story of Apollonius and the finding of the *Emerald Tablet*. In the *Pure Pearl* (chapter five) our author also mentions depictions which he to be of the alchemists' furnace in the (then still standing) 'temple of Akhmim, and other temples'. He description of the alchemical work in the *Pure Pearl* has an Egyptian character. He uses Egyptian measurements, 'clay brought from Aswan', charcoal of the mimosa trees of Upper Egypt, and Nile-water, and compares one stage of the work to the annual inundation.

author (*The Pure Pearl*, chapter added after chapter nine, *Mimiyya Commentary*, third work, para. 4). (2) He has learned about one method from 'one of the Maghrebi sages' (*The Pure Pearl*, end of chapter 8). It is also relevant that Paul Kraus (1942-3, p. 299) notes that, according to an old Vatican catalogue (not seen), one manuscript adds the epithet (*nisba*) 'Andalusian' to his name.

In spite of these indications, the kind of strong emotional reaction to temple sites, and personal identification with whatever wisdom it is that they contain, convinces the present writer that Ibn Umayl was brought up in an area where there were Egyptian temples, and he shared the popular awe of them. He does not seem to have been an outsider who embraced the wisdom of Egypt as an adult. Rather, he is so closely associated with his country that one is reminded of the Egyptian patriotic sentiment expressed in the saying 'if you cut me Nile water flows out'.

This alchemist's background is therefore Egypt, at a time of weak Abbasid rule and Ismaili missionary activity in the build-up to the Fatimid invasion. Although many other alchemists of the time were Ismaili, there is no passage which clearly shows the religious affiliation of our author.[15] The first thing to note is that Ibn Umayl, who in *The Silvery Water* and *The Pure Pearl* was so fond of giving the advice that people should stay away from human society, may have avoided sectarian (if not alchemical) disputes. There are some indications that he was a Shiite. The one hadith that we find in Ibn Umayl's works is that of 'Ali, namely 'Beware of the physiognomical insight of the believer.' However, this is a popular hadith in many works of mysticism. The title 'Commander of the Faithful', and the blessing 'May God honour his face' (Stapleton/Turab 'Ali, p. 100, l. 29) give us no clear direction (in any case, copyists were free to add blessings). More significantly, in his short treatise *Hall ar-rumuz* (Explanation of the Symbols) he cites 'Ali as an authority, and says the Caliph regarded alchemy as 'the sister of prophethood'. (Madelung/Abt/Hofmeier, p. 97) We have already seen that Ibn Umayl was close to one strongly Shiite personality, an-Nashi al-Asghar. These facts tend to suggest that our alchemist was a Shiite, but give no detailed insight.[16]

What is clear, however, is that our author was strongly attached to an approach to his art which, while it involves a reverance for the ancients, is most directly revealed in his

15 In *Jabir ibn Haiyan* (1942-3), the leading scholar of Arabic alchemy, Paul Kraus, argued that many of the works ascribed to Jabir were written by Shiite Ismailis. What is certain is that the Ismaili *Letters of the Brethren of Purity*, written in tenth-century Iraq, includes material similar to that ascribed to Jabir. Kraus (vol. 2, p. 299) briefly describes Ibn Umayl as Iraqi.

16 An-Nashi is listed by Ibn an-Nadim as 'Imami', which in his case I take to mean Twelver Shiite. Devin Stewart notes that '…many of the Shiites [in Egypt] both before and during Fatimid rule were probably Twelver Shiites rather than Ismailis…,' see: 'Popular Shiism in Medieval Egypt,' *Studia Islamica* 84 (1996), p. 35-66, see p. 35.

own teachings. Like many alchemists, he insists on the significance of his own books, and does so in a way which puts him at an important point in the revelation of alchemy's secrets:

> If in the future someone is able to gain a true understanding of some aspect of the writings of the sages, that will only be because of his reading my books and poems… I have written in a few pages what the philosophers scattered over thousand of thousands of pages… (Stapleton/Turab 'Ali, p. 43, l. 8–10)

The works of the ancients, obscured for so long, are restored to clarity in the age of Islam, and above all in his own works.

Let us first consider the tradition with which he identifies himself. For our author the authorities in alchemy were sages whose works were translated, or claimed to be translated, from Greek. Indeed, the commentary section of *The Silvery Water* is built around quotations from Mary, Aras, Marqunus, Secundus, Hermes, Zosimus and Agathodaimun. These writers are to be followed, while most later, Muslim alchemists are said to have gone astray.

Martin Plessner was the first modern scholar to suggest the existence a school of Egyptian alchemists strongly influenced by Greek alchemy. Apart from Ibn Umayl, works of this school include *Mushaf al-jama'a*, translated in the Middle Ages as *Turba philosophorum*, (Plessner: 1954, Plessner: 1975) and *Miftah al-hikma*. (Levi Della Vida: 1938)[17] In order to expand our knowledge of this school of alchemy, it would be wise to examine the connections with such works. As Stapleton recognized, Ibn Umayl quotes from *al-Jama'a/Turba*, without citing his source. He also gives a version of the *Emerald Tablet* text somewhat different from the earliest Arabic version, the origin of which is to be sought in Syriac circles. (Kraus: 1942-3, p. 270-303, now edited by Weisser) To the works of this school we can add the compilation of Zosimus' works called *Mushaf as-suwar* which is quoted in the following sub-section.

4.4 Ibn Umayl's Islamic alchemy

For all his devotion to Greek alchemy, it is important for Ibn Umayl that he writes as a Muslim, and he frequently mentions his religion. He gives an account of his doctrine 'for you [Abu al-Husayn] and for all our brothers who are pious Muslims'. Our author occasionally quotes verses in the Qur'an of interest to alchemists.[18] He sees himself as following 'predecessors among the sages of Islam'. While rejecting many later Muslim alchemists, he says he has 'recognized the merits' of Dhu an-Nun al-Masri and Khalid

17 Unfortunately I have not yet been able to consult these works.

18 Stapleton/Turab 'Ali, p. 43, l. 8–9; Qur'an quotes: p. 40, l. 7; p. 84, l. 24; 87, and especially l. 20–21 (Surat al-anbiya' 21: 30).

ibn Yazid, who, he claims, conform with the teaching of the ancients. He repeatedly calls on God to help his co-religionists. (Stapleton/Turab 'Ali, p. 58, l. 9, 21–25)

The Islamic character of this revelation of alchemy is paramount, and a passage in *The Pure Pearl* is revealing. In a section also notable for the fact that it predicts Ibn Umayl's death and the succession of Abu al-Hasan as-Siqili, who is to 'become part of' his teacher, Abu al-Hasan asks about an intermediary principle between the male and female which they call 'Shaytanil'. He says:

> 'Then, by God, tell me about it in Arabic, so that the wisdom be complete in me.' So Sheikh Muhammad ibn Umayl said… 'I ask God's pardon for having revealed this secret. Receive it, then, in Arabic, and hide it in silence…' (middle of chapter one)

This implies that Ibn Umayl's role was to bring the clearest revelation of alchemy, in the same way that Islam, revealed in 'clear Arabic', is the culmination of the divine messages. He is not alone in believing that the Arabic language is important in the true expression of the art. This belief is also stressed in some of the texts of the followers of Jabir ibn Hayyan. (Kraus, vol. 2, 1942-3, p. 288-289)

One passage in an Arabic text makes particularly plain the belief in the significance of Islamic alchemy. It is found in a compilation of works of Zosimus of Panopolis (Akhmim) set in question-and-answer form. The following interpolation is put into the mouth of Zosimus:

> [Theosebeia] said: 'Tell me about what Mary says her father said, that: "The nation in which this science will appear will be at the end of time."' [Zosimus] said:… 'This is not a suitable question for you to ask… They are the sons of Ibrahim.' She said: 'The Jews?' He said: 'No. The sons of Ismail. After a hundred and sixty years of their reign it [i.e. alchemy] will become apparent to them. There is no nation as reluctant to believe the sages as they are. After one hundred and forty years of their reign, the number of those learning this science will increase, and they will become devoted to it. Great and exalted God will reveal it to them… to increase their desire for the other world rather than this world.'[19]

This prophecy about the Arabs is, of course, an attempt to vindicate the strongly Greek-inspired tradition from an Islamic point of view. It should be read as part of an on-going debate about alchemy and between alchemists.[20]

19 *Mushaf as-suwar*, folio 10a, l. 8 – 16. See the excellent facsimile printed by Theodor Abt, *The Book of Pictures* (Zurich, Living Human Heritage, 2007). From the point of view of its sectarian context, it is notable that just before this passage Zosimus uses a phrase derived from a hadith of the Caliph 'Umar. Regarding 'the end of time' see also the 'brothers of Jabir' (below).

20 In terms of specifically Islamic alchemy, is interesting to note a comparison Ibn Umayl makes between misguided alchemists, who make use of unclean materials and desecrate the divine art of alchemy, and Christians, who believe that God could be subjected to humiliations like incarnation

We see that his religion is of primary importance to Ibn Umayl, and yet some of the beliefs he held are highly unusual, deriving from Hermetic legends. His devotion to this ancient tradition is underpinned by the conviction that there was a golden age when alchemy was understood, and the philosophers ruled the world. In *The Pure Pearl* he writes:

'Eggs are only used as an analogy… When the philosophers ruled mankind, and they were above every rank, they knew that the science of the Art [alchemy] is the most glorious science… Then they wrote many books on such things as eggs, hair, the biles, milk, semen, claws, salt, sulphur, iron, copper, silver, mercury, gold and all the various animals and plants. When they had finished they scattered their writings in the streets and places where people gather. This was in order that people would find [these books about alchemy], and desire it intensely. But then people would copy and circulate these books according to the apparent meaning of these things, and waste their possessions and ruin their souls…' (beginning of chapter one)

For Ibn Umayl, unlike some of his Muslim contemporaries, the myths about the origins of alchemy are still relevant. We find this myth in alchemists at least as far back as Zosimus, who tells us that a book of angelic origin first brought alchemy to mankind. The wisdom of this book was preserved by being disguised and distributed in twenty-four books, each called *The Book of Imhotep* after the Egyptian sage who wrote them. No doubt the ruined Egyptian temples were associated with this past golden age for our alchemist.

4.5. Ibn Umayl's view of Jabir and other Arab alchemists

A direct recourse to ancient authorities by the Egyptian Arab alchemists is accompanied, in Ibn Umayl at least, by the conviction that Muslim contemporaries have generally failed to understand these authorities:

> I looked at the books of other [alchemists], and I looked at what they discuss and pass on of what the first sages said, as well as the Muslims who followed the sages and were devoted to them… None of those people who are famous for their wisdom could explain a word of what the philosophers said. In their books they only continue using the same terms which we find in the sages… What is necessary, if I am a sage to whom secrets have been revealed, and if I have learned the symbolic meanings, is that I explain the mysteries of the sages… (Stapleton/Turab 'Ali, p. 43, l. 17–21)

On the one hand, he writes of alchemists who merely parrot the teachings of the ancients because they have no real understanding. On the other, our author condemns

and crucifixion (*The Silvery Water*, p. 49.4 - 7). There is, however, an endorsement of true alchemists 'of all sects (*min ahl kull milla*)' in *The Explanation of the Symbols* (p. 94.6). In her commentary on this work, Marie-Louise von Franz recognizes a 'shift of emphasis from the material to the divine' in Ibn Umayl's approach, and she relates this to Islam's strong monotheism (2006: p. 98).

contemporaries whom he calls 'the jealous ones', those who understand the sages but disguise the truth to mislead their followers.

By contrast, it is important that some of Ibn Umayl's Muslim predecessors were authorities for him. His praise for the Khalid ibn Yazid and Dhu an-Nun al-Masri, about both of whom legends already existed, has been mentioned. We have seen that the *The Pure Pearl* shows our author's great respect for al-Marrakushi, and Ibn Umayl also says that he employs a method learnt from 'one of the Maghrebi sages' (end of chapter eight). It is notable that a reference to the Persian physician and alchemist ar-Razi in the *The Pure Pearl* is positive, as the student Abu al-Hasan is recommended to read 'the book of Ibn Zakariya ar-Razi, which is difficult for beginners but simple for adepts' (end of chapter three). The reader needs to keep in mind the fact that our alchemist writes well of these writers as we turn to consider his frequent condemnation of other alchemists.

We soon find that Ibn Umayl was no stranger to polemics, and he adopts a tone that suggests much more than a detached awareness of the alchemy practiced by his contemporaries. First of all, it is remarkable that he states that he met 'Jabir [ibn Hayyan] the Sufi of Damascus'.[21] This may be surprising to those aware of the tradition that places this most famous of Arab alchemists in the court of Harun ar-Rashid (m. A.D. 809). Without entering the complex arguments about when, and if, Jabir lived, what concerns us here is that Ibn Umayl's relationship with his great predecessor is ambigious. Many references are negative, accusing Jabir of an over-simple, materialist approach. For example, in his account of this meeting, our alchemist disputed with Jabir about his literalistic view of 'eggs' and other references in the sages. Ibn Umayl notes that Jabir died without completing the work. On the other hand, in *The Silvery Water* he makes an exception concerning two of Jabir's books to his general condemnation of the books of his contemporaries:

> [N]one even came near (the meaning of the ancients), except the indications given by Jabir ibn Hayyan the Sufi in his book *The Blessed and Pure Book on the Words of the Sages*… and his book known as *Gleanings from the Sayings of the Monk and Others*. In these two books he nullified the chapters of his books… He praises, encourages and guides people to read the words of the monk, and orders that no-one go beyond them… (Stapleton/Turab 'Ali, p. 58)

This shows that Jabir's authority, and the fact that he is said to have come over to the traditional position, was important to our author.

Other sections, towards the end of the book (p. 93–97, 103), show that Ibn Umayl regarded some of Jabir's sayings as at least worthy of interpretation. Indeed, he seems

21 *The Pure Pearl*, end of chapter five. See also the dispute with Jabir on page 57 of *The Silvery Water*.

to ascribe great significance to some of that writer's obscurer allusions. These passages concern a dispute with a group of Jabireans calling themselves 'the brothers of Jabir' over a statement of their late master concerning what is needed for the alchemical work to succeed. Rather than dismissing Jabir's prophecy, Ibn Umayl offers an alternative interpretation of what about the 'two brothers' meant. Ibn Umayl is particularly scathing about these contemporary Jabireans who are called the 'brothers of Jabir'. Members of this group see themselves the brothers who will come 'at the end of time', mentioned in a prophecy of their master. The accounts of these disputes are highly suggestive. They require a comparison with the numerous texts attributed to Jabir, especially those mentioning the 'two brothers'.

Earlier in this paper we have sought to place Ibn Umayl in the context of an Egyptian school, which followed the 'method of Maria, Aras and Zosimos'. In view of the texts studied by Martin Plessner and Julius Ruska which show a similar approach to that of our alchemist, he should not be seen as an innovator. Importantly, we have noted that the tone taken in his polemics suggests that he, and his school, were in dispute with contemporaries over the meaning of the alchemical heritage. This suggests that their school emerged as a reaction to developments in the mainstream of Arabic alchemy. These developments, and most of the books of Jabir, they condemned as being in contradiction to the teachings of the first alchemists.

This hypothesis is, of course, opposed to the idea that there was an unbroken tradition of Hermeticism in Egypt. However, it is understandable that members of the 'Maria, Aras and Zosimos' school could make common cause with isolated readers of the esoteric literature so characteristic of that country. Perhaps in this context we can see the passing reference, at the beginning of the *Qasida nuniyya*, to Abu al-Hasan as-Siqili obtaining a book from an Upper Egyptian monk.

5. Conclusion

Ibn Umayl saw in the Hermetic tradition clues as to the origin of science. These speculations did not lead him in the experimental direction that chemistry was later to take. As time passed, he seems to have become an isolated figure, and had few students, perhaps only one, to pass on his works. He created no tradition. However, it is a sign of a value of his works that they had a lasting appeal to a variety of readers who were looking for comprehensive explanations of man's power over matter. Our study began with an apparently innocent inquiry into a reference to the book of 'Senior' in Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. This has led us inexhorably into the world of ninth and tenth-century Middle Eastern alchemy. It is hoped that the inquiry has provided insights, not only into the life and times of Ibn Umayl/Senior, but into the intertwined worlds of eastern and western thought.

It was above all in the Middle Ages that Europe enjoyed a close rapport with the Muslim lands and, as is well known, there were many areas of science that benefited from Arabic-Latin translations. In the case of esoteric literature, Arabic works seem to have reached the West through the devotion of individuals and groups who are often obscure. So what was Geoffrey Chaucer's attitude to this kind of literature? Chaucer was associated with a royal court which sponsored alchemy; one of the alchemists was even a canon of Edward III's chapel. On the first reading, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* would seem to be an amusing attack on alchemists as charlatans. Chaucer, through his narrator, can be seen as dismissing alchemy from a rational point of view. However, a more positive view of alchemy emerges elsewhere in *The Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, a careful re-reading of the second half of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* shows that Chaucer does not dismiss the claims of alchemy. At the end of the tale, the canon's yeoman says (l. 1472–1478):

Thanne conclude I thus; sith god of hevene	So I conclude, that since the God of heaven
Ne wol nat that the philosophres nevene	Does not want these (alchemists) to state
How that a man shal come un-to this stoon,	How people make (the philosopher's) stone,
I rede, as for the beste, lete it goon.	I suggest that one should not get involved.
For who-so maketh god his adversarie,	Because if someone makes God his enemy
As for to werken any thing in contrarie	By doing something which is against
Of his wil, certes, never shal he thryve.	His will, that person will surely be ruined.

Far from denying the validity of alchemy, the yeoman concludes with a typical statement of alchemists. It is a warning, also found in Ibn Umayl, that their science is dangerous precisely because it is so powerful.

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