

The Searched-for Thing:
A Literary Approach to Four Early
Alchemical Texts



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To the examiners

Statement concerning the impact of the Impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) Public Health Emergency on the present thesis

This is to inform the examiners about how the Public Health Emergency resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the last seven months of the present research.

I had COVID-19 symptoms myself in March, and self-isolated; this only affected me for around three weeks.

A major and unexpected setback has been the closure of the University libraries from March onwards due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures applied in the United Kingdom. A number of adjustments were needed, such as looking for online copies of essential bibliography, purchase of books unavailable online, and applying for a book grant from the Faculty. These endeavours have been particularly time-consuming for my research, as it depends on a significant number of editions and reference works that date from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century: a number of them are rare or out of print, and only a few are available or easy to find online. Some examples of essential works that I have not had full access to for approximately five months due to the library closures are: M. Berthelot and Ch.-Ém. Ruelle's *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs* (important for a thorough finalisation of all chapters and for general information about manuscript transmission), A.J. Festugière's *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* (only vol. 1 acquired through book grant), W. Scott's *Hermetica* (only vol. 4 acquired through book grant), J. Bidez *et alii*, *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs* (important for manuscript transmission, e.g. the problems around *the Book of Comarius* and the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* in Chapter II); W. Daniel and F. Mantomini's *Supplementum Magicum* (for expanding on connections between alchemical and magical texts, especially in Chapter I); J. Bidez and F.

Cumont's *Les Mages hellenisés* (important for the contextualisation of the figures of Ostanes and Zoroaster in Chapters II and III, respectively).

These difficulties have been remedied only partially by the reopening of the libraries in August. The Bodleian and Sackler libraries have been operating at limited hours and under limited capacity by means of a booking system – this has severely limited the hours I have had in libraries in order to access bibliography. Furthermore, some of the works to which I needed full access (e.g. J. Bidez and F. Cumont's *Les Mages hellenisés* and F. Queyrel and R. Veymiers' chapter and bibliography in *Individuals and Materials in the Greco-Roman Cults of Isis*, which I was planning to revisit regarding a discussion from Chapter I) were either stored offsite at the Bodleian, the request service of which has restarted only recently, or available only at the Sackler, the booking system of which has been far more overwhelmed than that of the Bodleian. Ideally, I would have preferred to extend my research for one or two terms in order to compensate for all the limitations from the past seven months, but as my Brazilian scholarship provider has stated that they would not extend funding of research impacted by the pandemic, this choice would have been too heavy a financial burden.

Preface

The manuscript *Marcianus graecus* 299 (tenth-eleventh century CE) starts with an intriguing foreword.¹ It urges every friend of the Muses (πᾶς Μουσῶν φίλος) to look at the book containing a secret bliss (ὄλβον... ἐγκεκρυμμένον ἔχουσαν). There, a treasure of superior knowledge is to be found (πλοῦτον ἄν) εὔροις γνώσεως ὑπερτέρας). It also celebrates a certain Theodorus (possibly a civil servant of the Byzantine Empire under Heraclius) who, having learned the accomplishment of the supreme substance hidden enigmatically within (μαθὼν τὰς ἐκβάσεις | αἰνιγματώδως ἔνδον ἐγκεκρυμμένης), assembled a strange collection in this book (συλλογὴν ξένην | ἐν τῇδε βίβλῳ).

The ideas and imagery of this passage deeply relate to the purposes of this thesis. It intends to demonstrate how certain early alchemical writings exploit literary and linguistic artifice in such a way that the text itself becomes a reflection of alchemical knowledge. By mixing spiritual, magical, philosophical and technical language and motifs, the text becomes a laboratory where different ‘ingredients’ are transformed into material that seems strange, impenetrable, yet compelling: an exquisite treasure for which the reader has to dig. Both deprived of and given enough information to be bewildered but not completely lost, the reader is prompted to take up the search that may or may not give access to the secret of alchemical knowledge.

This thesis aims to take a fresh look at texts which have received valuable attention, but from relatively restricted points of view. It challenges the way some scholars have seen ancient alchemy in the past in order to demonstrate that this tradition had a broader set of concerns than metallurgy and philosophy combined. I argue that early alchemical texts

¹ The Greek text is *CAAG Gr.* modified.

display literary ambitions that have been overlooked and downplayed in previous scholarship. Experimentation is not restricted to technical operations: these texts are themselves experiments that result in elaborate and inventive compositions.

That this mainly literary approach to alchemical texts does not intend to downplay its wider historical and cultural context is implied in the thesis's title, which pays tribute to Garth Fowden's *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (1993). There, Fowden finds in Hermetism "a spiritual way" (*ibid.*, pp. xxiv, 186, 215) greatly indebted to "the unusually intimate cultural interactions that had been stimulated by the settlement of Greeks in the narrow valley of the Nile" (*ibid.*, p. 215). Here, I try to identify in four alchemical works what may be called 'a literary way' that expresses, among other things, the very societal picture brought forward by Fowden.

The main part of the thesis investigates in detail what this shift to a literary interpretation entails for each of the compositions here selected, namely the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (Chapter I), the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (Chapter II), *On the Letter Omega* by Zosimus of Panopolis (Chapter III), and *Memoirs 10-12* by the same author (Chapter IV). Each chapter starts with a brief introduction to the work's dating, transmission, and contents. It then proceeds to an analysis of how each writing in question approaches conventional textual forms in both expected and unexpected ways. This is followed by a close reading; the reader is given the chance to relish each writing's peculiarity and language as it unfolds. Finally, contextual parallels are brought into the picture in order to enrich interpretation.

The undertaking of this project would have remained nothing but a far-fetched aspiration if it were not for some key figures to whom I will always be grateful. I would like to thank Professor Isabella Tardin Cardoso, whose exceptional supervision of both my

undergraduate and Master's dissertations at the University of Campinas was the best possible introduction to academic life. Professor Paulo Sérgio de Vasconcellos has also been an invaluable source of classical knowledge and an inspiration to pursue Classics further. I am very thankful to Professors Trajano Augusto Ricca Vieira and Flávio Ribeiro de Oliveira for providing me with essential Greek language training. I owe special gratitude to Professor Stephen Harrison for my six-month stay in Oxford as an Academic Visitor during my Master's degree (funded by The São Paulo Research Foundation), which turned out to be the first step towards the doctoral degree that culminated in the present thesis.

I am very thankful to Professor Gregory Hutchinson for agreeing to supervise a thesis on such unusual and often challenging material, and for helping me persevere through the setbacks along the way. The present thesis has benefited immensely from his rigorous look at the Greek and the arguments. I am also very thankful to my co-supervisor Professor Mark Edwards, whose learned and intellectually stimulating remarks and suggestions have deeply changed the course of this work for the better. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Mary Whitby for her excellent Greek reading classes, to Ms. Juliane Kerkhecker for the opportunity to teach one myself and to Emily Rudgard for providing helpful and encouraging academic support.

Warm thanks are also due to colleagues, friends and family that have supported the development of this project in different ways. I thank Emilia Savva for her scholarly recommendations over the few but memorably lively conversations we have had about our related research interests. I am also very grateful to Vincenzo Carlotta for generously sending me essential bibliography for my second chapter, and to Tom Stennett for proofreading many of my abstracts and papers throughout the years. I am also very thankful to Alfredo Rezende for our remote Greek reading sessions, as well as our Greek-bound friendship of many years. I am deeply grateful to Dan Sperrin for proofreading many of the pages to come and for being the best possible companion during lockdown. Special thanks

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I would also like to sincerely thank those involved in my Transfer of Status, Confirmation of Status and Viva examinations. Professors Amin Benaissa and Tim Rood have been attentive and patient readers of this work when it was still at a very incipient stage; their encouragement for me to go where the evidence was taking me without reserve could not have come at a better time. Professor Jane Lightfoot and Dr. Scott Scullion have provided me with useful evidence and suggestions that have helped me improve the presentation of both minor and major matters this thesis addresses. Special thanks are owed to Dr. Scott Scullion (once more) and Dr. Michèle Mertens for being avid readers of this work at its final stage and for providing extremely valuable suggestions and corrections. Any remaining errors are my own.

Lastly, I wish to thank the CAPES Foundation (Ministry of Education, Brazil) for funding the present research.

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ABSTRACT

A lot of classical scholarship has perceived early Greco-Egyptian alchemy as a combination of Egyptian metallurgy and Greek philosophy coated with what André-Jean Festugière has called “mystical reveries”. More recent scholarship has challenged this perception by drawing attention to the fact that ancient alchemy had a broader set of concerns (such as various dyeing techniques unrestricted to metals) and influences (such as magic and various spiritual traditions). The present thesis aligns with the latter view by introducing a literary dimension to such concerns. I argue that some early alchemical compositions display literary ambitions that have been overlooked and downplayed (as implied in Festugière’s phrase) in previous scholarship. Experimentation does not seem restricted to technical operations: these writings are themselves experiments that result in elaborate and inventive compositions. I investigate in detail what this shift to a literary interpretation entails for four early alchemical works, namely the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (Chapter I), the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (Chapter II), *On the Letter Omega* by Zosimus of Panopolis (Chapter III), and *Memoirs 10-12* by the same author (Chapter IV). Each chapter starts with a brief introduction to the work’s dating, transmission, and contents, followed by an analysis of how each writing in question approaches conventional textual forms in both expected and unexpected ways. I then proceed to a close reading of each composition, when the reader is given the chance to relish each writing’s peculiarity and language as it unfolds. Finally, contextual parallels are drawn in order to enrich interpretation. The first chapter demonstrates how the *Letter from Isis to Horus* incorporates motifs found in Hermetism, Greco-Egyptian magic, and Jewish magic and scripture (*1 Enoch*) in a way of its own. The second chapter looks into how the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* creates a peculiar scene of knowledge transmission by narrating an encounter between the Egyptian ruler Cleopatra and the Persian magus Ostanès that lies between a philosophical dialogue and a Christian sermon. The third chapter investigates how Zosimus’ *On the Letter Omega* tries to harmonise various doctrines explicitly attributed to different cultural backgrounds, revealing the highly eclectic milieu of late antique Egypt already suggested by the works analysed in the first two chapters. The fourth chapter examines Zosimus’ eclectic and inventive writing style displayed in his dream narratives, which stylise a number of motifs found in scripture, Hermetism, and other traditions of revealed knowledge with surreal, disorienting prose. By mixing these various elements together with a language of secrecy and intellectual inquiry, I argue, these works become strange yet intriguing compositions that compel the reader to partake in the search for alchemical knowledge each of them prompts in different yet related ways.

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations of the names of ancient authors and their works follow the conventions of *LSJ* and *OLD* (see below).

- ACE* Schwartz, E., ed., 1914-1984. *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- CAAG Intr.* Berthelot, M. & Ch.-Ém., eds., 1887-1888. *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs - Introduction*. Paris: G. Steinheil.
- CAAG Gr.* Berthelot, M. & Ch.-Ém., eds., 1887-1888. *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs - Texte grec*. Paris: G. Steinheil.
- CAAG Transl.* Berthelot, M. & Ch.-Ém., eds., 1887-1888. *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs - Traduction*. Paris: G. Steinheil.
- CCAG* Kroll, W. *et al.*, eds., 1898-1953. *Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum*. 12 vols. Brussels: H. Lamertin.
- CH* Nock, A.D. & Festugière, A.J., eds., 1945-1954. *Corpus Hermeticum*. 4 vols. Paris: Belles Lettres.
- CIL* 1963-. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*.
- CMA* Berthelot, M., Duval, R. *et al.*, eds., 1893. *La Chimie au moyen âge*. 3 vols. Paris: Imprimerie nationale.
- CMAG* Bidez, J., Cumont, F. *et al.*, eds., 1924-32. *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs*. 8 vols. Brussels: M. Lamertin.
- CPG* Geerard, M. & Glorie, F. *et al.*, 1974-1987. *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*. 6 vols. Turnhout: Brepols.
- EGM* Fowler, R.L., 2000-13. *Early Greek Mythography*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hermetica* Scott, W. & Ferguson, A.S., 1924-1936. *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- IK* 1972-. *Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien*.
- LSJ* Liddell, H.G. & Scott, R., 1925-40. *Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th edition, rev. H. S. Jones; Suppl. by E. A. Barber *et al.*, 1968. Oxford.
- Mem.* Mertens, M., 1995. *Les Alchimistes grecs. Tome IV: Zosime de Panopolis. Mémoires authentiques*. Paris: Belles Lettres.
- NHC* *Nag Hammadi codices*.
- OA* Berthelot, M., 1885. *Les Origines de l'alchimie*. Paris: G. Steinheil.
- OCD*⁴ Hornblower, S., Spawforth, A. & Eidinow, E., eds., 2012. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 4th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- OLD* Glare, P.G.W., 2012. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- PEG Orph.* Bernabé, A., 2012. *Poetae epici Graeci. Testimonia et fragmenta. Orphicorum et Orphicis similium testimonia et fragmenta*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter.
- PGM* Preisendanz, K. *et al.*, 1973-4. *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*. 2 vols. 2nd edition. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner.
- RE* Pauly, A., Wissowa, G. & Kroll, W., 1893-. *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler.
- RHT* Festugière, A.J., 1944-1954. *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*. 4 vols. Paris: Lecoffre.

- RICIS* Bricault, L., 2005. *Recueil des inscriptions concernant les cultes isiaques*. 3 vols. Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres.
- RIGLE* Letronne, M., 1842-1848. *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines de l'Égypte*. Paris: Imprimerie royale.
- Suda* Adler, A., 1928-1938. *Suidae Lexicon*. Leipzig: B.G. Teubner.
- TLG* *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

Introduction

What mattered to ancient alchemy?

Alchemy has always been, and probably always will be, a contentious topic. Its historiography attests the most disparate views about its value, nature and concerns. Newman (2011, p. 313) mentions views among post-Second World War Scientific Revolution historians that well exemplify a tendency to the extreme: alchemy is “a pathology of thought” (Dijksterhuis, 1961, p. 160) and “the greatest obstacle to the development of rational chemistry” (Hall, 1962, p. 310). In fact, a lot of the heat regarding the history of alchemy is concentrated in the debate on where alchemy ends and where chemistry begins, and even on the validity of making this distinction in texts prior to the late seventeenth century (Newman & Principe, 1998). While Jung’s influential works on alchemy (*Zosimus’ Visions* and *On the Letter Omega* included) as deeply related to “the processes of the collective unconscious” (1967, p. 4) added psychology to a field over which a number of disciplines already disputed, scholars like Newman and Principe worked hard on purging alchemy of interpretations too influenced by what they consider “Victorian occultism” that tend to obscure alchemy’s scientific concerns – among which they include Jung’s.²

The particular case of ancient alchemy is no less complex.³ One may start from the fact that the term ‘alchemy’ is anachronistic when applied to ancient evidence (Grimes, 2018, p. 19). The term does not appear until the Middle Ages, when Arabic-speaking authors are believed to have added the definite article *al* to the Greek word for “the art of alloying

² Newman & Principe (1998); Principe & Newman (2001); Newman (2011); Principe (2013).

³ A lot of the following literature review on ancient alchemy is indebted to Grimes (2018, pp. 19-24 and pp. 29-77).

metals” (*LSJ*), spelled χημεία or χυμεία – which, in turn, may have derived from the verb χέω in its meaning of ‘to smelt metal’ (Halleux, 1979, p. 46). The Diocletian ban on the writings of Egyptians on the *chēmia* of gold and silver (*Suda* δ 1156 & χ 280) adds to speculations about an Egyptian origin for the term, which some consider to derive “from the ancient Egyptian word *km* (‘black’) or *kmt* (‘black earth’)” (Grimes, 2018, p. 20) – in which case, the word could possibly pay tribute to its birthplace, “the black, fertile land along the Nile” (*ibid.*). In short, the very term ‘alchemy’ seems as difficult to pinpoint as the topic to which it refers.

The anachronism in applying the term ‘alchemy’ to the ancient texts here addressed may at times imply an effort to impose narratives on these works that are not necessarily appropriate to them. The following outlines two of these narratives and their limitations. One narrative is that ancient alchemy is concerned with gold-making. Another one is that ancient alchemy depends heavily on Greek natural philosophy. This is followed by a proposition that some of these ancient texts have clear literary ambitions that have been largely overlooked, albeit acknowledged, by previous scholars.

(i) Technical concerns

One of the most widespread beliefs about alchemy in the popular imagination is that one of its top priorities is promoting metal transmutation, and in particular making gold. Yet more thorough consideration shows that this is a limited notion about what alchemy was concerned with until as late as the eighteenth century – as Newman and Principe (1998) have forensically demonstrated, early modern alchemists had concerns ranging from mineralogical to pharmaceutical. As Grimes (2018, p. 44) indicates, when Needham (1974, vol. 5 pt. 2, p. 10) introduced the distinction between “aurifaction” (gold-making) and “aurifiction” (gold-faking), he mentions Greco-Egyptian alchemists as invested in

‘aurifaction’, claiming that they “were probably *not* professional metallurgists, but rather philosophers who erroneously believed that they were making real gold” (Grimes, 2018, p. 45).

As an example of this belief, Needham mentions passages from *Natural and Secret Questions* (hereafter *PM*) by Ps.-Democritus (first century CE; see Martelli, 2013, p. 29) containing statements of the sort “and you will have gold” (καὶ ἔξεις χρυσόν, *PM* 5.71-72). However, Grimes (2018, p. 45) observes that when looked at more closely, these passages seem to be about gold-colouring rather than gold-making *proper*. This can be inferred from the Ps.-Democritus statement above when put back into context:⁴

λαβὼν ὑδράργυρον, πῆξον τῷ τῆς μαγνησίας σώματι, ἢ τῷ τοῦ Ἰταλικοῦ στίμεως σώματι, ἢ θείῳ ἀπύρῳ, ἢ ἀφροσελήνῳ, ἢ τιτάνῳ ὀπτῷ, ἢ στυπτηρίᾳ τῇ ἀπὸ Μήλου, ἢ ἀρσενικῷ, ἢ ὡς ἐπινοεῖς. καὶ ἐπίβαλλε λευκὴν γενομένην χαλκῷ, καὶ ἔξεις χαλκὸν ἀσκίαστον. **ξανθὴν δὲ ἐπίβαλλε ἀργύρῳ, καὶ ἔξεις χρυσόν·** χρυσῷ, καὶ ἔσται χρυσοκόραλλος σωματωθεῖσα. (*PM* 5.67-72)

Take mercury and make it solid with the body of *magnēsia*, or with the body of Italian stibnite, or with unburnt sulphur, or with moon foam, or with roasted lime, or with alum from Melos, or with orpiment, or according to your knowledge. When it [i.e. mercury] turns white, put it on copper, and you will have ‘shadowless’ copper. [**When the mercury turns yellow, put it on silver and you will have gold;** on gold, and it will be solid gold coral.

Martelli (2013, p. 217 n. 25) gathers from the above that “the various ingredients listed by Ps.-Democritus (...) could react with the small amounts of silver or copper usually mixed with gold and produce a superficial, coloured patina”. The choice of the verb ἐπίβαλλω (‘to cast upon/to put on’) to describe the interaction between the compound and the metals indeed indicates an awareness that the process would change the metals’ outer appearance rather than turn them into something else.

⁴ All text and translations of Ps.-Democritus’ works here used are by Martelli (2013), with occasional modifications.

There is another passage in Ps.-Democritus where the text's ambiguous wording ultimately points to a process of colouring rather than transforming:

πυρίτην οἰκονόμει ἕως οὗ γένηται ἄκαυστος, ἀποβαλὼν τὴν μελανίαν· οἰκονόμει δὲ ὀξάλμη, ἢ οὐρῶ ἀφθόρῳ, ἢ θαλάσση, ἢ ὀξυμέλιτι, ἢ ὡς ἐπινοεῖς, καὶ ὄπτησον ἕως οὗ γένηται ὡς ψῆγμα χρυσοῦ ἄκαυστον. καὶ ἐὰν γένηται,⁵ πρόσμιξον αὐτῷ θεῖον ἄπυρον, ἢ στυπτηρίαν ξανθὴν, ἢ ὄχραν Ἀττικὴν, ἢ ὡς ἐπινοεῖς. καὶ ἐπίβαλλε ἀργύρῳ διὰ⁶ τὸν χρυσόν, καὶ χρυσῶ διὰ τὸ χρυσοκογχύλιον. ἢ γὰρ φύσις τὴν φύσιν κρατεῖ. (PM 7.83-89)

Process pyrite until it becomes incombustible, losing its blackness: process it with vinegar and brine, or pure urine, or seawater, or honey and vinegar, or according to your knowledge; roast it until it becomes like incombustible gold-dust. And if it becomes so, mix with it unburnt sulphur, or yellow alum, or Attic ochre, or according to your knowledge. Put it on silver in order to have gold and on gold in order to have gold shell. For nature masters nature.

Here, we again find instructions to make a compound that one is to “cast upon” (ἐπίβαλλε) metals. The very fact that the process of making the compound is described in much more detail than the change each metal would then undergo shows that the focus here is on the dyeing compound and its capacities rather than the metals themselves. Even more telling is the fact that the outcome of laying this compound on gold is called “gold shell” (χρυσοκογχύλιον) – a word only attested in the alchemical *corpus* (Martelli, 2013, p. 220 n. 32). This application of the term ‘shell’ (κογχύλιον) seems quite illustrative of the idea of enveloping something rather than changing its nature.

While Ps.-Democritus' recipes are somewhat discreet about their aims, some recipes in the papyri are known for talking about counterfeiting quite overtly.⁷ A recipe for obtaining silver (ἄσημος) in one of the alchemical papyri promises that it would make it look as if it

⁵ καὶ ἐὰν γένηται might refer to back to “gold-dust” (ψῆγμα χρυσοῦ), and it might be that the result is thought to have been achieved already. If that is the case, Prof. Hutchinson suggests that an addition might be necessary, e.g. ἐὰν (μὴ) γένηται.

⁶ This is a slightly odd use of διὰ, which occurs immediately afterwards (διὰ τὸ χρυσοκογχύλιον). Martelli (2013, p. 89) indicates that the literal translation of the phrases would be “for the sake of gold” and “for the sake of gold shell”, respectively. He opts for the more natural-sounding “in order to have...” for both cases, which I maintain above.

⁷ The two examples to follow are mentioned by Grimes (2018, p. 44).

were of the highest quality, to the point of escaping even craftspeople's notice (ἔσται ὡς πρῶτον ἄσημον, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς τεχνίτας λαθεῖν, *Leiden* 39).⁸ Another recipe (*Leiden* 37) aims to make copper look like gold and not let it be given away either by the test of fire or by rubbing on stone (ὥστε φαίνεσθαι τὰ χαλκᾶ χρυσᾶ. καὶ οὔτε τῆ πυρώσει οὔτε τῆ παρατρίψει τῆ πρὸς τὸν λίθον ἐλέγχεσθαι), and to produce the appearance above all on a ring (ποιεῖν δὲ μάλιστα ἐπὶ τὸν δακτύλιον τὴν φαντασίαν). The term φαντασία is amusingly ambiguous here, as it can refer simply to the metal's appearance or more cunningly to the illusion it is intended to create.

In any case, a discussion too focused on techniques for gold-making/gold-faking comes with the risk of misrepresenting what the ancient recipes amount to as a whole. As mentioned before, alchemists showcase more varied ambitions than that. Halleux (1981, p. 35) observes that the majority of the recipes in the alchemical *Leiden* and *Stockholm* papyri are related to silver rather than gold. Beyond a restrictively metallurgical aim, the *Leiden* papyrus contains various recipes for producing (often gold/silver-based) inks one can use to write on papyrus or parchment (γράφει εἰς βιβλία καὶ διφθέρας, *Leiden* 71). Stones and textile dyes are also a concern (see Halleux, 1981, pp. 43-52), and they also feature among the interests of Ps.-Democritus (see Martelli, 2013). In short, what one calls 'ancient alchemy' was a craft that covered a wide range of technical interests marked with less unawareness of what was being achieved than some may have recognised. The notion that its practitioners were naïve, clueless philosophers chimerically trying to make gold seems naïve in itself.

⁸ Scholars have different views about what ἄσημος means. Berthelot, on the one hand, claims that it derives from the Egyptian word *asem*, which would have referred to electrum (a gold and silver alloy). Halleux (1981, pp. 35-38) sticks to the Greek, explaining that the word is in origin an adjective meaning 'unmarked, uncoined', but that in monetary ateliers and treasury inventories designated metals not coined into money. As time went by, its meaning became more specialised, referring only to uncoined silver.

(ii) Philosophical concerns

While other scholars are more cautious when talking about the technical aims these texts convey, they may at times misleadingly overlay or misplace the part played by Greek philosophy in them. An influential example is that of Hopkins (1934), whose book title unabashedly takes its stand on what alchemy was about (*Alchemy: Child of Greek Philosophy*). Despite acknowledging that many of the techniques described in early alchemy are for dyeing metals and indebted to Egyptian metallurgy techniques (*ibid.*, pp. 38-50), Hopkins argues that it was Greek philosophy that provided the theoretical framework for what was missing in practice:

But it sometimes happens, as in this case, that the art develops almost too rapidly and in consequence products unexpected and perhaps undesired are brought out. These products, coming as a surprise, need to be explained, but centuries of development may be required before scientific knowledge in its slow advance can formulate the explanation looked for. This was illustrated with regard to metal work in Egypt. (...) In Egypt, however, in the Alexandrian age, an attempt was made to clear up this mystery and to this end Greek philosophy and popular theories were available and were invoked. The application thus made was alchemy – a form of philosophy applied to technique. (Hopkins, 1934, pp. 1-2)

This view is also adopted by Festugière about ten years later:

L'alchimie gréco-égyptienne (...) est née de la rencontre d'un fait et d'une doctrine. Le fait est la pratique, traditionnelle en Égypte, des arts de l'orfèvrerie. La doctrine est un mélange de philosophie grecque, empruntée surtout à Platon et à Aristote, et de rêveries mystiques. (*RHT* 1:218-219)

In fact, the names of Greek philosophers do appear in the corpus, as well as some of their language. Viano (2005, p. 93) reminds us that a *Souda* entry says that Zosimus wrote a life of Plato (*Souda* ζ 168), and that Zosimus himself calls Plato “thrice-great” in *On the*

Letter Omega (see Chapter III). Plato, Viano (*ibid.*, p. 99) argues, may also be an influence on the formula that expresses the alchemical law of sympathies among substances: “nature delights in nature, nature conquers nature, nature masters nature” (ἡ φύσις τῆ φύσει τέρπεται, καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ, καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν κρατεῖ). Versions of this formula appear several times in Ps.-Democritus’ *PM* and *On the Making of Silver* (hereafter *AP*), as well as in most of the writings addressed in the following chapters; the terms νικάω and κρατέω are used in the *Timaeus* to describe how elements transform one another (e.g. *Tim.* 56e, Viano, 2005, p. 99 n. 43).⁹ The attribution of one of the earliest alchemical works known to us to Democritus, as well as the fact that the alchemists at times refer to themselves as philosophers (see e.g. the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* in Chapter II), clearly suits this argument as well.

Not until more recently has this great stress on Greek philosophy been put into question. It has been criticised not only for its implied assumption that “Near Eastern artisans had no theoretical underpinning to their work until Greek philosophy came along” (Grimes, 2018, p. 53), as if the Egyptians were completely in the dark until enlightened by the Greeks, but also for the lack of substantial support when a closer examination of the Greek corpus takes place. For instance, Viano observes that, although a considerable amount of early alchemical material is attributed to Democritus, his atomism is hardly a presence there (2005, p. 92 n. 6). While acknowledging the overlaps of the alchemists’ uses of πνεῦμα and the aforementioned law of sympathy with Stoic notions, Viano also observes that Stoic

⁹ Even though one of the most important primary sources for the law (namely Firm. Mat. 4. 22.2) is astrological and associated with the name of the magus Ostances: “Nechepso, the most just ruler of Egypt, and moreover a most excellent astronomer, collected together, by means of decans themselves, all the vices and virtues, and showed what illness each decan brought to pass, because one nature is subjected by another and one god to another. Thus from contrary natures and contrary powers he found cures for all illnesses by the teaching of divine reason” (*sic et Nechepso, iustissimus Aegypti imperator et astrologus valde bonus, per ipsos decanos omnia vitia valetudinesque collegit ostendens quam valetudinem qui decanus efficeret, et quia natura alia natura vincitur et quia deum frequenter alius deus vincit, ex contrariis naturis et ex contrariis potestatibus omnium aegritudinem medelas divinae rationis magisteriis invenit*). The English translation is in Fraser (1972, vol. 2, p. 443).

philosophers are never mentioned in the alchemical corpus, making it “difficile de parler d’une influence directe” (*ibid.*).

By taking a closer look at the alchemical corpus, Viano (2005) and Dufault (2015) convincingly argue that more robust philosophical reflections are a later development of the alchemical tradition, one that started with Zosimus and the commentators (Viano, 2005, p. 96). For instance, it is through the commentator Olympiodorus (ca. sixth century)¹⁰ that one hears of Zosimus referring to the bodies as fusible substances (τὰ μὲν σώματα λέγει εἶναι τὰ χυτά, *CAAG Gr.* 89.14-15) – the term χυτός, Viano (2005, p. 97) implies, may be borrowed from Plato’s distinction of two physical states of water as liquid and fusible (ὕγρον and χυτόν, *Tim.* 58d). Viano (*ibid.*, pp. 94-95 & n. 20) also mentions a passage from the alchemical corpus (*CAAG Gr.* 206.6-7) where Zosimus would have referred to the four causes of Aristotle, to which the alchemist would have added two others by Plato – but the passage in question was actually misattributed to Zosimus by Berthelot and Ruelle (Dufault, 2015, p. 226; Mertens, 1995, p. 266). Dufault (2015, pp. 227-228) adds that, although Zosimus seems to have an awareness of the Aristotelian distinction between power and potentiality (δύναμις and ἐνέργεια) when the terms appear side by side in *Mem.* 2 2.16,¹¹ the alchemist normally uses ἐνέργεια “to refer to a process of an operation and... the action of substances” (*ibid.*, p. 228). As for δύναμις, Dufault mentions numerous examples where Zosimus uses the term “to mean the power or efficacy of a drug” (*ibid.*), which points more to a medical and technical tradition than a philosophical one (*ibid.*).

These observations signal that we might be on the verge of a paradigm shift in the study of ancient alchemy. As recently stated by Koutalis, Martelli and Merianos (2018, p. 18), “there are indeed good reasons for thinking that late antique alchemy was not the mere

¹⁰ Not confirmed to be the same as the philosopher and commentator Olympiodorus of Alexandria (see Dufault, 2015, p. 215 n. 1 and Martelli, 2013, p. 50 – they both refer to Viano, 2006).

¹¹ *Mem.* 2, however, has been “diversement maltraité par les copistes et les compilateurs” (Mertens, 1995, p. 121), and therefore its contents may be unreliable (Dufault, 2015, p. 228 n. 58).

outcome of a re-evaluation of the Egyptian craft traditions through the lens of the Greek philosophical heritage”. While these investigations by Viano and Dufault confirm that ancient alchemists show some influence from Greek philosophy in their language, there is a lack of evidence that this influence amounted to a system or a theory of the craft. The use of names of Greek philosophers and some of their terms could be, to some extent, rhetorical: it may have been in the ancient alchemists’ interest to sound philosophical rather than create a philosophical system. It seems that it was not just their fellow craftspeople that these alchemists tricked by making one thing look like another (see *Leiden 37* above): their very means of expression seems to have an element of deceptive φαντασία.

(iii) Literary ambition

Now it is time to address other aspects of ancient alchemical writings that Festugière put under the possibly disdainful label of “*rêveries mystiques*” (*RHT* 1:218-219). These narrative, rather surreal passages, often tinted with a language of spirituality, are always what both fascinates and bemuses the reader the most. Not surprisingly, these are also the passages that tend to cause the most controversy among scholars, leading to a turf war across disciplines. Theologians see religion and ritual practice; psychologists see inner experiences; historians of science see science hidden in metaphor. Much of the disagreement boils down to the fact that these passages are vividly strange and mysterious, or mystifyingly extravagant. Their bewildering nature tends to trigger some level of suspicion, followed by an instinct to find an explanation beyond what is immediately presented.

An interesting case is the following passage from Ps.-Democritus:

εἰ γὰρ καὶ τέθνηκεν ἡμῶν ὁ διδάσκαλος, μηδέπω ἡμῶν τελειωθέντων, ἀλλ’ ἔτι περὶ τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τῆς ὕλης ἀπασχολουμένων, ἐξ Ἄιδου τοῦτον φέρειν ἐπειρώμην· ὡς δὲ εἰς τοῦτο ὄρμησα, εὐθὺς παρεκάλεσα λέγων· « παρέχεις δωρεὰς ἐμοί, ἀνθ’ ὧν ἀπείρασμαι εἰς σέ»;

καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν¹² ἐσιώπα. ὡς δὲ πολλὰ παρεκάλουν ἠρώτων θ' ὅπως ἀρμόσω τὰς φύσεις, ἔφησέ μοι δύσκολον λέγειν, οὐκ ἐπιτρέποντος αὐτῷ τοῦ δαίμονος. μόνον δὲ εἶπεν· «αἱ βίβλοι ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ εἰσιν». ἀναστρέψας εἰς τὸ ἱερόν ἐγενόμην ἐρευνήσων, εἴπερ δυναθῆναι εὐπορήσαι τῶν βιβλίων· οὔτε γὰρ περιῶν τῷ βίῳ ταῦτα εἰρήκει· ἀδιάθετος γὰρ ὢν ἐτελεύτα, ὡς μὲν τινὲς φασιν, δηλητηρίῳ χρησάμενος διὰ¹³ ἀπαλλαγὴν ψυχῆς ἐκ τοῦ σώματος, ὡς δὲ ὁ υἱὸς φησιν, ἀπροσδοκῆτως ἐσιώμενος, ἦν δὲ πρὸ τῆς τελευτῆς ἀσφαλισάμενος μόνον τῷ υἱῷ φανήσεσθαι τὰς βίβλους, εἰ τὴν πρώτην ὑπερβῆ ἡλικίαν· τούτων δὲ οὐδεὶς οὐδὲν ἡμῶν ἠπίστατο. ὡς οὖν ἐρευνήσαντες εὔρομεν οὐδέν, δεινὸν ὑπέστημεν κάματον ἔστε ἂν συνουσιωθῶσι καὶ συνεισκριθῶσιν αἱ οὐσίαι καὶ αἱ φύσεις. ὡς δὲ ἐτελειώσαμεν τὰς συνθέσεις τῆς ὕλης, χρόνου τινὸς ἐνστάτος καὶ πανηγύρεως οὔσης ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ πάντες ἡμεῖς εἰσιτώμεθα· ὡς οὖν ἦμεν ἐν τῷ ναῷ, ἐξ αὐτομάτου στήλη τις [κίων ἦν· ἦ] διαρρήγνυται, ἦν ἡμεῖς ἐωρῶμεν ἔνδον οὐδὲν ἔχουσαν. ἴδὲ δὲ οὐτ' ἂν τις ἔφασκεν ἐν αὐτῇ τὰς πατρώας τεθησαυρίσθαι βίβλους, καὶ προκομίσας εἰς μέσον ἦγαγεν. ἐγκύψαντες δὲ ἐθαυμάζομεν ὅτι μηδὲν ἦμεν παραλείψαντες· πλὴν τοῦτον τὸν λόγον εὔρομεν ἐκεῖ πάνυ χρήσιμον· ἡ φύσις τῇ φύσει τέρπεται, καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ, καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν κρατεῖ. ἐθαυμάσαμεν πάνυ ὅτι ἐν ὀλίγῳ λόγῳ πᾶσαν συνήγαγε τὴν γραφήν. (PM 3)

Since our master died before our initiation was completed, while we were still devoted to investigating matter, I tried to conjure him from Hades. As soon as I was ready to do it, I immediately conjured him up by saying: “Are you giving me any gift in return for what I did for you?” So I spoke, but he kept silence. Since I conjured him several times asking how to combine natures, he replied to me that it was difficult to speak, because he was not allowed to do so by his daemon. He told me only: “The books are in the temple.” I came back to the temple and prepared to explore it in the hope of finding the books. He had not spoken about them when he was alive and he died intestate: some people claim that he swallowed a poison for separating soul from body; according to his son, he died suddenly during a banquet. But before dying he made sure that the books would have been shown only to his son after he had passed his first age [i.e. his childhood]: none of us knew anything about these things. Since we did not find anything despite our searches, we worked very hard to make substances and natures mix together and to bring them into aggregation. When we accomplished the combinations of matter, after a little while a festival took place in the temple and all of us joined the banquet. We were in the *sancta sanctorum* when a block of stone broke up by itself, which at first sight did not contain anything inside. But (...) said that the books of his father had been preserved within this column, and he took them out and showed them to us all. Peering [into the books] we were surprised [to find] that we had not neglected anything, except this very helpful saying that we found there: “Nature delights in nature, nature conquers nature, nature masters nature.” We marvelled greatly at how he had summarized all his work in such a short saying. (PM 3)

This fantastical and “detailed first-person narrative” (Martelli, 2013, p. 213 n. 21) is in sharp contrast with the rest of Ps.-Democritus’ mainly instructional work. Two main factors have led some to question the authenticity of this passage: “the corrupt and dubious reading of some passages” (Martelli, 2013, p. 213 n. 21), and the fact that later accounts of Ps.-Democritus being initiated into alchemical knowledge lack many of the above details. For

¹² Anacoluthon for εἰπόντος.

¹³ This is another unusual use of διὰ; see n. 6.

instance, in his commentary on Ps.-Democritus' work, Synesius (ca. mid-late fourth century CE; see Martelli, 2013, pp. 50-51) provides a much more pedestrian account of the initiation:

ἐν ᾧ οὖν πρόκειται ἡμῖν εἰπεῖν τίς ἂν εἴη ὁ ἀνὴρ ἐκεῖνος, ὁ φιλόσοφος Δημόκριτος, ἐλθὼν ἀπὸ Ἀβδήρων, φυσικὸς ὢν καὶ πάντα τὰ φυσικὰ ἐρευνήσας (...). ἐγένετο δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ λογιώτατος, ὃς ἐλθὼν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ ἐμυσταγωγῆθη ὑπὸ τοῦ μεγάλου Ὀστάνου ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῆς Μέμφεως σὺν τε πᾶσι τοῖς ἱερεῦσι Αἰγύπτου. (...) Λέγω δὴ· τὰς ἀφορμὰς λαβὼν, συνεγράψατο παρὰ τοῦ μεγάλου Ὀστάνου. Ἐκεῖνος γὰρ ἦν πρῶτος ὁ γράψας ὅτι ἡ φύσις τῆ φύσει τέρπεται καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν κρατεῖ καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς. (*Syn. Alch.* 1)¹⁴

Therefore we set forth right now to say who was that famous man, the philosopher Democritus: he came from Abdera and as a natural philosopher he investigated all natural questions (...); the man became very learned: he went to Egypt, and was initiated in the temple of Memphis along with all Egyptian priests by the great Ostanos. (...) I stress this point: he wrote by taking his basic principles from the great Ostanos. For he was the first to write that nature delights in nature, and nature masters nature, and nature conquers nature, and so on.

Ps.-Democritus' master is also identified with Ostanos in a passage from Zosimus that discusses technical issues (*CAAG Gr.* 197.5-18; see Martelli, 2013, p. 70). Later in the ninth century, Syncellus (*Chron.* 297) also provides a more succinct and down-to-earth account of the initiation: Ps.-Democritus was initiated into the mysteries by Ostanos (μυηθεὶς ὑπὸ Ὀστάνου) in the temple of Memphis with other priests and philosophers (ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῆς Μέμφεως σὺν ἄλλοις ἱερεῦσι καὶ φιλοσόφοις). Recognising that “the available sources do not allow us to answer the question definitely” (Martelli, 2013, p. 70), Martelli finds middle ground by suggesting the possibility that an account of Ps.-Democritus' initiation may have featured in his work, and that “later interpolations by anonymous readers perhaps expanded this original narrative ‘nucleus’” (Martelli, 2013, p. 214).

However, the assumption that the authenticity of a story depends on later authors recalling it in its most minute details is disputable, especially when “no anachronistic

¹⁴ Text Martelli (2013); translation Martelli (2013) modified.

elements preclude this passage from dating back to the same period” of Ps.-Democritus’ book (Martelli, 2013, p. 214). Firstly, the fact the later accounts do not contradict the one in Ps.-Democritus seems to have been underplayed: both Synesius and Syncellus talk of an initiation in a temple; both later accounts inform that Ps.-Democritus was not initiated alone, when the narrator of *PM* 3 mentions a number of people involved in alchemical practice; and Synesius also mentions Ps.-Democritus’ learning principles from his master, including the alchemical formula of the law of sympathy mentioned in the anecdote from *PM* 3. Secondly, there may have been a number of reasons for the later authors to have deliberately omitted some of the details of the original account. They might have simply wanted to provide a briefer or less personal account of the philosopher’s initiation; or they might have tried to strip down the story of its most imaginative elements (such as the conjuring up of the master from Hades and the shocking breaking of the column by itself) under the belief that they were squeezing the facts out of the legend; or, given the far more Christian environment in which they were writing, they might have preferred to smooth out the most overtly pagan embellishments of the story. Thirdly, assuming that *PM* 3 was indeed an interpolation, it would be surprising that it does not mention Ostanes as the master, given the extent to which this storyline seems to be widespread at a later stage by Zosimus’, Synesius’ and Syncellus’ accounts alike.

In light of the above, one may wonder whether the details of the story that go unmentioned by the later authors would have been received with the same scepticism if they had a less imaginative quality. Would scholars raise their brows as vigorously if Ps.-Democritus’ master had left him a letter instead of having been conjured up from the dead, or if Ps.-Democritus had casually found the book in the temple library rather than having witnessed a column mysteriously breaking up by itself to reveal it? Would a corrupt recipe, instead of an anecdote, be subject to such close scrutiny? While it is ultimately impossible

to prove whether this passage was or was not an original part of Ps.-Democritus' book in all of its details, the result of the debate over its authenticity is a lack of engagement with its most compelling literary traits. The abruptness with which Ps.-Democritus transitions from wondrous narrative to dry technical instructions may be awkward, but as the following chapters will show, this is not an isolated occurrence in alchemical writings.

Another common response to the most outlandish passages of texts left by ancient alchemists is trying to 'decode' them. A classic example is Zosimus' dream visions, a group of three texts (*Mem.* 10-12 – see Chapter IV) where the alchemist narrates bizarre dreams for which he provides overly vague and succinct technical interpretations during his waking states in between. On the one hand, many elements of the dreams obviously point to technical procedures: Zosimus is confronted with an altar in the shape of a phial (the φιάλη appears quite often in drawings of alchemical apparatuses and is mentioned by Zosimus himself);¹⁵ the phial is filled with boiling water; he sees a “copper man” holding a lead tablet (*Mem.* 10 3.61-62). On the other hand, other more puzzling elements – such as the fact that the copper man asks for each of the people burning alive in the phial to look up with their mouths open until their uvulas have grown (ἐπιτρέπω... τὰς ὄψεις (ἔχειν) ἄνω καὶ τὰ στόματα ὑμῶν ἀνεωγμένα ἕως ἂν αὐξήσῃ ἡ σταφυλὴ ὑμῶν, *Mem.* 10.3 63-67) – have been seen as more complex encrypted information to be cracked.

However, as Chapter IV demonstrates in more detail, most attempts at decoding Zosimus' *Memoirs* 10-12 showcase great speculations and small rewards. As eloquently put by Dufault regarding Zosimus' dream-texts:

¹⁵ For drawings of alchemical apparatuses, both from manuscripts and conjectural, see Mertens (1995, pp. cxiii-clii). Zosimus mentions the φιάλη a number of times in *Mem.* 7 as being on top of the *kērotakis* (a type of hot plate, often associated with Maria the Jewess), the precise uses of which are not entirely clear from the evidence left. Some of the uses of the *kērotakis* seem to have been heating up substances in low heat and promoting colour changes on the products treated in it (Mertens, *ibid.*, pp. cxxx-clii).

Reading his allegories as simple codes for the beliefs he held would force a deductive and systematic reading onto a form of writing that most evidently avoided the systematisation of what he called ‘demonstrative reasoning’ (*logos apodeiktikos*) and which he could also have used if he wished. Allegorical writing for Zosimus was a careful way of relating different processes without reducing the phenomena to a single and coherent system of explanation. (Dufault, 2015, p. 243)

However helpful these scholars’ associations between the dreams’ images and technical procedures are, there is an undeniable limit to them. One would be downplaying the allegorical issue in Zosimus by saying that “some of the most allegorical writings (...) can be sensitively ‘decoded’ and the chemical effects reproduced in a modern laboratory” (Newman & Principe, 2001, p. 406). While Newman and Principe’s statement concerns early modern alchemy, it is certainly not this simple with ancient alchemy. For this period in time, it is sometimes impossible for the modern reader to identify even substances referred to straightforwardly; when this is possible, the substances “pouvaient contenir des impuretés modifiant le résultat final de la réaction” (Mertens, 1983-4, p. 117 and Halleux, 1981, p. 33). If one can only speculate about what ancient practitioners were really doing when their experiments are presented fairly descriptively, one cannot assume that each element of Zosimus’ dreams can be broken down to steps for technical procedures.

This is not to say that attempts at ‘decoding’ Zosimus’ writings are ultimately pointless, but rather that an exaggerated focus on looking for what may be lying behind the language overlooks what is at the language’s surface: Zosimus was a craftsman *and* a creative writer. This also seems true of the anonymous authors of the other works analysed in the following. In fact, the coexistence of these two aspects seems to be one of the reasons why these authors have left such a confounding legacy, where the lines between fact and fiction get quite blurry. If a recipe from the Stockholm papyrus, on the one hand, advises the reader to keep a recipe secret because of its exceptional beauty (τήρει ἀπόκρυφον πρᾶγμα. ἔστιν γὰρ καὶ εὐανθῆς ὑπερβολῆ, *P. Holm.* 106.727-729), the narrative of the *Letter*

from Isis to Horus, on the other hand, embellishes the advice of secrecy by making it come from a mysterious angel who teaches the goddess Isis the mysteries of the preparation of gold and silver (see Chapter I). An approach solely invested in ‘unmasking’ the technician behind these writings’ inventiveness resists to engage with their weirdness, and as a result underappreciates their literary achievements. The following chapters try to take a close look at these works as elaborate, multi-faceted compositions, and will hopefully convince the reader that they are more than just instructional pamphlets in disguise.

The textual tradition

(i) The papyri

The two extant alchemical papyri that are known to us have already been mentioned: the Leiden and the Stockholm papyri (*P. Leid. X* and *P. Holm.*, respectively). Their place of origin is uncertain, but the earliest publications of the former claim, “sans doute d’après les registres d’inventaire” (Halleux, 1981, p. 5), that the Leiden papyrus originates from Egyptian Thebes. As both the Leiden and Stockholm papyri belong to the same collection, and their handwriting suggests that they were written by the same scribe or group of scribes (Lagercrantz, 1913, p. 51; see Halleux, 1981, p. 9), it is assumed that *P. Holm* would originate from Thebes as well. The date of these papyri is difficult to infer on the basis of their calligraphy, as their “beautiful uncial” is atypical (Halleux, *ibid.*, p. 22). Scholars have made slightly different cases spanning from the late third to the late fourth centuries CE (*ibid.*, p. 22). Based on the facts that the Stockholm papyrus mentions Julius Africanus’ Κεστοί (230 CE) and that the frequent use of the term ‘unmarked silver’ (ἄσημος) to denote silver in the Leiden papyrus may be “une précaution à l’égard de la législation sur la fausse

monnaie, qui est renforcée au début du IV^e siècle” (*ibid.*, p. 23), Halleux argues that they both date from the time of Constantine.¹⁶

As previously mentioned, these papyri are quite different from the material to be focussed on in the present thesis; they do, however, belong together in a broader context. Although the specifically Theban provenance of these compositions cannot be confirmed,¹⁷ their orthographic mistakes are indicative of an Egyptian provenance:

En fait, la plus grande partie de ces confusions provient des habitudes phonétiques du grec parlé en Égypte à l'époque romaine. Elles sont abondamment attestés dans les papyrus documentaires: iotacisme (confusions ει, ι, η, υ, οι), étacisme (ε, η, αι), confusion entre brève et longue (ο, ω), entre simple et géminée (σ, σσ), entre sourde et sonore (κ, γ), voyelles d'anaptyxe. (Halleux, 1981, pp. 12-13)

The subsequent investigation of the alchemical writings here selected points to a similar Greek-speaking Egyptian background. Furthermore, the technical, hands-on recipe style of these papyri also appears towards the end of the otherwise predominantly literary *Letter from Isis to Horus*, discussed in Chapter I, and Zosimus' *Memoir* 10 (whose author may in fact be a contemporary of these papyri), discussed in Chapter IV.

Despite the unambiguously technical focus of the Leiden and Stockholm papyri standing in stark contrast to the narrative, literary focus of the alchemical works here addressed, they are not entirely detached from this phenomenon. Firstly, these papyri's predominant interest in recipes relating to gold, silver, stones, and dyes is the same that features in Ps.-Democritus' works, which do make room for narrative and rhetorically

¹⁶ For a codicological description and more detailed analysis of the hand(s) of both papyri, see Halleux (1981, pp. 6-12). See also Lippmann (1919-1954, vol. 1, pp. 1-27) and Lagercrantz (1913 – Stockholm papyrus only).

¹⁷ Cf. Dosoo (2016) for a recent and thorough analysis of the hypothesis that these and other papyri form the so-called 'Theban Magical Library'.

elaborate moments.¹⁸ In fact, one recipe from the Stockholm papyrus is explicitly attributed to Democritus (P. Holm. 2; see Martelli, 2013, p. 6): the papyri do not seem have derived their recipes from recipe-only books. Secondly, these papyri also happen to be codices, a form normally used for literary texts (Halleux, 1981, p. 27). Although the codex form could be justified from a practical standpoint because it would allow easier access to the recipes by a practitioner at work (*ibid.*), these papyri “ne portent aucune trace d’un frequent usage. (...) Ce sont des copies de bibliothèque” (*ibid.*).¹⁹ Thirdly, as briefly mentioned above (see Chapter I for more details), these papyri seem to be by the same hand behind *PGM* 13. The subsequent chapters will demonstrate that magic and the alchemical works here analysed often cross paths. In short, the Leiden and Stockholm papyri reveal more of the context which informs the literary choices of the texts here addressed than may at first appear.

(ii) The main manuscripts

Apart from the Leiden and Stockholm papyri, one must turn to the Byzantine anthologies for ancient alchemical literature. Its textual transmission is known for having been erratic: many of these works have been epitomised throughout history (Martelli, 2013, pp. 1-2), and some of them present considerable variations from manuscript to manuscript. What follows is a general introduction to the main manuscripts through which the texts selected in this thesis have been transmitted; some specific transmission issues, when relevant, are discussed within the chapters themselves.²⁰ A much more thorough analysis of these and many more manuscripts can be found in the extensive *CMAG*.

¹⁸ See above and *PM* 15-16, where Ps.-Democritus makes an exalted eulogy of nature, followed by a short but exasperated speech against certain craftspeople.

¹⁹ See Martelli (2011), who demonstrates a lack of clear evidence about the places where early alchemists would carry out their procedures in comparison to the considerable amount of references to what he calls the “‘intellectual side’ of alchemy” (*ibid.*, p. 310), in particular the consultation of books. He draws attention to the fact that the Leiden and Stockholm papyri never make any mention of the kind of space where their recipes would have been put into practice (*ibid.*, pp. 280-281).

²⁰ The following discussion of the main manuscripts is entirely based on Mertens (1995, pp. xxii-xliii).

Marcianus graecus 299 (**M**), which dates from the tenth-eleventh century, is the earliest extant manuscript containing alchemical works. This manuscript has two characteristics that affect some of the texts here addressed. One of them is that the manuscript has suffered many changes throughout the years: **M** has been reassembled in a disorderly way at some point, and numerous gatherings and some folios are missing (Mertens, 1995, pp. xxii-xxiii). This is evident from the inconsistencies between the manuscript's table of contents and the material that follows it (*ibid.* with further bibliography). Another characteristic is that **M** has two versions of Zosimus' *Memoirs* (*ibid.*, p. xlix); I follow Mertens in referring to one of these versions as **M'**, and to the rest of the manuscript as **M** (*ibid.*, where one can find a summary of and speculations about these variations). Of the writings here discussed, this manuscript has *Cleopatra*, Zosimus' *On the Letter Omega* (only in **M'**) and *Mem.* 10 (in **M** & first paragraph only in **M'**).

Parisinus graecus 2325 (**B**), which dates from the thirteenth century, is the earliest of the Parisian family of manuscripts (Mertens, 1995, p. xxix). This manuscript is badly preserved: the ink is faded at several places, and some folios have holes in them (*ibid.*, p. xxx). Although a lot of the content of **B** matches that of **M**, **B** tends to focus more on technical aspects (*ibid.*), leading Mertens to suppose that **B** was probably composed as a "manuel d'atelier" (*ibid.*). Not surprisingly, then, this is the manuscript that features the least amount of material with which the present thesis is concerned: it contains only the first paragraph of Zosimus' *Memoir* 10.

Finally, *Parisinus graecus* 2327 (**A**) is the only manuscript here addressed that can be traced back to a specific date. A colophon informs that it was copied in Crete by a certain Theodoros Pelecanos in June of 1478 (see Mertens, 1995, p. xxxii, who quotes the colophon and provides detailed contextualisation). Mertens proposes that **A** has a common source to **B**, but discards the possibility of the former being a copy of the latter (*ibid.*, p. xxxvii). This

manuscript features all the alchemical writings investigated in the subsequent chapters apart from Zosimus' *On the Letter Omega*.

Chapter One

The *Letter from Isis to Horus*

La singularité de l'œuvre se marque aussi dans son contenu mythologique. La figure d'Isis, l'angéologie scabreuse, le mécanisme de la révélation, ne correspondent pas aux traditions communes. Il aura fallu une longue et patiente enquête dans les littératures ésotériques pour en découvrir traces et allusions.
Michèle Mertens (1983-4), p. iv.

1.1) The Text

(i) Dating, transmission, overview

Halleux (1979, p. 61) lists this very peculiar text together with the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (Chapter II) among the earliest extant alchemical texts – i.e. the ones which would have been written sometime before those by Zosimus of Panopolis (late third/early fourth century CE) and after those by Ps.-Democritus (second half of the first century CE; see Martelli, 2013, pp. 29-30). Halleux does not elaborate much on his reasons for such dating, claiming that “on se trouve (...) réduit au jeu des citations croisées à l'intérieur du *Corpus*” (Halleux, 1979, p. 61). In her Master's dissertation on the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (the most recent and reliable edition and translation of the text, as well as its most extensive study), Mertens (1983-4, pp. 124-126) offers more precise evidence for the timeframe proposed by Halleux. She argues for a handful of allusions to Ps.-Democritus' *Natural and Secret Questions* in the second half of the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (see Mertens, 1983-4, pp. 113-116) that amounts to a fairly convincing *terminus post quem*. As a *terminus ante quem*, she follows Festugière (*RHT* 1:256) in mentioning a Zosimus

quotation in Syncellus (*Chron.* 24) with striking echoes of the story Isis tells in the first half of the text (see **1.2** below).

It is also Mertens (1983-4, pp. 2-25) who provides the most detailed account of the textual transmission of the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (hereafter *Isis to Horus*), including a stemma (*ibid.*, p. 25). The text is known to have been transmitted in seventeen manuscripts dating from the late fifteenth up to the nineteenth century, out of which Mertens had access to thirteen (*ibid.*, pp. 3-6). These are divided into two families “d’importance et de valeur fort inégales” (*ibid.*, p. 7), both of which probably have **A** (*Parisinus* 2327 – see Introduction) as the earliest extant specimen. The first family (excluding **A**) has nine manuscripts, while the second, much smaller family consists only of *Parisini Graeci* 2250 (**La**) and 2329 (**E**) – the former derives directly from the latter (*ibid.*, p. 23). As for **E**, its comparison with **A** provides ambiguous evidence: while the majority of **E**’s writings seem connected to **A**, the scribe seems to have left several blank pages that were filled with later additions, among which is a very different version of *Isis to Horus* (*ibid.*). Mertens (*ibid.*, pp. 23-24) considers these differences to be corrections and improvements “dont devait être capable un humaniste du XVIIe siècle désespérant de comprendre le texte de A (rempli, il faut le reconnaître, de bizarreries et d’incohérences) et désireux d’en donner une version claire et intelligible”.

Below is a summary of what takes place in *Isis to Horus*:

§ 1: Isis tells Horus that, as he was about to leave in order to contend against Typhon, she spent a long time in Hormanouthis in Egypt.

§ 2: While in Hormanouthis, Isis is visited by an angel who desires her sexually. Isis resists him and mentions her interest in learning the preparation of gold and silver. The angel says that a more important angel, called Amnael, would come the next day in order to bring a solution to her search regarding these things.

§ 3-6.1: Amnael comes down and also desires Isis, who again refuses to yield until he reveals to Isis her searched-for mysteries. After revealing the mysteries, he declares a series of adjurations. Amnael asks Isis to communicate these things to no one except a beloved and legitimate son.

§ 6.2-7: Isis instructs Horus to observe and learn from the farmer Acharas that “one sows what one reaps”, a statement that Isis tautologically rephrases.

§ 8: Those who were illuminated by these statements achieved their goal. This, Isis says, is the mystery made manifest.

§ 9-17: The actual recipes start, with the description of ingredients, quantities, and procedures.

The letter can be divided roughly into two parts. While § 1-8 is an earnest, atmospheric account of how the transmission of alchemical knowledge from Amnael to Isis took place, § 9-17 predominantly consists of flat and down-to-earth instructions on technical procedures. The division of both parts is quite balanced (eight paragraphs for the first and nine for the second), assigning equal importance to the more literary portrayal of how alchemical knowledge is attained and to more practical aspects of alchemical knowledge itself. After discussing the text’s use of the epistolary form and providing a close reading mainly of its first half, the present chapter argues that the literary features of *Isis to Horus* are not only given as much prominence as its technical ones, but also that these same literary features can be linked with some of the technical concerns of alchemy.

(ii) The epistolary form

The following tries to answer the following questions: 1) why a letter? and 2) why a letter from Isis to Horus? The addressing of these two questions is interwoven with a third, more intriguing one: what is distinctive about the use of this form in *Isis to Horus*?

As for the first question, tradition shows that the use of the epistolary form for the transmission of alchemical knowledge from parent to child can be an unsurprising, if not underwhelming choice. Letters tend to be seen as facilitators of communication (Morello & Morrison, 2007, p. vi) and “associated with a relatively simple communication style” (*ibid.*), and thus have been widely used for the transmission of knowledge in general, be it philosophical, scientific, or technical.²¹ Parental relationships often appear in ancient letters as well (e.g. the elder Cato and his son Marcus, Cic. *Off.* 1.37),²² alongside the relationship between teacher and pupil (e.g. Seneca and Lucilius). “The differences in power, competence, or technical expertise which can be dramatized in such role-playing”, Morello and Morrison argue, “make the letter form especially suited for the transmission of knowledge (...), and (...) one of the strongest affinities of the epistle is with a variety of didactic traditions” (*ibid.*). This is particularly true towards the second half of *Isis to Horus*, where the language of learning (μάθε ἀπὸ τοῦ... μάθης, *Isis to Horus* 6.2.45-46) and instructing (N.B. the astounding number of imperatives from *Isis to Horus* 6.2 onwards) is quite noticeable.

However much *Isis to Horus* fits the above in staging knowledge transmission and a parental relationship, there are at least two aspects of this composition that make it stand out among other ancient letters. The first is that *Isis to Horus* challenges the association between

²¹ For epistolarity and scientific/technical knowledge (especially medicine), see Langslow (2007).

²² Also Philip and Alexander (Cic. *Off.* 2.48) and Antigonos and Philip (Cic. *Off.* 2.53). See Gibson & Morrison (2007).

letters and a simple and easy style. The revelatory part of *Isis to Horus*, as will be demonstrated shortly, is complex and abstruse to the point that, were it not for its second half, the choice of the epistolary form would go from predictable to nearly mystifying. To the counterargument that this could be justified by the not uncommon phenomenon of “letters serving as dedications, or prefaces, separate from the principal work that follows” (Langslow in Morello & Morrison, 2007, p. 215),²³ it should be considered that even the most technical moments of *Isis to Horus* contain rather vague and bewildering statements, such as “reflect, child, upon the mystery of the widow’s drug” (νοήσον οὖν τὸ μυστήριον, τέκνον, τοῦ φαρμάκου τῆς χήρας, *Isis to Horus* 16.2.115-16) and the already mentioned alchemical formula “for nature delights in nature, and nature conquers nature” (ἡ γὰρ φύσις τῇ φῦσει τέρπεται καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ, *Isis to Horus* 7.2.54-5).²⁴

The second aspect that makes *Isis to Horus* quite different from other instances of ancient letters is the unique casting of sender and recipient. While parental relationships are quite common in epistolary literature, *Isis to Horus* seems to be the only surviving instance in antiquity of a letter that is written as sent from one god to another.²⁵ This brings us to the second question: why a letter from Isis to Horus? The answer lies in the Hermetic tradition: there are five texts in the *Corpus Hermeticum* that depict knowledge transmission from Isis to Horus (*CH* 23-27). Festugière was the first to make the connection between these and the

²³ And Isis indeed calls the tale of her revelation a preface: ταῦτα, τέκνον, διὰ **προοίμιον** ἀκηκοώς, ἐννόησον τούτων ὅλην δημιουργίαν τε καὶ γέννησιν... (*Isis to Horus* 7.1.48-50). For prefaces, prologues, and proems of technical/scientific works, see Santini & Scivoletto (1990-1998).

²⁴ See Introduction (esp. n. 9) & Mertens (1983-4, pp. 113-115).

²⁵ However, there is a mention of a letter from Isis to a prince warrior named Arianes in a first-century CE Oxyrhynchus papyrus (P. Oxy. 5481, edited by Professors Peter J. Parsons and Lucia Prauscello in Gonis *et al.*, 2020, pp. 18-29). The narrative in the papyrus also mentions the conflict with Typhon referred to in *Isis to Horus* and seems to mention Joseph (or “Oseph”; the reading is uncertain) – there are biblical themes in *Isis to Horus* to be discussed in the present chapter. These thematic links between the two writings, however loose, might suggest that *Isis to Horus* belongs to larger narrative clusters circulating in Egypt in the first centuries of the Common Era. Many thanks to Prof. Prauscello for a stimulating presentation about this papyrus at the Research Seminar on Greek fragmentary texts (Classics Faculty, University of Oxford - Michaelmas Term/2020) and for subsequent interactions about the edition.

letter, including *Isis to Horus* in a group of texts that became known as the “technical Hermetica”.²⁶ Even though Hermes is not given any particular emphasis in the epistle itself (he is mentioned just once and alongside many other divine and semi-divine figures adjured in an oath, *Isis to Horus* 5.2.36-37), Festugière confidently claims that it “peut être rapporté à Hermès avec certitude” (*RHT* 1:241). His statement is based not only on how “la tradition hermétique (...) met en scène Isis enseignant son fils” (*RHT* 1:254), but also on how Zosimus attributes an instruction very similar to one from *Isis to Horus* (παρελθὼν οὖν σκόπησον καὶ ἐρώτησον Ἀχάραν τὸν γεωργόν... καὶ μάθῃς ὁ σπείρων τὸν σῖτον σῖτον καὶ θερίσει, *Isis to Horus* 6.2.44-47) to Hermes (Ἐρμῆν λέγοντα. Ἐπελθε πρὸς Ἀχάαβ τὸν γεωργόν, καὶ μαθήσῃ ὡς ὁ σπείρων σῖτον σῖτον γεννᾷ, *CAAG Gr.* 89.9-10; see Mertens, 1983-4, p. 112). How these and other links with Hermetism can inform us about the presentation of alchemical knowledge and its transmission in *Isis to Horus* and beyond is a much bigger question, one that is addressed separately below (see **1.2**). For the moment, it suffices to say that alchemy seems quite invested in portraying itself as more than a merely technical field.

Yet the transmission of knowledge from Isis to Horus in the Hermetic Corpus is always conveyed as a dialogue – a form not alien to alchemical literature (see Chapter II on the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra*). This brings us back to the first question, but from a new angle: why a letter over a dialogue?²⁷ This may be due to another effect a letter can have on the reader, one that Morello and Morrison have called “eavesdropping” (*ibid.*, p. vi): reading something in letter form may cause readers to feel as if they were entering a private world. The epistle has an intrinsic advantage over the dialogue in this

²⁶ These assorted texts are collected in the first volume of his monumental *La Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste* (1944-1954 = *RHT*). Unlike the philosophical Hermetica, there is no concrete evidence that the technical ones circulated as a collection in antiquity (see Fowden, 1993, pp. 1-4).

²⁷ Both forms have been associated since ancient times, e.g. Artemon *ap.* Demetr. *Eloc.* 223 (see Bishop, 2018, p. 228).

regard. While a fictional dialogue recreates, in written form, an act of communication that would have originally occurred in person, in a different place and time, a fictional letter reproduces the actual written medium through which the act of communication would have taken place: the illusion of ‘breaking into’ one’s world is much stronger. This effect fits perfectly with the aura of secrecy created in the revelatory section of *Isis to Horus*: Amnael instructs Isis to transmit his secrets to Horus and no one else (*Isis to Horus* 6.1), and yet the letter gives the reader a chance to take a peek.

The epistolary *topos* that opens *Isis to Horus* can be illustrative in that regard. Isis starts the letter by mentioning the separation between her recipient and herself, saying that Horus was on the verge of contending with Typhon (μέλλοντος... ἐπ’ ἀπίστου Τυφῶνος μάχης καταγωνίσασθαι, *Isis to Horus* 1.1.1-3)²⁸ while she was close to Hormanouthis in Egypt (γενναμένης μου (πρὸς) Ὁρμανουθί, (...) ἱερᾶς τέχνης Αἰγύπτου, *Isis to Horus* 1.1.3-4). The casual ‘myth-dropping’ of Horus’ revenge for his father’s death has an interesting double-edged effect: while it gives the text the more ‘relaxed’ tone often found in letters, it makes it clear that the interaction in question is an exchange between gods invested in god-related businesses. The fact that a big mythological event is talked about almost as if it were an errand to be run enhances the “eavesdropping” effect allowed by the letter form: the remote, grandiose world of gods suddenly becomes intimate, almost pedestrian.

A contrast emerges: while the letter form gives the reader a chance to spy on the businesses of gods, Isis’ convoluted and disorienting narrative, as well as some of her instructions, might make the contents of the letter seem impenetrable. This contrast relates to an important argument of the present thesis, namely that one of the most distinct features

²⁸ Prof. Hutchinson observes that an object is expected for καταγωνίσασθαι, and that the use of ἐπί with the genitive is unexpected here; he suggests the emendation ἐπὶ (τῷ τὸν ἄ)πιστον Τυφῶνα μάχη καταγωνίσασθαι as a possibility. For περί, see Luc. *VH* 2.22.

of early alchemical texts is that they create an environment where the reader is constantly teased by the giving and withholding of information. Enough is provided for one to be lured into the realm of alchemical knowledge, but not enough for one's sense of search to be immediately satisfied. Indeed, a prolonging of this sense of search is part of how the revelatory experience is described by Isis herself: she needs to deny the sexual advances of the first angel, wait for the second one to arrive the next day, deny the sexual advances of the second one, to only then be offered the revelation of the **searched-for** mysteries of preparing gold and silver (τὴν τῶν **ζητουμένων** μυστηρίων παράδοσιν, *Isis to Horus* 4.29-30).

Hopefully the above answers the proposed questions successfully. On the one hand, the letter form is a rather conventional choice for staging the transmission of many knowledge forms. *Isis to Horus* is anything but innovative in portraying a parental, didactic relationship in an epistle. Furthermore, the text gives the impression of an awareness of the epistolary tradition in which it is inserted by using the *topos* of the separation between sender and recipient, and by describing its first, non-technical half as a preface. On the other hand, *Isis to Horus* confounds expectations by how, to put it simply, it is at times very hard to follow: there is a strange vagueness and complexity even in its much more straightforward second half. It is also very peculiar in having Isis and Horus as sender and recipient – a nod to Hermetism that deserves special attention (see **1.2** below). Yet the very choice of the letter form is a twist in the Hermetic model, which always stages the communication between Isis and Horus as a dialogue. The advantages of this shift show that the epistle is a convenient medium for *Isis to Horus* to bring out tensions alchemical texts always build: it enhances a mysterious atmosphere by telling a tale of knowledge that should be transmitted to Horus and Horus alone – knowledge to which the reader feels privileged to be given access. *Isis to Horus* achieves this “eavesdropping” effect that letters facilitate in a very specific way: by

mixing unpretentious, informative passages with others that are self-important yet cryptic, one is seduced to listen harder.

(iii) Close reading

The mixture of convention and singularity one notices in the letter's use of the epistolary form will prove to be a recurring theme throughout the present analysis of *Isis to Horus*. The letter's artifice seems to lie in a quirky reworking and combining of themes that, as **1.2** below argues, may have been familiar in its milieu. While one could argue that it would be more profitable to have the context preceding and thus informing the close reading, analyses of specific early alchemical works have often been dissolved in a large pool of context where one can hardly see them for themselves anymore. Therefore, each chapter of the present thesis starts with the closest engagement possible with the text as it unfolds, bringing in a moderate number of external references when they prove to be relevant tools for an immediate interpretation of the primary material, and only later ponders on the text's relationship with its larger cultural and literary environment.

The beginning of the letter already contains this amusing combination of more and less usual elements. On the one hand, Isis is described as a prophetess (Ἴσις προφητις τῷ υἱῷ Ὁρῶ, *Isis to Horus* 1.1.1), a term not known to have been applied to the Egyptian goddess elsewhere.²⁹ On the other hand, Mertens (1983-4, p. 55) observes that variations of the term are at times used in reference to specialists “in the occult sciences” and notably by alchemists to refer to themselves and their knowledge (*ibid.*, pp. 55-56).³⁰ While this is

²⁹ Mertens (1983-4, p. 54) refers to the catalogue of Isis' epithets in Dunand (1973, vol. 3, pp. 337-340).

³⁰ She mentions that Ps.-Democritus uses συμπροφηται (*PM* 15.155); that Zosimus says that Ps.-Democritus and the ancient alchemists “hold first place in the prophetic domain” (τὰ πρωτεῖα ἐν προφητικῇ, *CAAG Gr.*

undeniably at play here, the fact that Isis is just about to have knowledge revealed to her by an angel shows that there is more to the use of προφήτις than just a convention of the field: there is the additional effect of giving a scriptural flavour to the revelation framed within the Hermetic-sounding transmission of knowledge from Isis to Horus.³¹

What immediately follows, however, is full of pagan references. Isis' mention that Horus is about to fight Typhon for his father's throne reminds one of Zeus' battle against the same monster (Hes. *Th.* 820-885) that resulted in Zeus reigning over the gods.³² Yet the reference is much more accurately explained by the identification between Typhon and Seth,³³ the brother and murderer of Horus' father, Osiris – an identification that thrived “above all in the Greek Magical Papyri” (Ogden, 2013, p. 78).³⁴ Sometimes they are mentioned side by side (e.g. *PGM* 3.87 and 14.20), at other times completely assimilated: this is the case of the fourth-century papyrus that also mentions the quarrel between Horus and the “godless Typhon”: “I am Horos the Great, (...) son of Osiris and Isis. I want to flee the godless Typhon” (ἐγώ εἰμι Ὁρος ὁ μέγας... υἱὸς τοῦ Ὀσίρεως καὶ τῆς Ἰσιδος. βούλομαι δὲ φυγεῖν τὸν ἄθεον Τυφῶνα (*PGM* 36.317-319 – N.B. ἀπίστου Τυφῶνος in *Isis to Horus* 1.1.2).³⁵

This combination of elements is placed in a setting that is familiar and unfamiliar at once. While Horus was busy revenging his father's murder, Isis arrived near Hormanouthis,

240); that the “whitening has become an object of worship on the part of every prophet” (ἡ λεύκωσις σεβασμία γέγονε παντὸς προφήτου, *CAAG Gr.* 114). See also Mertens (1989a).

³¹ I do not use ‘scriptural’ here “in the narrow sense of a closed canonical collection” (Meyer & Pagels in Meyer, 2007, p. 1), but “in the broader sense of texts composed, read, translated, and copied as books recognized as inspired – and inspiring – for those seeking God” (*ibid.*).

³² Interestingly, the aftermath of the battle between Zeus and Typhon is described with two metallurgy similes: part of the earth melted like tin or iron (see Hes. *Th.* 861-866).

³³ From at least the classical period (Hecat. *FGrHist* 1 F 300 = Hdt. 2.144.2; *EGM* 2:28); see also Pachoumi (2017, p. 143, esp. n. 439).

³⁴ For the magical papyri here mentioned with relation to Typhon-Seth, see Pachoumi (2017, pp. 143-150).

³⁵ See suggested emendation in n. 28. However, Prof. Hutchinson observes that ἄπιστος might be too weak for the context of physical combat.

the place of (?) “the sacred art (i.e. alchemy) of Egypt” (γενναμένης μου (πρὸς) Ὁρμανουθί, (...) ἱερᾶς τέχνης Αἰγύπτου, *Isis to Horus* 1.1.3-4),³⁶ a location not attested anywhere else and over which much ink has been spilled with little success.³⁷ The possibility that the place is deliberately fictitious or obscure should not be discarded: the places of origin of revelations are often “savage and remote” (Scopello in Meyer, 2007, p. 313) and even imaginary, like the mountain of Jericho in the Revelation of Paul from the Nag Hammadi Codices (*NHC* 5.2; see Scopello in Meyer, 2007, p. 313). The anonymous author did make sure, however, that Hormanouthis was set in Egypt: an obvious setting not only for the Egyptian goddess, but also for one among the προφήται to practice the sacred art of alchemy (see Introduction).

It is appropriate for an art described as “sacred” to be associated with sacred beings.

Isis’ first encounter with an angel is described as follows:

κατὰ δὲ τὴν τῶν καιρῶν παραχώρησιν καὶ τὴν τῆς σφαιρικῆς κινήσεως ἀναγκαίαν φοράν, συνέβη τινὰ τῶν ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ στερεώματι διατριβόντων, ἓνα τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἄνωθεν ἐπιθεωρήσαντά με, βουληθῆναι τῆς πρὸς ἐμὲ μίξεως κοινωνίαν ποιῆσαι. φθάσαντος δὲ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς τοῦτο γίνεσθαι μέλλοντος, οὐκ ἐπέτρεπον ἐγώ, πυνθάνεσθαι βουλομένη τὴν τοῦ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου κατασκευήν.
ἐμοῦ δὲ τοῦτο αὐτῷ ἐρωτησάσης, (οὐκ) ἔφη ὁ αὐτὸς³⁸ ἐφίεσθαι περὶ τοῦτο ἐξείπειν, διὰ τὴν τῶν μυστηρίων ὑπερβολήν, τῇ δὲ ἐξῆς ἡμέρα παραγίγνεσθαι τὸν τούτου μείζονα ἄγγελον

³⁶ Ὁρμανουθί, (...) ἱερᾶς τέχνης Αἰγύπτου (*Isis to Horus* 1.1.4); the term ruling the genitive is missing (Mertens, 1983-4, p. 56), but is probably “un terme comme « ville », « haut lieu », « métropole », « capitale » de l’art sacré d’Egypte” (*ibid.*). See apparatus in Mertens (*ibid.*, p. 128), who leaves a lacuna in the Greek and suggests “haut lieu” (with a question mark) in her translation.

³⁷ As Mertens (1983-4, pp. 56-58) explains, Reitzenstein (1904, p. 141 n. 3) corrects the name to Ὁρμαχουθί, which he translates as “Horus vor Edfu”, a city that would have been referred to as Apollinopolis (Ἀπολλωνόπολις) and that could then be connected with an Ἀπόλενος listed among Egyptian cities where metallurgical activities would take place (*CAAG Gr.* 26): too much explaining is required for an emendation that, just like the original Ὁρμανουθί, is not found elsewhere (see Mertens, 1983-4, p. 57, who adds that the transposing of the phonetic components of “Horus from Edfu” from Egyptian to Greek would not work with Reitzenstein’s proposition either). Berthelot & Ruelle, in turn, maintain Ὁρμανουθί in the Greek (*CAAG Gr.* 29) but translate the term as “Hermonthis” without further explanation. Mertens (*ibid.*, p. 58) considers it unlikely that the well-known Ἑρμώνθις would have been so bizarrely transcribed. Finally, Mertens (*ibid.*, pp. 58-59) makes learned investigations of two other possibilities, but considering neither of them to be fully satisfactory, settles for the feminine Ὁρμανούθις and thus interprets the word to be in the dative.

³⁸ Prof. Hutchinson observes that ὁ could be deleted, or that the passage could be read alternatively: ἐρωτησάσης, ἔφη ο(ὐκ) αὐτὸς... (e.g. *App. BC* 4.43: ἔφη οὐ τῶν παρόντων στιγμάτων αισθάνεσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ μνημονεύειν).

Ἀμναήλ, κάκεϊνον ἰκανὸν εἶναι περὶ τῆς τούτων ζητήσεως ἐπίλυσιν ποιήσασθαι· ἔλεγεν δὲ περὶ σημεῖον αὐτοῦ ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, καὶ ἐπιδείκνυσθαι κεράμιον ἀπίσσωτον ὕδατος διαυγοῦς πλήρες· ἐβούλετο τὸ ἀληθὲς λέγειν. (*Isis to Horus* 1.2 - 2.2)

And in the course of the succession of the seasons and the inexorable course of the spherical movement, it came to pass that one of the angels that resided in the first firmament, having watched me from above, desired to get together with me. He made the first move and was going to proceed to this business, but I would not yield, wishing to learn the preparation of gold and silver. And after I asked him this, he said that he did not want to talk about this himself, given the greatness of the mysteries, and that on the next day the angel Amnael, mightier than him, would come, and that he would be up to providing an explanation about the investigation of these things. He told me about the sign he had on his head,³⁹ and that he would display an unpitched vessel full of translucent water. He wanted to speak the truth.

There is a complex mixture of elements here. The arrival of the angel seems to rely on the astrological notion of the *καταρχαί*, according to which certain actions should be performed when certain celestial bodies are at a certain position (Mertens, 1983-4, p. 71).⁴⁰ The knowledge Isis seeks is technical (τὴν τοῦ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου κατασκευήν), but her search for this knowledge is described as inquisitive and nearly intellectual (πυνθάνεσθαι, ἐρωτησάσης, περὶ τῆς τούτων ζητήσεως ἐπίλυσιν ποιήσασθαι). The term used for how the angel noticed Isis (ἐπιθεωρήσαντά, *Isis to Horus* 1.2.9) indicates a similarly invested mind (the term can also be applied to astrological observations),⁴¹ but ultimately reveals sexual desire (βουληθῆναι τῆς πρὸς ἐμὲ μίξεως κοινωνίαν ποιῆσαι (*Isis to Horus* 1.2.9-10)).⁴² The reference to mysteries, in turn, adds a spiritual dimension to the narrative.

The language used to express the angel's desire for Isis (βουληθῆναι τῆς πρὸς ἐμὲ μίξεως κοινωνίαν ποιῆσαι) may express this very combination of elements. The word *μίξις*

³⁹ Although the context suggests “his”, there is no relative pronoun in the Greek. Prof. Hutchinson observes that there might be some issues with the construction as a whole, as αὐτοῦ seems like an odd occurrence here. He suggests the possible emendation σημεῖον· τοῦτο (or αὐτὸ, which could come first in less highbrow Greek) ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς.

⁴⁰ Mertens refers to Bouché-Leclercq (1899, pp. 458-486), who indicates Hesiod as the cradle of the belief of favourable/unfavourable days (*ibid.*, p. 459; Hes. *Op.* 479-492). In his scholia to the *Works and Days*, Proclus says that Hesiod, by revelation of the muses or the Egyptians, used astrology without either knowing it or confessing it (*ibid.*).

⁴¹ *LSJ* mentions Vett. Vall. 44.31; Gal. 19.541.

⁴² Both *μίξις* and *κοινωνία* can refer to sexual intercourse, and their combined use here reinforces this meaning.

and other related terms appear in a technical sense six times in the second half of *Isis to Horus*:⁴³ the language used in Isis' tale of search for technical knowledge echoes technical knowledge itself. In terms of the eclectic language used by Isis above (and, as it will be shown, in the letter as a whole), μίξις could also be a gentle nod to the very mixture of technical, intellectual, spiritual, astrological, and magical (see 1.2 below) 'ingredients' by means of which alchemical knowledge is presented in the epistle. Finally, the term could also be connected with the cultural mixture this odd encounter between an Egyptian goddess and an angel with a Hebrew-sounding name represents (κοινωνία can also have a more general meaning of 'association' and 'partnership').

Isis' need to wait for the second angel who is to bring an explanation for her searches (ικανὸν εἶναι περὶ τῆς τούτων ζητήσεως ἐπίλυσιν ποιήσασθαι, *Isis to Horus* 1.4.17-18) and the second angel himself are also described with variegated oddity. While the use of ζήτησις and ἐπίλυσις in the same sentence gives a philosophical flavour to Isis' interest in alchemical knowledge, ἐπίλυσις is used in *2 Peter* 1:20-21 in the context of prophecy: "no prophecy comes from [the prophets'] own explanation of scripture, (...) but being carried by the Holy Spirit, humans spoke from God" (πᾶσα προφητεία γραφῆς ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως οὐ γίνεται, (...) ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι). And, being the prophetess that she is (at least here), Isis is to receive alchemical knowledge from a figure that could be seen as a messenger of God: Annael. The name certainly has scriptural undertones, but it is not mentioned anywhere in or out of scripture.⁴⁴ Likewise, the way in which Annael is described as having "a sign on his head" (σημεῖον αὐτοῦ ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, *Isis to Horus* 2.1.19-20 – see n. 39) and "an unpitched vessel full of translucent water" (κεράμιον ἀπίσσωτον ὕδατος διαυγοῦς πλήρες, 2.1.20-21) is quite peculiar.

⁴³ μίξις (9.2.67 and 10.1.72), συμμίξας (9.3.70), συνενωθῆ (11.2.90), and μῖζον (12.2.95 and 14.1.105).

⁴⁴ The only other known occurrence of the name seems to be a much later one, in a nineteenth-century Ethiopian collection of magical prayers (*P. Abbad.* 107, fol. 8b) – see Mertens (1989b, pp. 389 and 396 n. 33).

Mertens argues that Amnael's distinctive attributes are related to cultic activities in Isis' honour. The sign would be a deliberate tattoo or scar, typical of Isis' adepts in cult (1983-4, p. 86); the vessel would refer to the hydra that was carried in her procession (*ibid.*, p. 87).⁴⁵ While there is enough textual and visual evidence of water containers being carried in Isis-related cultic activities,⁴⁶ Mertens's argument for the tattoo/scar on the head is slightly harder to sustain. It seems to rely mostly on an article by Babelon (1941) that investigates a scarred bust from the Cabinet des Médailles (Bibliothèque nationale de France) and a number of others that had been identified with Scipio Africanus, arguing that in truth these would be priests of Isis. This discussion has a long history, and will be summarised in the following.⁴⁷

Images of bald men have been identified as Scipio Africanus since at least the sixteenth century due to a passage in Pliny (*primus omnium radi cotidie instituit Africanus sequens*, *Nat.* 7.59; Queyrel & Veymiers, 2018, p. 387 n. 12). The associations with scars came a bit later, as Ennio Quirino Visconti (see Winckelmann 1783, pp. 306-308 *apud* Queyrel & Veymiers, 2018) refers to a passage in Servius' commentary on Virgil (*nam Scipio Africanus, cum esset annorum vix decem et septem patrem suum defendit in bello; nec cessit nisi viginti septem confossus vulneribus*, *Aen.* 10.800). Bernoulli (1882, pp. 32-60 *apud* Queyrel & Veymiers, 2018) intelligently questioned both claims,⁴⁸ and Dennison (1905 *apud* Queyrel & Veymiers, 2018) later argued that these portraits' shaved heads, together with their cross-shaped marks ("this mark has a religious significance and was placed upon the head to stamp the individual represented as a devotee or priest of a deity",

⁴⁵ See Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 36, Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 6.4.37.1, and Ap. *Met.* 11.11.

⁴⁶ See n. 45; for visual evidence, see Malaise (1972, p. 234.411 and front pl.; p. 251.3 and pl. 35).

⁴⁷ My summary of this discussion is entirely based on the scholarship review by Queyrel & Veymiers (2018). Access to the bibliographical details of Queyrel & Veymiers's account was not accessible due to the library closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore are not mentioned in the final bibliography.

⁴⁸ Firstly, one who shaves daily is not necessarily bald; secondly, Servius seems to be the only source to mention twenty-seven scars, and in fact any scars at all; all portraits, however, contain no more than two scars.

ibid., p. 36) could only point to priests of Isis. Tempting as this newer identification may be, facial scars/tattoos do not seem to have ever been connected to Isis' adepts elsewhere.⁴⁹

However, a much closer parallel to the sign on Amnael's head can be found among the *Greek Magical Papyri*. In a dream request from *PGM* 7.795-845, an angel subordinate to the sun who is to enter (ὁ εἰσερχόμενος ἄγγελος ἡλίῳ ὑποτέτακται καὶ ὡς ὑποτεταγμένος ἡλίῳ εἰσέρχεται *PGM* 7.795-799) has a star on his head (ἔχων ἀστέρα ἑκκλαμπρον ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, *PGM* 7.800 – cf. σημεῖον αὐτοῦ ἔχειν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, *Isis to Horus* 2.1.19-20). Amnael could also have such a relationship with the sun, as the narrative mentions that he arrives at the time when the celestial body is halfway through its course (τοῦ ἡλίου μέσον δρόμου⁵⁰ ποιῶντος, *Isis to Horus* 3.1.22-23), i.e. midday. As Mertens (1983-1984, p. 75) points out, this time is suggested for the effectiveness of a spell elsewhere in the magical papyri (λέγε τὸ ὄνομα ἐπὶ τοῦ ἄγγους ἐπὶ ἡμέρας ζ' ἡλίου μεσουρανοῦντος, *PGM* 4.762-763).

It is also possible that Amnael's unpitched vessel of translucent water could point to something other than an Isiac cult. Here, one may turn to an account of angelic visitation not from the Greco-Egyptian magical tradition, but rather from the biblical tradition – and, in particular, an Egyptian portrayal of it. The story is that of the angel Gabriel visiting Virgin Mary to announce the birth of Jesus (*Luke* 1:26-38) as depicted on a piece of silk that probably originates from Panopolis and dates from around 400 CE (Mcnally, 2002, pp. 145-146) – compellingly, the same location and approximate date often attributed to the alchemist Zosimus (cf. Chapter III). Fittingly known as the 'Mary Silk', this textile features, amongst other images, "one of the first surviving depictions, if not the first, of the

⁴⁹ Dennison (*ibid.*, p. 39 n. 3 *apud* Queyrel & Veymiers, 2018) uses a passage in Tertullian as evidence, but it is actually about Mithraism (*Praesc.* 40.3-4).

⁵⁰ Prof. Hutchinson suggests the variant δρόμων.

Annunciation in any form, and of a rare but significant type, the so-called ‘Virgin at the Spring’” (McNally, 2002, p. 152). Mary holds a jar and kneels “toward a curved outline” (*ibid.*) – the spring – and “looks back over the shoulder at the angel” (*ibid.*), behind whom is “a crescent moon, a star, and something that is probably another star” (*ibid.*).

McNally argues that the designer of the silk “carefully weighed disparate traditions” (2002, p. 163), among which the most relevant to the description of Annael in the epistle are three. Firstly, of the images near the angel’s head, she points out that “the crescent moon and stars also appear frequently on all sorts of amulets, including those that invoke the archangels Michael or Gabriel, familiar figures in Egyptian magic” (*ibid.*, p. 157). Secondly, McNally (*ibid.*, pp. 158-169) argues that the image of chaste Mary kneeling by a spring and being approached by the angel may be a Christian reworking of (that stands in opposition to) images of Auge kneeling by a spring and being approached by Heracles, who is about to rape her (thus undermining Auge’s chastity). Thirdly, the fact that the Annunciation image of the ‘Mary Silk’ stresses the jar rather than the water is “deviant” (*ibid.*, p. 160), and “may reflect an Egyptian milieu, in which waterfalls, sacred or otherwise, would be unfamiliar” (*ibid.*). In different ways, these peculiar aspects of the story point to a design that “makes use of some established iconography (...), but also experiments freely and thoughtfully” (*ibid.*, p. 163), the viewers of which “must have found both assurance and challenge in the mingling of familiar and unfamiliar” (*ibid.*, pp. 163-164).

One wonders whether the narrative of Isis being visited by Annael is a similar type of reworking of the Annunciation scene. This would mean that, in *Isis to Horus*, Isis replaces Mary (close links between Isis’ iconography and that of the Virgin Mary have been found in Egypt – cf. Higgins, 2012), which might partially explain Isis’ refusal of consent to sexual activity. The depiction of a crescent moon and a star close to the angel’s head in the ‘Mary

Silk' and its possible magical associations may strengthen the links between the sign on Amnael's head and religiously loose angelic apparitions of the type one finds in the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri (discussed in more detail in section 1.2 below). Finally, it might be that Mary's water jar left the chaste woman's hands and fell into Amnael's (the spring edited out for the sake of the Egyptian landscape – see above), either intentionally to stand in contrast with the Christian story, or unintentionally as a result of inherited Egyptian reinterpretations among which the 'Mary Silk' would exemplify one of many. Although these are but speculations, the following will show that this experimental, Egyptian-flavoured mixture of pagan and Judeo-Christian elements will prove to be a prominent trait not only of *Isis to Horus*, but of all the alchemical compositions addressed in the present thesis.

Mightier and holder of more important mysteries than the first angel, Amnael is portrayed as being just as self-serving. Amnael is seized by the same yearning for Isis, who resists for the sake of her intellectual pursuit (τῷ αὐτῷ περὶ ἐμὲ ληφθεὶς πόθῳ... ἐγὼ δὲ οὐχ ἤττον ἐφρόντιζον περὶ τούτων ἐρευνᾶν, *Isis to Horus*, 3.2.24-26) – the chaste behaviour also suits the goddess turned inquisitive prophetess. Isis' endurance in resisting Amnael's insistent advances is expressed by means of an insistent prolonging of the narrative: as he took his time, Isis contained Amnael's desire until such time as he showed the sign on his head and bounteously and truthfully transmitted Isis' searched-for mysteries (ἐγγρονίζοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ, οὐκ ἐπεδίδουν ἑαυτήν, ἀλλ' ἐπεκράτουν τῆς τούτου ἐπιθυμίας ἄχρις ἂν τὸ σημεῖον τὸ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἐπιδεικνύηται καὶ τὴν τῶν ζητουμένων μυστηρίων παράδοσιν ἀφθόνως καὶ ἀληθῶς ποιήσῃται, *Isis to Horus* 4.27-31). The higher knowledge is not accessed either through a witty debate in Platonic style or an elevated encounter with the divine, but quite unexpectedly through a very palpable and forcible struggle for self-preservation and power.

To my knowledge, what follows remains a challenge to scholars. Starting from the mysteries and by way of recommendations and oaths, Amnael spoke (τῶν μυστηρίων ἤρχετο, καὶ ἐπὶ παραγγελίας καὶ ὄρκους ἐκχωρήσας ἔλεγεν, *Isis to Horus* 5.1.32-33)⁵¹ the following series of adjurations:

ὀρκίζω σε εἰς οὐρανόν, γῆν, φῶς καὶ σκότος· ὀρκίζω σε εἰς πῦρ καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ ἀέρεα καὶ γῆν· ὀρκίζω σε εἰς ὕψος οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς καὶ Ταρτάρου βάθος· ὀρκίζω σε εἰς Ἑρμῆν καὶ Ἄνουβιν, ὕλαγμα τοῦ Κερβέρου, δράκοντα τὸν φύλακα· ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὸ πορθμεῖον ἐκεῖνο καὶ Ἀχέροντος ναυτίλον· ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὰς τρεῖς Ἀνάγκας καὶ μάστιγας καὶ ξίφος. τούτοις με ἐφορκίσας, παρήγγειλεν μηδενὶ μεταδιδόναι, εἰ μὴ μόνον τέκνω φίλῳ καὶ γνησίῳ, ἵνα ἢ αὐτὸς σύ, καὶ σὺ αὐτός. (*Isis to Horus* 5.2 - 6.1)

I adjure you in the name of the sky, the earth, light and darkness; I adjure you in the name of fire, water, air and earth; I adjure you in the name of the height of the sky and the earth and of Tartarus' depth; I adjure you in the name of Hermes and Anubis, of the bark of Cerberos, of the serpent guarding the temple; I adjure you in the name of that ferry-boat, and the sailor through Acheron; I adjure you in the name of the three Necessities and their whip and sword. Having adjured me with these, he commanded me not to transmit this to anyone except my dear and legitimate child, so that he be you, and you him.

A number of difficulties arise here. Mertens (1983-4, p. 94) draws attention to the peculiar construction ὀρκίζω + εἰς + accusative.⁵² This is far from being the only instance of an unexpected construction in the epistle, which makes Mertens very cautious about proposing changes to the Greek. In search of a fine balance between not eliminating “des faits de langue qui peuvent être significatifs d’une époque ou d’un milieu” (*ibid.*, p. 31) and not attributing to the anonymous author “de grossières erreurs qui ne sont que le fait de copistes” (*ibid.*), Mertens meticulously lists all the linguistic peculiarities of *Isis to Horus* and ponders on each case (*ibid.*, pp. 32-48). Mertens (1988, p. 7) also argues that the oaths mentioned above

⁵¹ When commenting on the letter's grammatical idiosyncrasies, Mertens (1983-4, p. 41) lists ἐκχωρέω among other verbs that are followed by unexpected prepositional constructions: its use with a dative started being replaced by a number of prepositions from the Hellenistic period (*ibid.* with further bibliography), among which εἰς and πρὸς + accusative, “dont il faut ici, semble-t-il, rapprocher ἐπὶ avec l'accusatif” (*ibid.*).

⁵² Delatte (1957, p. 142) considers the construction recent in the Byzantine period. ὀρκίζω is normally followed by either a double accusative or κατὰ + genitive (*ibid.*).

(ὄρκους) here take the form of adjurations said by Amnael for Isis to repeat by replacing ὀρκίζω σε by “I swear to you” (ὄμνυμί σοι). But what is Amnael adjuring Isis (not) to do? One would expect a verb in the infinitive (e.g. *PGM* 4.346-347) or a purpose clause (see below) to specify that (the infinitive requiring secrecy, μηδενὶ μεταδιδόναι, is prompted by παρήγγειλεν), none of which happen.

When it comes to the ὀρκίζω + εἰς + accusative⁵³ construction, Mertens was on the right track in envisaging that some linguistic ‘anomalies’ from *Isis to Horus* could be particular to a time and milieu. This same construction happens to be found in the *Cyranides*, a “mostly Hermetic” (Fowden, 1993, p. 87) magico-medical work dated within the same time frame as *Isis to Horus*, i.e. between the first and the fourth centuries CE (*OCD*⁴ *Cyranides*).⁵⁴ The passage describes a rite in which an eagle is sacrificed in order to bring a cure:

ὦ ἀετέ, φίλε τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, νῦν θύω σε πρὸς παντὸς πάθους θεραπείαν. ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὸν θεὸν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ εἰς τὰ τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα, ἵνα ἐνεργήσης μοι ἐφ’ ἑκαστας θεραπείας ἐν ἧ προσφέρω σε. (*Cyranides* 3.1.21-24 [189 Kaimakis])

Eagle, friend of man, I now kill you for the treatment of all pain. I adjure you in the name of the god of the sky and the earth, and in the name of the four elements, that you be effective for me in each treatment in which I employ you.

The use of the same rare construction found in *Isis to Horus* becomes more suggestive given the fact that the sky and the earth also appear in the adjuration, though introduced by their god (τὸν θεὸν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς γῆς; cf. ὀρκίζω σε εἰς οὐρανόν, γῆν... *Isis to Horus* 5.2.33-34). While the passage differs from the alchemical epistle in that the purpose of the

⁵³ According to a *TLG* search for this construction.

⁵⁴ The Greek text is Kaimakis (1976); all translations of the *Cyranides*, unless otherwise mentioned, are mine.

adjuration is not left unrevealed (ἵνα ἐνεργήσῃς...), it provides further evidence of an engagement between *Isis to Horus* and magical texts (see *supra*). Among these, a similar (yet not identical) syntactical phenomenon occurs: in a charm “for those possessed by daimons” (*PGM* 4.3007-86) where ὀρκίζω σε happens no less than fourteen times, the construction is often repeated from three up to six times before its actual purpose is revealed by a clause. This seems to imply a belief that the very repetition of ὀρκίζω σε contains magical powers⁵⁵ – and so does the way in which the adjurations are presented as an essential and indeed the most extensive part of the magical ritual.⁵⁶

While the above corroborates Mertens’s view that the expression could be used in a particular time and milieu (which here seems composed of individuals interested in alchemy, magic, and Hermetism around late antiquity),⁵⁷ it still does not quite explain why the adjuration does not have any clear aim. For this particular idiosyncrasy of the passage, it might be necessary to swing towards the other side of Mertens’ measuring stick and consider that transmission errors might be at play. Isis mentions that Amnael moves on to admonitions and oaths (παραγγελίας καὶ ὄρκους), leading one to expect admonitions to be followed by oaths. Yet, where one would expect admonitions, one gets incomplete adjurations; where one would expect oaths, one gets Amnael admonishing Isis to transmit nothing to anyone other than her dear and legitimate son, i.e. Horus (παρήγγειλεν μηδενὶ

⁵⁵ The belief in the magical power of utterances in the *PGM* is noticeable in their profuse use of *voces magicae*. Cardoso (2016) has created a database that lists all the *voces magicae* from the *PGM* (including passages in Coptic) and the context in which they appear, which often features the repetition of words and sounds. She also notices occurrences in which there is no syntactic context around the *voces magicae* (*ibid.*, p. 68), which can only mean that “the magical words are entirely responsible for performing the magical operation” (*ibid.*, p. 69). Furthermore, her data shows that invocative expressions (among which ὀρκίζω is included; *ibid.*, pp. 33-36) are the ones that appear around *voces magicae* the most often (56,09% of the time; *ibid.*, p. 26). A more detailed study of the instances of ὀρκίζω in the *PGM* with the help of Cardoso’s database could cast some light on a potential magical purpose of repeating expressions like ὀρκίζω.

⁵⁶ The ritual contains seventy-nine lines, of which the adjurations take sixty lines. See n. 55 above.

⁵⁷ And perhaps astrology: Mertens (1983-4, p. 94 n. 28 and 1989, p. 10 n. 30) mentions a passage from the *CCAG* where an angel is adjured that contains the same structure as in *Isis to Horus*: “administration of an oath for an angel... I adjure you in the name of the god who placed you here to protect this concern” (ὀρκισμὸς τοῦ ἀγγέλου... ὀρκίζω σε εἰς τὸν θεὸν ὅπου σε ἔταξε φυλλάτειν ὥραν ταύτην, *CCAG* 10:80-81). The passage, unfortunately, cannot be dated by any other means than the date of the manuscript itself (Cod. Athen. 1265, sixteenth or seventeenth century; *ibid.*).

μεταδιδόναι, εἰ μὴ μόνον τέκνω φίλω καὶ γησίῳ, *Isis to Horus* 6.1.41-42). It seems quite likely that things have been rearranged in this passage and that others got lost in the process. Even if accidentally, however, this suits Amnael's request for secrecy: at large, the readers are left in ignorance about Isis' and Amnael's exchange.⁵⁸

There are, however, a few mysterious teachings that Isis allows the reader to access. Isis proceeds to admonish Horus to find the farmer Acharas⁵⁹ and learn (μάθε) from him that “one who sows grain also reaps grain, and one who sows barley equally reaps barley” (ὁ σπείρων τὸν σῖτον σῖτον καὶ θερίσει, *Isis to Horus* 6.2.46-47): while the reference to learning, the switch into the second person, and the emphasis on farming all point to a pagan-like didactic mode, the teaching itself echoes the New Testament (ὁ γὰρ ἐὰν σπείρη ἄνθρωπος, τοῦτο καὶ θερίσει, *Gal.* 6:7). Isis then makes a puzzling remark:

ταῦτα, τέκνον, διὰ προοίμιον ἀκηκόως, ἐννόησον τὴν τούτων ὅλην δημιουργίαν τε καὶ γέννησιν, καὶ γῶθι ὅτι ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπον οἶδεν σπείρειν, καὶ ὁ λέων λέοντα, καὶ ὁ κύων κύνα. (*Isis to Horus* 7.1)

Having learned these things, child, thanks to a proem,⁶⁰ reflect upon the whole making and engendering of these things, and know that a person knows how to sow a person, and a lion, a lion, and a dog, a dog.

Isis' mysterious tautologies are justified by what sounds like Aristotle's law of fixity of species: “and if it comes to pass that something is generated against nature, then it is like a monster is engendered” (εἰ δέ τι τῶν παρὰ φύσιν συμβαίνει γενέσθαι, ὥσπερ τέρας γεννᾶται,

⁵⁸ Mertens (1983-4, pp. 93-94; 1988, p. 9) finds Amnael's admonition requiring secrecy comparable to Vettius Valens' requiring his astrological teachings to remain hidden from the “uneducated” (N.B. the verb that introduces the request: ὀρκίζω σε, ἀδελφέ μου τιμώτατε... ἐν ἀποκρύφοις ταῦτα συντηρήσαι καὶ μὴ μεταδοῦναι τοῖς ἀπαιδεύτοις 4.11 Pingree), so the adjurations indeed seem like an incomplete request for Isis to keep quiet about the mysteries. However, closer parallels to Amnael's requirement for secrecy are found elsewhere and discussed in the next section.

⁵⁹ This name does not seem to be attested elsewhere.

⁶⁰ διὰ προοίμιον may figuratively refer to the previous sentence. Prof. Hutchinson observes that διὰ προοίμιον is found and is a variant in some manuscripts (see apparatus in Mertens, 1983-4, p. 132), but one would expect the genitive singular here: διὰ προοίμιου, “by means of a prelude”, could be an alternative reading.

Isis to Horus 7.2.52-53; see Aristotle *Metaph.* Z 1033^b30-3).⁶¹ The repetition of already repetitive statements makes one wonder whether an alchemical teaching hides beneath it all, and Isis confirms this: “For, as I said before, grain begets grain, a person sows a person, and thus **one who sows gold, reaps gold**, and the similar its similar. And now the secret is revealed” (ὡς γὰρ προεἶπον ὅτι ὁ σῖτος σῖτον γεννᾷ καὶ ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπον σπείρει, οὕτως καὶ ὁ σπείρων χρυσόν, χρυσὸν θερίζει, τὸ ὅμοιον τὸ ὅμοιον. ἐφανερῶθη νῦν δὲ⁶² τὸ μυστήριον, *Isis to Horus* 8.3). A moral, religious teaching transforms into a natural, philosophical teaching, and finally into an alchemical one: the secret knowledge that leads to metal alteration appears in the alteration of knowledge itself.

Now that the mystery is revealed, Isis shifts to more mundane, technical instructions. The analysis carried out by Mertens (1983-4, pp. 117-123) identifies six recipes overall (with the product of some being used in others),⁶³ the terminology of which indicates that some conventions among practitioners of alchemy were already at play. In the first recipe, Mertens (*ibid.*, pp. 117-118) observes a similar procedure to solidify quicksilver by using “body of magnesium” (καὶ λαβῶν ὑδράργυρον, πῆξον αὐτήν... διὰ σώματος μαγνησίας, *Isis to Horus* 9.1.65-66) in Ps.-Democritus – indeed, a near quotation of the author (λαβῶν ὑδράργυρον, πῆξον τῷ τῆς μαγνησίας σώματι, *PM* 5.67). The second recipe is for making a certain “white medicine” (φάρμακον λευκόν, *Isis to Horus* 10.3.83, 12.1.93, 14.1.102): a substance claimed to be “the whitening of all bodies” (μίξις λευκοῦ φαρμάκου ὅπερ ἐστὶ λεύκωσις πάντων τῶν σωμάτων, *Isis to Horus* 10.1.72-73) that appears in another work by Ps.-Democritus with the same function of whitening bodies (τὸ φάρμακον τοῦτο λευκαίνει πᾶν

⁶¹ This connection with Aristotle is discussed in more detail in the following section.

⁶² Prof. Hutchinson observes that δὲ is a possibility here.

⁶³ Although, as Mertens points out herself, there are some nearly insurmountable challenges for inferring what the actual results of these procedures would be, as some ingredients cannot be identified and others that are recognisable could contain impurities that may have affected the results (*ibid.*, p. 117).

σῶμα, *AP* 2.13-14; see also *AP*).⁶⁴ One of the ingredients mentioned to produce the “white medicine” is “ashes of kobathia” (σποδιᾶς κοβαθίων, 10.2 82), a substance only attested in alchemical writings (it also appears in Ps.-Democritus’ *AP* 3.21-22 as a whitening substance) that cannot be fully identified (Mertens, 1983-4, p. 120).⁶⁵ In the third recipe, the compound “gold shell” χρυσοκογχύλιον (*Isis to Horus* 13.1.98), that also only occurs in the alchemical *corpus* (Martelli, 2013, p. 220 n. 32), appears again (cf. Ps.-Democritus *PM* 7.89 & Introduction).⁶⁶

This very practical mode is maintained throughout the entire second half of the text, except for the following statement:

ἔγνωσται δὲ ὅτι καὶ τὰ μέλλοντά σοι ῥηθήσεσθαι, διπλώσεις τε καὶ καταβαφαὶ καὶ οἰκονομίαι πᾶσαι καὶ πᾶν ὀτιοῦν, εἰς ἓνα νοῦν καὶ ἓν ἔργον συντείνουσιν. νόησον οὖν τὸ μυστήριον, τέκνον, τοῦ φαρμάκου τῆς χήρας. (*Isis to Horus* 16.1 - 16.2)

It is known that the things that are about to be said to you, doubling, tinctures, all operations and whatever else lead into one meaning and one work. Apprehend the mystery, child, of the widow’s drug.

Mertens (*ibid.*, p. 122) calls this passage “une sorte de conclusion”. In fact, the sharp shift from a practical mode to a reflective one invites the reader to stop and think about the goal of these procedures. The return of the markers of sender (τῆς χήρας – the term can only be referring to Isis as the widow of Osiris) and recipient (τέκνον) would not be a bad way of

⁶⁴ More generally, the occurrence of ξανθὸν φάρμακον (Ps.-Dem. *PM* 13.135) might suggest a more general convention of referring to certain substances by colour + φάρμακον. The term φάρμακον can also have magical associations, meaning an enchanted potion or a charm. The following section contextualises meaningful connections between alchemical and magical literature.

⁶⁵ Martelli (2013, p. 230 n. 8) makes some progress with the evidence and proposes it was a sulphurous substance.

⁶⁶ Mertens (*ibid.*, p. 121) argues that the term χρυσοκογχύλιον “s’applique à un or de qualité supérieure, très pur, ayant une couleur rosée” (and so translates it as “pourpre d’or”, *ibid.*). I align with Martelli (2013, p. 220 n. 32) in seeing “gold shell” as “a specific material prepared by processing gold with substances that changed its mechanical and chromatic properties” which, I argue, appears to have been used for dyeing metals (see Introduction).

ending this missive. There is, however, yet another recipe that follows the passage, one that Mertens (*ibid.*) suggests might have been added by imitation of the last paragraph of Ps.-Democritus' *PM* (the end of *AP* in Martelli, 2013). While the second half of her argument seems to rely only on one phrase of the paragraph (ἡ δὲ αἰθάλη οὕτως αἴρεται, *Isis to Horus* 17.117) that does not quite match the passage in Ps.-Democritus (τῆς νεφέλης καὶ τοῦ ὕδατος ἡ ἄρσις, *AP* 10.86-87), the first half of it seems correct: this recipe does seem like a later addition.

1.2) The Context

*In this document, as in much of the alchemistic literature,
Graeco-Egyptian and Jewish traditions are intermingled.
Walter Scott, *Hermetica* 4:149.*

Many questions arise from the above. Is the dramatisation of knowledge transmission from Isis to Horus the only Hermetic trait in alchemical knowledge this letter contains? What can a comparison between the language of knowledge employed in *Isis to Horus* and Hermetic compositions tell us about alchemical knowledge? How can the parallels between the epistle and magical literature enrich one's understanding of ancient alchemy? What texture do the biblical touches of the composition add to the presentation of alchemical knowledge? These questions are addressed in the following.

(i) Hermetism

It is known that associations between Isis and Hermes in relation to knowledge are not exclusive to the philosophical Hermetica. Plutarch says of Isis that “many have related that she was the daughter of Hermes” (ἔτι πολλοὶ μὲν Ἑρμοῦ... ἱστορήκασιν αὐτὴν θυγατέρα, *Plut. De Is. et Os.* 352a 15-16; see also 355f).⁶⁷ Accordingly, there is a passage in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (= *PGM* 4) where the magician identifies with Hermes⁶⁸ and claims to be Isis’ father (Ἑρμῆς ὁ πρέσβυς, Ἴσιδος πατήρ ἐγώ, *PGM* 4.2290-2291). Griffiths (1970, p. 263) argues that “the idea that Hermes was her father (...) probably arose from the association of Isis with wisdom, a quality which was ascribed especially also to Thoth, who was equated with Hermes.”⁶⁹ The supposition works in Plutarch, who goes to great lengths to praise Isis’ remarkable wisdom (ἐξαρétως σοφὴν καὶ φιλόσοφον οὔσαν, *De Is. et Os.* 2.21-22e), stating that “her name certainly seems to imply that to her more than anyone belong knowledge and understanding” (τοῦνομά γε φράζειν ἔοικε παντὸς μᾶλλον αὐτῇ τὸ εἰδέναι καὶ τὴν ἐπιστήμην προσήκουσαν, 2.22e-1f). In the Isis Aretalogy of Cyme, the goddess’ knowledge is directly associated with Hermes: “I am Isis, the ruler of the whole land, and I was taught by Hermes, and I invented letters with Hermes – both the sacred (i.e. hieroglyphs) and the demotic ones – so that everything is not written with the same letters” (Εἷσις ἐγὼ εἰμι ἢ τύραννος πάσης χώρας· καὶ ἐπαιδεύθην ὑπ[ὸ] Ἑρμοῦ καὶ γράμματα εὔρον μετὰ Ἑρμοῦ, τὰ τε ἱερὰ καὶ τὰ δημόσια γράμματα, ἵνα μὴ ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς πάντα γράφηται; *IK* 5.41.4-8 *PHI IK Kyme* 3a-3b = Peek 122 3a-3b = *RICIS* 302/0204). Another inscription from Andros tells a similar story, with special emphasis on the transmission of sacred

⁶⁷ Both text and translation of *De Iside et Osiride* are from Griffiths (1970).

⁶⁸ This identification with a god is “a procedure typical of Egyptian magic” (Bortolani, 2016, p. 264 with further bibliography).

⁶⁹ E.g. Cicero when distinguishing “no less than five different individuals who claimed the name Hermes” (Fowden, 1993, p. 24): *quintus quem colunt Phenecatae, qui Argum dicitur interemisse ob eamque causam Aegyptum profugisse atque Aegyptiis leges et litteras tradidisse: hunc Aegyptii Theuth appellant* (Cic. *ND* 3.56); see also *PGM* 7.551-7. In fact, the same Great Magical Papyrus of Paris mentioned above has a passage in Coptic where Thoth is said to be the father of Isis (*PGM* 4.96-97).

knowledge (ἐγὼ χρυσόθρονος Εἷσις, ... | δειφαλέω δ' Ἑρμᾶνος ἀπόκρυφα σύμβολα δέλτων
| εὐρομένα γραφίδεσσι κατέξυσα, ταῖσι χάραξα(ς) | φρικαλέον μύσταις ἱερὸν λόγον, Peek
15 7-12 = *RICIS* 202/1801 7-12).⁷⁰

A connection between Hermes and angelic transmission of knowledge, however, seems like a predominantly Hermetic trait. Mertens (1989b, p. 388) refers to an example in the prologue of the *Cyranides*, already mentioned in the previous section of this chapter. Festugière (*RHT* 1:345) dates this particular passage to the third century CE:

θεοῦ δῶρον μέγιστον (ἀπ') ἀγγέλων λαβὼν Ἑρμῆς ὁ τρισμέγιστος θεὸς ἀνθρώποις πᾶσιν μετέδωκεν δεκτικοῖς μυστικῶν βιβλίον τόδε. μὴ οὖν μετάδος ἀνδράσιν ἀγνώμοσιν, ἀλλ' ἔχε ἐν ἑαυτῷ ὡς κτῆμα μέγιστον· μόνον δὲ τέκνοις, εἰ δυνηθεῖς, μετάδος σὺ ὁ πατήρ ἀντι χρυσίου πολυτίμου, κτῆμα μέγα πρὸς ἐνέργειαν, ὀρκῶν αὐτοῦς μόνον ἀσφαλῶς ἔχειν, τέκνον ἱερὸν. (*Cyranides* Prol. 7-12 [14 Kaimakis])

The god Thrice-great Hermes, having received from angels a great gift from a god, transmitted to all men fit for receiving mystical things this book. Do not transmit it to senseless men, but have it in yourself like a great possession. Transmit it only to your children, if you can, you, their father, equal to a highly priced treasure, a great possession for performance, making them swear just to keep it safe, sacred child.

The parallels between this passage and *Isis to Horus* are undeniable. The revelation of knowledge from angelic figures to pagan deities that should keep the secret in the family is supplemented by striking linguistic echoes (μόνον δὲ τέκνοις... μετάδος σύ above/μεταδιδόναι... μόνον τέκνω, *Isis to Horus* 6.1.41-42).⁷¹ These similarities are nonetheless minimised by a difference in point of view: while the *Cyranides* brings a third-person account of how knowledge from angels was revealed to Hermes, *Isis'* account is first-

⁷⁰ On associations between Isis and writing both in Greek and Egyptian contexts, see Bortolani (2016, pp. 375-376).

⁷¹ The state of the evidence for dating both *Isis to Horus* and the *Cyranides* may be too shaky for one to claim direct contact, but the coming discussion on magic will bring additional evidence suggesting that these two instances may reflect something bigger and potentially more interesting than sheer intertextuality.

hand, detailed, and directed at her son; the former is a remote legend, the latter a personal anecdote. This rather suits the intimate environment often implied by the epistolary form (see section 1.1).

The transmission of secret knowledge from parent to child also occurs in a relevant Hermetic dialogue to early alchemy, the *Korè Kosmou* (= *CH* 23).⁷² In this text of “highly idiosyncratic style” (Bull, 2018, p. 21),⁷³ Isis exposes to Horus her knowledge concerning the creation of the world and mankind. Isis urges Horus to hold on to the secret doctrine (πρόσεχε, τέκνον Ὡρε, κρυπτῆς... θεωρίας, *CH* 23 31.10-11), which she learned from the forefather Kamephis,⁷⁴ who in turn learned it from Hermes himself (ἦς ὁ μὲν προπάτωρ Καμήφεις ἔτυχεν ἐπακούσας παρὰ Ἑρμοῦ... (ἐγὼ δὲ) παρὰ τοῦ πάντων προγενεστέρου Καμήφεως, *CH* 23 31.11-13). Despite the similar secrecy theme, one sees a difference from the account in the more personal *Isis to Horus*: in the *Korè Kosmou*, Isis’ own knowledge acquisition is mentioned only *en passant*, and it takes place through indirect contact with the knowledge source.

Yet the closest link to the tale from *Isis to Horus* in relation to Hermetism is found in a quotation from Zosimus made by the Byzantine chronicler George Syncellus⁷⁵ briefly mentioned in the previous section:

⁷² For a discussion of the possible meanings of this title, see Jackson (1986). This is one of the Hermetic texts that received the most attention from scholars: e.g. Reitzenstein (1904, pp. 137-146), Festugière (1942, 1948 and 1967, pp. 231-248), Betz (1966), Carozzi (1982), Bull (2018, pp. 21-26). Reitzenstein (*ibid.*), Festugière (1967, p. 231) and Bull (*ibid.*) mention this text in relation to *Isis to Horus*.

⁷³ See Festugière (1942).

⁷⁴ For speculations about this figure, see Nock & Festugière (*CH* vol. 3:clxiv-clxiviii with further bibliography). Most notably, Reitzenstein (1904, pp. 137-140) identifies Kamephis not only with Kneph-Agathodaemon, but also with Amnael from *Isis to Horus*. He does not, however, explain the rationale behind the association with Amnael in any detail.

⁷⁵ As Martelli (2013, p. 60) has observed, the authenticity of the quotation is reinforced by the existence of the same passage in a Syriac translation of Zosimus’ works (*CMA* 2:238).

ἄξιον δὲ καὶ Ζωσίμου τοῦ Πανοπολίτου φιλοσόφου χρῆσιν τινα παραθέσθαι περὶ αὐτῶν ἐκ τῶν γεγραμμένων αὐτῷ πρὸς θεοσέβειαν ἐν τῷ θ' τῆς Ἰμουθ βίβλω, ἔχουσιν ὧδε· φάσκουσιν αἱ ἱεραὶ γραφαὶ ἦτοι βίβλοι, ὧ γύναι, ὅτι ἔστι τι δαιμόνων γένος ὃ χρῆται γυναιξίν.⁷⁶ ἐμνημόνευσε δὲ καὶ Ἑρμῆς ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς, καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπας λόγος φανερός καὶ ἀπόκρυφος τοῦτο ἐμνημόνευσε. τοῦτο οὖν ἔφασαν αἱ ἀρχαῖαι καὶ θεῖαι γραφαί, ὅτι ἄγγελοί τινες ἐπεθύμησαν τῶν γυναικῶν καὶ κατελθόντες ἐδίδαξαν αὐτὰς πάντα τὰ τῆς φύσεως ἔργα, ὧν χάριν, φησί, προσκρούσαντες ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔμειναν, ὅτι πάντα τὰ πονηρὰ καὶ μηδὲν ὠφελοῦντα τὴν ψυχὴν ἐδίδαξαν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους. ἐξ αὐτῶν φάσκουσιν αἱ αὐταὶ γραφαὶ καὶ τοὺς γίγαντας γεγενῆσθαι. ἔστιν οὖν αὐτῶν ἡ πρώτη παράδοσις Χημεῦ περὶ τούτων τῶν τεχνῶν. ἐκάλεσε δὲ ταύτην τὴν βίβλον Χημεῦ, ἔνθεν καὶ ἡ τέχνη χημεία καλεῖται· καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς. (*Chron.* 24)⁷⁷

It is worth quoting an example by Zosimus of Panopolis concerning these things from his writings to Theosebeia in his book 9 of Imouth, which goes like this: “The sacred books say, lady, that there is a certain race of daemons that has intercourse with women. Hermes also mentioned this in his *Physica*, and nearly every one of his texts, manifest and hidden, mentioned this. The ancient and divine texts said this, that certain angels longed for women and, having come down, taught them all the workings of nature, because of which, he says, having caused offence, they remained out of heaven, because they taught mankind everything worthless and nothing that is of service to the soul. These same writings said that the giants are their offspring. Of these, the first transmission about these arts is Chemeu. He called this book Chemeu, from where the art is called *chemeia*” etc.

It is interesting that the word used for the transmission of alchemical knowledge is notably the very same used by Isis (παράδοσις, *Isis to Horus* 4.30; see Bull, 2018, p. 19), but the quotation as a whole is quite abstruse. Bull (*ibid.*, p. 7) rightly observes how the convolutedness of the passage makes it “not easy to know which texts Zosimus is referring to in each instance.” Moreover, there is anything but a consensus about the subject of φησί. Festugière (*RHT* 1:256) translates it as “dit l’Écriture”, implying a metonymic reference to the plural αἱ ἀρχαῖαι καὶ θεῖαι γραφαί – but that brings us back to the problem of what writings Zosimus is talking about. Mertens (1983-4, pp. 67-9 n. 26) thinks the subject is Zosimus, and that Syncellus “paraphrase le texte de Zosime” (*ibid.*). Bull (2018, p. 7) is the boldest of all, saying that the subject may be Enoch given the parallels this passage has with

⁷⁶ γυναιξὶ ἐχρᾶτο (Herodotus 2.181) is another example of this verb being used with a sexual connotation.

⁷⁷ The text is Mosshammer (1984); the translation is mine.

a story from *I Enoch*, an Old Testament apocryphal work where an angel called Azael teaches metallurgy and tincturing to women.⁷⁸

While the connection with *I Enoch* is extremely relevant (and is given full attention later in this chapter), for the moment it is preferable to further investigate the fact that Zosimus connected this story both to the teaching of alchemy and to Hermetic writings. For such purposes, it is necessary to return to the back story of the *Korè Kosmou*. There, before transmitting to Horus the knowledge she attained from Kamephis (who, in turn, learned it from Hermes – see above), Isis tells her son how Hermes, who got to know everything (ὁ πάντα γνοὺς Ἑρμῆς, *CH 23 5.16*), saw the togetherness of things (ὅς καὶ εἶδε τὰ σύμπαντα, *CH 23 5.16-17*) and wrote the things he understood (καὶ γὰρ ἃ ἐνόησεν ἐχάραξε, *CH 23 5.18*). Hermes then hid his sacred books (as he addresses them himself: ὧ ἱεραὶ βίβλοι, *CH 23 8.13-14*).

At no stage is it implied that the Hermes' books contained either stories of angels desiring women or alchemical recipes; yet the *Korè Kosmou* presents a similar language of learning, cognition and knowledge to the one found in *Isis to Horus*.⁷⁹ The presence of a language of search (ζητήσεως, *Isis to Horus 1.4.18*; ἐρευνᾶν, 3.2.26; ζητουμένων, 4.30) and a desire to learn (πυνθάνεσθαι βουλομένη, 1.3.12) in describing Isis' interest in alchemical knowledge has already been mentioned. In the *Korè Kosmou*, the Craftsman of the whole (ὁ συμπάντων...τεχνίτης, *CH 23 4.7*) grants the other gods' intellects with more of the light that he had in his chest so that they would want to search (ἵνα... ζητεῖν θελήσωσιν, *CH 23*

⁷⁸ He thus suggests that Amnael's may be a combination of the name Azael and the Egyptian god Amun with the addition of the Hebrew suffix *-el* (*ibid.*, p. 20). While the use of this suffix to create a Hebrew-sounding name is perfectly plausible and the connection with Azael not unlikely, Bull's evidence for a connection between Amun and *Isis to Horus* – namely, the fact that “ἄμνός in Greek means lamb, which is the sacred animal of Amun” (*ibid.*), and a New Kingdom tale where “Isis tricks the sun god Ra to divulge to her his secret name” (*ibid.*; he explains that Ra and Amun are often syncretised) seems a bit far-fetched.

⁷⁹ Many thanks to Prof. Lightfoot and Dr. Scullion for suggesting this approach on the occasion of my Confirmation of DPhil Status interview.

4.11) and desire to find (ἐπιθυμήσωσιν εὔρεϊν, *CH* 23 4.11-12). Once the world is fully operative, humans will seek to discover which nature is inside the sacred innermost temples (ἐπιζητήσουσιν καὶ τίς ἐνδοτέρω τῶν ἱερῶν ἀδύτων φύσις ὑπάρχει, *CH* 23 45.12-13), and because of their desire they will search after the uttermost night (τὴν ἐσχάτην τῷ θέλειν ἐρευνήσουσι νύκτα, *CH* 23 45.16-17).

What is more, the way in which these souls were created by the Craftsman presents technical terminology that is quite common in alchemical texts:

αὐτὸς δ' οὐκέτι βουλόμενος ἀργὸν τὸν ὑπεράνω κόσμον εἶναι, ἀλλὰ πνευμάτων πληρῶσαι δοκιμάσας τοῦτον ὡς μὴ τὰ κατὰ μέρος ἀκίνητα καὶ ἀργὰ μένη, οὕτως εἰς ταῦτα ἤρξατο τεχνιτείας, οὐσίαις πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ἰδίου ἔργου γένεσιν χρησάμενος ἱεραῖς. πνεῦμα γὰρ ὅσον ἀρκετὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἰδίου λαβὼν καὶ νοερῶς τοῦτο πυρὶ μίξας ἀγνώστοις τισὶν ἐτέραις ὕλαις ἐκέρασε· καὶ ταῦτα ἐκάτερον ἐκατέρῳ μετὰ τινων ἐπιφανήσεων κρυπτῶν ἐνώσας τὸ πᾶν οὕτως εὖ μάλα διεκίνησε κρᾶμα, ἕως ἐπεγέλασέ τις ὕλη τῷ μίγματι λεπτοτέρα τε καὶ καθαρωτέρα μᾶλλον καὶ διαφανεστέρα ἢ ἐξ ὧν ἐγένετο· διειδῆς δὲ ἦν αὕτη, ἦν δὴ καὶ μόνος ὁ τεχνίτης ἑώρα. (...) Ψύχωσιν ὁ θεὸς ἐκάλεσε τὴν σύστασιν, – ἐξ οὗ δὴ ἐπιπάγου μυριάδας ψυχῶν ἱκανὰς ἐγενεσιούργησε (...). (*CH* 23 14.18-15.10)

As he no longer wanted the world above to lie idle, but rather had thought it fit to fill it with spirits so that its particulars would not remain motionless and idle, he thus started the artifice to achieve these things, having used sacred **substances** for the creation of his own **work**. For, **having taken** from his own as much spirit as was enough, and having **mixed** it **intelligently** in fire, he **blended** it with other unknown **substances**. And having united each of these things one with the other with secret spells, he thus stirred the entire **mixture** very well, until a certain matter, more subtle, purer and more translucent than the ones from which it came sparkled on the surface of the **compound**. It was transparent, and indeed one that only **the Craftsman** could see. (...) God called the compound Animation – out of which hardened crust he brought into being sufficient myriads of souls (...).

It is no surprise that God is here called a τεχνίτης; the creation of the souls is here described with the very language of alchemical operations.⁸⁰ The more obvious instances are references to mixing (μίξας, ἐκέρασε, κρᾶμα, μίγματι; similar terms for ‘mixing’ happen six times in the technical part of *Isis to Horus*)⁸¹ and substances (οὐσίαις, ὕλαις; the same words

⁸⁰ Cf. Festugière (1967 with further bibliography) and Fowden (1993, p. 118).

⁸¹ See n. 43 above.

appear in the epistle).⁸² A less apparent hint is the use of the aorist participle “having taken” (λαβών) which, however common in general, is very frequently used in alchemical recipes (it occurs no less than eleven times in *Isis to Horus* 9-17).⁸³ Most strikingly, the act of creating these souls is called an ἔργον: in *Isis to Horus*, Isis tells Horus that all procedures “lead into one intellect and one work. Apprehend so the mystery, child” (εἰς ἓνα νοῦν καὶ ἓν ἔργον συντείνουσιν. Νόησον οὖν τὸ μυστήριον, τέκνον, *Isis to Horus* 16.1.114-16.2.115). This, in turn, echoes what Isis tells Horus in yet another Hermetic text: “And the soul is a peculiar thing, child, and a royal one, and a work from the hands of God and his intellect, leading itself into the intellect” (ἡ δὲ ψυχὴ πράγμα ἰδιοφυές, τέκνον, καὶ βασιλικὸν καὶ ἔργον τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ χειρῶν τε καὶ νοῦ, αὐτό θ’ ἑαυτῷ εἰς νοῦν ὀδηγούμενον, *CH* 25 4.9-11). Hermes Trismegistus is also encouraged to apprehend the unity of God’s work in *CH* 11 13.16-17: “If you give yourself up to me a little, Hermes, you will easily apprehend that God’s work is one” (πρὸς ὀλίγον δ’ ἂν μοι σεαυτὸν ἐπιδῶς, ὦ Ἑρμῆ, ῥάδιον νοήσεις τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἔργον ἓν ὄν).

These Hermetic echoes in Isis’ searched-for mysteries in *Isis to Horus* reveal a dimension of the alchemical ἔργον that requires deeper knowledge than the technical one, one that implies an intellectual search for and understanding of the divine. An example of how these intellectual and divine dimensions relate to alchemical procedures and their practitioners’ sense of search can again be drawn from a passage from the *Korè Kosmou*, where God leaves the remains of his mixture for the souls to create things themselves:

τὸ δὲ τοῦ μίγματος λείψανον ταῖς ἤδη προκοψάσαις ψυχαῖς ἔδωκε, ψυχαῖς δὲ ταύταις ταῖς εἰς χωρία θεῶν (...) μετακεκλημέναις “πλάσσετε”, λέγων, “ὦ τέκνα, τῆς ἐμῆς φύσεως γεννήματα· δέχεσθε τῆς ἐμῆς τέχνης τὰ λείψανα καὶ ἐκάστη τῇ ἑαυτῆς φύσει πλασσέτω τι παραπλήσιον· παραθήσομαι δ’ ἔτι καὶ ταῦθ’ ὑμῖν παραδείγματα” (...). καὶ ἀπέστη

⁸² οὐσίῳν, ὕλην (*Isis to Horus* 8.2).

⁸³ And six times in the first recipe of Ps.-Democritus’ *PM* 1.1-16; in Zosimus, five times in *Mem.* 10 and four times in *Mem.* 13.

ὑποσχόμενος τοῖς ὄρατοῖς ἔργοις αὐτῶν τὸ ἀόρατον πνεῦμα ἐπιζεῦξαι οὐσίαν τε ὁμοιογονίας ἐκάστω, ὅπως αὐτῶ αὐθις ἕτερα γεννᾷ ὅμοια αὐταῖ τε μηκέτι ἀνάγκην ἔχουσιν⁸⁴ ἄλλο τι ποιεῖν (ἢ) ἃ ἔφθισαν ἐργάσασθαι. (...)
καὶ εἶπεν Ἴσις· “τὸ κεκερασμένον, ὃ τέκνον Ὡρε, τῆς ὕλης λαβόμενα **κατενόουν** πρῶτον καὶ τὸ τοῦ πατρὸς προσεκύνουν κρᾶμα καὶ ὀπόθεν ἦν συμπεπλεγμένον **ἐπεζήτουν**· τὸ δὲ ἦν αὐταῖς οὐκ εὔπορον **ἐπιγνῶναι**. (CH 23 19-22)

He gave the remains of the mixture to those souls which had already made progress, and to those souls which had been recalled (...) to the domain of the gods, saying “mould, children, the offspring of my nature. Accept the remnants of my craft and let each mould something that resembles its own nature. And further I will set before you these models too” (...). And he removed himself, having promised to join to the souls’ visible works invisible spirit and to each a substance for the generation of like offspring, so that it would in turn beget other beings similar to itself and the souls are no longer obliged to produce something other than the ones at which they first worked. (...)

And Isis said: “having taken what had been mixed from the matter, my son Horus, they first started to **apprehend** it, and they would **worship** the mixture from their Father and **seek to discover** from what place it had been mixed up; and **learning this** was not easy for them.

By doing so, the souls create birds, quadrupeds, fish, and reptiles (CH 23 23). In other words, these souls’ search (ἐπεζήτουν) was to understand (κατενόουν) God’s ἔργον, so that with this knowledge (ἐπιγνῶναι) of the divine creation (note how the divine superiority of the mixture is acknowledged in προσεκύνουν κρᾶμα) they could themselves ‘play God’ and produce their own ἔργον (see ἔργοις αὐτῶν, ἐργάσασθαι)⁸⁵ according to their creator’s rules.⁸⁶

The main rule implied above by the souls’ Father (that they must produce something similar to their own nature: ἐκάστη τῆ ἑαυτῆς φύσει πλασσέτω τι παραπλήσιον; ὅπως αὐτῶ αὐθις ἕτερα γεννᾷ ὅμοια)⁸⁷ agrees with Aristotle’s law of the fixity of species that also

⁸⁴ From μηκέτι το ἔχουσιν, I follow Scott’s reading of the text rather than Festugière’s (οὐκέτι... ἔχουσιν, CH 23 21.9); were Festugière’s reading to be adopted, Prof. Hutchinson suggests that a high point or a colon would be necessary after ὅμοια, separating the structure using the subjunctive (see γεννᾷ above) from the one using the indicative: “and the souls are no longer obliged...”.

⁸⁵ In order to apprehend God’s ἔργον, Hermes is encouraged to see what happens when he himself wants to create (εἰ δὲ καὶ **ἔργω** αὐτὸ θέλεις **νοῆσαι**, ἴδε τί σοὶ ἐγγίνεται θέλοντι γεννησαι, CH 11 14.20-21).

⁸⁶ As the Craftsman himself urges the souls: “Oh souls, beautiful children, hear these words of mine like they were laws” (ψυχαί, καλὰ τέκνα, ... λόγων ἐμῶν ὡς νόμων τούτων ἐπακούσατε, CH 23 17.3). “Zosimus and other alchemists see the potential to act in concert with the divine Demiurge to effect demiurgic transformations within the material world” (Edmonds, 2019, p. 282).

⁸⁷ Interestingly, this law appears in CH 11 (see n. 85 above) as an encouragement for Hermes to gain more understanding of God: only by making himself equal to Him would he understand Him (ἐὰν οὖν μὴ σεαυτὸν ἐξισιάσης τῷ θεῷ, τὸν θεὸν νοῆσαι οὐ δύνασαι· τὸ γὰρ ὅμοιον τῷ ὁμοίῳ νοήτον, CH 11 20.11-13).

appears in *Isis to Horus* (cf. close reading above). The passage from the epistle is now worth quoting in full:

παρελθὼν οὖν σκόπησον καὶ ἐρώτησον Ἀχάραν τὸν γεωργὸν καὶ **μάθε** αὐτοῦ τί μὲν ἐστὶν τὸ σπειρόμενον, τί δὲ καὶ τὸ θερίζομενον καὶ μάθῃς ὁ σπείρων τὸν σῖτον σῖτον καὶ θερίσει, καὶ ὁ σπείρων τὸν κρίθον ὁμοίως καὶ κρίθον θερίσει. ταῦτα, τέκνον, διὰ προοίμιον ἀκηκοώς, **ἐννόησον** τὴν τούτων ὅλην δημιουργίαν τε καὶ **γέννησιν**, καὶ **γνώθῃ** ὅτι ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπον οἶδεν σπείρειν, καὶ ὁ λέων λέοντα, καὶ ὁ κύων κύνα. εἰ δὲ τι τῶν παρὰ φύσιν συμβαίνει γενέσθαι, ὡσπερ τέρας γεννᾶται καὶ οὐ τέξει σύστασιν· ἢ γὰρ φύσις τῇ φύσει τέρπεται καὶ ἢ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ. αὕτη οὖν δυνάμεως θείας μετεσχηκότες καὶ παρουσίας εὐτυχίσαντος.⁸⁸ κάκεινοις προσλαμπόμενοι αὐτῆς ἐξ αἰτήσεως ἐξ ἄμμων καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἄλλων οὐσιῶν κατασκευάσαντες ἐπέτυχον διὰ τὸ τῆς αὐτῆς⁸⁹ φύσεως ὑπάρχειν τὴν προσβαλλομένην ὕλην τοῦ κατασκευαζομένου. ὡς γὰρ προεῖπον ὅτι ὁ σῖτος σῖτον γεννᾷ καὶ ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπον σπείρει, οὕτως καὶ ὁ σπείρων χρυσόν, χρυσὸν θερίζει, τὸ ὅμοιον τὸ ὅμοιον. ἐφανερῶθη νῦν δὲ τὸ μυστήριον. (*Isis to Horus* 6.2 - 8.3)

Having come forward, then, behold and ask Acharas, the farmer, and learn from him that that which is sown is also what is reaped, and **learn** that one who sows grain also reaps grain, and one who sows barley equally reaps barley. Having learned these things, child, thanks to a proem, **reflect upon** the whole **creation** and generation of these things, and **know** that a person knows how to sow a person, and a lion, a lion, and a dog, a dog. And if it comes to pass that something is generated against nature, then it is born like a monster and it will not beget a compound. For nature delights in nature, and nature conquers nature. Nature, then, belongs to one who partakes of divine power and obtained the fortune of its presence. And being shone upon by these words by nature's demand, having also made their preparation from sands and not from other substances, they achieved what they were making because the additional matter was of the same nature. For, as I said before, grain begets grain, a person sows a person, and thus one who sows gold, reaps gold, and the similar its similar. And now the mystery is revealed.

On the one hand, *Isis to Horus* does nod to the Aristotelian groundings of this notion by means of a number of linguistic echoes.⁹⁰ On the other hand, it has been pointed out before

⁸⁸ αὕτη... εὐτυχίσαντος: Mertens (1983-4, p. 115) observes that this passage is quite obscure and corrupted, and that many corrections have been proposed; see her critical apparatus (*ibid.*, p. 133). Prof. Hutchinson singles out the reading by Festugière (ταύτης [αὐτῆ] Α) οὖν δυνάμεως θείας μετεσχηκότες καὶ παρουσίας εὐτυχίσαντες..., *RHT* 1:259 n. 8) as plausible, even though he suggests that ταύτης would refer back to nature, and not δυνάμεως as Festugière's translation suggests ("ayant eu part à cette puissance divine et ayant été favorisés de cette présence divine..."), *RHT* 1:259).

⁸⁹ Prof. Hutchinson considers Festugière's reading αὐτῆς (as opposed to οὔσης in the manuscripts) more plausible here.

⁹⁰ φάνερρον ὅτι τὸ γεννῶν τοιοῦτον μὲν οἶον τὸ γενώμενον (...) ἄνθρωπος γὰρ ἄνθρωπον γεννᾷ, ἂν μὴ τι **παρὰ φύσιν γένηται** (*Metaph.* Z 1033^b30-3); see *Isis to Horus* above: ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπον – twice; γεννᾷ; τῶν παρὰ φύσιν...γενέσθαι.

(see close reading above) that, according to Zosimus, the instruction to go to a farmer and learn from him that one who sows wheat reaps wheat should be traced back to Hermes (Ερμῆν λέγοντα· ἄπελθε πρὸς Ἀχαάβ τὸν γεωργὸν, καὶ μαθήσῃ ὡς ὁ σπείρων σῖτον σῖτον γεννᾷ, *CAAG Gr.* 89.9-10). This implies that Zosimus either knew *Isis to Horus* as a Hermetic work or the law of the fixity of species as it is phrased in *Isis to Horus* as Hermetic.

In fact, despite the Aristotelian echoes just mentioned, most of the passage above is articulated with a language of cognition and knowledge with strong Hermetic resonances. Just like in the *Korè Kosmou*, the reflection upon the creation (ἐννόησον τὴν...γέννησιν, *Isis to Horus* 7.1.49-50; τὸ κεκερασμένον... κατενούουν, *CH* 23 22.12-13)⁹¹ should be followed by knowledge (γνῶθι, *Isis to Horus* 7.1; ἐπιγνῶναι *CH* 23 22.15) – this progression from νοῦς to γνῶσις is common in Hermetism,⁹² and in fact the very same progression from μαθεῖν to νοῆσαι to γνῶναι seen above in *Isis to Horus* is found in one of the best known Hermetic compositions, namely the *Poimandres*⁹³ (μαθεῖν θέλω τὰ ὄντα καὶ νοῆσαι τὴν τούτων φύσιν καὶ γνῶναι τὸν θεόν, *CH* 1 3.11-12). This knowledge is what allows one’s work to be executed: the generation of other living beings in the *Korè Kosmou* and the generation of gold in *Isis to Horus* (ὁ σπείρων χρυσόν, χρυσὸν θερίζει). Most importantly, this knowledge is again connected to the divine by being considered the revelation of a mystery (ἐφανερῶθη νῦν δὲ τὸ μυστήριον) and by Isis’ use of a word of γνῶσις which in Hermetism often denotes the knowledge of God *par excellence*.⁹⁴ The “spiritual way” of

⁹¹ In the *Korè Kosmou*, God started gathering substances for the τοῦ ἰδίου ἔργου γένεσιν (*CH* 23 14.21-22).

⁹² E.g. εἰς δὲ τὴν εὐσεβῆ ψυχὴν ὁ νοῦς ἐμβᾶς ὁδηγεῖ αὐτὴν ἐπὶ τὸ τῆς γνῶσεως φῶς (*CH* 10 21.25-26). For a detailed account of this progression, see Fowden (1993, pp. 104-115).

⁹³ As Fowden (1993, p. 34) points out, the entire *Corpus Hermeticum* circulated under the title *Poimander* “from Ficino’s time up to the beginning of the twentieth century”.

⁹⁴ E.g. γνῶναι τὸν θεόν (*CH* 1 3 above); ὁ θεός, ὃς γνωσθῆναι βούλεται (*CH* 1 31); ἡ γὰρ τελεία κακία, τὸ ἀγνοεῖν τὸ θεῖον (*CH* 11 21.9-10); ἦλθεν ἡμῖν γνῶσις θεοῦ (*CH* 13 8). Fowden (1993, p. 112) notes that this notion “that one may ‘know God’ is extremely rare in the literature of classical and Hellenistic paganism, but common in Jewish and Christian usage”, and refers to Norden (1913), pp. 87-99. See Chapter III.

Hermetism goes precisely through these blurred lines between the spiritual and the philosophical here attested in *Isis to Horus*.⁹⁵

The interconnection between the spiritual and the philosophical may be explained by the alchemical formula that justifies the law of fixity of species in the passage (“for nature delights in nature, and nature conquers nature”, ἡ γὰρ φύσις τῇ φύσει τέρπεται καὶ ἡ φύσις τὴν φύσιν νικᾷ, *Isis to Horus* 7.2.54-55) and a comparison with Stoicism. This formula has long been associated with the law of sympathy and antipathy (Festugière, 1967, p. 232 n. 7; Mertens, 1983-4, p. 113; Fowden, 1993, p. 77 n. 8). It has also been used by Fraser (1972, vol. 1 p. 443) to illustrate his point that “the first steps towards the occult are a recognisable perversion of current scientific and philosophical doctrine”. Yet “perversion” is quite a questionable word, especially if the Stoic take on the law of sympathy is considered. As Balbus’ exposition of it in Cicero puts it:

*Quid vero, tanta rerum consentiens conspirans continuata cognatio quem non coget ea quae dicuntur a me conprobare? Possetne uno tempore florere, dein vicissim horrere terra, aut tot rebus ipsis se inmutantibus solis accessus discessusque solstitiis brumisque cognosci, aut aestus maritimi fretorumque angustiae ortu aut obitu lunae commoveri, aut una totius caeli conversione cursus astrorum dispares conservari? Haec ita fieri omnibus inter se concinentibus mundi partibus profecto non possent nisi ea **uno divino et continuato spiritu continerentur**. (Cic. ND 2 7.19)*

Again, consider the **sympathetic agreement**, interconnexion and affinity of things: whom will this not compel to approve the truth of what I say? Would it be possible for the earth at one definite time to be gay with flowers and then in turn all bare and stark, or for the spontaneous transformation of so many things about us to signal the approach and the retirement of the sun at the summer and the winter solstices, or for the tides to flow and ebb in the seas and straits with the rising and setting of the moon, or for the different courses of the stars to be maintained by the one revolution of the entire sky? These processes and this musical harmony of all the parts of the world assuredly could not go on were they not maintained **in unison by a single divine and all-pervading spirit**.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ It is Fowden (1993, pp. xxiv, 186, and 215) who describes Hermetism as a “spiritual way”.

⁹⁶ The translation is Rackham (1983).

To the Stoics, then, the law of sympathy proves the existence of divinity, here called “a divine spirit” or “breath” (*divino... spiritu*). Given the extreme to which the Stoics take the connectivity of the world (Holmes, 2019, p. 240), *spiritus* or its Greek equivalent πνεῦμα “is identified with the governing force of the cosmos, called god, reason, fate, providence, and nature (for the Stoics, all these names point to different aspects of what is essentially the same thing)” (*ibid.*, p. 251).⁹⁷ While the explicit use of φύσις in the alchemical formulation of the law of sympathy and antipathy does not necessarily point to a Stoic influence, both views are very much in agreement in an identification between the philosophical and the divine: knowledge of the workings of Nature is knowledge of God. While the Stoics may have not articulated this identification as a ‘mystery’, the alchemical take on the law hardly seems to ‘pervert’ its grounding in natural philosophy, but rather appropriate it in a similar way as Hermetism, including the *Korè Kosmou*:⁹⁸ “In short, the Hermetists’ understanding of cosmic sympathy (...) underlies too the philosophical spirituality of later Hermetism” (Fowden, 1993, p. 78).

Overall, the above can enrich our understanding of *Isis to Horus* and its context in many ways. It shows that, although *Isis to Horus* does nod to the Hermetic tradition by choosing Isis and Horus as its *dramatis personae* for a tale of secret knowledge transmission and by employing a similar language of knowledge that is both spiritual and philosophical, there is still something distinctive about it. By choosing the letter form over the dialogue, it departs from the Hermetic convention and adopts a medium much more associated with technical knowledge. This formal choice also accounts for other details that differ from the

⁹⁷ [ὁ θεὸς] πνεῦμα... διῆκον δι’ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου (*SVF* 2:306 21-22); ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (...) οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἢ πνεῦμα σωματικόν (*SVF* 2:310 24-25). Nature, in turn, is God: *quid enim aliud est natura quam deus et divina ratio* (*SVF* 2:305 34-35).

⁹⁸ Where the understanding of the law of sympathy is in fact connected to god and mysteries: οὗτοι παρ’ Ἐρμοῦ μαθόντες ὡς τὰ κάτω **συμπαθεῖν** τοῖς ἄνω **ὑπὸ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ** διατάγη, τὰς προσκαθέτους τοῖς ἐν οὐρανῷ **μυστηρίοις** ἱεροποιίας ἀνέστησαν ἐν γῆ (*CH* 23 68.3-5). See also *CH* 11 20.12-13 (n. 87 above).

Hermetic passages mentioned. For both the *Cyranides* and the *Korè Kosmou*, on the one hand, present their secret knowledge as an indirect acquisition (the former by using the third person, the latter by having Isis access knowledge through a third party) and give little to no detail about how such acquisition occurred. In *Isis to Horus*, on the other hand, it is Isis herself who tells her own story of how she acquired alchemical knowledge, while adding a lot of personal colouring to the episode: it is given a place (Hormanouthis), a time (Amnael arrives at midday), and characterisation (the angels have desires; Isis resists them). This personalisation of motifs shared with Hermetism gives the text a vivid and intimate nature that is far less common in other Hermetic literature.

By making these significant changes of form and plot, what *Isis to Horus* achieves is a work invested in both appreciating the spiritual-intellectual contributions from Hermetism and differentiating itself from it. A similar effort seems to take place in the *Korè Kosmou*, which employs alchemical language to illustrate what is essentially a Hermetic rendition of how the souls were created by God. From a social standpoint, this is hardly surprising: one of the most straightforward ways for a milieu to self-define and self-present is by means of comparison with others, highlighting with whom and with what ideas they do and do not want to associate.

(ii) Greco-Egyptian magic

A definition of magic is expected before a contextual investigation of its links with *Isis to Horus*. This is famously not an easy matter, especially when discussions of the nature of magic (ancient or not) have always been strongly influenced by biases arising from scholars' own religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds and/or surroundings, as well as scholars' responses to and preferences of ancient sources:

There is little profit, from the historian's point of view, in condemning magic just because it failed to measure up to the sublime conceptions of a Plotinus, or, even more irrelevantly, because it conflicts with the Christian or 'scientific' prejudices of modern scholars. (...)

In classical Greece, (...) the magico-religious world-view was exposed to systematic criticism by the natural philosophers; but one of the more important advances of recent research has been the recognition that these arguments had to await the advent of 'critical' scholarship in the nineteenth century to find their most receptive audience. In antiquity their success was at best patchy. Most would have sympathized with Lucian's *Deinomachus* when he declared that disbelief in magic was tantamount to atheism. One may of course agree with Plotinus' attack on the *naïveté* of the magicians (...); but that is no excuse for glossing over the full range of the Greek magical papyri. (Fowden, 1993, pp. 80-82)⁹⁹

In other words, it would be no more appropriate to define 'magic' as a fraudulent craft just because Pliny the Elder says so (*fraudentissima artium*, Plin. *HN* 30.1.1; see Fowden, 1993, p. 80) than to claim that magical charms reflect "un état d'âme qui est exactement à l'opposé du sentiment religieux" just because Dominican friar André-Jean Festugière says so (Festugière, 1932, p. 327). As Edmonds (2019, p. 7) argues, magic is "a dynamic social construct":

Magic is not a thing, but a way of talking about things. It is thus a discourse (...). Such a discourse, as Foucault points out, always has a history, since such a way of talking about things shifts over time as different people do the talking. (Edmonds, 2019, p. 7)

Pliny's and Festugière's examples illustrate the ways in which the term 'magic' has been used to distance oneself from (and very often to denigrate) ritual practices and ways of engaging with the divine that are different from one's own. This shows that, although it is virtually impossible to reach a perfect, permanent definition of 'magic', reflections about

⁹⁹ For the references in the quotation, see Fowden's notes.

why one would refer to one practice as ‘magical’ and another as ‘religious’ are of paramount importance for a more critical use of such terms, however limited they may be.¹⁰⁰

In light of the above, for the present purposes and the present purposes only, I refer to as ‘magical’ any “discourse pertaining to non-normative ritualized activity” (Edmonds, 2019, p. 5)¹⁰¹ aimed at or accompanied by an intended close engagement with extra-ordinary entities (such as deities, daimons, angels, and the dead) in order to attain immediate, tangible objectives other than the engagement with the entity or entities in question. This is not a claim that these are the only features magical practice can have, or that such characteristics are never to be found in texts or practices considered religious (or else) rather than magical by many:¹⁰² this is simply a limited framework here used for a better understanding of how *Isis to Horus* relates to certain motifs displayed in the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri.¹⁰³

That said, the occurrence of magical elements in *Isis to Horus* is hardly surprising for numerous reasons. Broadly speaking, magic is the main attribute, alongside writing and wisdom, that connects Isis to the Egyptian deity so often associated with Hermes in and out of Hermetic writings, Thoth.¹⁰⁴ This has already been suggested by how these two gods claim to be Isis’ father in both the Greek and Coptic passages of the Great Magical Papyrus

¹⁰⁰ “Sarah Iles Johnston refers to Marvin Meyer’s comparison of the scholarship on magic to riding a rather rickety bicycle; we continue to make progress in understanding ancient magic as we pedal forward working with the evidence, but every once in a while, we need to stop and do some maintenance on the bicycle itself, our definition of the category of magic. The definition will always be a bit rickety, but if we spend all our time and energy trying to fix it up, we will never make any progress” (Edmonds, 2019, p. 5).

¹⁰¹ I also follow Edmonds (2019, p. 10) in defining “ritual” “very broadly as symbolic action, which may include speech, gesture, movement, or other kinds of symbolic actions.”

¹⁰² Fowden (1993, pp. 82-84) mentions a section from the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (*PGM* 4.475-750) containing a rite that, despite its immediate, tangible objective of divine revelation, contains mystery language and other elements that in antiquity would not necessarily be labelled as ‘magic’: “the notion of immortalization, and the allusion to the initiate’s finding himself on the edge of bodily extinction, remind one perforce of the rituals of death and rebirth in which certain of the mystery religions culminated” (*ibid.*, p. 84 – see Reitzenstein, 1910). Likewise, rituals deemed valid by Neoplatonist philosophers have been called ‘theurgy’ when they could easily be labelled as ‘magic’ by others (see discussion in Edmonds, 2019, pp. 314-377).

¹⁰³ For a more intricate definition of magic, as well as a critical and detailed scholarship review and investigation of definitions of magic focussed mainly on ancient Greco-Roman evidence, see Edmonds (2019, pp. 1-34).

¹⁰⁴ See n. 69.

of Paris (*PGM* 4.2289-2290 and 96-97, respectively; see above).¹⁰⁵ More specifically, there are also many points of connection between magic and Hermetism.¹⁰⁶ In fact, an excerpt of enchantments from the Augustan period (Brashear, 1979, p. 261; Maltomini, 1988, p. 247) is considered one of the earliest pieces of evidence for Hermetism (P. Berol. 21243 = *PGM* 122):¹⁰⁷

ἐξαγωγή ἐπωδῶν ἐκ τῆς εὐρεθείσης ἐν Ἡλίου{ς} πόλει ἐν τῇ ἱερᾷ βύβλωι τῇ καλουμένῃ Ἑρμοῦ ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ Αἰγυπτίῳις γράμμασιν καὶ διερμηνευθέντων Ἑλληνικοῖς. (P. Berol. 21243 1-5)

An excerpt of enchantments from the holy book called Hermes', found in Heliopolis in the innermost shrine of the temple, written in Egyptian letters and translated into Greek.

This has some parallels with the Hermetic corpus. The description of the “Hermes” book as sacred (ἱερᾷ) coincides with how Hermes addresses the books he wrote in the *Korè Kosmou* (ὧ ἱεραὶ βιβλοὶ, τῶν ἀφθάρτων αἰ τετεύχατέ μου χειρῶν, *CH* 23 8.13-14; see above). The fact that the book of spells mentioned above was found (εὐρεθείσης) in the innermost temple (ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ) is reminiscent of the *Korè Kosmou* prediction that people will seek to discover which nature is inside the sacred innermost temples (ἐπιζητήσουσιν καὶ τίς ἐνδοτέρῳ τῶν ἱερῶν ἀδύτων φύσις ὑπάρχει, *CH* 23 45.12-13; see above). As for the translation from Egyptian into Greek, in a passage from *CH* 16, Asclepius says that his teacher Hermes would tell him (Ἑρμῆς... ὁ διδάσκαλός μου, πολλάκις μοι διαλεγόμενος,

¹⁰⁵ But it must be said that the Isis-Thoth connection through magic long precedes the time when Hermes' identification with Thoth was common. One already finds it in papyri of the New Kingdom where Isis and Thoth “shared the epithet ‘great of magic’” (Bortolani, 2016, p. 264 n. 175). In the Metternich Stela (ca. 360-343 BCE), Thoth comes “equipped with his magic” (Allen, 2005, p. 57) in response to Isis' cry for help in the face of Horus' nearly dying; Thoth says that “the magic of his mother Isis” is among the things that protect Horus (*ibid.*).

¹⁰⁶ See *RHT* 1:283-308; Fowden (1993, pp. 79-87).

¹⁰⁷ The text of this particular magical papyrus is that of Brashear (1979). All translations of the *PGM* are Betz (1992), occasionally modified.

16 1) that when the Greeks later desire to translate his books from Egyptian into their own language, his writings will suffer a great distortion and a lack of clarity (τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὕστερον βουληθέντων τὴν ἡμετέραν διάλεκτον εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν μεθερμηνεῦσαι, ... ἔσται τῶν γεγραμμένων μεγίστη διαστροφή τε καὶ ἀσάφεια, 16 1).¹⁰⁸

In the second century CE, one finds significant evidence for overlaps between magic and Hermetism in Apuleius' *Apologia*, where the author defends himself against accusations of being a practitioner of magic. Apuleius is accused of having a statuette made in secret for malevolent magical purposes (*quod me aiunt ad magica maleficia occulta fabrica, Apol. 61.2*), an image which allegedly had the aspect of a skeleton (*cum sit sceleti forma, ibid.*) and which would have been addressed by Apuleius in Greek as βασιλεύς (*ibid.*).¹⁰⁹ Apuleius claims that the statuette was not made in secret, but by the hands of a well-known artist named Saturninus, and that it actually depicts an image of Mercury carved out of wood:¹¹⁰ having had the piece brought from his accommodation, he urges the audience to see how it does not look like a skeleton (*Apol. 63.4-5*) and addresses his accuser, Aemilianus, in the following way:

At tibi, Aemiliane, pro isto mendacio dicit deus iste superum et inferum commeaor utrorumque deorum malam gratiam, semperque obvias species mortuorum, quidquid umbrarum est usquam, quidquid lemorum, quicquid manium, quicquid larvarum, oculis tuis oggerat, omnia noctium occursacula, omnia bustorum formidamina, omnia sepulchrorum terriculamenta, a quibus tamen aevo et merito haud longe abes. (Apol. 64.1-2)

But as for you, Aemilianus, may that god, the intermediary between the upper and lower worlds, repay you for that lie with the ill will of the gods above and below; may he ever bring dead men's forms to meet your eyes, every shade, phantom, specter, ghost that ever was, every apparition of the night, every horror of the pyre, every terror of the graveyard, to all of which your age and just deserts have brought you near.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Asclepius later justifies the distortion his texts would undergo on the basis of properties particular to the Egyptian words (τῶν Αἰγυπτίων... ὀνομάτων, *CH 16 2*).

¹⁰⁹ Many thanks to Emilia Savva for referring me to this passage.

¹¹⁰ Nock (1929, p. 227) suggests that this wooden statue of Mercury shares the same magical background as the wooden statue of Eros mentioned in *PGM 4.1840ff.*, produced and used in a magical preparation to obtain a πάρεδρος that would assist the magician in love affairs and send dreams.

¹¹¹ Text and translation Jones (2017).

Although Apuleius does not explicitly admit a connection between Hermes-Mercury and magic, the above passage suggests otherwise: Apuleius recurs to Mercury’s authority in order to throw a curse at Aemilianus.¹¹² The passage indeed portrays a much darker Hermes than the Homeric one who, despite also being connected to the underworld, is often portrayed in a more light-hearted, even humorous light (e.g. the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* and *Odyssey* 8.339-343). Furthermore, the accusation that Apuleius would address this Mercury statuette as βασιλέα might suggest a belief in Hermes-Mercury “not merely as patron of magic and learning, but also as ruler of the whole universe – as Hermes Trismegistus (though he does not use the title)” (Fowden, 1993, p. 199).¹¹³

One also finds explicit allusions to magic in the *Korè Kosmou*. When the Craftsman is creating the souls as per an alchemical procedure (see above), he unites the substances with certain secret spells (μετά τινων ἐπιφωνήσεων κρυπτῶν ἐνώσας... *CH* 23 14.25). A bit further on, he mixes the remaining elements – water and earth – and utters equally secret sayings over them (τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν στοιχείων... μίξας, ὕδωρ καὶ γῆν, καὶ τινὰς ὁμοίως κρυπτῶν ἐπειπὼν λόγους, *CH* 23 18.12-14) and thus moulds the signs of the zodiac in human form (τὰ ἀνθρωποειδῆ τῶν ζώων διέπλασε, 18.17-18).¹¹⁴ Finally, towards the end of the same text, Isis repeats to Horus a type of aretology of herself and Osiris made by Hermes (see Festugière, 1948), in which he states: “these [i.e. Isis and Osiris] are the ones who contrived the () of the prophets, perfect in all respects, (...) in order that philosophy and

¹¹² See Gaisser, 2008, p. 16, who refers to Abt (1967, pp. 303-306) for parallels between Apuleius’ curses and passages from the magical papyri.

¹¹³ In a spell where the magician refers to their own procedure of invoking and drawing down the moon as magic (μαγείης τῆς ἐμῆς, *PGM* 4.2320), the magician says: “**To Hermes, leader of the gods**, you promised to contribute to this rite” (ἐνευσας Ἑρμῆ, **τῷ Θεῶν ἀρχηγέτῃ**, εἰς τήνδε τὴν πρᾶξιν συμβαλεῖν, *PGM* 4.2330).

¹¹⁴ Pliny says that astrology is one of the crafts that have been incorporated in magic (Plin. *HN* 30.1.1-2).

magic may nourish the soul” (οὗτοι... τὸ ἐν ἅπασι τέλειον () τῶν προφητῶν ἐτεχνάσαντο... ἵνα φιλοσοφία μὲν καὶ μαγεία ψυχὴν τρέφῃ, 68.6-9).

When it comes to alchemy and magic specifically, Edmonds (2019, p. 273) has recently reminded us of something of paramount importance regarding the editorial history of both traditions. The alchemical Leiden and Stockholm Papyri (see Introduction) seem to come from the same cache of papyri as the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri; in fact, *PGM* 5a is a loose page found in the middle of the Stockholm papyrus.¹¹⁵ Less incidental evidence is the fact that *PGM* 7.167-86 has, under the title “Democritus’ ‘table gimmicks’”, a very short recipe “to make bronzeware look like it’s made of gold”¹¹⁶ – a technique for metal alteration is attributed to a name that has been associated to alchemy from a very early period (see Introduction). Even more tellingly, Preisendanz considers that these two alchemical papyri were written by the same hand that wrote *PGM* 13 (see *PGM* vol. 2:86), a magical papyrus that will feature some parallels with alchemical texts in the following chapters. All this indicates that the separation of the Leiden and the Stockholm papyri from the magical papyri in editorial terms could be misleading in accentuating a distinction between alchemical and magical traditions that is not necessarily representative of how they were perceived in antiquity. Edmonds (2019, p. 273) laments: “nothing [...] shows so clearly the impact of modern scholarly categorizations on the study of the ancient materials for magic than this segregation of the alchemical texts from other magical texts written in the same hand.”

Hopefully the earlier discussion on defining ‘magic’ will prevent the above from being perceived as a simplistic argument that alchemy and magic were unequivocally the same thing in antiquity. On the contrary, as the third chapter will show, the alchemist Zosimus uses the term μαγεία in his *On the Letter Omega* precisely when discussing views

¹¹⁵ Halleux (1981, p. 6), Betz (1992, p. 1 n. 13) and Brashear (1995, p. 3403). Cf. detailed analysis in Dosoo (2016).

¹¹⁶ Δημοκρίτου παίγνια· τὰ χαλκᾶ χρυσᾶ ποιῆσαι φαίνεσθαι. (*PGM* 7.167-68)

attributed to the Persian magus Zoroaster that he considers inadequate (or, to put it in his terms, pretentious and unnecessary).¹¹⁷ In this case, more important than focussing on categorisation is taking note of the fact that there were persons in antiquity interested and/or engaging in activities that can be easily associated with alchemical and magical traditions alike, i.e. that the evidence points to a common milieu. The passage in Zosimus only reinforces the possibility that such persons and milieux existed, even if it shows that they are not representative of all practitioners of alchemy at that time.¹¹⁸

It seems quite likely that the anonymous author of *Isis to Horus* was among such persons. The close reading above has already mentioned how adjurations of the sort found in the epistle are common in the magical papyri, and how its peculiar structure occurs in a magical ritual from the *Cyranides*. These parallels, however, are not just at a linguistic level: Mertens (1983-4, pp. 96-97; 1988, pp. 10-18) shows that one finds noticeable similarities in the way the entities adjured are portrayed in *Isis to Horus* and magical texts. Hence, the occurrence of a recipe for metal alteration attributed to Democritus with no clear sign of magical activity in the magical papyri and of parallels with magical texts in a predominantly alchemical and Hermetic letter seems like two sides of the same coin: persons with more than a single interest, dabbling in different but entangled traditions and unpretentiously meshing them together in their writings.

In fact, this eclectic milieu's attitude towards texts could help explain why the adjurations section fits so unsatisfactorily with the rest of *Isis to Horus*. Fowden (1993, p. 85) mentions how a magical papyrus contains a prayer markedly different from what had preceded, thus looking as though "it has been borrowed from elsewhere and incorporated

¹¹⁷ This comes not long after a passage where he condemns those who recur to astrological calculations and their personal daimon in order to succeed in their procedures (*On the Letter Omega* 2-3) – a practice that falls under the definition of magic used in the present thesis. Pliny mentions Zoroaster as a pioneer of magic (*HN* 30.2.3).

¹¹⁸ See also Edmonds (2019, pp. 306-307).

regardless of stylistic considerations”. The prayer happens to occur in the philosophical Hermetica at the end of *Asclepius*.¹¹⁹ Fowden considers this instance no surprise, as “magicians were adept with scissors and paste” (*ibid.*): it can be considered part of “a process well known in the magical and analogous literature, where prayers and hymns circulated freely and might be re-used many times, losing in the process most of their original associations” (*ibid.*). It is quite possible that the adjurations in *Isis to Horus* involve some level of borrowing of bits of texts detached from their larger contexts.

These reflections add more texture to a connection with magic in *Isis to Horus* outside the adjuration section, namely the physical description of Amnael and a passage from *PGM 7* mentioned in the close reading above, now quoted more extensively:

ὄνειραιτητὸν Πυθαγόρου κ[αί] Δημοκρίτου ὄνειρόμαντις μαθηματικός. ὁ εἰσερχόμενος ἄγγελος ἡλίῳ ὑποτέτακται καὶ ὡς ὑποτεταγμένος ἡλίῳ εἰσέρχεται, οὕτως ἐν φίλου σου, οὗ γνωρίζεις, σχήματι εἰσέρχεται, ἔχων ἀστέρα ἐκλαμπρον ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, ποτὲ δὲ καὶ πύρινον εἰσέρχεται ἔχων ἀστέραν. λαβὼν οὖν κλάδον δάφνης ἐπίγραψον εἰς ἕκαστον φύλλον ζῳδίων κινναβάρει (καὶ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ τοῦ ζῳδίου προσυπογράφων), ἐστεμμένος. καὶ αὕτη ἡ πρᾶξις ἔ[ν]θεος· διὸ ἐν στέρνοις ἔχων τὰ ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ σοι δηλωθέντα καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἀπόλυσιν τοῦ βίου τοῦ ἐμοῦ ὁσίως πράξας ἐπιτευξῆ.

(...)

ἐλθὼν ἀέρος δυσμικοῦ ἐπιθύων λίβανον λέγε τὸν λόγον·

‘ ἐπικαλοῦμαι [σ]ε, ἄγιε ἄγγελε Ζιζαβιω ἀπὸ τῆς Πλειάδος τάξ[ε]ως, ἧ ὑποτετάξαι καὶ δουλεύεις (εἰς) ἅπαντα (...). διὸ παρακαλῶ, ἵνα τάχει ἔλθητε ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ταύτῃ καὶ δηλώσητέ μοι, περὶ ὧν θέλω, σαφῶς καὶ βεβαίως. (...) διὸ παρακαλῶ σε ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ, καὶ πάντα μοι δηλώσης κατὰ τοὺς ὑπνοὺς ἐπ’ ἀκριβείας, ἄγγελε Ζιζαβιω.’ (*PGM 7.795-841*)

Pythagoras’ request for a dream oracle and Democritus’ dream divination:

The entering angel is subordinate to the sun, and as subordinate to the sun he enters – so he enters in the form of your friend whom you recognise, with a shining star upon his head, and sometimes he enters having a fiery star. Take, then, a branch of laurel, and inscribe in each leaf a sign of the Zodiac with cinnabar, having crowned yourself [with it]. (Also write its name in front of the sign of the Zodiac). This rite is divine. Hence, keep in your breast the things revealed to you by me and after the parting of my life, if you perform them devoutly you will be successful.

(...)

Having come when it is evening, while burning frankincense, speak this *formula*:

¹¹⁹ *Asclepius* is the Latin translation of the Greek *Perfect Discourse*, which survived only in fragments (see Nock & Festugière, *CH 2:275-277* and Fowden, 1993, pp. 9-10). Two Coptic texts from the Nag Hammadi Library, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (*NHC 6.7*) and *Excerpt from the Perfect Discourse* (*NHC 6.8*) also derive from the Greek original. *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* contains the prayer that occurs in the magical papyrus.

“I call upon you, holy angel ZIZAUBIŌ, from the company of the Pleiades to whom you are subordinate and serve for all things (...). Hence I call upon you all that you may come quickly in this night, and reveal to me clearly and firmly, concerning those matters I desire. (...) Hence, I call upon you in this night, and may you reveal all things to me in sleep with accuracy, O angel ZIZAUBIŌ”.

Similarly to what happens in *Isis to Horus*, the user of the spell is associated with a desire for acquiring knowledge from an angel (... παρακαλῶ, ἵνα τάχει ἔλθητε... καὶ δηλώσητέ μοι περὶ ὧν θέλω; cf. πυνθάνεσθαι βουλομένη τὴν τοῦ χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου κατασκευήν, *Isis to Horus* 1.3.12-13). The user of the spell should also specify how such knowledge should be transmitted (σαφῶς καὶ βεβαίως... ἐπ’ ἀκριβείας – and so in *Isis to Horus* 4.29-31: τὴν... μυστηρίων παράδοσιν ἀφθόνως καὶ ἀληθῶς ποιήσεται). There is also a suggestion of secrecy when it is said that the revealed content is to be kept inside one’s heart (ἐν στέρνοις). These similarities gain significance when the ritual is attributed to Democritus, a name not only long associated with alchemical writings, but now occurring a second time in the magical papyri in a passage containing links with alchemical literature. The only difference is that, when describing the angel’s appearance, the epistle uses the more general term “sign” (σημεῖον) and the magical papyrus is more specific, saying “star” (ἀστέρα).

However, another magical papyrus uses both terms together when describing an angel’s arrival, and brings more connections with *Isis to Horus*:

ἔσται δέ σοι **σημεῖον** ἐν τάχει τοιοῦ[το· ἀστὴρ αἴθω]ν κατελθὼν στήσεται εἰς μέσον τοῦ δώματος καὶ κατ’ ὄμ[μα κατα]χυ[θ]έν τὸ **ἄστρον**, ἀθρήσεις, ὃν ἐκάλεσας **ἄγγελον** πεμφθ[έντα σοί, θεῶν δὲ βουλὰς συντόμως **γνώση**. (*PGM* 1.74-77)

At once there will be a **sign** for you like this: [A blazing star] will descend and come to a stop¹²⁰ in the middle of the house, and when the **star** [has dissolved] before your eyes, you will behold

¹²⁰ This description of the sign-star stopping is reminiscent of the star stopping over where Jesus was in *Matthew* 2:9 (καὶ ἰδοὺ ὁ ἀστὴρ, ὃν εἶδον ἐν τῇ ἀνατολῇ, προῆγεν αὐτούς ἕως ἔλθων ἐστάθη ἐπάνω οὗ ἦν τὸ παιδίον); the wrapped baby lying in a crib is called a σημεῖον in *Luke* 2:12. See discussion of a late antique shared cultural backdrop below.

the **angel** whom you have summoned and who has been sent [to you], and you will quickly **come to know**¹²¹ the decisions of the gods.

Here, the star-sign stands for the angel himself rather than a part of his body. Similar to Amnael in *Isis to Horus* and Zizaubio in *PGM* 7.795-841, the angel is here presented as a knowledge source (“come to know”, γνώση). A bit further on in the same papyrus, the reciting of a spell to Selene is said to be followed by a star coming down from heaven and becoming a god,¹²² who is shortly after referred to as an angel (*PGM* 1.172 and 177). The instructions end with a plea for secrecy that will sound familiar to the reader: “Therefore **share these things with no one except** [your] legitimate **son** alone when he asks you for the magic powers imparted by us” (ταῦτα οὖν μηδενὶ παραδίδου, εἰ μὴ μόνῳ [σο]υ ισχινῶ¹²³ υἱῶ σου ἀξιοῦντι τὰ [παρ’] ἡμῶν ῥηθέντα ἐνεργ[ή]ματα, *PGM* 1.192-194).

Mertens (1988, p. 19) draws attention to the similarity between this passage and Amnael’s request to Isis mentioned previously (παρήγγειλεν μηδενὶ μεταδιδόναι εἰ μὴ μόνον τέκνῳ, *Isis to Horus* 6.1.41-42) in relation to the *Cyranides* passage (μὴ οὖν μετάδος ... μόνον δὲ τέκνοις... μετάδος σύ, *Cyranides* Prol. 8-10 [14 Kaimakis]) also mentioned above. The parallels are again striking, appearing in syntax (all three commands, direct or indirect), vocabulary (εἰ μὴ μόνῳ/εἰ μὴ μόνον/μόνον), semantics (υἱῶ/τέκνῳ/τέκνοις), and morphology and collocation (compounds of δίδωμι followed by dative). While the difficulties of dating any of these texts with precision make it extremely challenging for one to claim which, or in fact if any of the three contained the original version of the statement,

¹²¹ The translation of γνώση as “come to know” is my own adaptation of the translation in Betz (1992).

¹²² ταῦτα εἰπὼν ὄψει τινὰ ἀστέρα ἐκ τοῦ (οὐρανοῦ) κατ’ ὀλίγον ἀναλυόμενον καὶ θεοποι[ο]ύμ[ε]νον (*PGM* 1.154-155).

¹²³ Betz (1992, p. 8 n. 37) observes: “Preisendanz’s reading ισχινῶ υἱῶ is doubtful because the term is nowhere else attested (see his apparatus *ad loc.*). The word may reflect an Egyptian or Semitic idiom (‘son of your own loins’), an idiom formed in Greek from the word ἴσχιον (hips). The Egyptian term is more general, however, and refers to ‘part of the body’”. Further references are given by Betz (*ibid.*).

these parallels point to a flexible formula that was common to and adapted by Hermetists, alchemists, and magicians alike – another indication of cultural kinship among these groups.

Nonetheless, one must be careful not to talk about these movements as an undefined mass of ‘occult knowledge’. Just as *Isis to Horus* acknowledges the neighbouring milieu of Hermetism but makes choices that keep it slightly apart from it, its features of the descending angel motif shared with the magical papyri are explored rather differently. For while the angels in the magical papyri appear first and foremost in descriptions of spells and rites, showing mainly a concern with “the magical *action*”,¹²⁴ *Annael* is woven into a fantastical personal narrative. The rather specific similarities with some angels from the *PGM* serve the very different purpose of bringing a story to life by mentioning its every detail; what is instruction there is intriguing drama here.

(iii) Jewish magic and scripture (*1 Enoch*)

An investigation of the theme of angelic revelation would be incomplete without its obvious Jewish associations.¹²⁵ While “angelic revelations are attested in nearly all literary genres among post-exilic writings” (Beyerle, 2007, p. 208), the present discussion focusses on magical and prophetic texts that are particularly relevant to *Isis to Horus*. The main objective is to bring out what is (and what is not) particular about the use of the theme of angelic revelation in *Isis to Horus* for a better understanding of its general late antique “cultural backdrop” – a notion borrowed from Hoffman (1981) that will prove to be key to all the alchemical texts addressed in the present thesis:

Instead of viewing society as a series of already sharply defined conflicting religious groups, vying with each other, I suggest a model in which all are presumed to share equally in a generally pervasive cultural backdrop. This cultural backdrop is what everyone takes as

¹²⁴ Fowden (1993, p. 87).

¹²⁵ See Origen *Contra Celsum* 41.

normative, and within which everyone takes some stand or another. In their liturgy, people declare themselves to stand within the commonly accepted boundaries of the religious enterprise, sharing certain generally accepted cultural characteristics along with everyone else – that is, censoring themselves in; at the same time they preserve the boundaries of their own integrity by censoring out those cultural characteristics which they have chosen not to accept. (Hoffman, 1981, p. 22)¹²⁶

This notion is also extremely important for avoiding a one-sided discussion that underplays a Judeo-Christian presence in both the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri and the origins of alchemy. It was briefly exemplified in the previous section by the take on the Annunciation scene found in the ‘Mary Silk’ and its possible thematic links with *Isis to Horus*, but can easily be identified elsewhere. For instance, Edmonds (2019, p. 36) observes that “Iāo, the Greek rendering of the Hebrew Jehovah, is the deity most often mentioned within the Greek Magical Papyri”. While no unambiguously Jewish primary sources of early alchemy survive (see Grimes, 2018, p. 110), Zosimus often alludes to the ‘Hebrews’ and their presence in the field (e.g. *On the Letter Omega* discussed in Chapter III), sometimes with particular reference to Jewish material (e.g. when Zosimus explicitly says that he found a description of an apparatus in “the Jewish books”, βιβλους... ἐν ταῖς Ἰουδαϊκαῖς, *Mem.* 8 2.17-18; see also the *Final Count* in *RHT* 1:363-368).¹²⁷ Mary the Jewess appears as a particularly appreciated pioneer in terms of alchemical instruments (e.g. *Mem.* 7).¹²⁸

It is now time to turn to the Jewish magical literature that provides important contextual links with *Isis to Horus*. There are two main bodies of work to be considered, namely the Hekhalot literature and especially the magical handbook *Sepher ha-Razim*.

¹²⁶ This same model of society informs Lesses’s (1996, p. 45) discussion of Jewish and Greco-Egyptian adjurations.

¹²⁷ For a French translation, see *RHT* 1:275-281.

¹²⁸ Arguably, Zosimus only mentions Maria in technical rather than religious remarks, making it difficult to infer his predecessor’s background. Olympiodorus (see Introduction), however, makes the following quotation: “Maria says elsewhere: do not care to touch it with your hands; you are not of the race of Abraham; and if you are not of our race...” (μη θέλε ψάυειν χειροῖν· οὐκ εἶ γένους Ἀβραμιαίου· καὶ εἰ μὴ εἶ ἐκ τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν..., *CAAG Gr.* 103.4-6). See full discussion in Grimes (2018, pp. 156-167) and Patai (1994) with further references and bibliography.

‘Hekhalot literature’ is how scholars refer to Jewish texts from the third to the eighth centuries CE from Babylonia and Palestine that contain “ascetic preparations and directions for rituals of adjuration to bring angels down from heaven and teach wisdom to human beings” (Lesses, 1996, pp. 42-43). Although these might at first seem geographically (and to some extent chronologically) remote for the early alchemical corpus, scholars have long argued for links between the Hekhalot literature and the closer-to-home adjurations from the *PGM*.¹²⁹ The *Sefer ha-Razim*, in turn, presents itself as a book given to Noah by the angel Raziel, and dates from the late third-early fourth century (see Morgan, 1983, pp. 8-11) Egypt or Palestine (Lesses, *ibid.*, p. 43) and has also been shown to engage with the *PGM*.¹³⁰

There are some aspects of how angels are talked about in *Isis to Horus* that can tighten their connection with Jewish traditions. One aspect is mentioned by Mertens (1983-4, pp. 73-74), who drew attention to the fact that the first, nameless angel in *Isis to Horus* was among those who spent their time in the first firmament (τινὰ τῶν ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ στερεώματι διατριβόντων, ἓνα τῶν ἀγγέλων, *Isis to Horus* 1.2.8-9). While she agrees with Festugière in seeing this notion as a Jewish trait,¹³¹ the examples of such use of στερεώμα are from a passage from the Hermetic corpus (*CH* 26 1) that does not feature angels and from a spell from a Carthaginian lead tablet from the third century CE (which nonetheless contains an adjuration: ὀρκίζω σε τὸν θεὸν τὸν τοῦ δευτέρου στερεώματος; Audollent 242). Yet the notion of angels occupying different firmaments is a structural feature of *Sefer ha-Razim*, according to which there are seven firmaments occupied by different quantities of angelic figures that the reader is taught to adjure in order to attain their goals.

¹²⁹ See bibliography in Lesses (1996, p. 44, esp. n. 11), who quotes Smith (1963, p. 150): “much of the celestial personnel of the *hekhalot* is found also in the magical papyri and in Gnosticism. Not only have the papyri and the Gnostics taken over Hebrew names, but the *hekhalot* have taken over Greek names and sometimes have even taken back Greek corruptions of names which were originally Hebrew”. A clear example of the magical papyri taking angelic names from the Hekhalot tradition that Lesses mentions is *PGM* 35 (*ibid.*, p. 59).

¹³⁰ Lesses (1996, p. 44), who refers to detailed comparisons made by Margalioth (1966), pp. 1-16.

¹³¹ Festugière makes this comment (referring to Dodd, 1935) in his annotated translation of *CH* 26. This text is also a dialogue between Isis and Horus.

Another important aspect also mentioned by Mertens (*ibid.*, p. 75) is the fact that Amnael appears when “the sun is halfway through its course” (τοῦ ἡλίου μέσον δρόμου¹³² ποιοῦντος, *Isis to Horus* 3.1.22-23), i.e. at midday (*ibid.*). As mentioned before, Mertens argues for a pervasive belief in astrology, alchemy and magic that this time of the day “était... favorable aux opérations magiques et propice à l’activité des forces surnaturelles” (*ibid.* with further references); but the angels of *Sepher Ha-Razim* also have a notably strong association with the sun¹³³ and, what is more, with knowledge and secrecy:

I adjure you O sun that shines on the earth, in the name of the angels who make men of knowledge understand and comprehend wisdom and secrets, that you will do what I ask and make known to me what will be in this year — do not conceal a thing from me. (Morgan, 1983, p. 30)

The association seems to be at its strongest in the fourth firmament, “the lovely bridal chamber of the sun” (Morgan, 1983, p. 67), where “the angels surround him (the sun) and lead him during the day” (*ibid.*). One particular adjuration taps into the symbolism of knowledge revelations occurring during the day:

I adjure you, angels that fly through the air of the firmament, by the One who sees but is not seen, by the King who uncovers all hidden things and sees all secret things, by the God who knows what is in darkness, and who transforms the shadows into morning, and who illumines the night as the day, before whom all secrets are as clear as the sun, for whom there is nothing too difficult. (Morgan, 1983, p. 70)

¹³² See n. 50 above.

¹³³ There is at least one instance of a great angel being identified with the sun: “I beseech thee O great angel who art called ‘sun’” (Morgan, *ibid.*, p. 56).

The brightest moment of the day thus seems like the best one for Isis' searched-for mysteries to come into the light.¹³⁴

One last comment to be made concerns the adjuration as an action. In the *PGM*, in the Hekhalot literature, and in *Sepher Ha-Razim*, these adjurations are always a way to make the angel or divine entity to appear to the adjurers for their ends to be met. The different ways in which the divine figure is requested (such as verbal formulas, the listing of a series of names, and *voces magicae*), Lesses (1996, p. 52) argues, "display a performative use of language": it seems that the adjuring power lies in a special act of speaking rather than the speech's meaning or lack thereof, as if there was something intrinsically magical attached to it. The adjuration thus appears as a rather flexible ritualistic action to be adapted and employed in various contexts, i.e. to be in the fabric of the shared "cultural backdrop" mentioned earlier. In fact, Lesses (*ibid.*, p. 59) concludes that the similarities that she observes among Greco-Egyptian and Jewish adjurations "stem from the common phenomenon of revelatory adjuration in late antiquity, in which all three types of adjuration participate, rather than originating in a particular Greek, Egyptian, or Jewish cultural framework". On a more general note, it seems that the non-normative status of magic has been a particularly productive sphere for cultural exchanges that would occur less freely in a more normalised one.

Yet when it comes to the general storyline of *Isis to Horus*, it is with the Jewish scriptural text *I Enoch* that the most interesting parallels occur. In fact, Syncellus provides the Zosimus quotation about angels uniting with women right after quoting a long passage from *I Enoch*, an Old Testament text of a very complex nature.¹³⁵ It is a collection of works scattered in different languages (Aramaic, Greek and Ethiopic) and periods in time

¹³⁴ With regard to the hymns from the *PGM*, Bortolani (2016, p. 349) observes that "most of the expressions and vocabulary that can be traced back with certainty to Judaeo-Christian literature appear to be clustered in the solar hymns".

¹³⁵ Although normally referred to as an apocryphal work, *I Enoch* is part of the Jewish canon in Ethiopia.

(Lightfoot, 2007, p. 71). Scholars have also argued either for a Hebrew original¹³⁶ or for parts of it to have been originally written in Hebrew, but in the absence of any Hebrew textual evidence (e.g. Charles, 1913, vol. 2 pp. 171-177), this is all based on linguistic analysis of how the text has been transmitted in other languages. The latest and most developed version of *I Enoch*, in Ethiopic, displays a pentateuchal form containing the *Book of Watchers*, the *Astronomical Book*, the *Book of Dreams*, the *Epistle* and the *Parables*.

While a detailed account of such a complicated textual transmission goes way beyond the scope of the present thesis, the complexity of the matter calls for a bit of contextualisation.¹³⁷ Seven Aramaic manuscripts “dating from the beginning of the second century BCE (or perhaps the end of the third) to the Herodian period” (Knibb, 2009, p. 60) among the so-called ‘Dead Sea Scrolls’ contain parts of the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Book of Dream Visions*, the *Epistle of Enoch* and the *Astronomical Book*, and provide evidence for the “unambiguously Jewish” (*ibid.*) origin of *I Enoch*.¹³⁸ The Greek evidence is more scattered: the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2069 frs. 1 and 2 (early fourth century CE)¹³⁹ may contain small parts of the *Book of Dream Visions*, and fr. 3 parts of the *Astronomical Book*;¹⁴⁰ the Chester Beatty-Michigan Papyrus (fourth century) contains the *Epistle of Enoch*

¹³⁶ See bibliography in Charles (1913, vol. 2 p. 171), who had shared the same view before revisiting it in this same publication.

¹³⁷ For a detailed and scholarly account of the Aramaic, Greek, and Ethiopic versions and how they relate to one another, see Knibb (2009, pp. 36-55). For a text and translation of the Aramaic evidence, see Milik (1976); for the Greek text known at the time, see Black (1970) – but Knibb (2009, p. 62 n. 20) mentions mistakes in the edition; for an edition of the Ethiopic, see Knibb (1978).

¹³⁸ For the Christian transmission and interpretation of *I Enoch*, especially in Ethiopic, see Knibb (2009, pp. 56-76).

¹³⁹ When Hunt first published the fragments in 1927, they were given no further identification than as ‘apocalyptic fragments’ (Chesnutt, 2010, p. 485) and were dated to the late fourth century CE. It was only decades later that Milik (1971) identified their connections with *I Enoch*; almost a century later, Chesnutt (2010, p. 487) also observed the “‘severe style’ of script that peaked in the third century and degenerated in the fourth. The palaeographic affinities of the fragments”, he explains, “are with the latest stages of this style and fit best in the early rather than the late fourth century”.

¹⁴⁰ Milik (1971) argued that fr. 1 and 2 belonged to a different codex from fr. 3, a view very well challenged by Chesnutt (*ibid.*). Fr. 3 is too small to be associated with the *Astronomical Book* without a doubt, but if that is the case, and if Chesnutt (2010, p. 2010) is right in proposing that the three fragments “share a codicological context (...), there are significant implications for the evolutionary history of the Enochic corpus” (*ibid.*), as they would represent “our only evidence in any language prior to the Ethiopic compilation that the *Astronomical Book* was combined with another of the works that comprise what is now called *I Enoch*” (p. 504).

(chapters 105 and 108 missing); the Gizeh codex, also known as the Akhmim manuscript (sixth or the end of the fifth century CE), and extracts in Syncellus' *Chronography* (early ninth century CE) have parts of the *Book of the Watchers*; another extract of the *Book of Dream Visions* is found in the margin of the Codex Vaticanus Gr. 1809 (eleventh century). Finally, the already mentioned Ethiopic version is attested in at least fifty manuscripts (Knibb, 2009, p. 52) spanning from the fifteenth up to the twentieth century. The transformation that the text underwent during this striking process is best summarised by Knibb:

The changes evident in the Greek and the Ethiopic are not simply the kind of changes that naturally occur when texts are translated and copied over many centuries, but reflect a process of redaction, and the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* represents at the oldest a fifth-sixth century translation of a Greek text that came into existence in the first century C.E.; they represent (a) new edition(s) of the original Aramaic. (Knibb, 2009, p. 55)

The passage mentioned by Syncellus belongs to the part known as the *Book of Watchers*. While his account dates from the ninth century and the one from the Gizeh codex from the late fifth or sixth, one of the Aramaic fragments containing some of the *Book of Watchers* (4QEn^a) dates from the early second century BCE,¹⁴¹ and may have been copied from an even earlier version, “dating from the third century at the very least” (Milik, 1976, p. 141).¹⁴² The story is one of angels who come down to earth, take human women as wives and teach them a number of arts. The text from the Gizeh codex goes as follows:¹⁴³

καὶ ἐγένετο ὅταν ἐπληθύνθησαν οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐγεννήθησαν (αὐτοῖς) θυγατέρες ὡραῖαι καὶ καλαί. καὶ ἐθεάσαντο αὐτὰς οἱ ἄγγελοι υἱοὶ

¹⁴¹ See Lightfoot, 2007, p. 72 n. 84, who refers to VanderKam (1984, pp. 111-114) and the paleographical analysis in Milik (1976, pp. 139-141).

¹⁴² Milik's statement is based on orthographical and phonetic features of the text (*ibid.*).

¹⁴³ Mertens (1983-4, pp. 64-66) displays the versions of the Gizeh Papyrus and the one transmitted in Syncellus side by side. The text is Flemming & Radermacher (1901, 22-26).

οὐρανοῦ, καὶ ἐπεθύμησαν αὐτάς (...) καὶ ἔλαβον ἑαυτοῖς γυναῖκας (...) καὶ ἐδίδαξαν αὐτὰς φαρμακείας καὶ ἐπαιδὰς καὶ ρίζοτομίας καὶ τὰς βοτάνας ἐδήλωσαν αὐταῖς. (...) ἐδίδαξαν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους Ἀζαήλ μαχαίρας ποιεῖν καὶ ὄπλα καὶ ἀσπίδας καὶ θώρακας καὶ ὑπέδειξεν αὐτοῖς τὰ μέταλλα καὶ τὴν ἐργασίαν αὐτῶν καὶ ψέλια καὶ κόσμους καὶ στίβεις¹⁴⁴ καὶ τὸ καλλιβλέφαρον καὶ παντοίους λίθους ἐκλεκτοὺς καὶ τὰ βαφικά.

And when the sons of men multiplied, it happened in those days that they begot youthful and beautiful daughters. And the angels, sons of the sky, saw them, and desired them (...). And they took them as wives for themselves (...) and taught them the use of drugs, spells, the cutting of roots and showed them plants. (...) And Azael taught humankind how to make daggers, weapons and shields and breastplates, and he showed them metals¹⁴⁵ and metalwork, and bracelets, ornaments, antimony, paint for the eyelids, and all sorts of select stones and tinctures.

The combination of components of the tale (angels seeing women from above, desiring them and teaching them a number of crafts which include metal work and possibly magic) is too close to the story in *Isis to Horus* to be but a coincidence – a fact long acknowledged by Scott (*Hermetica* 4:149-150), Festugière (*RHT* 1:254-60) and others. Syncellus' version of the passage is even closer to the alchemical epistle, as he specifically mentions works on gold and silver.¹⁴⁶ The resemblance of the names of the angels of each story (alpha + phonetic consonant cluster + ήλ: Ἀζαήλ - Ἀμναήλ; see n. 78), as well as their association with metalwork, makes the connection even more compelling.

The link with *The Book of Watchers* clearly reinforces the characterisation of alchemy as a ἱερὰ τέχνη. While metal work in itself may not be sacred, it belongs to a tradition according to which its acquisition depends upon divine beings. Mertens (1983-4, p. 69) interprets this Enochic element as a concern among alchemists for attaching their craft “à une origine illustre et digne de foi, espérant par là donner plus d'autorité à leurs ouvrages” (*ibid.*). The connection also illuminates the characterisation of Isis as a ‘prophetess’ at the very beginning of the epistle. While the opening lines of the text clearly situate Isis and

¹⁴⁴ Mertens (1983-4, p. 65 with further bibliography) points out that στίβεις is a strange form; she argues that it must be the accusative plural of τὸ/ὁ στίβι, an orthographical variation of στίμι.

¹⁴⁵ “Mines” is also a possible translation for μέταλλα.

¹⁴⁶ Ἀζαήλ (...) ἐδίδαξε (...) τὸ χρυσίον πῶς ἐργάσωνται, καὶ ποιήσωσιν αὐτὰ κόσμια ταῖς γυναῖξί, καὶ τὸν ἄργυρον (Syncellus, *Chron.* 21).

Horus in their authoritative Egyptian mythological framework, the development of the narrative lowers Isis' status to a quasi-human condition in her being less knowledgeable than the angels.¹⁴⁷ This finds resonance in the prophetic tradition to which *I Enoch* belongs: we know of both pagan and Judaeo-Christian representations of the Sibyl (Lightfoot, 2007, p. 16) as a figure “between God and man” (*ibid.*, p. 73) – not unlike Enoch himself (*ibid.*).¹⁴⁸ This “betwixt and between” status (*ibid.*, p. 16) is particularly appealing to transmitting knowledge both sacred and technical: while prophetic literature by definition presents itself as dependent upon the divine, its function is first and foremost to inform humans on matters that affect them: very much like magic and oracles.¹⁴⁹

While Zosimus' attribution of the story to multiple books by Hermes (“Hermes also mentioned this in his *Physica*, and nearly every one of his texts, manifest and hidden, mentioned this”, Ἑρμῆς ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς, καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπας λόγος φανερός καὶ ἀπόκρυφος τοῦτο ἐμνημόνευσε, Syncellus, *Chron.* 24) could be seen as an indication that the alchemist indeed knew *Isis to Horus*, the alchemist mentions an aspect of the Enochian story (*Book of Watchers* 9:8-9) that the epistle does not. Having desired these women and taught them the workings of nature (ἐπεθύμησαν τῶν γυναικῶν καὶ... ἐδίδαξαν αὐτὰς πάντα τὰ τῆς φύσεως ἔργα), these angels caused offence and remained out of heaven (προσκρούσαντες ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔμειναν); “the ancient and sacred writings” (αἱ ἀρχαῖαι καὶ θεῖαι γραφαί) – suggesting scripture – also say that the giants are their offspring (φάσκουσιν... καὶ τοὺς γίγαντας γεγενῆσθαι).

¹⁴⁷ This is different from what was presented in previous discussions of Hermetic and magical texts, where Isis appears to be less knowledgeable than Hermes/Thoth. Hierarchy among gods is not something alien to polytheistic religion, but the superiority of an angel over such a prominent goddess is striking. Scott is even more forceful: “the writer regards Isis and Horus, not as deities, but as human beings” (*Hermetica* 4:150).

¹⁴⁸ It is hard to say who is borrowing from whom here. When exposing similarities between the Sibyl and Enoch, Lightfoot (*ibid.*, pp. 70-77) argues: “if, in the depiction of an omniscient Jewish hero, it was possible to make opportunistic use of themes that scripture had attributed to a pagan, it was no less possible to select an originally pagan figure and to bring her more fully within the fold of Jewish prophetic/sapiential tradition” (*ibid.*). The notion of a pervasive “cultural backdrop” is also relevant here.

¹⁴⁹ It is different from hymns, for example, where the main objective is to praise the deity rather than learn from it.

In an attempt to better understand this quotation in relation to Zosimus' views, Grimes (2018, pp. 173-181) insightfully analyses the Syncellus passage in relation to *Isis to Horus*. She observes that Isis' resisting of the advances of both angels in the letter is implied in her statement that "if it comes to pass that something is generated against nature, then it is engendered like a monster and it will not beget a compound" (εἰ δέ τι τῶν παρὰ φύσιν συμβαίνει γενέσθαι, ὥσπερ τέρας γεννᾶται καὶ οὐ τέξει σύστασιν, *Isis to Horus* 7.2.52-53). Given that the sexual encounter between angels and human females in the *Book of Watchers* results in the aberration of giants, Isis' view that anything begotten out of the 'x begets x' formula would be "like a monster" (ὥσπερ τέρας) resonates with the lesson taught by the Enochian myth (Grimes, 2018, pp. 177-178). As a result, Isis' resistance to the angels' lust would validate "her methods of obtaining alchemical wisdom"— her behaviour is "in accordance with the natural order" (*ibid.*, p. 180).

In literary terms, this is quite a convenient departure from the Enochian myth. The fact that the Egyptian goddess does not have to undergo any punishment, but learns the preparation of gold and silver from Amnael all the same, puts *Isis to Horus* in a quite favourable position. While it grants alchemy all the allure of revealed divine knowledge, it spares the reader the sternness of religious morality. The scriptural weight is also alleviated by the other features listed so far: the myth is framed within a typically Hermetic narrative of Isis imparting knowledge to Horus, and the way in which the angels are described in the epistle evokes the less controlled environment of magical practice.

Final remarks

The above demonstrates that the *Letter from Isis to Horus* shows remarkable awareness of various cultural movements occurring during late antiquity. This epistle has a creative way of picking and choosing from this shared "cultural backdrop" whatever elements are of

service for its presentation of alchemical knowledge, while giving it an original twist by means of literary artifice. The result is that alchemical knowledge gets situated within this complex context, but also finds a distinct – and rather strange – voice for itself. Beyond the many embellishments these contextual interactions may have undergone in the composition, *Isis to Horus* shows an enthusiasm for an ideal of rich intellectual, spiritual and cultural exchange among various traditions circulating in Egypt in that period. If this is right, the possibility that the Egyptian city chosen as the setting for this story was fictional, implying an ‘imagined Egypt’, becomes all the more interesting.

To conclude, the biggest literary achievement of *Isis to Horus* may be this: a text that revolves around an interaction between an Egyptian goddess and an angel with both pagan and Jewish associations puts societal and cultural mixture at the very centre of a craft that at once thrives and depends upon mixture (as the epistle makes clear in multiple instances). By working with a mixture of different cultural ‘ingredients’, it creates a new composition that reflects the alchemical work itself. To quote Zosimus describing the so-called gold acquired from mixing several substances, “behold: by subduing matter, you receive the uniform species coming out of multiple species” (ἰδοὺ καὶ τὴν ὕλην δαμάζων ἀπέχεις τὸ μονόειδον τὸ ἐκ πολλῶν εἰδῶν, *Mem.* 10 8.147-148): very much an alchemical “melting pot.”

Chapter Two

The Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra

2.1) The text

(i) Dating, transmission, overview

The *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (hereafter *Cleopatra*) is a particularly complicated text to investigate. The fundamental challenge lies in its intricate transmission and editing history. As a result of the erratic transmission of the dialogue in manuscript (the main manuscripts being **M** and **A**), editors have never fully agreed on a very basic fundamental question, namely where the text begins.¹⁵⁰ Given that a thorough analysis of such a situation goes beyond the scope of the present thesis,¹⁵¹ the following intends to provide an overview of how the existing editions have approached such a demanding editorial task.

What might be called the first edition of *Cleopatra* (Ideler, 1963, 2:248-253) does not present itself as such. It appears as the second half of the *Teaching of the same Philosopher Stephanos to the Emperor Heraclius* (τοῦ αὐτοῦ Στεφάνου φιλοσόφου διδασκαλία πρὸς Ἡράκλειον τὸν βασιλέα, *ibid.* 243-253; hereafter *Teaching*).¹⁵² Ideler's entire edition claims to be based on transcriptions made by Dietz of a manuscript. Berthelot (*CAAG Intr.* 182) does not provide much information about this manuscript other than that it is located in Munich, derives from **M** indirectly, and that his son examined it (*CAAG Intr.*

¹⁵⁰ For a summary of this issue, see Festugière (1967, pp. 216-217).

¹⁵¹ Such analysis will hopefully become available in Vincenzo Carlotta's forthcoming edition, English translation and commentary of *Cleopatra* as announced at *Chemical Intelligence* (the newsletter of the *Society for the Study of Alchemy and Chemistry*) in August of 2016.

¹⁵² For an analysis of the text as transmitted in **M**, **A**, and Ideler (*ibid.*), cf. Romano (1995).

193-194).¹⁵³ In fact, the big gap in and rearranging of **M** (see Introduction) results in Stephanos' *Teaching* and *Cleopatra* being placed one immediately after the other.

The second edition (*CAAG Gr.* 289-299)¹⁵⁴ attempts to clarify the confusion in Ideler's edition as follows:

(...) la fin de la 9^e leçon de Stéphane et le milieu du Dialogue de Cléopâtre ont été confondus et mis bout à bout dans le manuscrit de Saint-Marc, ainsi que dans le texte d'Ideler, par suite d'une erreur fort ancienne des copistes. La même confusion a lieu dans le Voss. (*CAAG Intr.* 212)

In the face of the gap in **M**, Berthelot recurred mainly to **A** for his edition on the basis of two hypotheses. The first is that **M** would derive from a manuscript from which the folios between Stephanos' *Teaching* and *Cleopatra* would have already disappeared. The second is that **A** would derive from a manuscript preceding such destruction. This would explain why **A**, although being much later than **M**, would have the end of Stephanos' *Teaching*, as well as the *Teaching of Comarius to Cleopatra* (hereafter *Comarius*) and *Cleopatra* itself. As a result, although Berthelot (*CAAG Intr.* 174-186) does acknowledge two separate titles in the table of contents in the beginning of **M** (Κομερίου [sic] φιλοσόφου διάλεξις πρὸς Κλεοπάτραν and διάλογος φιλοσόφων καὶ Κλεοπάτρας; see Reitzenstein, 1919, p. 3), he follows **A** in publishing both the *Comarius* and *Cleopatra* as one unit (*ibid.*, p. 8).

The present chapter uses Reitzenstein's edition of *Cleopatra* (1919) as standard.¹⁵⁵ While some of Reitzenstein's views about the dialogue are problematic, his edition remains the most reliable one available to date. Reitzenstein heavily criticises Berthelot's edition on the basis of a more thorough investigation of the manuscript transmission and of differences

¹⁵³ On the Munich manuscript (*Monac. Gr.* 112), cf. *CMAG* 4:247-272 and Festugière (1967, p. 218).

¹⁵⁴ The French translation is in *CAAG Transl.* 278-287.

¹⁵⁵ Festugière (1967, pp. 241-246) also uses Reitzenstein's text in his translation of some passages of *Cleopatra*.

between what he correctly identifies as two separate texts. *Comarius*, after a Christian prayer and a narration of the archpriest philosopher Comarius (*CAAG Gr.* 290.9) sitting on a throne and teaching Cleopatra the secret philosophy (*CAAG Gr.* 290.11-12), develops into a three-paragraph technical treatise on the steps towards metal alteration.¹⁵⁶ *Cleopatra*, the beginning of which has not come down to us, goes as follows (following Reitzenstein's edition of **M**):

1-23: This short passage, which does not appear in **A**, is a vague discussion on planets, metals, and the four elements.

24-73: Cleopatra mentions the action of substances on raw materials. Ostanes and the philosophers ask for clarification, but provide themselves information on the technical procedures. Cleopatra responds accordingly.

74-113: Cleopatra instructs Ostanes and the philosophers on where to find substances needed for the operations. She explains how to carry out the procedure in order to attain gold that the treasure-houses of kings do not possess.

114-154: Cleopatra launches into a monologue on how the secret lies in the unity of the substances, stressing the divine aspect of the process.

155-195: Cleopatra reveals that the philosophers and herself have learnt the mystery from the archpriest Comarius. She speaks at great length (albeit not clearly) about the interaction among the four elements and the traditional alchemical saying of 'natures' conquering 'natures' (see Introduction).

Reitzenstein uses a rather unorthodox method for suggesting a date for *Cleopatra*. He starts by arguing for the presence of old Iranian doctrines in the dialogue. The term φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς (*Cleopatra* 45), for instance, is identified as Iranian-Chaldean (1919, p.

¹⁵⁶ For another, more recent edition of *Comarius* other than Reitzenstein (1919), see *CMAG* 4:399-432. A translation of this edition into French can be found in Brunet & Mieli (1934, pp. 18-23). Many thanks to Vincenzo Carlotta for referring me to these publications.

21). He claims that the name Comarius also suggests a Middle-Eastern origin, as *komar* in Aramaic means “chief-priest” (1978, p. 165 n. 68) – the exact epithet used for him in *Cleopatra* (Κομαρίου τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, *Cleopatra* 164). Based on these linguistic peculiarities and Diocletian’s ban of books on *chēmeia* in 296 (*Suda* χ 280 Adler, see Introduction), he claims that the dialogue is a translation from Aramaic into Greek from the third century CE (*ibid.*, 1919, p. 26). The dating of the alleged Aramaic original would be unknown.

However, Reitzenstein’s claims are too ambitious in light of what he presents as evidence.¹⁵⁷ Although influences vaguely referred to as ‘Eastern’ are often pointed out in the alchemical tradition¹⁵⁸ (and the connections between *Isis to Horus* and *I Enoch* shown in Chapter I are a good example of that), Reitzenstein does not offer more than the expression φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς and Comarius’ name to make his case for a translation from Aramaic. Unfortunately, what he makes of both of them can be easily questioned. Reitzenstein presents no precise evidence when stating that the phrase φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς is Iranian-Chaldean – he generically describes it as “das Lichtwasser oder ‚gesegnete Wasser‘, der himmlische Jordan der mandäischen liturgischen Texte” (1919, p. 21) without ever specifying these liturgical texts. At the same time, the exact same Greek expression occurs in *Ecclesiasticus* 6:16. As for Comarius’ name, it is also attested in a Latin inscription from first-century CE Transpadana (*CIL* 05.5597) and later in the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), where one hears of Cyril sending a letter to a Comarius and a Potamon who would have been ecclesiastical superintendents (ἡ σταλεῖσα ἐπιστολή τοῦ ἁγίου Κυρίλλου Κομαρίῳ καὶ Ποτάμῳ ἐπισκόποις, *ACE* 1.11 5 30).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Festugière (1967, p. 218 n. 17), Philonenko (1992, pp. 652 and 654) reminds us, is also unconvinced by Reitzenstein’s claims.

¹⁵⁸ E.g. Martelli (2013, pp. 32-34) with further bibliography.

¹⁵⁹ Philonenko (1992), however, would later establish connections between passages *Cleopatra* and Iranian traditions in more detail – see close reading below.

Admittedly, *Cleopatra* is one of the most difficult early alchemical texts to date, certainly the most difficult among the texts addressed in the present thesis. Unlike *Isis to Horus*, the works attributed to Zosimus that are known to us do not seem to make the vaguest allusion to *Cleopatra* to give us a more or less safe *terminus ante quem*. Diocletian's ban did not keep Zosimus of Panopolis from writing on alchemy around 300 CE (Mertens, 1995, pp. xv-xvii) and thus is not particularly useful for that purpose either. As for a *terminus post quem*, the astounding volume of biblical language that appears in *Cleopatra* (see below), most notably terms found more often in the New Testament, seems to indicate that the text probably dates from at least the second century CE, at the very earliest.

The state of the evidence is malleable enough for one to argue for dates both earlier and later than the second century. On the one hand, *Comarius* (the text that precedes *Cleopatra* and is edited as its beginning in the CAAG; see above) starts with an unambiguously Christian prayer and, in *Cleopatra*, the chief-priest Comarius is said, without much context, to have taught Cleopatra and the philosophers the mystery presently shared (τοῦτο τὸ μυστήριον ἐμάθομεν, ἀδελφοί, ἐκ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Κομαρίου τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, *Cleopatra* 163-4): these facts could make a case for heavy 'Christianising' editing of an originally pagan and therefore earlier text. On the other hand, if we assume that *Cleopatra* is originally Christian and that the "Comarius" of both texts is the same religious leader mentioned in the Council of Ephesus (a point to which I shall return in the close reading below), the authorship can be pushed to the mid-fifth century CE or even later. A much more thorough philological investigation of *Cleopatra* would be necessary for convincingly putting forward a more precise date. As such an investigation is beyond the scope of the present thesis, the following tries to demonstrate that *Cleopatra* can be read as a cohesive enough piece of writing regardless of the possible process of editing it has

undergone, and that it is possible to interpret it successfully as a work heavily influenced by Early Christianity written sometime between the second and the fifth centuries CE.¹⁶⁰

(ii) The form: a ‘sermonic dialogue’?

While the previous chapter dealt with the epistle, a format that has long been seen as one half of a dialogue (Artemon *ap. Demetr. Eloc.* 223; see n. 27) and a suitable vehicle for didactic messages, the present text bears both the giving and receiving ends of knowledge transmission. But first and foremost, it must be said that the title *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* might be somewhat misleading. It can be evocative of the Platonic dialogue to both ancient and modern readers, and this is confirmed to an extent as the piece does feature philosophers interacting with Cleopatra in their search for a better understanding of her teachings. Yet the close reading below will demonstrate that the subject-matter, style and language employed depart from that tradition hugely. Not only does the text employ Koine Greek over Attic, but it also uses vocabulary that is markedly biblical,¹⁶¹ with the result that Cleopatra often sounds like a preacher trying to move a crowd of philosophers into believing in the glorious mysteries of metal alteration rather than a peer trying to outwit them through reasoned argumentation.

As a result, *Cleopatra* seems to move between ‘dialogue’ and ‘sermon’ in a way that projects a rather peculiar voice. What follows demonstrates how *Cleopatra*’s mixing of both these modes, as well as its inevitable associations with specific textual traditions to which they relate, can enrich our understanding of how the search for alchemical knowledge is

¹⁶⁰ Although the use of neuter plural nouns with verbs in the plural one can see in *Cleopatra* (e.g. τὰ θνητὰ ἐμψυχούνται καὶ δεχόμενα τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐξεληθὲν ἐξ αὐτῶν κρατοῦνται καὶ κρατοῦσιν ἄλληλα, *Cleopatra* 118-119) may be seen as a feature of much later Byzantine Greek, it is attested from at least as early as the *Septuagint* (e.g. τὰ πρόβατα διασκορπισθήσονται, *Mark* 14:27). It also occurs in the fourth century (Greg. Nyss. *Ad imaginem dei et ad similitudinem* 1345.13; Epiphanius. *Haer.* 3.336).

¹⁶¹ Cf. Charron (2005, esp. pp. 448-452), who argues for close parallels between *Cleopatra* and the *Secret Book of John* (esp. *NHC* 2.1).

dramatised in this striking piece of writing. This will be done by means of a very short introduction of the main features expected in a philosophical dialogue and in a ‘sermon’, followed by a reflection upon how such mixture may impact our interpretation of *Cleopatra*.

As Plato is considered by some the pioneer of the philosophical dialogue, Diogenes Laertius’ remarks about the form are a good starting point for the discussion:

δοκεῖ δέ μοι Πλάτων ἀκριβώσας τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὰ πρωτεῖα δικαίως ἂν ὥσπερ τοῦ κάλλους οὕτω καὶ τῆς εὐρέσεως ἀποφέρεσθαι. ἔστι δὲ διάλογος (λόγος) ἐξ ἐρωτήσεως καὶ ἀποκρίσεως συγκείμενος περὶ τινος τῶν φιλοσοφουμένων καὶ πολιτικῶν μετὰ τῆς πρεπούσης ἠθοποιίας τῶν παραλαμβανομένων προσώπων καὶ τῆς κατὰ τὴν λέξιν κατασκευῆς... οὐ λανθάνει δ’ ἡμᾶς ὅτι τινὲς ἄλλως διαφέρειν τοὺς διαλόγους φασί – λέγουσι γὰρ αὐτῶν τοὺς μὲν δραματικούς, τοὺς δὲ διηγηματικούς, τοὺς δὲ μεικτούς – ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνοι μὲν τραγικῶς μᾶλλον ἢ φιλοσόφως τὴν διαφορὰν τῶν διαλόγων προσωνόμασαν. (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.48.18-25).

It seems to me that Plato, having perfected the form, should justly be handed the first prize for its beauty as well as for its invention. The dialogue is a discourse consisting of asking and answering questions about some philosophical or political question, with suitable characterisation of the people being used and suitable treatment in language (...) I am not oblivious to the fact that some say that the dialogues diverge from each other in a different way – they say some are dramatic, some narrative, some mixed – but they have denoted the difference among the dialogues in a fashion more relevant to tragedy than to philosophy.

Plato is also ascribed a pioneering status in a second century papyrus (P. Oxy. 3219) where the unknown author, similarly to Diogenes, “repudiates the assertion made by Aristotle in the *De Poetis* (quoted by Athenaeus and alluded to by Diogenes Laertius) that Alexamenus of Teos (...) was the first to write dialogues – or dramatic dialogues, as the papyrus qualifies” (Haslam in Bowman *et al.*, 1977, p. 29). It is worth noting how both the papyrus and Diogenes Laertius stress the dialogue’s dramatic component and how Diogenes, perhaps mockingly, observes that those who tried to classify Plato’s dialogues have spoken about them in terms of tragedy rather than philosophy (τραγικῶς μᾶλλον ἢ φιλοσόφως, see above). Beyond the advantages that the dialogue form offers for displaying a search for knowledge

through the dialectical method of questioning and answering, the ‘staging’ of such search among individuals seems at times just as important as the dialogue itself.

A preference for staging an exchange among characters over intense cross-questioning is a signature feature of Cicero’s philosophical dialogues.¹⁶² Cicero’s characters present much lengthier speeches (*continentem orationem*, Cic. *Tusc.* 1. 17.1), and have led many scholars to prefer the term ‘treatise’ over ‘dialogue’ (e.g. Steel, 2005).¹⁶³ Longer speeches are also prominent in the case of *Cleopatra*, and could be classified under what Cossutta has called a “monologue with dialogic emergences” (2006, p. 186). To be more precise, these emergences are three: the first is by Ostanēs and his companions (Ὀστάνης καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ ὄντες, *Cleopatra* 36), implied to be the philosophers shortly afterwards (οἱ φιλόσοφοι, *Cleopatra* 50), the philosophers themselves (οἱ φιλόσοφοι, *Cleopatra* 167), and an unnamed wise man (ὁ σοφός, *Cleopatra* 174).

Diogenes Laertius also states that another important element of such ‘staging’ is the characterisation of the participants. This is certainly a relevant point of connection between *Cleopatra* and a specific Platonic dialogue, namely the *Symposium* – which in fact retells a gathering that would have been hosted by a tragedian. The former dialogue resonates with the latter on at least three different levels: firstly, both dialogues place a female character in the position of knowledge-holder and teacher of the male philosopher(s); secondly, both texts make noticeable use of mystery language in the imparting of such knowledge (see *Symp.* 209e5-210a4 and the close reading below);¹⁶⁴ thirdly (and this point is an unfolding of the first) is the fact that both Diotima and Cleopatra are given much more voice than their interlocutor(s), in the sense that their views are exposed at much greater length than and are

¹⁶² In one of Cicero’s many appearances as a character in one of them, he states that the Academy no longer uses the dialectal method (*Fin.* 2.2).

¹⁶³ Even though Steel “is not insensitive to the status of many of these works *as* dialogues” (Schofield, 2008, p. 67).

¹⁶⁴ For mystery language in Plato and others, see Riedweg (1987); for the specific case of the *Symposium*, see Evans (2006).

immediately accepted by their interlocutor(s). As Hunter (2004, p. 82) says about the unbalance between Diotima and Socrates' positions in the *Symposium*:

Socrates (...) now places himself on the receiving end of a 'Socratic' examination, (...) followed by a long 'Socratic' speech (...). The childlike naïveté of his alleged responses to Diotima may be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the position of Socrates' interlocutors in some of Plato's most famous dialogues, who often contribute nothing themselves or find themselves agreeing, as modern readers often complain, to propositions and arguments to which they should never have unthinkingly assented.

The fact that in *Cleopatra* the philosophers are placed “on the receiving end” (see above) of Cleopatra's long-winded teachings and have an astonishingly restricted intellectual participation in them brings *Cleopatra* closer to this specific characteristic of the *Symposium*.

There is also something to be said for a thematic similarity between Diotima's and Cleopatra's choices of imagery for addressing their respective subject matters (love and craft, respectively). Diotima talks about love in terms of “giving birth in beauty as regards both body and soul” (ἔστι γὰρ τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν, Plat. *Symp.* 206b 7-8) – a statement as bewildering to Socrates (“Whatever it is you are saying needs power of divination;”, I said, ‘I do not understand’”, μαντείας, ἣν δ’ ἐγώ, δεῖται ὅτι ποτε λέγεις, καὶ οὐ μανθάνω 206b 9-10) as to most modern scholars to this day. Cleopatra talks about her craft in terms of nursing an embryo that eventually will be born (“just as the embryo nursed by the womb grows little by little, and when the accustomed month approaches, it is not hindered from coming out, so likewise is this admirable craft”, ὥσπερ ἔμβρυον ὑπὸ τῆς γαστρὸς τιθηνούμενον κατὰ βραχὺ αὖξει, ὅτε δὲ προσεγγίσει ὁ μὴν ὁ νενομισμένος, οὐ κωλύεται τοῦ μὴ ἐξελθεῖν, οὕτως ὑπάρχει καὶ ἡ τέχνη αὕτη ἢ ἀξιάγαστος,

Cleopatra 63-65).¹⁶⁵ While both images remain mystifying (not surprisingly, as both Diotima and Cleopatra articulate their knowledge transmission in terms of mystery revelation),¹⁶⁶ it is clear that they strengthen the character-building within the dialogue context as highlighted by Diogenes Laertius. Here, again, a statement made by Hunter regarding Diotima by and large applies to Cleopatra: “Diotima herself is not ‘pregnant’, though it might be thought that her mystic language is appropriate to the sex for whom pregnancy is a real physical possibility” (*ibid.*, p. 83).

However, one fundamental linguistic variation exemplifies what sets Diotima and Cleopatra apart. While the former talks about “love” as ἔρως, the latter says that body, soul, and spirit have all united **in love**” (καὶ ἠνώθησαν πάντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ, τὸ σῶμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, *Cleopatra* 138-139). The word chosen for ‘love’ here, ἀγάπη, is markedly biblical, being quite frequent in the New Testament to describe the love of God (e.g. *Romans* 5:8, *2 Corinthians* 5:14) or brotherly love (e.g. *1 Corinthians* 13:1).¹⁶⁷ Considering the importance Diogenes Laertius gives to the λέξις employed by a character in the constitution of a dialogue, and the fact that this will prove to be one of many instances in which *Cleopatra* employs biblical language, this deserves due attention.

The profuse use of biblical language combined with Cleopatra’s longer speeches results in a deviation from the philosophical dialogue into what one might call a ‘sermon’. Given that “New Testament scholarship has not yet been able to define what a sermon is” (Aune, 1987, p. 197) with exactitude, it would be more reasonable for the present purposes to refer to such passages in *Cleopatra* as employing a ‘sermonic mode’ – i.e., one with “a generally didactic character” (*ibid.*) that employs language most commonly found in a

¹⁶⁵ An echo of one of Diotima’s views (*Symp.* 206c) in Cleopatra’s exposition (*Cleopatra* 116-117) is also discussed in the close reading below.

¹⁶⁶ See n. 164 above.

¹⁶⁷ And the specific phrase ἐν ἀγάπῃ can be found a number of times in the New Testament, e.g. *1 Corinthians* 16:14, *Ephesians* 1:4 & 5:2, *Colossians* 2:2, *1 Thessalonians* 5:13, *1 Timothy* 4:12, and *Jude* 1:21.

scriptural text like the New Testament and rhetorical devices aimed at persuading.¹⁶⁸ Alongside Cleopatra’s language and longer utterances, the use of this mode would illuminate the sheer anonymity given to the philosophers in the alchemical dialogue. At all times, Cleopatra addresses the philosophers as an undefined collective rather than individuals, either as φίλοι (*Cleopatra* 24), σοφοί (*Cleopatra* 86) or notably, and more frequently, as ἀδελφοί (*Cleopatra* 94, 164, 165) – the same term used to address the recipients in *Hebrews* (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22),¹⁶⁹ and in at least one of Severian of Gabala’s homilies (*CPG* 4198 1.156; 11.141-2). While this sheer anonymity is at odds with the philosophical dialogue, it evokes the congregational context befitting a sermon or an act of preaching.¹⁷⁰ The fact that in one instance the philosophers address Cleopatra (“for the womb that has borne you is blessed”, μακαρία γὰρ ὑπάρχει ἢ σε βαστάσασα κοιλία, *Cleopatra* 168-169) with a nearly identical expression to one with which a woman addresses Jesus after his explanation of how he drove a demon out of a mute by the hand of god (μακαρία ἡ κοιλία ἡ βαστάσασά σε, *Luke* 11:27 – see below)¹⁷¹ is palpable evidence for that.

Quite noticeable, too, is that this ‘sermonic’ mode is employed much more intensely after the second half of the dialogue – from around *Cleopatra* 114 (see close reading below). This provokes two effects that suggest a much more artful text than *Cleopatra* would appear to be at first. One effect illustrates the phenomenon of *Cleopatra*’s style expressing the alchemical process it describes. As Cleopatra unfolds the mystery of the philosophers (ἰδοὺ τὸ μυστήριον τῶν φιλοσόφων, 114) that **divine** is the thing that makes beings united to

¹⁶⁸ Some of these features have led scholars to reflect upon the relationship between “preaching and teaching styles in Early Christianity” (Aune, 1987, p. 198) and the so-called ‘diatribe’. See Aune (*ibid.*, pp. 200-202).

¹⁶⁹ As Aune (1987, p. 213) observes when arguing for rhetorical influences over literary ones in *Hebrews*. Aune also calls *Hebrews* a “A Hortatory Sermon” (*ibid.*, p. 212).

¹⁷⁰ This is an important feature considering the likely oral origin of what later became written Christian texts: “preaching of the *evangelium*, ‘evangelization’ in the strict Christian sense, began to be practiced by the apostles and their disciples even before the four Gospels and other texts later included in the canon of the New Testament had been written, let alone recognized as canonical and inspired. (...) This starting point has to be borne in mind because it is likely that the New Testament sprang from the early Christian preaching, rather than the other way round” (Alexander Olivar, 1998, pp. 21-22).

¹⁷¹ Cf. Reitzenstein (1978, pp. 399-400) and Charron (2005, p. 452).

divinity divine (θεῖον γάρ ἐστιν ὅτι ἐνουμένας τῇ θεότητι θείας ἀποτελεῖ τὰς οὐσίας, *Cleopatra* 116-117), the text itself is rendered divine by a process of becoming progressively infused with the language of divine inspiration. Another effect may be compared to that of a conversion: the extant text begins by setting a scene that is evocative of pagan times through the characters of Cleopatra, Ostanes, and Greek philosophers taking part in a dialogue.¹⁷² As Cleopatra’s teaching progresses, so does the use of biblical language, as if the progressive illumination of the crowd (as they demand from Cleopatra: σαφήνισον ἡμῖν τηλαυγῶς, *Cleopatra* 37-38) were concomitant to the progressive ‘Christianisation’ of the text. In fact, the very adverb τηλαυγῶς appears in *Mark* 8:25 when Jesus touches a blind man’s eyes and he starts seeing everything clearly again (ἐνέβλεπεν τηλαυγῶς ἅπαντα):¹⁷³ a story that can easily be interpreted as a parable of enlightenment, especially as it occurs immediately after Jesus’ disciples struggle to understand what their leader is saying (*Mark* 8:21).

Yet these implications of the use of a sermonic mode within a text that also has traces of the philosophical dialogue do not solve the last problem to be tackled: the main subject-matter of *Cleopatra* is neither philosophy nor religion. While Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* and Varro’s *De Rebus Rusticis* already show the use of the dialogue form to address matters that are more technical than philosophical (Hutchinson, 2008, pp. 248-249), the inclusion of sermonic notes in such context is far less common. In a way, it seems to dramatise the transmission of alchemical knowledge in a similar fictional setting to that of *Isis to Horus*:

¹⁷² The recurrent reference to “Hades” in *Cleopatra* could arguably be interpreted as reflecting pagan beliefs, but the term does appear both in the Old and New Testaments (e.g. 2 *Samuel* 22:6, *Job* 11:8, *Acts* 2:27, *Luke* 16:23).

¹⁷³ A similar request is made in Severian of Gabala (*CPG* 4212 17.29-30): εἰπέ, ὦ προφήτα, τηλαυγῶς ὁ λέγεις· σαφήνισον ὁ κηρύττεις (cf. τηλαυγῶς in *Cleopatra* 38 and 74). Interestingly, τηλαυγῶς also occurs in a Hermetic dialogue between Tat and Hermes (“In the ‘General Lessons’, father, you spoke enigmatically and not far-shiningly when holding a discussion about divine nature”; ἐν τοῖς Γενικοῖς, ὦ πάτερ, αἰνιγματωδῶς καὶ οὐ τηλαυγῶς ἔφρασας περὶ θεϊότητος διαλεγόμενος, *CH* 13 1.4-5) that features the motif of knowledge revelation on a mountain (“... upon coming down the mountain after your discussion with me”, ἐπὶ τῆς τοῦ ὄρους καταβάσεως, μετὰ τὸ σὲ ἐμοὶ διαλεχθῆναι, *CH* 13 1.7-8), quite prominent in Judeo-Christian literature.

it sets up a legendary Egyptian female figure associated with pagan times and practices as the communicator of alchemical knowledge through the Greek language – knowledge which, by different means, is coded as markedly Judeo-Christian.¹⁷⁴ In the particular case of *Cleopatra*, this cultural mixture (let us not forget the Persian Ostanes) in a dialogue setting is comparable to a point made by Goldhill (2008, p. 5) regarding the Ciceronian dialogue, which he sees as “a way of negotiating a space between cultures and traditions, a way of expressing Roman intellectual life in and against Greek models”. This is what the ‘sermonic dialogue’ that *Cleopatra* seems to be doing: negotiating a space for alchemical knowledge in a Hellenised Egypt inhabited by Jews and recently converted Christians. It does so astonishingly (however abstrusely), by crafting a text where the transformation of matter, the transformation of the interlocutors’ understanding and the transformation of the text itself mix in curious entanglement.

(iii) Close reading

It is not surprising that the CAAG does not include these first twenty-three lines of *Cleopatra* found in **M**. There is no use of the second person or vocatives (for the rest of the dialogue no speech goes on for too long without either of these occurring), neither is there any indication from the anonymous narrator regarding who is making the utterance. While it is true that a long treatise-like speech would not be alien to a dialogue that nods to the Platonic tradition (see above), the lack of any dialogic traces and the unclear relationship between this passage and the rest of the text opens the question as to whether this was originally a part of *Cleopatra* or not.

¹⁷⁴ In *Isis to Horus*, by means of the angel Amnael and the use of a theme from *I Enoch*; in *Cleopatra*, by means of biblical language and possibly the figure of Comarius who teaches her (see above). This is discussed in more detail in 2.2 below.

Be it the original beginning of *Cleopatra* or not, it is certainly incomplete – in fact, Reitzenstein had to reconstruct the start of the first sentence we do have. There is a short comment about the lack of a specific word for referring to something (“some called them elements and spoke the truth, and others called them bodies, others called them an egg and they were not mistaken”; <στοιχεῖα ἐκά>λεσαν καὶ ἀλήθειαν εἶπον, ἕτεροι δὲ σώματα ἐκάλεσαν, ἄλλοι ὄον, καὶ οὐκ ἔπταισαν, *Cleopatra* 1-2). At first it seems that these unidentified objects could be atoms, but the comment is followed by the disorienting but ingenious remark that “and because of this, the wandering was scattered in the cosmos because of the great number of names, and the foolish people were led astray and banished from the truth concerning the four elements and the five < >” (καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐσπάρη ἡ πλάνη ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ διὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἐπωνυμιῶν, καὶ οἱ ἄφρονες ἐπλανήθησαν καὶ ἐξωστρακίσθησαν τῆς ἀληθείας περὶ τῶν τεσσάρων στοιχείων καὶ τῶν πέντε < >, *Cleopatra* 2-5): words like πλάνη, κόσμος, and the number five (πέντε) all seem to indicate that the term missing to complete the sentence is one for ‘planets’ (e.g. πλάνητες), but what could easily be a description of how wandering planets are scattered in the cosmos artfully surprises the reader by becoming a comment on the profuseness of names to describe them (τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἐπωνυμιῶν).

What follows first appears to be an attempt at establishing a sympathetic link between metals and planets, but proves to be more complicated than that. Those discussing nomenclature are compared to what seems to be the ‘Craftsman’ with an uppercase ‘c’, i.e. the creator of the cosmos (“some, then, called them bodies and put them opposite one another, just as the demiurge placed them”, τινὲς μὲν <οὔν> ἐκάλεσαν <αὐ>τὰ σώματα καὶ ἔθηκαν αὐτὰ κατέναντι ἀλλήλων, καθὼς ἔθηκεν αὐτὰ ὁ δημιουργός), and they are implied to be individuals at the interface of alchemy and astrology:

πρῶτον μὲν ἔθηκαν τὸν Κρόνον, κατέναντι αὐτοῦ τὸν μόλιβδον ἐν τῷ στέγει τῷ ἀνωτάτῳ. καὶ τεθείκασιν μετ’ αὐτὸν τὸν Δία, καὶ κατέναντι αὐτοῦ τὴν ὑδράργυρον ἐν τῷ στέγει τῷ δευτέρῳ. καὶ τεθείκασιν μετ’ αὐτὸν τὸν Ἥλιον ἐν τῷ στέγει τῷ μέσῳ, καὶ τεθείκασιν μετ’ αὐτὸν τὴν Σελήνην ἐν τῷ στέγει τῷ ἐσχάτῳ, ἕκαστον πρὸς τὸ[ν] ἕτερον, καθὼς ἔθηκεν αὐτὰ ὁ δημιουργός. (*Cleopatra* 7-12)

First, they placed Saturn, and opposite him lead in the topmost heaven. And they have placed after him Jupiter, and opposite him quicksilver in the second heaven. And after him they have placed the Sun in the middle heaven, and they have placed after him the Moon in the furthest heaven, each next to each other, just as the craftsman placed them.

The links between metals and celestial bodies get frustrated when Sun and Moon are associated with none; the expectation regarding the five planets is also broken by the absence of Mercury, Venus, and Mars. The cosmological-astronomical discussion (“and each stands apart from the other and they are yoked together into one wheel”, καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου ἕκαστον δίσταται καὶ ἐνὶ τροχῷ ὑποζευγνύονται, 12-13) also becomes strangely intimate and affectionate as the celestial bodies “through one spirit are fond of and gaze earnestly at one another, and they travel around in each others’ company, and they live with each other, and they make peace with each other and they move around in their heavens” (δι’ ἐνὸς πνεύματος στέργονται καὶ ἐν ἀλλήλοις ἀτενίζουσιν, καὶ ἐν¹⁷⁵ ἀλλήλοις συνεκδημοῦσιν καὶ σὺν ἀλλήλοις καταλύουσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς) στέγαις αὐτῶν περιπατοῦσιν, 14-15). The subsequent statement “for they are found in the earth and they exist in the air and are in water and fire” (ἐν γὰρ τῇ γῆ εὐρίσκονται καὶ ἐν τῷ ἀέρι ὑπάρχουσι καὶ ἐν ὕδατι καὶ πυρὶ εἰσιν, 17-18) no longer seems to be about planets and destabilises the hypothesis that they could be the solution to the riddle. In any case, “each of them is hidden in their own glory” (καὶ ἕκαστον αὐτῶν [ἐν τῇ γῆ] κέκρυπται ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ δόξῃ, 22-23), nowhere for the reader to see.

The writing becomes less discombobulated from this point onwards, but still quite elusive:

¹⁷⁵ Prof. Hutchinson suggests that ἐν could be deleted, and so ἀλλήλοις would be governed by συνεκδημοῦσιν.

καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὦ φίλοι, ὅταν τὴν τέχνην ταύτην τὴν περικα(λ)λῆ βούλησθε προσεγγίσει, βλέπετε τὴν φύσιν τῶν βοτανῶν πόθεν ἔρχονται. τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐκ τῶν ὀρέων κατέρχονται, [καὶ τὰ μὲν ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἀναφύονται, καὶ τὰ μὲν ἐκ κοιλάδων ἀνέρχονται,] τὰ δὲ ἐκ πεδίων (ἀν)άγονται. ἀλλὰ βλέπετε πῶς προσεγγίζετε αὐτοῖς· ἐν καιροῖς γὰρ (ιδίοις) καὶ ἐν ἰδίαις ἡμέραις τρυγήσατε αὐτά· καὶ ἐκλέξασθε ἐκ τῶν νήσων τῆς θαλάσσης, καὶ ἐκ τῆς χώρας τῆς ἀνωτάτης· καὶ βλέπετε τὸν ἀέρα τὸν διακονοῦντα αὐτοῖς καὶ τὸν σῆτον τὸν περικυκλοῦντα αὐτοῖς. μὴ λυμήνητε μηδὲ θανατώσητε. βλέπετε τὸ θεῖον ὕδωρ τὸ ποτίζον αὐτὰ καὶ τὴν νεφέλην τὴν βαστάζουσαν αὐτὰ καὶ τὸν ἀέρα τὸν κυβερνῶντα αὐτά. καὶ ὅταν ἐνωθῶσιν, ἓν εἰσιν καὶ οὐδεὶς δύναται διαχωρίζειν αὐτά, ἐπειδὴ ἐσωματώθησαν ἐν μιᾷ οὐσίᾳ. (*Cleopatra*, 24-35).

And you, friends, whenever you want to approach this very beautiful art, behold the nature of the plants [and]¹⁷⁶ from where they come. For some come down from the mountains, [and some are produced again out of the earth, and others come up from the hollows], and others are brought up from the plains. Behold how you approach them: for you reaped them in their own time and their own day, and picked them from the islands of the sea and from the topmost land. And behold the air serving them and the food encircling them. Do not damage and do not kill them. Behold the divine water irrigating them and the cloud bearing them and the air driving them and whenever they are united, they are one and no one is able to separate them, since they were embodied in one being.

It is somewhat striking that, in a dialogue that is in theory about alchemy (here called a τέχνη as it often is), one learns about crops rather than metals or dyeing techniques (see Introduction). But as the exposition progresses, some clues are dropped which allow one to infer that the botanical imagery may refer to metal alteration. Just like plants, metals can be extracted from mountains (ἐκ τῶν ὀρέων) or the ground (ἐκ πεδίων). The recommendation about reaping (τρυγήσατε) the plants in their own time might refer to being attentive as to the timing for collecting metals at a given step of a procedure. The fact that they are picked (ἐκλέξασθε) from the islands of the sea and the topmost region remains, at least for now, mysterious in alchemical terms. While the imagery of irrigation (τὸ θεῖον ὕδωρ τὸ ποτίζον αὐτά) and being ‘steered’ by the air (τὸν ἀέρα τὸν κυβερνῶντα αὐτά) is perfectly applicable for plants, the use of the alchemical term “divine water” (τὸ θεῖον ὕδωρ),¹⁷⁷ as well as “the

¹⁷⁶ Prof. Hutchinson suggests that one could read (καὶ) πόθεν; cf. Hld. 2.28.1, Procl. in *Tim.* 1.10 line 4 Diehl.

¹⁷⁷ The term τὸ θεῖον ὕδωρ already appears in Ps.-Democritus (e.g. *PM* 11.108-113) as a substance performing “a technical function with regard to the processes of ‘dyeing’ base metals, which are transmuted into gold or silver” (Martelli, 2009, p. 6). Its translation can be challenging depending on the context, as θεῖον could mean

cloud” (see τὴν νεφέλην),¹⁷⁸ reveals that this speech is most likely a succession of images. Finally, their embodiment in one being (ἐν εἰσιν, ἐσωματώθησαν ἐν μιᾷ οὐσίᾳ) could mean that the procedure cryptically described would be that for making a metallic alloy. If it is correct that this is describing an alchemical procedure, the repetition of βλέπετε may even be interpreted as if the speaker was carrying it out in front of the interlocutors in question, drawing their attention to every step. As a whole, this language of agriculture, combined with the use of sight-related imperatives, translates into a didactic mode that is quite fit for a text concerned with technical knowledge.

It is at this point that the dialogue form comes to light, while other things do not. The philosophers respond alongside Ostanēs, the legendary Persian magus; it is also now that the preserved text makes it explicit that the previous utterance was by Cleopatra (ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Ὀστάνης καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ εἶπον τῇ Κλεοπάτρᾳ, *Cleopatra* 36). But other things remain unrevealed and clarification about them is sought. Ostanēs and the philosophers say:

ἐν σοὶ κέκρυπται ὅλον τὸ μυστήριον τὸ φρικτὸν καὶ παράδοξον. σαφήνισον ἡμῖν τηλαυγῶς καὶ περὶ τῶν στοιχείων· εἰπέ πῶς κατέρχεται τὸ ἀνώτατον πρὸς τὸ κατώτατον καὶ πῶς ἀνέρχεται τὸ κατώτατον πρὸς τὸ ἀνώτατον καὶ πῶς ἐγγίζει τὸ μέσον πρὸς τὸ ἀνώτατον καὶ κατώτατον καὶ οὐκ ἀπαργοῦσι τὰ μέρη τοῦ προελθεῖν καὶ ἐνωθῆναι (εἰς) τὸ μέσον, καὶ τί (τὸ ἄμμα) τῶν στοιχείων αὐτοῖς, καὶ πῶς κατέρχονται τὰ ὕδατα τὰ εὐλογημένα τοῦ ἐπισκέψασθαι τοὺς νεκροὺς παρειμένους καὶ πεπεδημένους καὶ τεθλιμ(μ)ένους ἐν σκότῳ καὶ γνόφῳ ἐντὸς τοῦ Ἄιδου, καὶ πῶς εἰσέρχεται τὸ φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς καὶ ἀφυπνίζει αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξ ὕπνου ἐγερθῆναι τοῖς κτήτορσιν, καὶ πῶς εἰσέρχονται τὰ νέα ὕδατα ἅπερ ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ () τῆς κλίνης καὶ ἐν τῇ κλίνῃ τικτόμενα καὶ μετὰ τοῦ φωτὸς ἐρχόμενα καὶ νεφέλη βαστάζει αὐτά, καὶ ἐκ θαλάσσης ἀναβαίνει ἢ νεφέλη ἢ βαστάζουσα τὰ ὕδατα, τὰ ἐμφανισθέντα δὲ θεωροῦντες οἱ φιλόσοφοι χαίρονται; (*Cleopatra* 37-50)

In you the entire awful and unexpected secret is hidden. Tell us distinctly and far-shiningly about the elements as well. Tell us how the topmost goes down towards the downmost and how the downmost goes up towards the topmost and how the middle goes towards the topmost and the downmost and the portions do not lie away idle from going towards and

either ‘divine’ or ‘sulphur’ – and alchemists are known to play with this very ambiguity (see Mertens, 1995, p. 163). The testimonies from early alchemists and the commentators also make it difficult to be specific about this substance’s function. See Mertens, 1995, pp. 163-167.

¹⁷⁸ Although not exclusively an alchemical term, it appears a number of times in Ps.-Democritus (*AP* 2.9-12; 8.72; 10.86). Evidence from Byzantine and Syriac manuscripts indicate that the term may refer to mercury or arsenic, either of which would have been used for whitening (Martelli, 2013, pp. 229-230).

being united into the middle, and what is the link of the elements to one another, and how the blessed waters go down to visit the corpses that are weakened, constrained and oppressed in gloom and darkness inside Hades, and how the medicine of life comes in and wakes them up so that they awaken from sleep for their possessors, and how the new waters come in, which [those] in the beginning () of the bed and engendered in the bed coming with the light and a cloud holds them, and the cloud bearing the water comes out of the sea; and seeing the things made manifest, the philosophers rejoice?

In saying that “the entire awful and incredible secret is hidden” (κέκρυπται ὅλον τὸ μυστήριον τὸ φρικτὸν καὶ παράδοξον) in Cleopatra, Ostanēs and the philosophers seem to be referring metonymically to Cleopatra’s previous utterance and confirm that she was in fact speaking cryptically. In this sense, the use of παράδοξον (which can also mean ‘unexpected’), could be a confirmation of how Cleopatra’s discourse is, rather unexpectedly, about something other than what its language of harvesting suggests. The use of τὸ φρικτόν, literally ‘to be shuddered at’ (translated above as “awful”), in turn, seems to look towards what Cleopatra’s interlocutors add to her exposition: they use bleak and indeed poetic imagery of corpses imprisoned “in gloom and darkness inside Hades” (ἐν σκότῳ καὶ γνόφῳ ἐντὸς τοῦ Ἄιδου) that are visited by “blessed waters” (τὰ ὕδατα τὰ εὐλογημένα) and woken up by a certain “medicine of life” (τὸ φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς). They may have changed the quality of the imagery, but their means of expression is no less mysterious than Cleopatra’s: while demanding far-shining clarification (N.B. the use of yet another poetic word: σαφήνισον ἡμῖν **τηλαυγῶς**),¹⁷⁹ Ostanēs and the philosophers remain in as much darkness as their chosen images.

Cleopatra does clarify a couple of things in her response. She states that waters coming in awaken the bodies and the spirits (τὰ ὕδατα εἰσερχόμενα ἀφυπνίζουσι τὰ σώματα καὶ τὰ πνεύματα, *Cleopatra* 51-52), which could explain what Ostanēs and the philosophers were referring to as “corpses”: σῶμα and πνεῦμα could have been a way of referring to the

¹⁷⁹ On τηλαυγῶς, see. n. 173.

solid and evaporated substances. Although they are again shut in Hades (πάλιν περικλεισθήσονται ἐν τῷ Ἄιδῃ, *Cleopatra* 53-54), she explains, they little by little come up and put on many glorious colours (κατὰ μικρὸν... ἀναβαίνουσιν καὶ ἐνδύονται ποικίλα καὶ ἔνδοξα χρώματα, *Cleopatra* 54-55), just like the flowers in spring (καθάπερ τὰ ἄνθη ἐν τῷ ἔαρι, *Cleopatra* 55). In other words, Cleopatra finds a way of tying Ostanēs' and the philosophers' imagery of the afterlife with her own imagery of the life cycle of plants, making it progressively more explicit to the reader that both parties are in fact talking about the same thing by means of different metaphors.

Cleopatra proceeds:

ὕμῖν δὲ λέγω τοῖς εὖ φρονούσιν· τὰς βοτάνας καὶ τὰ στοιχεῖα καὶ τοὺς λίθους ὅταν ἐπαίρητε ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν, ὠραῖοι μὲν φαίνονται λίαν καὶ <πάλιν>¹⁸⁰ οὐχ ὠραῖοι, ἐπειδὴ τὰ πάντα τὸ πῦρ δοκιμάζει. ὅταν δὲ ἐνδύσωνται τὴν δόξαν ἐκ τοῦ πυρός καὶ τὴν χροῖαν τὴν περιφανῆ, ἐκεῖ ὀράσεις μείζονες, ἐκεῖ δόξα κεκρυμμένη, τὸ σπουδαζόμενον κάλλος, καὶ χροῖα μεταβληθεῖσα εἰς θεότητα, ὅταν ἐν τῷ πυρὶ τιθηνή(σω)σιν αὐτά. ὥσπερ τὸ ἔμβρυον ὑπὸ τῆς γαστρὸς τιθηνούμενον κατὰ βραχὺ αὖξει, ὅτε δὲ προσεγγίσει ὁ μὴν ὁ νεομισμένος, οὐ κωλύεται τοῦ μὴ ἐξελθεῖν, οὕτως ὑπάρχει καὶ ἡ τέχνη αὕτη ἢ ἀξιάγαστος. τιτρώσκουσιν αὐτὰ¹⁸¹ κλύδωνες καὶ κύματα ἀλλεπάλληλα ἐν τῷ Ἄιδῃ καὶ ἐν τῷ τάφῳ, ἐν ᾧ κατάκεινται. ὅταν δὲ ἀνεωχθῇ ὁ τάφος, ἀναβήσονται αὐτὰ ἐξ Ἄιδου ὡς οἷα βρέφος ἐκ γαστρὸς. (*Cleopatra* 57-68)

I am telling this to you, who understand well: whenever you lift up plants, elements and stones out of their places, they seem very beautiful and contrariwise they are not, since the fire puts all things to the test. But whenever they put on the glory from the fire and its conspicuous colour, then there, there are greater sights, [there is] the hidden splendour, the zealously pursued beauty, and the earthliness transformed into divine, whenever they nurse them in the fire. Just as the embryo nursed by the womb grows little by little, and when the accustomed month approaches, it is not hindered from coming out, so likewise is this admirable craft. Waves and floods wound them one after another in Hades and in the tomb, inside which they lie dead. But whenever the tomb is open, these will come up from Hades just like a baby out of the womb.

Cleopatra adds one more element other than waters to the procedure, namely fire – this goes well with the earlier mention of bodies and spirits, i.e. of metals having solid and evaporated

¹⁸⁰ Prof. Hutchinson questions the necessity of Reitzenstein's addition here.

¹⁸¹ Reitzenstein's text has αὐτήν.

parts when put under fire (see above). She seems to be referring to a process well acknowledged in alchemical literature of putting metals on fire in order to change their colour (N.B. τὴν χροιάν and the verb ἐνδύσωνται; ἐνδύονται is used with χρώματα in *Cleopatra* 54-55, see above).¹⁸² Cleopatra calls this new appearance that metals gain from the process “the hidden splendour” (δόξα κεκρυμμένη, which echoes ἔνδοξα χρώματα in *Cleopatra* 55), as if it had always been there for the fire to manifest (N.B. “its conspicuous colour”, τὴν χροιάν τὴν περιφανῆ, *Cleopatra* 60). It is noteworthy that the perfect form of κρύπτω, used earlier to describe the secret hidden in Cleopatra (ἐν σοὶ κέκρυπται... τὸ μυστήριον, *Cleopatra* 37) in a request for clarification (σαφήνισον ἡμῖν, *Cleopatra* 37-38), reappears here to describe something hidden made manifest in alchemical terms: text subtly forecasts process.

While maintaining her own imagery of exploitation of the natural world by talking about these metals as plants, elements and stones (τὰς βοτάνας καὶ τὰ στοιχεῖα καὶ τοὺς λίθους), as well as Ostanēs’ and the philosophers’ resurrection imagery, Cleopatra also adds something new here. She interestingly compares the metal change promoted by alchemy, here called an “admirable craft” (ἡ τέχνη... ἀξιάγαστος), to that of the embryo in the womb by means of a simile – a rhetorical device quite rare outside epic poetry in antiquity (*OCD*⁴ “metaphor and simile”). It is interesting that in the exact moment when Cleopatra uses this markedly literary device, she makes it most explicit that it describes something essentially non-literary, the τέχνη of changing metals. Implicitly admitting that she has been talking about a craft in a crafty way, she ends her speech by stitching together all three threads of imagery used thus far: waves and floods (natural world) wound the accumulation in Hades,

¹⁸² The use of ἐνδύω, which is often used in relation to clothes, and χροιά, which often describes a surface, imply an awareness that the procedures described here would not actually transform one metal into another, but rather change the metal’s appearance. See Introduction.

in the tomb, but they will come out of it (resurrection) like a baby out of the womb (pregnancy and birth-giving).

The philosophers' reaction engages with Cleopatra's maternal imagery:

θεωρήσαντες οἱ φιλόσοφοι τὸ κάλλος οἷα φιλόστοργος μήτηρ τὸ τεχθὲν ἐξ αὐτῆς βρέφος τότε ζητοῦσί πως ἵνα τιθηνήσωσιν ὡς βρέφος τὴν τέχνην ταύτην ἀντὶ γάλακτος τοῖς ὕδασιν. μιμεῖται γὰρ ἡ τέχνη τὸ βρέφος, ἐπειδὴ καὶ ὡς τὸ βρέφος μορφοῦται καὶ ὅταν τελειωθῇ ἐν τούτοις πᾶσιν, ἰδοὺ μυστήριον ἐσφραγισμένον. (*Cleopatra* 68-73)

The philosophers, seeing the beauty like the affectionate mother [sees] the baby born from her, seek somehow to nurse this craft like a baby with waters instead of milk. For the craft imitates the baby, since it also takes shape, like the baby, and whenever it is brought to perfection in all these things – behold the secret that has been sealed.

The philosophers' reaction to Cleopatra's speech is portrayed not surprisingly in intellectual terms (N.B. θεωρήσαντες, ζητοῦσί), but not without a touch of affection (N.B. φιλόστοργος μήτηρ). Cleopatra's imagery of the slow-growing embryo (κατὰ βραχὺ αὐξεί, *Cleopatra* 63-64) that is nursed in the womb (τὸ ἔμβρυον ὑπὸ τῆς γαστρὸς τιθηνούμενον, *Cleopatra* 63) and eventually comes out of it as a baby is here taken further, as the craft being nursed (τιθηνήσωσιν... τὴν τέχνην) with waters is compared to the baby being nursed with milk (ὡς βρέφος... ἀντὶ γάλακτος τοῖς ὕδασιν): the imagery employed in the text is nursed and developed like the procedure. And so, the secret that has been sealed can be beheld: was it sealed up by imagery, and is it being opened up little by little – κατὰ βραχὺ – as the text progresses?

What follows does not make it seem so. First, Cleopatra says that she will tell, far-shiningly, where the elements and the plants lie (ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν δὲ ἐρῶ ὑμῖν **τηλαυγῶς** ποῦ κεῖνται τὰ στοιχεῖα καὶ αἱ βοτάναι, *Cleopatra* 74-75) – her announcement echoes Ostanēs' and the philosophers' request for clarification made earlier in the dialogue (σαφήνισον ἡμῖν

τηλαυγῶς, *Cleopatra* 37-38).¹⁸³ Yet immediately afterwards she makes a statement that points into the opposite direction: “I will start my speaking in riddles” (ἐν αἰνίγμασι δὲ ἄρξομαι τοῦ λέγειν, *Cleopatra* 75). Then, shifting to the second person, she instructs one to go into the topmost dwelling, into the bushy mountain in the middle of trees (ἄνελθε εἰς τὴν στέγην τὴν ἀνωτάτω εἰς τὸ δασὺ ὄρος ἐν δένδροις, *Cleopatra* 75-76), behold a rock in the mountain ridge (ἰδοὺ πέτρα ἐν τῇ ἀκρωρείᾳ, 76-77), take the yellow orpiment from the rock and whiten divinely/with sulphur¹⁸⁴ (ἐκ τῆς πέτρας λάβε ἄρσενικὸν¹⁸⁵ καὶ λεύκανον θείῳ, 77): although she said that she would speak in riddles, this looks rather straightforward at first.

Straightforwardness, however, never lasts for long in *Cleopatra*. The interlocutor is urged to look in the middle of the mountain, beneath the orpiment (ἰδοὺ ἐν τῇ μέσῃ τοῦ ὄρους κάτωθεν τοῦ ἄρσενικοῦ, 78): there lies the orpiment’s “female counterpart” (ἐκεῖ ἐστὶν ἡ ὁμόζυξ αὐτοῦ, 78-79). The literal tone of Cleopatra’s previous instruction for extracting yellow orpiment from a mountain (we know from Theophrastus that it could be extracted from mines, *On Stones* 40) and carrying out some form of whitening (a very common goal in alchemy – see Chapter I) is broken here: the appearance of ‘female’ (ὁμόζυξ) creates a pun on ἄρσενικόν, ‘orpiment’, and ἄρσενικὸς/ἄρρενικός, ‘male’. One is obliged to reread the passage and reevaluate what Cleopatra is really saying: the effect is almost as disorienting as her sequence of statements about speaking “far-shiningly” and then “in enigmas”. While the identity of the “female” component is not revealed, it becomes fairly clear that the pun was made in order to illustrate a chemical interaction: the orpiment “becomes one in her, with whom it has pleasure” (ἐν ἣ ἑνοῦται, μεθ’ ἧς ἔχει τὴν τέρψιν, 79), and this is immediately followed by a version of the famous alchemical statement on the law

¹⁸³ On τηλαυγῶς, see. n. 173.

¹⁸⁴ See n. 177 above.

¹⁸⁵ According to Pliny the Elder, orpiment could be used for making gold (i.e. a gold-looking product that was nonetheless breakable) – the method would even have attracted Caligula (Pliny *NH* 33.79).

of sympathies and antipathies (“nature rejoices in nature”, χαίρεται φύσις ἐν φύσει, 79-80; see Introduction).

What immediately follows may be more descriptive, but could still be playing with words slightly. Cleopatra instructs one to go down to the Egyptian sea (κάτελθε εἰς τὴν Αἰγυπτιακὴν θάλασσαν, 80-81) and take from its sand, out of the source, the so-called sodium carbonate (καὶ ἀνάγαγε μεθ’ ἑαυτοῦ ἐκ τῆς ψάμμου ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς τὸ λεγόμενον νίτρον, 81-82), and unite the components with one another (ἔνωσον αὐτὰ ἀλλήλοις, 82). While this probably refers to the fact that this mineral used to be extracted from the Nile Delta in antiquity (Edwards & Currie *et al.*, 2007),¹⁸⁶ the choice of terms here suggests an extra layer of meaning. A piece of Egyptian land is talked about as the source (N.B. ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς, 81) of an ingredient used in the procedure described by a character who may be the last Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt, and whom the dialogue portrays as the source of alchemical knowledge. Text and craft intertwine once more.

It is possible to speculate about procedures for acquiring and maybe using this sodium carbonate. After saying that by uniting all these components in equal measure natures conquer natures and delight in one another (ὅταν τὰ πάντα ἰσομέτρως συναθροίσης, τότε νικῶσιν αἱ φύσεις τὰς φύσεις καὶ τέρπονται ἐν ἀλλήλαις, 84-85), Cleopatra addresses the philosophers again:

βλέπετε, σοφοί, καὶ συνίετε· ἰδοὺ γὰρ τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς τέχνης [τῶν] συζευχθέντων νυμφίου τε καὶ νύμφης καὶ γενομένων ἔν. ἰδοὺ αἱ βοτάναι καὶ αἱ διαφοραὶ αὐτῶν. ἰδοὺ, εἶπον ὑμῖν πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ πάλιν ἔρῳ ὑμῖν· βλέπετε καὶ συνίετε ὅτι ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης ἀνέρχονται τὰ νέφη βαστάζοντα τὰ ὕδατα τὰ εὐλογημένα, καὶ αὐτὰ ποτίζει τὰς γαίας καὶ ἀναφύει τὰ σπέρματα καὶ τὰ ἄνθη. ὁμοίως καὶ τὸ ἡμέτερον νέφος ἐξερχόμενον ἐκ τοῦ ἡμετέρου στοιχείου βαστάζον τὰ θεῖα ὕδατα καὶ ποτίζον τὰς βοτάνας καὶ τὰ στοιχεῖα, καὶ οὐδενὸς χρήζει ἐκ τῶν ἄλλων γαιῶν. (*Cleopatra* 86-94)

Behold, wise ones, and understand: behold the fulfilment of the craft of yoking groom with bride and them becoming one. Behold the plants and their differences. Behold, I told you all

¹⁸⁶ Sodium carbonate was used for a number of purposes, including mummification, the production of Egyptian blue, and glass-making (*ibid*).

the truth and I will again say to you: behold and understand that the clouds come up out of the sea bearing the blessed waters, and they moisten the lands and let the seeds and the flowers grow; just so does our cloud coming out of our element carrying the divine waters and watering the plants and the elements, and needs nothing from other lands.

The repetition of sight-related imperatives evokes lines 24-35, where Cleopatra talks rather cryptically about reaping plants in the proper time (and, in fact, βοτάναι reappear here). She now ties this together with the coupling of “bride and groom” (i.e. the undefined ‘female’ ingredient and the ‘male’ orpiment), which may rectify the prior hypothesis of what the βοτάναι stand for: rather than referring to the metals themselves, they seem to stand for ingredients capable of altering them, which need to be collected at a natural environment (such as a mountain and the bottom of the “Egyptian sea”; see above). The clouds that come out of the sea (ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης ἀνέρχονται τὰ νέφη) producing “the blessed waters” (βαστάζοντα τὰ ὕδατα τὰ εὐλογημένα) which let the flowers grow (ἀναφύει... τὰ ἄνθη), in turn, may be related to the so-called sodium carbonate mentioned earlier (τὸ λεγόμενον νίτρον, 82), as it was also said to be extracted from the sea. This seems coherent with the fact that sodium carbonate is a soluble mineral and also an evaporite, i.e. it becomes accessible when water evaporates: the formation of such clouds would be necessary for alchemists to attain sodium carbonate and then dissolve it into “blessed waters” for their own purposes. These same “blessed waters” were said to visit the bodies in Hades earlier (τὰ εὐλογημένα τοῦ ἐπισκέψασθαι τοὺς νεκρούς, *Cleopatra* 43), a visit that would result in them putting on various colours “like flowers at spring” (ἐνδύονται ποικίλα καὶ ἔνδοξα χρώματα, καθάπερ τὰ ἄνθη ἐν τῷ ἔαρι, *Cleopatra* 54-55) – as these flowers reappear here, their function in relation to colouring becomes more plausible.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Ps.-Democritus has a recipe (*AP* 9) for a liquid compound including orpiment (which appears in *Cleopatra* – see above), sodium carbonate (νίτρον, which Martelli translates as “soda”) and other ingredients, a “wash” into which one is to dip dark metallic leaves in order to make them “shadowless”: “Take orpiment, one ounce, and soda, a half-ounce (...) grind it together in vinegar, or urine, or filtrate of quicklime, until a wash is formed: dip into this wash the dark metallic leaves while heating them, and you will make them ‘shadowless’” (δέξαι

Although the language gets more philosophical and abstract at this point, Cleopatra remains faithful to vivid imagery as the text progresses. She invites the philosophers to behold the incredible and entirely unknown secret (ἰδοὺ τὸ παράδοξον μυστήριον, ἀδελφοί, τὸ ἄγνωστον ὅλως, 94-95), claiming that the truth has been revealed (ἡ ἀλήθεια ὑμῖν πεφανέρωται, 95), and then proceeds:

ἄκουσον¹⁸⁸ τοῖνυν καὶ σύνες καὶ ἀνάκρινον ἀκριβῶς ἐν οἷς λέγω· λάβε ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων στοιχείων ἀρσενικὸν ἀνώτατον καὶ κατώτατον ἄσπρον τε καὶ ρούσιον, ἰσόσταθμα ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ, ὅπως συζευχθῶσιν ἀλλήλοις. ὥσπερ γὰρ ἡ ὄρνις ἐν θερμότητι θάλπει καὶ τελειοῖ τὰ φᾶ ἀυτῆς, οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς θάλψατε καὶ λειώσατε καὶ ἐξενέγκαντες καὶ ποτίζοντες ἐν τοῖς θείοις ὕδασι ἐν ἡλίῳ καὶ ἐν τόποις ἐγκαυστικοῖς,¹⁸⁹ [καὶ] ὀπτήσατε ἐν πυρὶ μαλακῶ μετὰ τοῦ παρθενικοῦ γάλακτος καὶ προσέχετε ἐκ τοῦ καπνοῦ. ἐν γὰρ τῷ Ἄιδῃ κατάκλεισον αὐτά. καὶ πάλιν ἐξαγαγόντες ποτίσατε αὐτὰ κρόκον Κιλικίον ἐν ἡλίῳ καὶ ἐν τόποις ἐγκαυτικοῖς [καὶ]¹⁹⁰ ὀπτήσατε ἐν πυρὶ μαλακῶ μετὰ γάλακτος καὶ παρθενικοῦ καὶ προσέχετε ἐκ τοῦ καπνοῦ. καὶ ἐν τῷ Ἄιδῃ κλείσατε αὐτὰ καὶ ἐν ἀσφαλείᾳ κινήσατε αὐτά, μέχρις ἂν γένηται ἡ κατασκευὴ αὐτῶν στερεωτέρα καὶ οὐκ ἀποδιδράσκουσα ἐκ τοῦ πυρός. καὶ τότε λαβὼν ἐξ αὐτοῦ () καὶ ὅταν ἐνωθῆ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ γίνωνται ἓν, τότε ἐπίρριπον ἐπὶ σῶμα ἀργύρου καὶ ἕξεις χρυσόν, ὃν οὐκ ἔχουσιν αἱ τῶν βασιλέων ἀποθήκαι. (*Cleopatra* 98-113)

Now, listen, understand and examine accurately the words with which I speak: take, out of the four elements, the topmost and downmost orpiment, both white and red, male and female in equal measure, in order for them to couple with one another. For just as the bird warms and incubates her eggs in heat, so heat and smoothen and, having carried [them] out and watered [them] in the divine waters under the sun and in places for burning in, roast them in a slow fire with maiden's milk and protect them from the smoke. Enclose them in Hades. Having led them out again, water them with Cilician saffron in the sun and in places for burning in, roast them in a slow fire with maiden's milk and protect them from the smoke. And shut them in Hades and stir them up cautiously, until their preparation has become rather firm and not escaping the fire. And then, having taken () out of them and when the soul and spirit have been united and they have become one, then apply it on to the body of silver and you will have gold, one which the storehouses of kings do not possess.

ἀρσενικοῦ οὐγγίαν μίαν, καὶ νίτρου οὐγγίας δύο τὸ ἡμισυ... λείου ὁμοῦ ἐν ὄξει, ἢ οὐρῳ, ἢ ἀσβέστῳ στακτῆ, ἕως γένηται ζωμός· εἰς τοῦτον τὰ ἐνσκια πυρὶ κατάβαπτε πέταλα, καὶ ἀποσκιώσεις, *AP* 9.79-84). This may fit the present hypothesis of the sodium carbonate being used in a liquid solution (the "blessed waters"); the dark metallic leaves from Ps.-Democritus could be the corpses from *Cleopatra* that are awakened and made colourful ("shadowless") by these "blessed waters".

¹⁸⁸ Note the shift to the singular here; the same utterance shifts to the plural soon afterwards. It is hard to tell whether these shifts are due to transmission errors or to Cleopatra's alternating between Ostanes and the philosophers as her addressee(s).

¹⁸⁹ Reitzenstein's text has ἐγκαύστοις; the above reading is suggested by Prof. Hutchinson.

¹⁹⁰ Reitzenstein's text has ἐγκαύστοις καί; see n. 189 above.

In the midst of imagery that has already become relatively familiar to the reader (e.g. that of ‘male’ and ‘female’ ingredients and of Hades), a second simile appears here. It is similar to the first one in that it uses the language of imminent birth: the embryo in the maternal womb here becomes eggs under a mother-bird’s heat. While similes of motherhood have been used by male characters elsewhere in ancient texts,¹⁹¹ the fact that the only utterances that use them in the dialogue are by the dialogue’s only explicitly female character may be telling. Considering that the philosophers’ response to Cleopatra’s first motherhood simile was compared to that of an affectionate mother towards her baby (θεωρήσαντες οἱ φιλόσοφοι τὸ κάλλος οἷα φιλόστοργος μήτηρ τὸ τέχθέν, 68-69), it seems that the imagery is being employed in a way that reinforces Cleopatra’s female authority on the topic over the male philosophers. As what the craft of alchemy produces is presented as imitating the baby (μιμεῖται γὰρ ἡ τέχνη τὸ βρέφος, 71), a female who is in theory able to bring life forth is the perfect medium for the explanation of how alchemy works. The fact that the philosophers have been compared to mothers in light of Cleopatra’s explanation suggests their gain from being exposed to her perspective.

This is not the only aspect of Cleopatra’s identity that appears in the passage. Towards the end of her explanation of the procedure, Cleopatra claims that it will result in gold (this is notably the first time metals are explicitly mentioned at all in the dialogue, alongside σῶμα ἀργύρου) which the storehouses of kings do not possess (ἔξεις χρυσόν, ὃν οὐκ ἔχουσιν αἱ τῶν βασιλέων ἀποθήκαι, *Cleopatra* 112-113). Again, Cleopatra is an authoritative enough figure for making such a claim to the philosophers – though this time as the last active ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt. What the statement says about the nature of the gold her procedure would produce is a more difficult matter. While it could be a promise of gold even more valuable than that of kings, it could equally be a disclaimer: what Cleopatra

¹⁹¹ Similes of mother birds included, e.g. Achilles (*Iliad* 9.323-7) and Jesus (*Luke* 13:34).

here describes does not produce real gold at all – the product would not even make it to the safes of such authorities. We are again confronted with a lack of clarity as to whether alchemists were invested in genuine attempts to make gold, mere forgery or both. What they do seem particularly invested in, however, is leaving a lot of room for interpretation in their texts.

At this point, Cleopatra's association of the τέχνη with divinity becomes much stronger. She invites the philosophers once more to behold the mystery – for the first time called theirs (ἰδοὺ τὸ μυστήριον τῶν φιλοσόφων, 114): can they at last claim possession of the gold that was at last given to them by the text? – about which their parents (including Cleopatra's) administered an oath not to reveal or make public (περὶ αὐτοῦ ἐξώρκισαν ἡμῖν οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν τοῦ μὴ ἀποκαλύψαι αὐτὸ καὶ δημοσιεῦσαι, 114-115),¹⁹² a secret that has divine form (θεῖον ἔχον τὸ εἶδος, 115-116), as well as divine action (θεῖαν καὶ τὴν ἐνέργειαν, 116). She adds that the divine is the thing that makes beings united to divinity divine (θεῖον γὰρ ἐστὶν ὅτι ἐνουμένας τῇ θεότητι θείας ἀποτελεῖ τὰς οὐσίας, 116-117; see above). One can hear an echo of Diotima's ideas in the *Symposium* (see above), in particular when she says that the engendering and bringing to birth that results from a man and a woman uniting is something immortal within a mortal being (ἢ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν. ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο θεῖον τὸ πρᾶγμα, καὶ τοῦτο ἐν θνητῶ ὄντι τῷ ζῳῷ ἀθάνατον ἔνεστιν, ἢ κύησις καὶ ἢ γέννησις, Plat. *Symp.* 206c). The link becomes more convincing in light of the emphasis given by Cleopatra earlier to the uniting of a male and a female (see above), as well as what she says immediately after: it is by such means that **mortal things** attain a soul (ἐν ᾧ... **τὰ θνητὰ** ἐμψυχοῦνται, 117-118). Less helpfully, however, Cleopatra's reasoning is as hard to follow as Diotima's.

¹⁹² This echoes the oath for secrecy in *Isis to Horus* – see Chapter I.

Cleopatra adds that this is how they (whatever beings she refers to as “mortal things”) receive the spirit coming out of them by being overpowered and overpowering one another (καὶ δεχόμενα τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐξεληθὸν ἐξ αὐτῶν κρατοῦνται καὶ κρατοῦσιν ἄλληλα). Precisely what αὐτῶν refers to is unclear, though the use of the verb κρατέω may be referring to substances (οὐσίαι, see line 117) reacting to one another according to the law of sympathies and antipathies. What follows seems to confirm this:

ὥσπερ γὰρ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ σκοτεινὸν τὸ πλήρες ματαιότητος καὶ ἀθυμίας τὸ κρατοῦν τὰ σώματα τοῦ μὴ λευκανθῆναι καὶ δέξασθαι τὸ κάλλος καὶ τὴν χροιάν, ἣν ἐνεδύσαντο ἐκ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ (). ἀσθενεῖ γὰρ τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ διὰ τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐκτεταμένον. ἐπὰν δὲ αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ σκοτεινὸν καὶ βρωμοῦν ἀποβληθεῖ ὥστε μὴ φανῆναι ὀσμὴν μήτε τὴν χροιάν τοῦ σκότους, τότε φωτίζεται τὸ σῶμα καὶ χαίρεται ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα ὅτι ἀπέδρα τὸ σκότος ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος καὶ καλεῖ ἡ ψυχὴ τὸ σῶμα τὸ πεφωτισμένον· ἔγειραι ἐξ Ἄιδου καὶ ἀνάστηθι ἐκ τοῦ τάφου καὶ ἐξεγέρθητι ἐκ τοῦ σκότους· ἐνδέδυσαι γὰρ πνευμάτων καὶ θείωσιν, ἐπειδὴ ἔφθακεν καὶ ἡ φωνὴ τῆς ἀναστάσεως καὶ τὸ φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς σέ. (*Cleopatra* 119-130)

For just as the dark spirit, the one full of vanity and faintheartedness, the one that conquers the bodies so that they do not get whitened and receive the beautiful colour which they wear from the craftsman (). For the body, the spirit and the soul get weakened because of the gloom that has stretched over them. And on the occasion when the spirit itself, the dark and foul-smelling one, is thrown away, to the point of there being no perception of smell or colour of darkness, then the body shines, and the soul rejoices, and so does the spirit, because the gloom has fled the body, and the soul summons the body that has become luminous: “awake from Hades, rise from the tomb, wake up from the darkness; for you have put on spiritualisation and divinisation since the voice of resurrection has come and the medicine of life has entered you.”

Through near-death imagery, we are brought back to processes of metal alteration. This can be inferred mainly by the references to rather sensorial features associated with the “dark, foul-smelling spirit” (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ σκοτεινὸν καὶ βρωμοῦν, 123-124), which will no longer leave a smell (ὀσμὴν, 124) or a dark colour (τὴν χροιάν τοῦ σκότους, 124-125) once thrown away. These could easily describe observable phenomena from a technical experiment. Alongside such descriptions, the term ‘demiurge’ seems to be used here in the down-to-earth sense of ‘craftsman’.

While the sense-based language used in the passage above makes the death-rebirth imagery more graspable in technical terms than when first introduced in the dialogue, the presence of what one might vaguely call ‘spiritual’ language cannot be denied. It is precisely with regard to the “dark, foul-smelling spirit” that Philonenko (1992, pp. 656-661) argued for a far more compelling Iranian parallel than Reitzenstein (1919, p. 21) ever did (see above). According to a version of the Zurvanite myth, the androgynous God Zurvan generates two spirits, one of them being Ahriman:

« Zervan l’ayant vu ne sut pas qui il pouvait bien être, et il demandait : Qui es-tu, toi ? Et celui-ci dit : Je suis ton fils. Zervan lui dit : mon fils est parfumé et lumineux, et toi, tu es ténébreux (*xawarin*) et puant (*žandahot*) ».

La question posée a sa réponse : « l’esprit ténébreux et puant », c’est le mauvais fils de Zervan, c’est Ahriman. (Philonenko, 1992, p. 657)

Philonenko here quotes a translation from a passage found in the work of Eznik of Kołb, a fifth-century, Armenian Christian writer (*ibid.*).¹⁹³ Considering *Cleopatra*’s bias towards biblical language and our suggested date for the dialogue, it seems at least possible that its author had access to Iranian religious notions via Christian sources. At any rate, this seems more plausible than the straight Iranian origin proposed by Reitzenstein.

In fact, other descriptive expressions used in the passage are given Christian colouring. The soul calls the body that has become luminous (πεφωτισμένον, 127) – while the verb could easily refer to the bright colour of the metal, φωτίζω is quite frequently used in the New Testament (e.g. *1 Corinthians* 4:5; *2 Timothy* 1:10; *Ephesians* 3:9).¹⁹⁴ As the soul says that the body has put on “evaporation/spiritualisation and divinisation”

¹⁹³ Philonenko (1992, p. 657 n. 44) uses the French translation by Victor Langlois via indirect sources, one of them being Bidez & Cumont (1938, vol. 2 p. 90).

¹⁹⁴ The same perfect form that occurs here also appears in an Orphic fragment (*PEG Orph.* 760) and in *CH* 9 3.

(πνευμάτωσιν καὶ θείωσιν), the blurring of the lines between physical and spiritual transformations becomes even more obvious. This overlap also happens in the reappearance of the φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς, which could easily denote an ingredient, but this exact expression is used metaphorically in *Ecclesiasticus* 6:16 to describe a loyal friend. More tellingly, the “voice of resurrection” directed at the body in the tomb is reminiscent of *John* 11:43, where Jesus makes Lazarus rise from the tomb by shouting with a loud voice (καὶ ταῦτα εἰπὼν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ἐκράυγασεν Λάζαρε, δεῦρο ἔξω). In short, these ambiguities show that ‘demiurge’ is probably being used here with an uppercase ‘D’ (as the divine Creator of the world) just as much as with a lowercase one (as a mundane craftsman).

As if animated by the φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς, the following lines get livelier. The spirit is given emotion (τὸ... πνεῦμα... εὐφραίνεται ἐν τῷ σῶματι, 131), which is in turn mixed with movement (τρέχει κατεπεῖγον ἐν χαρᾷ εἰς τὸν ἀσπασμὸν αὐτοῦ, 131-132). The soul joins the joyful party (καὶ χαίρεται ἡ ψυχὴ ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτῆς, 134-135), feeling at home in the body that became divine in correspondence with her (ἐπειδὴ θεῖον γέγονεν κατ’ αὐτήν, 136): the attainment of divinity is talked about in rather affectionate and intimate terms. The three of them, then (body, soul, and spirit), have united in love (καὶ ἠνώθησαν πάντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ, τὸ σῶμα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, 138-139) – as mentioned earlier, the word of affection ἀγάπη is quite frequent in the New Testament. Finally, the mystery is hidden in their becoming one (καὶ γεγόνασιν ἓν, ἐν ᾧ κέκρυπται τὸ μυστήριον, 139-140): the religious undertone is undeniable.

Lines 140-154 insist on the importance of body, soul, and spirit uniting, but bring an interesting addition:

τὸ γὰρ πῦρ αὐτοὺς ἠνωσεν καὶ μετέβαλεν καὶ ἐκ τοῦ κόλπου τῆς γαστρὸς αὐτοῦ ἐξήλθον [ὁμοίως καὶ ἐκ τῆς γαστρὸς τῶν ὑδάτων καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ἀέρος τοῦ διακονοῦντος αὐτοῖς]. καὶ αὐτὸ ἐξήνεγκεν αὐτοὺς ἐκ τοῦ σκότους εἰς φῶς καὶ ἐκ πένθους εἰς φαιδρότητα καὶ ἐξ

ἀσθενείας εἰς ὑγείαν καὶ ἐκ θανάτου εἰς ζωὴν, καὶ ἐνέδυσεν αὐτοὺς θεῖαν δόξαν πνευματικὴν, ἣν οὐκ ἐνεδιδύσκοντο τὸ πρῖν, ὅτι ἐν αὐτοῖς κέκρυπται ὅλον τὸ μυστήριον καὶ (τὸ) θεῖον ἀναλλοίωτον ὑπάρχει. (*Cleopatra* 141-148)

For the fire has united and altered them, and they have come out the cavity of his womb [similarly also out of the womb of the waters and the air serving them]. And it has carried them out of the darkness into light, out of grief into joyousness, out of sickness into health, out of death into life, and dressed them with the divine and spiritual glory, which they had not put on before, for in them the whole mystery is hidden and the divine unchangeability lies.

Two instances of the formula ‘ἐκ x εἰς y’ are parallel to a passage in Melito’s *De Pascha*. The passage in question is the one where Jesus Christ is described as the one who “rescued us... from shadows to light, from death to life” (ὁ ῥυσάμενος ἡμᾶς... ἐκ σκότους εἰς φῶς, ἐκ θανάτου εἰς ζωὴν, Mel. *De Pascha* 489-492; see also *1 Peter* 2:9) – the verb ῥύομαι used here also belongs to the same semantic field as ἐκφέρω, the form chosen to introduce the formula in *Cleopatra* (ἐξήνεγκεν αὐτούς, 144). The expression θεῖαν δόξαν, in turn, also appears in the work of the second/third century CE Christian theologian Clement of Alexandria (διὸ πιστευόμεν... εἰς δόξαν θεῖαν καὶ σωτηρίαν, *Stromata* 2.6.28).

This expands the range of scriptural influence on alchemical texts already indicated in the previous chapter in the case of *Isis to Horus* and *1 Enoch*. In fact, part of the earliest evidence of Melito’s *De Pascha* is in the fourth century Chester Beatty-Michigan papyrus which also contains the *Epistle of Enoch* (see Chapter I). This might indicate that alchemical authors could have shared a tradition of scriptural works among which many did not make the cut to the biblical canon (as the following chapter will show, this is further corroborated by Zosimus’ *On the Letter Omega*). But while in the case of *Isis to Horus* one of the effects of the parallels with the Enochic *Book of Watchers* is elevating the source and the transmission of alchemical knowledge, the parallels with *De Pascha* here seem to confer something spiritual to what occurs in the alchemical process itself: the transformation metals

undergo through fire are comparable to the transformation one would undergo through Christ.

Cleopatra then moves to language closer to the natural world. She talks about the interaction among the four elements, stating that “the fire has been made subject to the water and the earth to the air, and similarly the air is with the fire and the earth with the water, and the fire with the earth and the water with the air” (ὑπετάγη γὰρ τὸ πῦρ τῷ ὕδατι καὶ ὁ χοῦς τῷ ἀέρι, ὁμοίως καὶ ὁ ἀήρ μετὰ τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ ὁ χοῦς μετὰ τοῦ ὕδατος καὶ τὸ πῦρ [καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ] μετὰ τοῦ χοῦς καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ μετὰ τοῦ ἀέρος, 155-157). The re-combining of the interaction among elements is so disorienting that it is hard to see any separation among them, and understandably so, as the following statement clarifies: “and they became one” (καὶ ἐγένοντο ἓν, *Cleopatra* 157). One of the first images of the dialogue returns, as unity comes about from plants and thick smoke (ἐκ γὰρ βοτανῶν καὶ αἰθαλῶν γέγονε τὸ ἓν, *Cleopatra* 157-158). The nod to the agricultural imagery from the beginning of the text seems to indicate some sort of culmination, as this is also the moment when a particularly repetitive version of the alchemical formula occurs: “And behold: the natures have overpowered the natures, the natures have conquered the natures, and because of this they alter the natures and the bodies and everything from their nature” (ἰδοὺ ἐκράτησαν αἱ φύσεις τὰς φύσεις καὶ ἐνίκησαν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἀλλοιοῦσιν τὰς φύσεις καὶ τὰ σώματα καὶ πάντα ἐκ φύσεως αὐτῶν, 159-161).

Cleopatra concludes her long speech about many things becoming one by becoming one with the philosophers, as she uses a verb in the first person plural for the first time and addresses them as brothers: “We have learned this mystery, brothers, from God and our father Comarius, the chief-priest” (τοῦτο μυστήριον ἐμάθομεν, ἀδελφοί, ἐκ θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Κομαριοῦ τοῦ ἀρχιερέως, *Cleopatra* 163-164). The hypothesis that this Comarius might refer to a church figure that would have attended the Council of Ephesus (see above)

becomes more attractive when one considers that Cleopatra has been exalting unity. One of the points discussed in the Council was the doctrine of the one nature of Christ and, quite interestingly, the expression “one nature” (μία φύσις) is soon to appear in *Cleopatra* 188 (see below).¹⁹⁵ Cleopatra then adds that she has said “all the truth that has been kept secret by many **wise men and prophets**” (εἶπον ὑμῖν... πᾶσαν ἀλήθειαν κεκρυμμένην παρὰ πολλῶν **σοφῶν καὶ προφητῶν**, 165-166) – a pair of terms that in Antiquity seems to appear mostly, if not exclusively, among Christian authors (e.g. Origen *Homily* 5.10; Apollinaris Frag. 118 line 4 Reuss; Didymus the Blind Frag. 74 line 7 Mühlenberg) and might potentially refer to the learned churchmen that had the privilege to attend such discussion.

The Christian references keep pouring in as the philosophers show their extravagant appreciation for Cleopatra by saying that the womb that bore her is blessed (μακαρία γὰρ ὑπάρχει ἢ σε βαστάσασα κοιλία, 168-169). As mentioned above, the utterance is strikingly similar to one said by a woman in a crowd to Jesus in *Luke* 11:27 (μακαρία ἡ κοιλία ἡ βαστάσασά σε); it is also mentioned as a “saying” by Origen (...ὡς ἐχέσθαι τινος λόγου καὶ τό· μακαρία ἡ κοιλία ἡ βαστατάσά σε, *Homilies on Luke* Frag. 165). This is possibly the clearest expression of the transformation from a Platonic-like dialogue setting to a Christian-like gospel one, where Cleopatra would be the prophet and the philosophers the crowd to be converted, but with a fundamental difference: rather than the resurrection of Christ, Cleopatra needs to persuade her interlocutors to believe what may be called (and indeed she has described as) the resurrection of matter.

Cleopatra replies by saying that her words to them are celestial bodies and divine mysteries (σώματα οὐράνια καὶ θεῖα μυστήρια ὑπάρχουσιν τὰ ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ ὑμῖν ῥηθέντα, 170-171). By borrowing a word of her disciples’ borrowed saying (N.B. the adaptation of

¹⁹⁵ I found no other primary evidence about this Comarius other than the passage mentioned in 2.1 above (*ACE* 1.11 5 30). There are two instances where Price (2014, p. 20 & 2016, p. 14) states that this Comarius was an Egyptian bishop “known from other sources” (*ibid.* & *ibid.*) to have been one of Cyril’s agents in Constantinople, but he does not provide such sources in either instance.

ὑπάρχω), Cleopatra once again transforms language employed to describe her into language to describe the knowledge she is sharing (as seen above, she does the same with perfect forms of κρύπτω in lines 61 and 139-140). She also seems to revisit the transformation the text underwent by mentioning both its ends as it has come down to us: the celestial bodies which are first mentioned (lines 1-23) and the divine mysteries preached at the philosophers towards the end. Quite fittingly, she concludes her remark by reinforcing her doctrine of transformation, saying that they (the celestial bodies and the divine mysteries? – the same avoidance of mentioning things by name from the start of the text reappears here) “transform the natures by means of their twisting and alteration and dress them with an unknown and exalted glory which they did not possess before” (ὑπὸ γὰρ τῆς διαστροφῆς καὶ ἀλλοιώσεως αὐτῶν μεταβάλλουσι τὰς φύσεις καὶ ἐνδύουσιν αὐτὰς δόξαν ἄγνωστον καὶ ἐπηρμένην, ἣν πρότερον οὐκ εἶχον, 171-173). In fact, it seems that the terms διαστροφή and ἀλλοίωσις, which can also mean more abstractly ‘distortion’ and ‘confusion’, respectively, are also hinting at *Cleopatra*’s very manner of ‘twisting’ her reasoning and confounding the reader with regard to what this shape-shifting text really is.

A wise man responds (καὶ φησὶν ὁ σοφός, *Cleopatra* 174) with questions that sound like those of a natural philosopher:

εἰπέ ἡμῖν, ὦ Κλεοπάτρα, καὶ τοῦτο· διὰ τί γέγραπται (οὕτως τὸ)¹⁹⁶ μυστήριον τῆς λαίλαπος; σώματά ἐστιν ἢ τέχνη; καὶ τροχοῦ δίκην ἄνωθεν αὐτῆς, ὥσπερ τὸ μυστήριον (ἐμφαίνει, ὁ οὐρανός) καὶ ὁ δρόμος καὶ πόλος ἄνωθεν καὶ οἰκήματα καὶ πύργοι καὶ παρεμβολαὶ ἐνδοξόταται; (*Cleopatra* 174-178)

Tell us the following also, Cleopatra: why has the mystery of the whirlwind been written in this way? Is the art bodies? And are there, like a wheel, above it, as the mystery shows, the sky and its running and the axis of the heaven above and the most glorious dwelling places and towers and camps?

¹⁹⁶ According to Prof. Hutchinson, this addition seems doubtful, although there is presumably something missing; it might be a reference to the Septuagint.

Despite its focus on the mechanics of the cosmos, the term ἐνδοξόταται suggests a slightly different context. The verb ἐνδοξάζομαι seems exclusive to the Septuagint and the New Testament, except for one very significant instance in the fourth-century *PGM 13, The Eighth Book of Moses*. As Chapter I has pointed out, this is the papyrus whose hand Lagercrantz identified with the proto-alchemical papyri of Leiden and Stockholm. Also as demonstrated in Chapter I, the remarkable overlap of scripture and technical knowledge gains further complexity through parallels with magical texts.

Cleopatra's last utterance is far from a conclusion that brings a resolution to the many puzzling moments of the dialogue. She recognises the philosophical concepts underlying the wise man's comment (καλῶς τεθείκασιν αὐτὴν οἱ φιλόσοφοι, 179 – αὐτὴν probably refers back to τέχνη), but immediately connects it with the divine realm (ὡς ἐτέθη ἐκ τοῦ δημιουργοῦ καὶ δεσπότου τῶν ἀπάντων, 179-180). While apparently retrieving the connection among the four elements and the movements of the cosmos (ὁ πόλος ἐκ τῶν τεσσάρων δραμεῖται καὶ οὐ μὴ παύσεται, 181) that gently nods to the first lines of the text, Cleopatra introduces information that is entirely new: “these things were engendered in this Ethiopian land of ours, from where are taken plants and stones and divine bodies – which God has placed, not a man” (ταῦτα ἐτέχθησαν ἐν τῇ γῆ ἡμῶν ταύτῃ τῇ Αἰθιοπίδι, ἐξ ἧς λαμβάνονται βοτάναι καὶ λίθοι καὶ σώματα θεῖα, ἅτινα ἔθηκεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ οὐκ ἄνθρωπος, 182-4). What so far had looked more specifically like an Egyptian setting gets challenged – and the kind of context this may bring to light is explored in the following section.

The closing lines amplify rather than explain the alchemical formula, by saying that the Demiurge has sown a capacity in each of these (ἐν ἐκάστῳ δὲ ἐνέσπειρεν ὁ δημιουργὸς τὴν δύναμιν, 184 – ἕκαστος seems to refer back to each of the βοτάναι καὶ λίθοι καὶ σώματα θεῖα; see above): one turns pale, the other does not (τὸ ἐν χλωραίνει, καὶ ἄλλο οὐ χλωραίνει, 185); one is dry, the other is humid (ἐν ξηρόν, ἐν ὑγρόν, 185); one tends to contain, the other

to distinguish (ἐν καθεκτικὸν καὶ ἐν κριτικόν, 185-186), and this is why the rule is made possible:

... καὶ ἐν τῷ ἀπαντῆσαι ἀλλήλοισι κρατοῦσιν ἄλληλα. καὶ ἐν ἐν τῷ ἄλλῳ σωματοῖ καὶ (ἐν) ἐν τῷ ἐτέρῳ καταγλαΐζει καὶ γίνονται μία φύσις ἢ πάσας τὰς φύσεις θηρεύουσα καὶ κρατοῦσα, καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἐν νικᾷ πᾶσαν φύσιν τὴν τοῦ πυρὸς καὶ τοῦ χόος καὶ ἀλλοιοῖ πᾶσαν τὴν δύναμιν αὐτῶν. καὶ ἰδοῦ λέγω ὑμῖν τὸ πέρασ αὐτοῦ. (*Cleopatra* 186-191)

And in their meeting they conquer one another. One thing makes corporeal in the other, and one gives glory in the other, and they become the one nature that pursues and conquers all natures, and the one itself conquers every nature, that of the fire, of the earth, and changes all their power. And there, I tell you the end it reaches.

The Greek of this passage seems deliberately convoluted, as if refusing to break down what the law of sympathies and antipathies really means (see Introduction). The word order is a bit disorienting, and the vocabulary again accumulates disorienting vagueness: what does τὸ ἐν refer to? Does αὐτοῦ refer back to it? Most importantly, what is the exact meaning of τὸ πέρασ here? ‘Limit’ or ‘boundary’ is quite a common sense, but the way in which the process is described, however elusively, in the language of power and conquest (N.B. θηρεύουσα, κρατοῦσα, νικᾷ) undermines a sense of limitation. Rather, it seems to mean ‘end’ in the sense of accomplishment, from which the term can sometimes mean ‘perfection’, or sometimes even adverbially ‘at last’. When finished, (the final product of the procedure?) becomes a medicine that runs within the body (ὅταν τελειῶται, γίνεται φάρμακον φονευτ(ικ)ὸν ἐν τῷ σώματι τρέχον, 191-192). And as she rushes to the end like the φάρμακον runs through the bodies, the text is completed by Cleopatra’s closing statement: “for here the craft of the philosophy is complete” (ἐνταῦθα γὰρ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἡ τέχνη πεπλήρωται, 195). The closing lines are also filled with endings, displaying one last instance of processes being described by Cleopatra relating to the text itself.

While this toilsome close reading of a text that defies interpretation provides a starting point for navigating *Cleopatra*, many of its aspects do (and some will) remain baffling. The following section attempts to contextualise some of *Cleopatra*'s features that may be particularly disconcerting to the classical scholar. Why is Cleopatra the chosen protagonist for this dialogue, and what transformation has given the renowned queen of Egypt from pagan times a Christian voice that nonetheless does not mention Christ? Why is the Persian magus Ostanos the only named figure among the philosophers? How do these literary choices relate to those in the *Letter from Isis to Horus*? Do these choices combined start to reveal an underlying set of literary conventions among alchemical authors?

2.2) The context

(i) Cleopatra

The Cleopatra of this dialogue is a challenging figure. Her co-appearance with the legendary magus Ostanos arguably calls for a figure just as legendary, namely Cleopatra VII, the last Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt. In fact, this identification can easily be corroborated not only by the astounding amount of early evidence explicitly associating the craft of alchemy with famous names, some of which are Egyptian (see Introduction and Chapter I), but also by the established reputation both Cleopatra and Egypt enjoyed in relation to knowledge among the Greeks. At the same time, the Christian language and themes that often appear in the dialogue (see close reading above) could indicate that this identification is either inadequate (because 'out of character')¹⁹⁷ or relative in the sense that the Cleopatra of this dialogue

¹⁹⁷ Considering the Christian language of the dialogue, Charron (2005, p. 453) speculates that the author of *Cleopatra* could "be a ... Jewish-Christian, or a Gentile-Christian, a learned Egyptian woman adhering to the teaching of Paul (...) and maybe baptised". After raising this possibility, Charron seems to identify the author with the main character in the dialogue: "we must infer that Cleopatra had close contacts with members of the Alexandrian Jewish milieu, sharing philosophical and esoteric speculations with outsiders, including disciples of Hermes like her" (*ibid.*).

would be similar to the Isis of the letter investigated in the previous chapter: an Egyptian figure placed in an openly eclectic work in which historical and cultural consistency is not a major concern. To make things more challenging, Cleopatra talks of “this Ethiopian land of ours” (τῆ γῆ ἡμῶν ταύτη τῆ Αἰθιοπίδι, *Cleopatra* 182).¹⁹⁸ While this could be justified by the cultural eclecticism just mentioned, one should not downplay the use of the pronoun in the first person plural (no personal pronouns are used when she mentions Egypt in *Cleopatra* 80-81). The following investigates these three threads that unravel from *Cleopatra* and argues that early alchemical literature and other contextual factors allow for the three of them to be interwoven.

It is true that the cultural impact of Cleopatra VII, the political mastermind whose erudition, connections with Roman rulers, and even death, are now the stuff of legend, often overshadows the existence of many other Cleopatras – mythical, historical and somewhere in between.¹⁹⁹ Among early and most likely mythical Cleopatras is one that features in Phoenix’s story in his attempt to convince Achilles to return to the battlefield (*Iliad* 9.555-605); one Cleopatra that is the daughter of Boreas and Oreithya and wife of Phineus, and who was probably much better known than the extant evidence on her has allowed modern readers to see (both Aeschylus and Sophocles had plays called *Phineus*, now lost); and one Cleopatra that has been associated with Midas and who Whitehorne (1994, pp. 6-12) suggests might be the missing link between the mythical Cleopatras and the long line of Macedonian rulers in Egypt. Finally, one hears of another historical, royal Cleopatra: one of the wives of Herod the Great, about whom not much information seems to have survived other than that she was known as “Cleopatra of Jerusalem” (Josephus *AJ* 17.1.3).

¹⁹⁸ The present thesis refers to ‘Ethiopia’ in the sense it would have been used in the ancient Greek-speaking world from Herodotus onwards, i.e. “the lands south of Egypt comprising most of the modern states of Sudan and Ethiopia, the ancient Kush, Meroe, and Aksum” (*OCD*⁴, ‘Ethiopia’). See Snowden Jr. (1970).

¹⁹⁹ The summarised account of various Cleopatras to follow is from Whitehorne (1994, pp. 1-13).

While this shows that the name ‘Cleopatra’ is less exceptional than the general public might expect – and some non-Egyptian inscriptions show that this name was not restricted to royals either (Whitehorne, 1994, p. 1) – the accounts about and the reception of the famous Cleopatra still make her a very strong contender to be associated with the dialogue. Plutarch famously speaks of her as a persuasive (μετὰ τῆς ἐν τῷ διαλέγεσθαι πιθανότητος, *Ant.* 27.2), learned woman who could speak without any need for an interpreter with Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabs, Syrians, Medes, and Parthians (*Vit. Ant.* 27.3). The last Ptolemaic queen has also been associated with technical knowledge: according to Galen, Cleopatra was “the author of a treatise entitled *Cosmetics*, of which several recipes have been preserved” (Totelin, 2017, p. 150; see Gal. *Comp. Med. Loc.* 12.403.16-17);²⁰⁰ for the particular case of alchemy, Pliny’s (*NH* 9.58) anecdote about how Cleopatra made one of the largest pearls in history dissolve in vinegar could also be relevant. This combination of persuasiveness and associations with technical knowledge and skill makes Cleopatra VII a perfect fit for the setting and subject-matter of *Cleopatra*. Furthermore, it is plausible that a culturally eclectic author would feel drawn to a culturally ambiguous,²⁰¹ polyglot figure, acclaimed for an impressive capacity for both political and cultural articulation²⁰² (according to Plutarch, she was the only Ptolemaic ruler who bothered to learn Egyptian).

This can be reinforced by ancient evidence concerning Egypt both in and out of alchemical literature. It is well known that Egypt has always had a considerable reputation

²⁰⁰ For an edition, French translation and commentary of the Greek fragments of this treatise, see Vincent (2010-2011).

²⁰¹ Ashton (2008, pp. 1-13) discusses the complexity of Cleopatra’s identity in relation to different approaches and agendas in modern scholarship. Some scholars tend to emphasise her Greek-Macedonian bloodline; others (including Ashton) draw attention to the facts that early evidence signals that Cleopatra was invested in presenting herself as Egyptian rather than Greek-Macedonian both in Egyptian and Roman contexts (*ibid.*, pp. 3-7); that “by the time she first came to power in 51 BCE her family had lived in Egypt for 272 years” (*ibid.*, p. 1), and most importantly, that the identity of Cleopatra’s paternal grandmother is not known (*ibid.*, p. 6), all of which could point to a mixed-race background.

²⁰² One prophecy from the third book of the Sibylline oracles that probably dates from Cleopatra’s reign (see Aune, 1983, pp. 74-75) “is of considerable political and social interest, since it reveals a strong current of Egyptian nationalism that regarded Cleopatra (...) as a deliverer of eastern Mediterranean peoples and as a conqueror of Rome” (*ibid.*, p. 75). See also Lightfoot (2007, p. 239 n. 112).

for its knowledge in metallurgy.²⁰³ As discussed in the Introduction, it is quite likely that the two extant alchemical papyri originated from Egypt, most likely Thebes (Dosoo, 2016). Ps.-Democritus claims to have come to Egypt “bringing natural substances” (ἤκω δὲ κατὰ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ φέρων τὰ φυσικά *PM.4.65*). A list of alchemists from manuscripts **A** (fol. 195v) and *Parisinus Gr. 2250* (fol. 245) contains the entry “Cleopatra, the wife of king Ptolemy” (ἡ Κλεοπάτρα ἡ γυνὴ Πτολεμαίου τοῦ βασιλέως, *CAAG Gr. 25.11-12*). While this list is probably quite late for the present purposes, Zosimus of Panopolis (whose epithet speaks for itself) stresses a connection between his craft and Egyptian royalty:²⁰⁴

ὄλον τὸ τῆς Αἰγύπτου βασιλείον, ὃ γύναι, ἀπὸ τῶν δύο τούτων τεχνῶν συνέστηκε, τῶν τε καιρικῶν καὶ τῶν φυσικῶν [καὶ] ψάμμων· ἡ γὰρ καλουμένη θεία τέχνη, τουτέστιν ἡ δογματική, περὶ ἣν ἀσχολοῦνται ἅπαντες οἱ ζητοῦντες τὰ χειρόκμητα ἅπαντα καὶ τὰς τιμίας τέχνας, τὰς τέσσαράς φημι (αἰ) δοκοῦσι τι ποιεῖν, μόνοις ἐξεδόθη τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν· ἡ γὰρ φυσικὴ ψαμμουργικὴ βασιλέων ἦν (...). ὥσπερ (γὰρ) οἱ τεχνῖται οἱ ἐπιστάμενοι βασιλικὸν τύπτειν νόμισμα οὐχ ἑαυτοῖς τύπτουσιν, ἐπεὶ τιμωροῦνται, οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς βασιλεῦσι τῶν Αἰγυπτίων οἱ τεχνῖται τῆς ἐνήσεως οἱ ἔχοντες τὴν γνῶσιν τῆς ἀμμοπλυσίας καὶ ἀκολουθίας οὐχ ἑαυτοῖς ἐποιοῦν, ἀλλ’ εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἐστρατεύοντο²⁰⁵ εἰς τοὺς θησαυροὺς ἐργασόμενοι.²⁰⁶ (...) νόμος γὰρ ἦν Αἰγυπτίοις μηδὲ ἐγγράφως αὐτὰ ἐκδιδόναι.²⁰⁷ (*Final Count 1.1-20*)

The entire Egyptian palace, woman, has arisen from these two crafts, the ones regarding metallic ore worked from time to time and the ones regarding natural metallic ore. For the craft called divine, that is the one that can be taught, the one with which all those searching for all the artificial things and the honourable crafts occupy themselves, the four ones I mean

²⁰³ A good overview of metallurgy in ancient Egypt is provided by Grimes (2018, especially pp. 34-53 and pp. 88-94), although I am not entirely convinced by her proposition that Zosimus was a Hermetic scribal priest in intimate connection with the House of Life. See also Martelli (2013, pp. 63-69) and for Egyptian evidence proper, see Aufrère (1991, vol.1, pp. 59-82).

²⁰⁴ The edition of the Greek text is Festugière (*RHT 1:363-364*), who edits this version following **M** together with a version from **A** (fol. 111r) alongside a slightly different version from **A** (fol. 251v-255r – hereafter **A**²). The quotation above predominantly follows **M&A**; whenever relevant, variants from **A**² are indicated in the footnotes.

²⁰⁵ On the one hand, Prof. Hutchinson considers the idea of these craftspeople being enrolled in the army odd, despite the ἀρχιστράτηγοι that occurs in an omitted passage from the **M&A** version (line 17); ἐστρατεύοντο εἰς may suggest “would go on an expedition to the treasuries”. He suggests a possibility like ἐτάττοντο “were assigned”, maybe with a corruption from ἀρχιστρατήγουσ. **A**² has the dative τοῖς Αἰγυπτίων βασιλεῦσιν between ἐστρατεύοντο and εἰς τοὺς θησαυροὺς, which could go with θησαύρουσ, but might suggest the pluperfect ἐστράτευντο, “had been enrolled in the treasures by the kings”. On the other hand, Festugière (*RHT 1:276 n. 3*) observes that people working in mines and quarries in Egypt were indeed under military surveillance (he refers to two inscriptions: *RIGLE 1.143* and *1.454*), so the emendations are not an absolute necessity.

²⁰⁶ Suggestion by Prof. Hutchinson; both versions in Festugière have ἐργαζόμενοι.

²⁰⁷ I follow **A**² in this particular passage, as **M&A** have a τινα between αὐτὰ and ἐκδιδόναι that does not seem to work well in the sentence.

which actually seem to be effective, has been assigned only to the priests. For the art of extracting gold from ore by nature belonged to the rulers (...). For just as the craftspeople who are knowledgeable about striking official royal coin do not do that for themselves, in which case they are punished, so do the craftspeople of smelting under the Egyptian rulers who possess the knowledge of sand-washing for gold and what follows it would not do it for themselves, but for this very reason were enrolled in the army in order to work at the treasures. (...) For there was a law among Egyptians according to which one could not make these things known even in writing.

Zosimus' attribution of a divine status to alchemy (N.B. *θεία τέχνη*) was already noted in *Isis to Horus*, when Isis refers to it as a *ιερά τέχνη* (see Chapter I): this approximation between knowledge and sacredness in the Greek reception of Egypt is not an isolated occurrence. A passage in Philostratus (VA 3.32) states that those who come from Egypt (*οἱ ἐξ Αἰγύπτου*) declare themselves both holy and wise (*σφᾶς μὲν αὐτοὺς ἱεροὺς τε καὶ σοφοὺς ἀποφαίνοντες*), and claim to have established the Greeks' sacrifices and initiations (*νομοθέτας θυσιῶν τε καὶ τελετῶν, ὅποσας νομίζουσιν οἱ Ἕλληνας*). Both Herodotus (2.143) and Plato (*Tim.* 21d-25d) tell stories of Greeks (Hecataeus and Solon, respectively) traveling to Egypt and attaining knowledge from priests. More relevant to the issue at hand, the second or third century CE fragment *CPF* Plato 139T (P. Ryl. 63) shows the ending of a dialogue between Plato and Egyptian prophets (*Πλάτωνος τοῦ Ἀθηναίου φιλοσόφου [π]ρὸς τ[ο]ὺς προφήτας...[ἀ]πάντησις σύνδο[ο]ς [...] διαλύσεως*) with “baldly informative exchanges on astrology” (Hutchinson, 2008, p. 248). The use of the dialogue form and the transmission of technical knowledge between Egyptian figures and a Greek philosopher form a meaningful parallel with *Cleopatra*.

Yet, the Greek romanticised view of Egyptian wisdom does not explain the presence of biblical language and *topoi* in *Cleopatra*. A few parallels with *Isis to Horus* may offer some insight into this and show that the eclecticism of alchemical texts is not arbitrary. Both in *Isis to Horus* and in *Cleopatra*, one finds two of the most easily recognisable female figures from an Egyptian context (and Cleopatra is reported to have strongly identified with

and dressed as the figure of Isis; cf. Plut. *Ant.* 54.6) as the ones in charge of the transmission of knowledge to a male audience (Horus and the philosophers, respectively).²⁰⁸ These choices could be related to the fact that we do hear of two historical female practitioners of alchemy (Maria and Theosebeia) and make one wonder whether female authors might be hiding behind the anonymity of these two works. But most strikingly, the knowledge they are now imparting was first acquired from obscure figures (Isis from Amnael and Cleopatra from Comarius) that evoke a Judeo-Christian element.²⁰⁹ Thus, the overall characterisation of Isis and Cleopatra carries a Judeo-Christian mark that detaches them from their original pagan contexts and creates updated versions of them: prophetesses over goddess and queen.²¹⁰

More speculatively, the Judeo-Christian thematic links between *Isis to Horus* and *Cleopatra* might cast some light on the latter's reference to the Ethiopian land. As the previous chapter mentioned, the scriptural text with which *Isis to Horus* engages, 1 *Enoch*, has been more extensively transmitted in Ge'ez (also referred to as 'Classical Ethiopic') than any other language – not a surprising fact, given that it is only among the Ethiopian Jews and the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Churches that this text holds canonical status. While these may be considered later developments, there is earlier evidence that

²⁰⁸ Although the identity of all the philosophers is not given in *Cleopatra*, the only ones that are singled out are identified as male: Ostanos and “the wise one” – a phrase that might actually refer to Ostanos as well (see close reading above).

²⁰⁹ Again, one wonders if there is a similarity between these fictional accounts and the teacher-pupil relationship between Zosimos (who, as the following chapters will show, is heavily influenced by early Christian literature) and Theosebeia.

²¹⁰ A similar phenomenon occurs outside alchemical literature with another female figure mentioned in Chapter I, namely the Sibyl. Lightfoot (2007, esp. pp. 18-24) argues for a transformation of the Sibyl “from pagan seer to Judaeo-Christian prophetess” (*ibid.*, p. 18). She proposes that one of the markers for this adaptation of the Sibyl in the Sibylline Oracles may be her being called a ‘prophetess’ (προφήτις) – the epithet given to Isis in *Isis to Horus* arguably Cleopatra's role in *Cleopatra*: “Pagan sources often call her a χρησμοδόχος or χρησμολόγος (or poetic equivalents), but these words are applied to her here only in order to be denied. I infer that their associations are unacceptably pagan. (...) The oracles much prefer προφήτις. (...) Noticeably, it is certain Christian authors who start to apply this label to her. Perhaps they have come to regard her as a forth-teller of the word of the true God” (*ibid.*, pp. 20-21). See Chapter I and Mertens (1989a), who has a broader take on the term ‘prophet’, but mentions how it is attributed to Moses in *PGM* 5.109 (*ibid.*, p. 264) and later to the alchemist Maria the Jewess (*ibid.*, p. 266; see *CAAG Gr.* 404.16-17).

might support some continuity from late antique Ethiopian Judaism and early Christianity to the formation of their religious canons.²¹¹ The story of Philip the Evangelist baptising an official of the Ethiopian queen in the New Testament (*Acts* 8:26-39; see Snowden Jr., 2001, p. 264) is described by Eusebius as the “first fruit of Christianity in the world” (*Church History* 2.1.13). In Alexandria proper, Origen interprets the marriage between Moses and an Ethiopian woman as “a foreshadowing of the universal church” (*ibid.*; see Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum* 2.362 and 366-7).²¹² In short, it is possible that some Judeo-Christian influences in *Isis to Horus* and *Cleopatra* might be connected to traditions developed south of Egypt, traditions which would maybe have travelled along the Nile.

It seems quite possible that the one-Church-for-all ideology of early Christianity would have appealed to an eclectic milieu. Furthermore, the inclusion of Ethiopian territory in the cultural mixture of *Cleopatra* is plausible not only from a religious standpoint, but also from that of trade, as the Aksumite empire provided the Roman empire with goods like ivory, incense, gold, and rhinoceros horn (Bard & Fattovich, 2001, p. 283) and imported many products from the Middle and Far East to the harbour of Adulis due to its strategic location by the Red Sea – and some of these products were bound to be used by alchemists in their procedures.²¹³ *Cleopatra* might be commenting on the Ethiopian land as one at the interface of religion and trade when talking about things that “were engendered in our

²¹¹ The obscure beginnings of Judaism in Ethiopia is a contentious topic in and out of scholarship. A detailed summary of different views about the matter, as well as of the earliest evidence of Jewish elements in Aksumite culture, is provided by Kaplan (1992, pp. 13-32), according to whom “the first carriers of Judaism reached Ethiopia between the rise of the Aksumite kingdom at the beginning of the Common Era and conversion to Christianity of King Ezana in the fourth century. (...)” (*ibid.*, p. 19). This view is followed more recently by e.g. Goodman (2019, p. 239).

²¹² St. Menas, the Egyptian martyr who lived between the late third and the early fourth centuries and “was a national saint in Egypt, and pilgrims from Asia and Europe as well as from Africa came to his shrine west of Alexandria” (Snowden Jr., 2001, p. 264), is sometimes portrayed as black (*ibid.*). For the images, see Snowden Jr.’s references and bibliography.

²¹³ Martelli (2013, p. 67 n. 391) mentions the first-century treatise *Periplus Maris Erythraei* that “mentions, among other products imported to the harbour of *Adylis*, the *λάκκος χρώματος*, possibly to be identified with the ingredient *λακκά* quoted by Ps.-Democritus (*PM* § I n. 7)”.

Ethiopian land, from where plants and stones and divine bodies – which God has placed, not man – have been taken” (ἐν τῇ γῆ ἡμῶν ταύτῃ τῇ Αἰθιοπίδι, ἐξ ἧς λαμβάνονται βοτάναι καὶ λίθοι καὶ σώματα θεῶα, ἅτινα ἔθηκεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ οὐκ ἄνθρωπος, 182-4). In the case of *Cleopatra*, this bias towards some type of universalism is expressed in the dialogue’s ‘Christianisation’ of pagan Egyptian Cleopatra, who praises the contributions from Ethiopia to her craft while enlightening (possibly Greek) philosophers and Persian Ostanēs – the figure to be contextualised in the following.

(ii) Ostanēs

The appearance of Ostanēs in *Cleopatra* is not surprising per se. As mentioned in the Introduction, he is one of the *dramatis personae* of the alchemical corpus, and different sources consider him to be the one who taught the craft of alchemy to Ps.-Democritus. What Martelli describes as “the progressive transformation of the Persian magus into an Egyptian scholar” (2013, p. 73) would also fit both his encounter with Cleopatra and the cultural eclecticism alchemical texts are trying to convey. However, his portrayal as learner rather than teacher, as well as his presence among the post-pagan ideas expressed in *Cleopatra*, are less common phenomena. By contextualising the figure of Ostanēs and the changes his identity underwent, especially in relation to Democritus, the following addresses these atypical features of *Cleopatra*.

The claim of a relationship between Ostanēs and Greek philosophers is not an invention of alchemical literature.²¹⁴ Pliny states that Ostanēs was a Persian magus who accompanied Xerxes in his invasion of Greece (*Osthanes Xerxen regem Persarum bello quod is Graeciae intulit comitatus*, NH 30.2) and who would have caused the Greeks to have a

²¹⁴ For passages regarding Ostanēs in Greek literature, see Bidez & Cumont (1938, vol. 2). Full access to this work was not possible while this section was written due to the library closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

craze for magical knowledge (*hic maxime Osthanes ad rabiem, non auiditatem modo, scientiae eius Graecorum populos egit*). Although Pliny's statement does not specify philosophers, immediately after this statement he says that Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Plato travelled for the purpose of learning about magic, which they then taught and valued as a secret upon their return (*certe Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Plato ad hanc descendam nauigauere exiliis uerius quam peregrinationibus susceptis, hanc reuersi praedicauere, hanc in arcanis habuere*). Pliny also mentions a second Osthanes who would have belonged to Alexander the Great's entourage and who would have travelled all around the world (*...Alexandri Magni temporibus... secundus Osthanes comitatu eius exornatus, planeque, quod nemo dubitet, orbem terrarum peragrauit*).

Roughly speaking, the Osthanes of alchemical literature seems to lie somewhere in between Pliny's two *magi*. Osthanes is reported to have taught Ps.-Democritus alchemy (similar to Pliny's first Osthanes) in Egypt (perhaps similar to Pliny's second, travelling Osthanes). The account by Syncellus mentioned in the Introduction provides a particularly culturally diverse perspective:

Δημόκριτος Ἀβδηρίτης φυσικὸς φιλόσοφος ἤκμαζεν. ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ μνηθεὶς ὑπὸ Ὀστάνου τοῦ Μήδου σταλέντος ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ παρὰ τῶν τηνικαῦτα βασιλέων Περσῶν ἄρχειν τῶν ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ ἱερῶν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τῆς Μέμφεως σὺν ἄλλοις ἱερεῦσι καὶ φιλοσόφοις, ἐν οἷς ἦν καὶ Μαρία τις Ἑβραία σοφὴ καὶ Παμμένης, συνέγραψε περὶ χρύσου καὶ ἀργύρου καὶ λίθων καὶ πορφύρας λοξῶς. (*Chron.* 297)

Democritus of Abdera, the natural philosopher, was at his prime. Having been initiated in Egypt by Osthanes, the Mede, who had been sent into Egypt by the Persian kings at that time in order to be in charge of the rites in Egypt at the Memphis temple together with other priests and philosophers – among whom was a wise Hebrew woman Maria, and Pammenes. He wrote about gold, silver, stones and dyes in an ambiguous way.

In the lists of alchemists that feature Cleopatra mentioned earlier, Osthanes appears as an Egyptian (Ὀστάνης ἀπ' Αἰγύπτου, see Martelli, 2013, p. 73). Yet the passage above suggests

that something of Ostanēs' Persian essence must have remained despite the Egyptian associations getting stronger. Again, the role of Egypt seems first and foremost one of a "crucial crossroads" (*ibid.*), the most plausible setting for figures of varied backgrounds to meet.²¹⁵

While the Syncellus passage above does not give much detail about Ps.-Democritus' initiation, there is evidence that suggests that magic was an important point of connection between the natural philosopher Democritus and Ostanēs. Democritus' very provenance, the Thracian region, had a reputation for magic throughout antiquity: Pliny says that he would have thought Orpheus could have been responsible for bringing the craft of magic from Thrace, were it not all magical (*si non expers... tota Thrace magices fuisset*, *NH* 30.8; see also Edmonds, 2019, p. 141). The account of Ps.-Democritus finding the books that belonged to his deceased master (possibly Ostanēs) mentioned in the Introduction (*PM* 3) is full of extraordinary and more or less ambiguously magical events: Ps.-Democritus conjures his master from Hades (the practice of necromancy is considered magic by Pliny, who uses the *Odyssey* 11 episode as an example; see *HN* 30.6); this contact is followed by a temple column mysteriously breaking apart, where the books are hidden;²¹⁶ and some claim that Ps.-Democritus' master would have died from taking something to separate the soul from the body (δηλητηρίῳ χρησάμενος διὰ ἀπαλλαγὴν ψυχῆς ἐκ τοῦ σώματος, *PM* 3.47-48) – the other two episodes lead one to consider if a potion was involved. The fourth-century commentator Synesius mentions sentences that would be Ps.-Democritus' quotations of Ostanēs, and one of them deals "with the dissolution of solid substances useful for making the dyeing 'drug' (φάρμακον)" (Martelli, 2013, p. 71) – or dyeing "potion". In short, Ostanēs' appearance among philosophers in *Cleopatra* is certainly related to the accounts

²¹⁵ See also Quack (2006).

²¹⁶ This retrieving of books belonging to the dead is reminiscent of Pliny's account of Democritus finding books on magic in the tomb of Dardanus the Phoenician (*HN* 30.9).

above, and there is enough reason to believe that an ancient reader of alchemical literature would have assumed Ps.-Democritus to be among the unnamed philosophers of the dialogue.

If a lot of the alchemical lore talks of Ostanēs teaching Democritus, why does the former and maybe the latter appear in the dialogue learning from Cleopatra? This question might be better answered by these very connections between Ostanēs and Democritus through magic. In *Cleopatra*, it is Ostanēs who first mentions the “medicine of life” (τὸ φάρμακον τῆς ζωῆς, 45), the reanimating capacity of which may evoke the magical sense of φάρμακον. Since this phrase reappears in Cleopatra’s speech as she makes progressive use of biblical language, one wonders if Ostanēs and the philosophers feature as learners in *Cleopatra* because they would represent an old, pagan school of practitioners of alchemy to be evangelised. In fact, Cleopatra mentions the “medicine of life” towards the end of the dialogue alongside the “voice of resurrection” (ἡ φωνὴ τῆς ἀναστάσεως, 129): she softens the pagan magical connotations of φάρμακον further (as it had already been slightly softened by its placement in a common phrase in the bible – see above) by putting it side by side with the revelatory and Christian miraculous connotations of φωνή.²¹⁷

Final remarks

The analysis of *Cleopatra* above reveals similar elements of cultural mixture identified in the *Letter from Isis to Horus* in Chapter I. The Ethiopian element explicitly mentioned in *Cleopatra* could indicate that the letter and the dialogue might also connect in terms of an influence coming from south of Egypt, which in *Isis to Horus* would manifest in the thematic links with 1 *Enoch*. Most tellingly, the place for such cultural mixture and the transformation of Isis and Cleopatra into prophetic types is Egypt, where subjects and themes from various

²¹⁷ Many thanks to Prof. Lightfoot for mentioning the revelatory associations of the voice featuring in Zosimus’ *Memoir* 10 at my Confirmation of Status interview and report. This aspect is discussed in more detail in Chapter IV.

backgrounds meet and are accommodated in order to express a common search for further technical and spiritual knowledge. While the works approached in the previous and current chapters offer a more imaginative account of these cultural encounters in Egypt, as the next two chapters move to the first and only historical alchemical author to be addressed in this thesis, it will become even more evident that these fictionalised accounts are not merely fantastical creations detached from the cultural landscape of late antique Egypt.

Chapter Three

Zosimus of Panopolis: *On the Letter Omega*

3.1) The text

(i) Dating, transmission, overview

Compared to both *Isis to Horus* and *Cleopatra*, one is in relatively less tricky waters when dealing with the dating and the transmission of *On the Letter Omega* (hereafter *Omega*). To start with, the work is neither anonymous nor pseudepigraphic. *Omega* is known to have only one main manuscript: namely, the recension from **M** (= **M**¹, following Mertens, 1995, p. xlix). The range of post-Berthelot & Ruelle (*CAAG Gr.* 228-234; *Tr.* 221-227) editions, translations, and commentaries available is also much wider than is the case with the texts addressed in the first two chapters. Among the most influential and thorough are the following: Reitzenstein (1904 pp. 102-106 and p. 267 – partial annotated edition); Scott (*Hermetica* 4, posthumous – edition 104-110, commentary 114-136, and additional notes by Ferguson 484-486); Festugière (*RHT* 1:263-273 – translation with footnotes), Jackson (1978 – partial annotated edition and translation with footnotes), and Mertens (1995 – annotated edition, translation, and commentary).²¹⁸ The text by Mertens (*ibid.*) is used here as standard.

The dating of *Omega* can be no more specific than the approximate period in which its author, Zosimus of Panopolis, may have been active. Berthelot (*OA* 31, 104; *CAAG Intr.* 201) claims this would have been in the third century CE, but many follow Riess (*RE* 1348, “Alchemie”) in placing Zosimus sometime around the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries CE (see e.g. *RHT* 1:239, Reitzenstein, 1904, p. 9 and Jackson, 1978, pp. 4-5). Riess’s main evidence for including the beginning of the fourth century happens to lie

²¹⁸ For an all-encompassing list including partial editions, translations, and commentaries, see Mertens (*ibid.*, pp. 52-53).

in a passage from *Omega* (14.133-146): using a rather prophetic mode, Zosimus predicts the arrival of the “mimic daimon” (ἀντίμιμος δαίμων, *Omega* 14.133), who would claim to be the son of God (λέγων ἑαυτὸν υἱὸν θεοῦ 14.135), but who before then would send off a precursor from Persia (πρὶν ἢ δὲ ταῦτα τολμῆσαι τὸν ἀντίμιμον... ἀποστέλλει αὐτοῦ πρόδρομον ἀπὸ τῆς Περσίδος, 14.140-141). The precursor’s name consists of nine letters, with the diphthong preserved (14.143-144). Riess suggests that the solution for this riddle is Μανιχᾶϊος, one of the possible spellings for Mani, the founder of Manicheism. Given the very critical tone of the passage and the avoidance of using Mani’s name explicitly, it seems possible that Zosimus would have written *Omega* around the time of Diocletian’s edict against Manicheism ca. 302 CE. While that remains a possibility (however precarious to some, e.g. Reitzenstein, *ibid.* and Grimes, 2015, pp. 190-191), the most prudent and slightly wider dating is that of Mertens (1995, p. xvi), based on more solid ground: Zosimus’ mention of Julius Africanus (*CAAG Gr.* 169.7), who would have died after 240 CE (see Mertens, *ibid.* n. 25), and Zosimus’ mention of the Serapeum (*Omega* 8.84), which was destroyed in 391 CE.

The confirmation that Zosimus was an Egyptian is also in *Omega* (Jackson, 1978, p. 3), where he says that “the first human is called Thoth among **us** and Adam among them” (καλεῖται ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος [ὁ] παρ’ ἡμῶν Θωὺθ καὶ παρ’ ἐκείνοις Ἀδάμ, *Omega* 9.87-88). Although most of the evidence associates him with Panopolis in Upper Egypt, the titles of two of his works call him “Theban” (Θηβαῖος, *CAAG Gr.* 211.14; 239.2).²¹⁹ A *Suda* entry (*Suda* Z 168 Adler) calls him Alexandrian (Jackson, *ibid.*). It seems possible that Zosimus was born in Panopolis and lived in Alexandria at some point (see Fowden, 1993, p. 120 and Mertens, 2002, pp. 165-166), thus creating the confusion.

²¹⁹ Jackson (1978, p. 11 n. 7) suggests that the term may be “an equivalent (Lower Egyptian?) for θηβαῖτης, a dweller in the Thebais”, a region of which Panopolis was a part. “Photius describes him as θηβαῖος Πανοπολίτης (*Bibliotheke* 170)” (*ibid.* n. 8).

Here is an overview of the contents of *Omega*:

§ 1: Zosimus states that the letter omega is different things according to what he calls “the corporeal language” and the “incorporeal language”. Not knowing what the letter omega is according to the incorporeal language, Zosimus sticks to the corporeal language, according to which the letter omega, among other things, encompasses the treatise on the instruments for making divine water and all the furnaces – mechanical and simple.

§ 2-3: Zosimus addresses Theosebeia and starts criticising those who made fun of the treatise on the furnaces. He accuses them of trusting their personal daimon far too much and being tossed about by Fate: these people are not accepted by either God or the philosophers.

§ 4-5: Hermes has also criticised these people for their subjection to Fate, beyond which Hermes and Zoroaster claim “the race of the philosophers” would be. The philosophers do not accept the gifts of Fate.

§ 6: For this reason, Hesiod would have made Prometheus advise Epimetheus not to accept Zeus’ (that is, Fate’s) gifts.

§ 7-9: Zosimus navigates a number of names (e.g. Zoroaster, Hermes, Bitos, Plato), works, and peoples in order to expose the notion of the “spiritual person”, who focusses on getting to know themselves and God, and by doing so goes towards the “incorporeal” zone, towards the light. He is also interpreted as “the first human”, and he is called “Thoth” among the Egyptians, and “Adam” among the Chaldeans, the Parthians, the Medes, and the Hebrews. Zosimus goes through the meaning of the letters in Adam’s name.

§ 10-11: Adam is the name of the “man of flesh” – the man inside him has two names: one is ignored by Zosimus (only Nikotheos knows it), and the other is Phos (a pun on ‘human being’ and ‘light’ in Greek). Zosimus tells a short story of how Phos was tricked into “dressing Adam up”, i.e. becoming a corporeal being reduced to slavery.

§ 12: According to Hesiod, Prometheus (the “inner man”, the soul) was bound to the outer man (Epimetheus, the body) by a band tied by Zeus, who then sent Pandora (or Eve among the Hebrews).

§ 13-15: Adam is attached to Jesus Christ, who appears to powerless men advising them to “kill their own Adam”, i.e. the “man of flesh”. This is what happens until an imitating demon arrives and claims to be himself the son of God – but before then, this demon will send a precursor from Persia, the name of whom Zosimus only gives a hint of (see above). This knowledge is restricted to the Hebrews and the holy books of Hermes.

§16 (152-159): The “earthy” Adam is called Epimetheus by the Greeks. His brother (i.e. Prometheus) advises him not to accept Zeus’ gifts and advises those who have “intelligent ears”, but those who only have “corporeal ears” are Fate’s property and accept nothing else.

§ 17-18: Those who make fun of the great book on the furnaces do not take people’s endeavours to heart. People succeed in a single craft in various ways. One can see people using different tools and different methods in all crafts. This can be more easily seen in medicine, and Zosimus provides an example to illustrate that.

§ 19: Zosimus reverts to the topic of instruments and reminds Theosebeia that she sent him letters asking him to write a book about them. Zosimus evokes the authority of “the ancients”, saying that he could not have written better than them. Yet he undertakes to display what these “ancients” have said for the sake of understanding, and as he announces this exposition the text ends.

(ii) The treatise form

By and large, *On the Letter Omega* has been referred to as a ‘treatise’ or a ‘commentary’ among scholars. The three-line long title given to *Omega* by **M**’ is the following: τοῦ αὐτοῦ

Ζωσίμου περὶ ὀργάνων καὶ καμίνων | γνήσια ὑπομνήματα | περὶ τοῦ ω στοιχείου, which Mertens navigates with caution. She first explains that the words τοῦ αὐτοῦ before Ζωσίμου are connected to their position in **M'**, as they immediately follow “fol. 186r-188v29 qui, sous le titre Ζωσίμου περὶ ὀργάνων καὶ καμίνων,²²⁰ livraient déjà des œuvres de Zosime” (Mertens, 1995, p. 51). She then addresses the other two lines of the title:

Faut-il rattacher περὶ τοῦ ω στοιχείου à γνήσια ὑπομνήματα, ou faut-il au contraire séparer les deux expressions ? Presque tous les éditeurs ont opté pour la première solution et traduisent « Commentaires authentiques sur la lettre oméga ». (...) En revanche, Ruska, coupe après ὑπομνήματα et traduit l'ensemble « Über Geräte und Öfen, echte Denkwürdigkeiten ; über den Buchstaben Ω » (...). La seconde formule me paraît préférable ; en effet, la plupart des titres des traités de Zosime se présentent sous la forme « περὶ + une expression au génitif », sans que περὶ soit précédé de quoi que ce soit (...). En outre, dans les manuscrits BAA'L, **qui n'ont pas le morceau** *Sur la lettre oméga*, le titre est simplement Ζωσίμου τοῦ Πανοπολίτου γνήσια ὑπομνήματα (...) « De Zosime le Panopolitain, Mémoires authentiques », ce qui semble indiquer que περὶ τοῦ ω στοιχείου doit être envisagé séparément. (Mertens, 1995, pp. 51-52).

This sort of investigation is invaluable for a better understanding of where *Omega* might have fitted in the entirety of Zosimus' works. At the same time, its attempt to find the best title for Zosimus' text on the basis of generalisation – by recurring to “la plupart des titres des traités de Zosime” (see above) – comes with implications for the specificity of *Omega* in that it may condition one's reading of it. This raises a question: would one get to the same conclusion, i.e. that *Omega* is a treatise, on the basis of the text itself rather than the titles provided by the manuscripts?

A good starting point for addressing this question are the very first words of the second section of *Omega*, which Mertens (1995, p. 61) considers the real beginning of the text (the first section would just be an introductory paragraph presenting the letter omega): Ζώσιμος Θεοσεβεία (*Omega* 2.11). This is followed by a disorienting passage in **M'**

²²⁰ This text is edited and translated in Mertens under *Memoir* 7 (1995, pp. 23-25).

consisting of “une curieuse série de voyelles, εὐήει ἀει” (Mertens, 1995, p. 61). Speculations on the expression have been on the fence between a possible magical or an epistolary formula (e.g. Dornseiff, 1925, p. 50 and *Hermetica* 4:114) until Jackson (1978, p. 18) suggested the emendation εὐ̃ εῖη ἀεί, followed by Mertens. Albeit not found in other epistles (Mertens, 1995, p. 62), the expression does not seem an impossible opener for a letter, especially when Zosimus addresses Theosebeia with a vocative immediately afterwards (ὦ γύναι, *Omega* 2.12). It also comes with the advantage of being much closer to **M'** than other suggested emendations on the epistolary side (e.g. χαίρειν *CAAG Gr.* 228 *apparatus*; εὐ̃ διάγειν *RHT* 1:264 n. 9).

There is also further indication that *Omega* could be a letter towards the end of the text:

ἐγὼ δὲ ἐπὶ τὸ προκειμένον ἐλεύσομαι, ὡς ἔστι περὶ ὀργάνων. λαβὼν γάρ σου τὰς ἐπιστολάς ἃς ἔγραψας, εὐρόν σε παρακαλοῦσαν ὅπως καὶ τὴν τῶν ὀργάνων ἔκδοσίν σοι συγγράψω. ἐθαύμασα δὲ σε ὅτιπερ καὶ τὰ μὴ ὀφείλοντα συγγράφεις²²¹ τυχεῖν παρ' ἐμοῦ. ἢ οὐκ ἤκουσας τοῦ Φιλοσόφου λέγοντος ὅτι ταῦτα ἐκὼν παρεσιώπησα διὰ τὸ ἀφθόνως αὐτὰ ἐγκεῖσθαι καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἄλλαις μου γραφαῖς; σὺ δὲ παρ' ἐμοῦ ταῦτα μαθεῖν ἠβουλήθης. (*Omega* 19.190-197)

But I will go over the proposed topic, which is concerning the instruments. For having taken the letters you wrote, I found you demanding that I also write a work about the instruments for you. I was amazed that you write that actually unfitting things have befallen you from me. Or did you not hear the philosopher saying “I have passed over these things in silence purposely, given that they are bounteously laid out in my other writings as well”? And you wanted to learn such things from me.

Amid an abundance of second-person pronouns, Zosimus explicitly reacts to a request made by Theosebeia through letters. The conversational tone is used in a reprimand that constellates a teacher-and-pupil relationship. Zosimus is reproaching Theosebeia for not

²²¹ An alternative reading to συγγράφεις, suggested by Prof. Hutchinson, would be σὺ γράφεις.

doing her homework (i.e. for ignoring the other writings indicated by “the philosopher”)²²² and expecting Zosimus to do it for her. After a display of humility towards his masters, “the ancients” (ἀλλὰ μὴ οἴου ἀξιοπιστότερον ἐμὲ τῶν ἀρχαίων συγγράψαι· γίνωσκε ὡς οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην, *Omega* 19.198-199), the benevolent though wronged teacher grudgingly agrees to expose their teachings (τοίνυν τὰ παρ’ ἐκείνων σοι ὑποθήσω, *Omega* 19.201) for the sake of understanding (νοήσωμεν, *Omega* 19.200).

This intimate teacher-pupil relationship in what now looks more like a letter (see Chapter I) could be better illustrated by means of a quick comparison with Seneca’s didactic *Epistles to Lucilius*. There are moments when Seneca wears the tough teacher *persona* that Zosimus does at the end of *Omega*. In *Ep.* 33, for instance, Seneca reproaches Lucilius for demanding a “maxim” (*sententia*) at the end of every letter (a habit Seneca kept for the first twenty-nine epistles). The reverence Zosimus expresses towards his predecessors is also present in Seneca, e.g. when he refers to Hesiod as one among *maioribus nostris* (*Ep.* 1.5) before quoting the same author.

Admittedly, what stands between the potentially epistolary formula in the beginning and the reprimand at the end of *Omega* (*Omega* 2.11 and 19.190-197, respectively) does not contain explicit markers of epistolarity. There, one finds what in a modern academic environment might be called a ‘literature review’ or even a ‘response paper’: Zosimus criticises those who made fun of the book *On Furnaces and Instruments*, implying that their successes, failures and opinions are always subject to their personal daimons and therefore, Fate (πάντοτε τῇ εἰμαρμένῃ ἀκολουθοῦντες, *Omega* 3.30-31 – incidentally, something that Seneca would disapprove of just as vehemently). Against these people, Zosimus sets “the race of philosophers above Fate” (τὸ φιλοσόφων γένος ἀνώτερον τῆς εἰμαρμένης, *Omega* 5.41-42) and how this kind of person has been described among different individuals (e.g.

²²² This is how Ps.-Democritus is often called among alchemists (see Mertens, 1995, pp. 116-117 n. 115).

Zoroaster, Hermes, and Plato) and peoples (e.g. the Egyptians, the Hebrews, and the Greeks), with a strong emphasis on written works (e.g. ὁ Ἑρμῆς ἐν τῷ περὶ φύσεων, *Omega* 4.34-35; ὁ μέντοι Ἑρμῆς ἐν τῷ περὶ ἐναυλίας, *Omega* 7.56; τὸν πίνακα ὄν καὶ Βίτος γράψας, *Omega* 8.75; see below).²²³

While there is no mention of Seneca or any other Stoic thinker (see Introduction; the ‘literature review’ regarding how people overcome Fate has a much more Christian-Hermetic than Stoic flavour), Zosimus’ exposition is not unlike some of Seneca’s longer, more technical letters. A couple of good examples are Seneca’s *Ep.* 58, where the philosopher expounds to Lucilius on how Plato divides all existing things,²²⁴ and *Ep.* 65, where Seneca makes a similar ‘literature review’ regarding the “first cause” (*prima causa*) that summarises the views of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. The two longest pieces in the collection, *Ep.* 94 and 95, explore the differences between “dogmas” (*decreta*) and “precepts” (*praecepta*) in treatise-like length and with an abundance of examples. In other words, the fact that the treatise format is predominant in *Omega* would not necessarily make it less of an epistle, especially if it is a didactic one as Seneca’s are.

This is not to argue that Seneca’s *Epistles* were a model for Zosimus’ *Omega*. The main objective of this comparison is showing that some letters from Seneca’s collection prove the possibility that a text like *Omega* may as well have been a didactic letter – a point that has been overlooked due to the confusing heading presented in **M**⁹. However, if Zosimus was indeed drawing inspiration from Seneca in this case, it would be striking that the alchemist’s focus was on borrowing some of the *Epistles*’ stylistic features (such as the vivid intimacy of the teacher-pupil relationship that constitutes their “dramatized

²²³ Cf. Dufault (2019), who sees the evidence of the relationship between Zosimus and Theosebeia “from the perspective of scholarly patronage” (*ibid.*, p. 3).

²²⁴ It is worth noting a similarity between Seneca’s announcement to return to the proposed topic (*nunc ad id, quod tibi promisi, revertor, quomodo quaecumque sunt, in sex modos Plato partitur, Ep.* 58.16) and Zosimus’ (ἐγὼ δὲ ἐπὶ τὸ προκειμένον ἐλεύσομαι, ὡς ἔστι περὶ ὀργάνων, *Omega* 190-191).

education”, Schafer, 2009 & 2011) rather than the philosophical ones. Should such a connection be confirmed, it would further reinforce a certain degree of ‘literarity’ being in the fabric of even the most conceptual early alchemical writings.

That said, there is one last aspect of *Omega* to be considered, one in which the micro-argument (i.e. how *Omega* presents itself) and the macro-argument (i.e. how *Omega* fits into the big picture of Zosimus’ works) meet. This brings us back to Mertens’ hypothesis (1995, p. 52) that the *On the Letter Omega* should be considered a separate work from the *Authentic Memoirs*, as it is not attested in the manuscript cluster **BAA’L** that contains the latter (see above). She continues:

Je considère donc que les deux premières lignes de M’ constituent le titre général de cette œuvre de Zosime, tandis que περὶ τοῦ ω στοιχείου représenterait l’intitulé du premier texte de l’œuvre en question (...). Par ailleurs, on sait grâce au témoignage de la *Souda* que Zosime était l’auteur de vingt-huit livres numérotés selon les lettres de l’alphabet (...). Une hypothèse séduisante consiste dès lors à supposer que les *Mémoires authentiques sur les appareils et les fourneaux* coïncident avec le *Livre Oméga*, dont le texte *Sur la lettre oméga* aurait été l’introduction. (Mertens, 1995, p. 52)

There are two passages in *Omega* that support Mertens’ theory that it may have been an introduction. One of them has just been mentioned: the fact that Zosimus says that he is going to display to Theosebeia what “the ancients” have said regarding instruments (*Omega* 19.200-201) – even though the furnaces are left unmentioned here, and the exposition itself seems to be missing. The other one, mentioned briefly in the text’s overview, is in the introductory section of the text: “And what is called the great and admirable letter omega encompasses the treatise on the instruments for divine water and all furnaces, mechanical and simple, and to put it simply, on everything” (τὸ δὲ λεγόμενον μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν ω στοιχεῖον περιέχει τὸν περὶ ὀργάνων ὕδατος θείου λόγον καὶ καμίνων πασῶν μηχανικῶν καὶ

ἀπλῶν, καὶ ἀπλῶς πάντων, *Omega* 1.7-10).

While Mertens uses the *Omega* statement on the letter omega above as evidence for the prior existence of Zosimus' works on the technicalities of furnaces, Mertens laments that “à l'exception de quelques phrases qui subsistent çà et là, toute cette partie de son œuvre est perdue” (1995, p. clxvi). But there is a short, 52-line writing attributed to Zosimus (*Memoir* 7 in Mertens, 1995) that could have been given a little more credence, and which might bring the two passages mentioned in the previous paragraph together:

ἐπειδὴ ἐξῆς ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν περὶ καμίνων καὶ καταβαφῆς πρόκειται, οὐ βούλομαι πρὸς σὲ ποιῆσθαι ()²²⁵ ἐμπεσοῦσαν ταῖς ἄλλων γραφαῖς. καὶ γὰρ παρὰ Μαρία ἢ τῆς ὀρωμένης καμίνου κεῖται διαγραφή, ἣς ὁ Φιλόσοφος οὐκ ἐμνημόνευσεν, εἰ μὴ μόνον πρισμάτων, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων περὶ ὧν ἡρέμα ἐν τῷ περὶ ποσότητος πυρὸς ὑπομνήματι διέλαβον. ἑώρακα εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν Μέμφιδος ἀρχαῖον κατὰ μέρος κειμένην τινὰ κάμινον ἣν οὐδὲ συνθεῖναι εὗρον οἱ μύσται τῶν ἱερῶν. ἔρρωσο. πολλαὶ μὲν οὖν ὀργάνων κατασκευαὶ γεγραμμέναι εἰσὶν τῇ Μαρία, οὐ μόνον ὑδάτων θείου, ἀλλὰ καὶ κηροτακίδων εἶδη πολλὰ καὶ καμίνων. (*Mem.* 7 1-2.12)

As a discussion of instruments and tincture now lies before me, I do not wish to make () to you, when you have stumbled on the writings of others. For in Maria's work the description of the furnace is situated – the one which the Philosopher did not mention, except for the one of sawdust – and the others which I touched on lightly in my work on the quantity of fire.

I saw inside the old temple at Memphis a furnace lying in pieces which even the initiates did not find a way to put together. Farewell. Then, many constructions of instruments have been written about by Maria, not only for sulphurous waters, but also many types of hot plates and furnaces.

The title given to this text in **M** is Ζωσίμου περὶ ὀργάνων καὶ καμίνων, which not only partially corresponds to the first words of the title given to *Omega* in **M'** (see above and Mertens, 1995, p. 185), but also seems like a shortened version of the treatise title Zosimus himself mentions in the introductory section of *Omega* (τὸν περὶ ὀργάνων ὕδατος θείου λόγον καὶ καμίνων πασῶν μηχανικῶν καὶ ἀπλῶν, *Omega* 1.8-9). Despite insightfully observing that the title “tend à confirmer que nous avons toujours bien affaire ici à un

²²⁵ Prof. Hutchinson suggests that there may be a missing object here, e.g. a verbal noun.

morceau du livre *Lettre oméga* de Zosime” (Mertens, *ibid.*), Mertens is not very optimistic about the state of *Memoir 7*: “le morceau se présente comme une suite de tronçons tirés de différents endroits de l’ouvrage que Zosime avait consacré aux appareils et aux fourneaux, et juxtaposés de manière artificielle” (*ibid.*).

However, there is considerable evidence in favour of a continuity between the last section of *Omega* and *Memoir 7* above. The use of the first-person plural in the first line (ἡμῖν, *Mem. 7* 1.1) agrees with Zosimus’ use of νοήσωμεν in the penultimate line of *Omega* (19.200); πρόκειται (*Mem 7* 1.2) echoes τὸ προκείμενον (*Omega* 19.190); the “philosopher” is mentioned in both (ὁ Φιλόσοφος, *Mem. 7* 1.4; τοῦ Φιλοσόφου, *Omega* 19.195); both texts intermingle the first person plural just mentioned with the second-person singular (σέ, *Mém 7* 1.2; σε, *Omega* 19.193). Although in *Omega* Zosimus only mentions that Theosebeia had requested information on “instruments” (τῶν ὀργάνων, 19.192), in *Memoir 7* (2.10-12) he implies that “furnaces” are nothing but a category of “instruments”, and they appear again later (ὄργανα, *Mem. 7* 2.13; ὄργανον *Mem. 7* 5.40). Finally, while Mertens does have a point in claiming that *Memoir 7* was altered over time, the text’s ‘bitty’ nature seems to fit Zosimus’ proposal from *Omega* 19 to summarise his predecessors’ teachings quite well, especially when he explicitly mentions Mary (see above and *Mem. 7* 3.16 and 4.33) and Agathodaimon (3.16-17). In fact, the fact that the imperative ἔρωσο (*Mem. 7* 2.10 above) looks so out of place – it is normally used for closing epistles (Mertens, 1995, p. 189 n. 10) – could indicate that *Omega* and *Mem. 7* may once have been written as one continuum that was split and reshuffled by Byzantine compilers.

What can be gathered from all this? It is extremely risky to present any investigation about the original disposition of these works as conclusive. Yet it seems at least plausible to propose that *Omega*, rather than a self-contained treatise, was a treatise-like epistle from Zosimus to Theosebeia that presented a short summary on the instruments and furnaces

(possibly *Mem.* 7) either as a constituent part of the letter or as an attachment. At the same time, the possibility of a book should not be discarded altogether (and the *Suda* entry on Zosimus would advise us not to discard it); in which case, Zosimus could be following the tradition of writing an introduction in the form of a letter,²²⁶ in the present thesis illustrated in the case of the *Letter from Isis to Horus*.

(iii) Close reading

The text starts by listing attributes of the letter omega and introducing a technical work:

τὸ ω στοιχεῖον στρογγύλον, τὸ διμερές, τὸ ἀνήκον τῇ ἑβδόμῃ Κρόνου ζώνῃ κατὰ τὴν ἔνσωμον φράσιν, κατὰ γὰρ τὴν ἀσώματον ἄλλο τί ἐστὶν ἀνερμήνευτον, ὃ μόνος Νικόθεος (ὁ) κεκρυμμένος οἶδεν. κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἔνσωμον, τὸ λεγόμενον Ὠκεανὸς θεῶν, φησί, πάντων γένεσις καὶ σπορά, καθάπερ φασὶν αἱ μοναρχικαὶ τῆς ἐνσώμου φράσεως. τὸ δὲ λεγόμενον μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν ω στοιχεῖον περιέχει τὸν περὶ ὀργάνων ὕδατος θείου λόγον καὶ καμίνων πασῶν μηχανικῶν καὶ ἀπλῶν, καὶ ἀπλῶς πάντων. (*Omega* 1.1-10)

The round letter omega, the bipartite one, the one belonging to the seventh zone of Cronos according to the corporeal language, for according to the incorporeal language it is something else, indescribable, which only Nikotheos, the hidden one, knows. According to the corporeal language, the so-called Ocean of gods, he says, is the creation and seed of everything, according to what the ruling [principles?] of the corporeal language say.²²⁷ And the great and amazing letter mentioned, omega, encompasses the treatise on instruments for making divine water and all furnaces, mechanical and simple, and [to put it] simply, on everything.

While the first two attributes of the letter, *στρογγύλον* and *διμερές*, are simply descriptive of the shape of the letter in its Coptic, “lower case” form (Mertens, 1995, p. 54 n. 1), its second attribute (“the one belonging to the seventh zone of Cronos”, *τὸ ἀνήκον τῇ ἑβδόμῃ*

²²⁶ See Langslow (2007), who mentions examples by Archimedes, Apollonius of Perge and Hyginus.

²²⁷ Mertens (1995, pp. 58-59) points out the difficulty of the passage *καθάπερ... φράσεως*, with which many scholars have struggled. Festugière (*RHT* 1:264 n. 6) says that he does not understand the passage and skips its translation. Jackson argues that the entire excerpt from *Ὠκεανὸς το φράσεως* is “a citation by Zosimos from the Nikotheos source, to whom *καθάπερ φησὶν* is Zosimos’ reference, and that *φησὶ* is the cited document’s reference to an interpolated Homer (cf. *Iliad* 14.201, 246, and 302). (...) The description *αἱ μοναρχικαὶ* would be Nikotheos’ explanation of the function of *γένεσις καὶ σπορά*, both feminine” (1978, p. 4 n. 6).

Κρόνου ζώνη) rapidly escalates to cosmic proportions. The belief that there was a zone for each of the seven ‘planets’ known at the time (the sun and the moon included) is attested in the magical papyrus that keeps appearing in every chapter, i.e. *PGM* 13.²²⁸ While such is the letter omega according to the “embodied” or “corporeal language” (τὴν ἔνσωμον φράσιν), what the letter is according to the “disembodied” or “incorporeal language” (ἄσώματον) is subjected to the typical alchemical motif of hidden knowledge: this definition is known only by “Nikotheos, the hidden one” (ὁ μόνος Νικόθεος ὁ κερκρυμμένος οἶδεν), leaving it unclear why Zosimus mentions it in the first place – this, for now (as well as what he means by “corporeal/incorporeal language”), also remains mysterious.

Returning to what he does know, i.e. the “corporeal language”, Zosimus mentions “the Ocean of gods”, “the creation and seed of everything” – the remark seems arbitrary in the context unless the significance of Ὠκεανός is here attached to its first letter, omega (as argued by Jackson, 1978, p. 41 n. 5) by means of ‘acronymy’, be it magical or not.²²⁹ What follows could indeed corroborate the ocean-omega magical association. The adjectives with which the letter omega is now described, “great and admirable” (μέγα καὶ θαυμαστόν) also appear in the same order in *PGM* 13 as it describes a series of anagrams using the seven vowels related to the seven planets (Mertens, 1995, p. 59 n. 7).²³⁰ The fact that this letter “encompasses” (περιέχει) “the treatise on (...), to put it simply, everything” (πάντων) could be wordplay with the attributes of the ocean earlier: it is creation and seed (σπορά) of everything (πάντων): the envelope of a seed can be called τὸ περιέχον (*LSJ*). In other words,

²²⁸ As Mertens (1995, p. 54 n. 2) indicates: ἐπτάζωνος· Κρόνος Ζεύς Ἄρης Ἥλιος Ἀφροδίτη Ἑρμῆς Σελήνη (*PGM* 13.215-224). An explicit equivalence between the letter omega and the seventh ‘zone’ or ‘sky’ is attributed to the Gnostic Marcus (Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.14.7, *ibid.* with further bibliography).

²²⁹ “Je crois que la mention de l’Océan ici s’explique surtout pour une raison d’ « acronymie », vu que Ὠκεανός commence par oméga. Ce jeu de lettres fait songer à ce que l’on trouve dans la Kyranis, traité greco-magique qui énumère, dans l’ordre alphabétique, un oiseau, un poisson, une plante et une pierre dont les noms commencent par la même lettre ; du seul fait de leur « acronymie », ces quatre objets étaient magiquement associés” (Mertens, 1995, p. 58 n. 5).

²³⁰ ἐκλήθη δὲ τῶν θ’ θεῶν ἀποσπάσας σὺν τῇ δυνάμει καὶ τὰς κεραίας τῶν ὀνομάτων ‘Βοσβεαδι’ καὶ τῶν ζ’ ἀστέρων ‘αειηουω εηιουω ηιουω ιουω ουω υω ω ωουοηεα υοηεα οηεα ηεα ηεα εα α’ (ἀναγραμ(μ) ατιζόμενον μέγα καὶ θαυμαστόν); *PGM* 13.555-561.

the letter omega is as all-encompassing as a seed or the ocean, and in this case it is the epigraphical, upper case form of the letter omega (indeed used in Ὠκεανός) that may be at play, the round shape of which might represent this idea of all-encirclement.²³¹

This is followed by another instance of wordplay, which the present and following chapters will prove to be a signature trait of Zosimus' style. The term ἀπλός undergoes an unexpected shift from specifying a category of furnaces ("the simple ones", ἀπλῶν) to generalising how the treatise referred to deals with pretty much everything ("simply on everything", ἀπλῶς πάντων). Both in this and the omega-ocean instances of wordplay, Zosimus seems to be playing with the reader's expectations with regard to his means of expression: in one instance, different words (omega and ocean) could be referring to the same thing; in the other instance, the same word is changed to refer to different things (ἀπλῶν to the furnaces, and ἀπλῶς to the treatise's content). Both instances also play with focus: the omega- ἀπλῶν pair serve a specific and self-contained purpose; the ocean- ἀπλῶς pair has a generalising and all-encompassing one. The effect created is an impression that Zosimus is constantly moving a magnifying glass closer and further away from his subject-matter. This, combined with Zosimus' creating of doubles (specific-general/corporeal-incorporeal) destabilises the reader: his means of expression is as twofold as the letter omega itself – quite a literary touch for a treatise. While what is meant by Zosimus' two kinds of language remains unclear, it seems pretty established from the start that the potentialities of language and duplicity are important aspects of this composition.

After what seems to be an opening epistolary formula (see above), Zosimus addresses Theosebeia for the first time (ὦ γυναῖκα, 2.12) in order to criticise people who have made fun of the book on the furnaces and instruments (πολλοὶ γὰρ... ἐχλεύασαν καὶ τὴν

²³¹ The Ocean was set around the outermost rim of Achilles' shield (*Iliad* 18. 607-608), containing the whole image. See Jackson, 1978, p. 39. In Zosimus' *Memoir* 6, a short passage on "The All" is written inside a circular diagram.

περὶ καμίνων καὶ ὀργάνων βίβλον, 2.13-15). It is not clear whether this includes the treatise just mentioned in *Omega* 1.8-9, but Zosimus' criticism soon gives the impression that he took the joke rather personally: when the text form takes the rather personal form of the epistle (see Chapter I), the subject-matter also gets personal. While he describes these same people who made fun of this book as deeply embedded in their personal daimon (εὐμένειαν ἐσχηκότες παρὰ τοῦ ἰδίου δαιμονίου ἐπιτυγχάνειν τῶν καιρικῶν, 2.13-14),²³² the content which they reject is described with the language of philosophy (“as if it were not true”, ὡς οὐκ οὔσαν ἀληθῆ, 2.15-16; “not one demonstrative argument persuaded [them] that it was true”, οὐδεὶς λόγος αὐτοῦς ἀποδεικτικὸς ἔπεισεν ὅτι ἀλήθειά ἐστιν, 2.16-17): another pair appears in opposition. Soon enough Zosimus makes the philosophical hints explicit: “such people cannot be accepted either by God or among the philosophers” (οἱ τοιοῦτοι οὐκ ἀποδεκτέοι οὔτε παρὰ θεῶ, οὔτε φιλοσόφοις ἀνθρώποις, 3.25-26).

Zosimus' criticisms of the daimon-driven people may actually cast some light on what he may have meant by “corporeal language”. His main point against trusting daimons is that this leads to changeability. As pointed out before, these people would not be persuaded by demonstrative arguments, unless uttered by their personal daimon (εἰ μὴ αὐτὸς ὁ ἴδιος αὐτῶν δαίμων, 2.17-18), who at this point was replaced by an evil one according to the times of their Fate (κατὰ τοὺς χρόνους τῆς αὐτῶν εἰμαρμένης μεταβληθεὶς, παραλαβόντος αὐτοῦς κακοποιοῦ δέ, εἶπεν, 2.18-19).²³³ As a result, these people are forever susceptible to a daimon's opinion:

πάλιν γὰρ τῶν ἀστέρων σχηματισθέντων κατὰ τοὺς λεπτοὺς χρόνους καλῶς καὶ τοῦ δαιμονίου σωματικῶς αὐτοῦς εὐεργετοῦντος, πάλιν μεταβάλλονται ἐφ' ἑτέραν ὁμολογίαν τῶν προτέρων ἐναργῶν πραγμάτων πάντων λελησμένοι, πάντοτε τῆ εἰμαρμένη

²³² The statement seems quite ironic, unless a ὡς is added before εὐμένειαν (suggested by Prof. Hutchinson).

²³³ The passage from μεταβληθεὶς up to εἶπεν has posed a challenge to scholars in the past, who proposed various solutions; these are listed by Mertens (1995, pp. 64-65 n. 13), who adopts the reading by Jackson (1978, p. 19).

ἀκολουθοῦντες καὶ εἰς τὰς λεγομένας καὶ εἰς τὰ ἐναντία, μηδὲν ἕτερον τῶν σωματικῶν φανταζόμενοι. (*Omega* 3.26-32).

For again, once the stars have been made to assume a position nicely according to the minutes, and their daimon is doing good services to them corporeally, they again change to a different premise, having forgotten all the manifest facts from before, following fate at all times (both towards the things said and the things that oppose them), imagining nothing but corporeal things.

Zosimus criticises people with very changeable dispositions by attaching them to the “corporeal” aspect (σωματικῶς, τῶν σωματικῶν) when, in the first few lines of the text, the alchemist talks about the letter omega according to the “corporeal language” with very changeable prose – it oscillates between specific and general, while changing the use of certain words and changing the words used to signify the same thing. It seems that the opening lines of *Omega* are in themselves an expression of the instability of all things corporeal, one which can effectively cause the reader to feel suspicious about it.

Some of the language used by Zosimus above (εἰμαρμένη, ὁμολογία) could be argued to give a Stoic undertone to the passage, but the deeply materialist Stoic view of the world would be at odds with the essential dichotomy established in the text – and indeed, Zosimus finds philosophical support elsewhere. He says that Hermes, in his work “On Natures”, has called these people “without intellect” (τοὺς τοιούτους δὲ ἀνθρώπους ὁ Ἑρμῆς ἐν τῷ περὶ φύσεων ἐκάλει ἄνοας, *Omega* 4.34-35), as they speak ill of fate’s corporeal lessons, and imagine nothing outside fate’s blessings ([τοὺς] δυσφημοῦντας αὐτῆς τὰ σωματικὰ παιδευτήρια, καὶ τῶν εὐδαιμόνων αὐτῆς ἐκτὸς (μηδὲν) ἄλλο φανταζομένους, 4.38-40). Mertens (1995, p. 68 n. 23) observes how these ideas indeed resonate with some passages from *CH* 4.²³⁴ Zosimus then mentions Hermes alongside the Persian magician

²³⁴ She mentions that the Hermetic work talks about people with no intellect (τὸν νοῦν μὴ ἐχόντων ἀνθρώπων, *CH* 4 3.5), devoting themselves to bodily pleasures and yearnings and believing that it is for these things that man comes to being (ταῖς δὲ τῶν σωματικῶν ἡδοναῖς καὶ ὀρέξεσι προσέχοντες, καὶ διὰ ταῦτα τὸν ἄνθρωπον γεγονέναι πιστεύοντες, 5.21-23). Mertens (*ibid.*) also reminds us that, according to Syncellus, Zosimus mentions a Hermetic book with a similar title (Ἑρμῆς ἐν τοῖς φυσικοῖς, *Sync. Chron.* 24) when telling a story

Zoroaster,²³⁵ saying that both affirm that the race of philosophers is above fate (ὁ δὲ Ἑρμῆς καὶ ὁ Ζωροάστρης τὸ φιλοσόφων γένος ἀνώτερον τῆς εἰμαρμένης εἶπον, *Omega* 5.41-42), as philosophers prevail over pleasures and do not accept fate's "fine" gifts (ἡδονῶν γὰρ κρατοῦσι,... μήτε τὰ καλὰ δῶρα παρ' αὐτῆς καταδέχεσθαι, 5.44-45). The ideals may suit well a Greek audience, but Zosimus indicates that his sources are vaster than 'mainstream' Greek philosophical schools.

These ideas are illustrated in the next section by a sudden shift to mythological discourse:

διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ὁ Ἡσίοδος τὸν Προμηθεά εισάγει τῷ Ἐπιμηθεῖ παραγγέλλοντα· τίνα οἴονται οἱ ἄνθρωποι πασῶν μείζονα εὐδαιμονίαν; γυναῖκα εὐμορφον, φησί, σὺν πλούτῳ πολλῷ. καὶ φησι μήτε δῶρον δέξασθαι παρὰ Ζηνὸς Ὀλυμπίου, ἀλλ' ἀποπέμπειν ἐξοπίσω, διδάσκων τὸν ἴδιον ἀδελφὸν διὰ φιλοσοφίας ἀποπέμπειν τὰ τοῦ Διός, τοῦτ' ἔστι τῆς εἰμαρμένης, δῶρα. (*Omega* 6)

Because of this Hesiod also brings in Prometheus exhorting Epimetheus: "what benefit do men think is better than all?". He [Epimetheus] said: "a nicely shaped woman with a lot of money". And he [Prometheus] told him not to accept a gift from Zeus the Olympian, but to send it back, teaching his own brother through philosophy to send back the gifts from Zeus, that is, from fate.

The abruptness with which this mythological illustration is introduced and the fact that the following section goes back to notions attributed to Zoroaster and Hermes could lead to some doubt regarding the authenticity of this section. But as Mertens (1995, p. 71 n. 31) has pointed out, the fact that the Prometheus-Epimetheus story does recur in sections 12 and 16 makes it more complicated to exclude it as an interpolation. Furthermore, the passage does contain some of the language used by Zosimus before, such as δῶρα, φιλοσοφία, and

similar to the one from the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (see Chapter I). One could wonder whether there were text collections in antiquity to which both *CH* 4 and *Isis to Horus* would belong.

²³⁵ For passages regarding Zoroaster in Greek literature, see Bidez & Cumont (1938, vol. 2). Full access to this work was not possible while this section was written due to the library closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

είμαρμένη, and in fact presents another Stoic trait by associating Zeus with fate (as Chrysippus did, Cic. *N.D.* 1.15.40-41.) in a process of “Stoic propaedeutic allegorization” (Jackson, 1978, p. 43 n. 22) that will be developed further throughout *Omega*. The passage is thus more connected to the preceding and following ones than it first appears: the instinctive suspicion would derive mostly from the fact that recurring to a poetic text (the excerpt μήτε δῶρον δέξασθαι παρὰ Ζηνὸς Ὀλυμπίου, ἀλλ’ ἀποπέμπειν ἐξοπίσω is a near quotation from Hesiod)²³⁶ and giving Prometheus and Epimetheus actual voices by using direct speech adds an unexpected lively and literary flavour to Zosimus’ exposition. The present and the following chapters will show that these changes of style and register that frustrate reader expectation are not an uncommon phenomenon in Zosimus’ prose.

Zosimus proceeds to make some distinctions between Zoroaster and Hermes, whereby Zosimus adds more elements that destabilise the reading experience. Zosimus first accuses Zoroaster of being boastful of his knowledge and of the magic of the corporeal language and reports that, according to the magus, all the evils of fate – both particular and general – can be turned away (Ζωροάστρης δὲ ἐπὶ²³⁷ εἰδήσει τῶν ἄνω πάντων καὶ μαγείᾳ αὐχῶν τῆς ἐνσώμου φράσεως, φάσκει ἀποστρέφεσθαι πάντα τῆς εἰμαρμένης τὰ κακὰ καὶ μερικὰ καὶ καθολικά, 7.54-56). This is then set in contrast with Hermes’ views:

ὁ μέντοι Ἑρμῆς ἐν τῷ περὶ ἐναυλίας διαβάλλει καὶ τὴν μαγείαν λέγων ὅτι οὐ δεῖ τὸν πνευματικὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐπιγόντα ἑαυτὸν οὔτε διὰ μαγείας κατορθοῦν τι, ἐὰν καὶ καλὸν νομίζεται, μηδὲ βιάζεσθαι τὴν ἀνάγκην, ἀλλ’ ἐὰν ὡς ἔχει φύσεως καὶ κρίσεως, πορεύεσθαι δὲ διὰ μόνου τοῦ ζητεῖν ἑαυτόν,²³⁸ καὶ θεὸν ἐπιγόντα κρατεῖν τὴν ἀκατονόμαστον τριάδα καὶ ἐὰν εἰμαρμένην ὃ θέλει ποιεῖν τῷ ἑαυτῆς πηλῶ, τοῦτ’ ἔστιν τῷ σώματι. (*Omega* 7.57-

²³⁶ οὐδ’ Ἐπιμηθεὺς ἐφράσαθ’ ὡς οἱ εἶπε Προμηθεὺς μή ποτε δῶρον δέξασθαι παρ Ζηνὸς Ὀλυμπίου, ἀλλ’ ἀποπέμπειν ἐξοπίσω, μή πού τι κακὸν θνητοῖσι γένηται. (Hes. *Op.* 85-88). See Mertens (1995, p. 71 n. 31) and Jackson (1978, p. 43 n. 22).

²³⁷ ἐπὶ suggested by Prof. Hutchinson.

²³⁸ Prof. Hutchinson observes that ἑαυτόν could be altered to αὐτόν, in which case the spiritual person would “do the investigating himself”, presuming that one who knows themselves would not need to seek themselves (see τὸν ἐπιγόντα ἑαυτόν).

64)

Hermes, however, in his “On the Retreat(ed Life?)”²³⁹ insults magic too saying that the spiritual person, who has learned to know himself, must not succeed in anything through magic – even if it is regarded as a good thing – nor do violence to necessity, but rather, leaving it as it is as regards nature and [divine] judgement, to proceed only through looking for himself, and, having learned to know God, to conquer the nameless triad and let destiny do whatever it wants with its own clay – that is, the body.

There is a pronounced, somewhat disorienting mixture of elements here. The notion of a “spiritual person” is found in Gnosticism,²⁴⁰ and indeed the parallel between getting to know oneself and getting to know God, here expressed through a linguistic parallel (τὸν πνευματικὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐπιγνόντα ἑαυτὸν... θεὸν ἐπιγνόντα) is in good harmony with texts labelled as Gnostic and Hermetic alike.²⁴¹ Yet the notion of accepting things as they come according to Nature (ὡς... φύσεως) maintains the noticeably Stoic undertone of *Omega*, while the mention of god, the triad, and the body as clay may give a slight Christian inclination to the passage – a potentially odd pairing with the previous use of a pagan myth, were it not for the fact that sources claim that Prometheus, like the biblical God, makes man from clay (e.g. *Ov. Met.* 1.78-88).²⁴²

The vagueness of the expression “nameless triad” (ἄκατονόμαστον τρίαδα) seems to almost deliberately jeopardise any possibility to identify with which tradition(s) Zosimus’

²³⁹ ἐναυλίας is an emendation proposed by Keil and followed by Reitzenstein (1904), Jackson (1978), and Mertens (1995) alike of the term ἀναυλίας that appears in *M*, which Mertens (*ibid.*, p. 73 n. 34) considers “aberrante”. On the editorial history of this particular word, see Mertens (*ibid.*, pp. 73-74 n. 34), whose French translation I here adapt into English. Jackson (*ibid.*, p. 25) translates τῷ περὶ ἐναυλίας as “On the Inner Life”.
²⁴⁰ The Valentinian *The Tripartite Tractate* (*NHC* 1.5) talks about “three kinds of human beings” (*NHC* 1.5 118.14-119.27), one of them being “the spiritual kind”: “the spiritual kind is like light from light and like spirit from spirit” (see Mertens, 1995, p. 75 n. 36). The following will show that light is also an essential attribute of the spiritual man.

²⁴¹ Gnosticism scholar Pagels says “Yet to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of *gnosis*” (1979, p. xix), and quotes a passage from Monoimus that recommends one to look for God by taking oneself as the starting point. It is important to stress, however, the problems that result from using ‘Gnosticism’ as an umbrella term, as it tends to homogenise various ways of thinking (see Grimes, 2018, p. 181 n. 70 with further bibliography), or even create a false impression that some notions are exclusive to a certain line of thought. The precept of getting to know oneself, in particular, is far from being exclusive to Gnosticism, and also occurs in Hermetism, e.g. the *Poimandres* (*CH* 1 21) – see below.

²⁴² Man is described as being made of clay in both the Old Testament (*Job* 10:9 and 33:6, as well as *Isaiah* 64:8, use πηλός like Zosimus’ passage) and the New Testament (in *2 Corinthians* 4:7 men are indirectly compared to clay vessels, ὄστράκινα σκεύη).

Hermetic source may be more in tune. The most straightforward approach is clearly to give the expression a purely Hermetic stance, as did Jackson (1978, p. 44 n. 26), to whom “the Triad is evidently the Father, who is Mind, his Son the *Logos* born of Mind (...), and either τὸ πᾶν, the material cosmos, or man as possessing mind. Such triadic formulations are common in the *Hermetica*”. Yet Mertens (1995, p. 78 n. 36) notes that none of the Hermetic passages listed by Jackson call these formulations either a triad or describe them as ἀκατονόμαστον.²⁴³ While the very fact that Zosimus talks of a “nameless triad” could allude to the fact that the triad in question has never been referred to as such in Hermetic sources, there is not enough hard evidence for Jackson to claim this connection to be evident. Scott (*Hermetica* 4:119) asserts that the phrase “can hardly have occurred in a *Hermeticum*”, and proposes an orthodox or Gnostic Christian origin (*ibid.*); Festugière (*RHT* 1:266-277 n. 6) also considers Christian gnosis a possibility, but is more drawn to the Middle Platonic Chaldean Oracles – the triadic notion of which, quite interestingly, has been claimed to have Stoic ‘ingredients’ (see Rasimus *et al.*, 2010). Yet Zosimus’ choice to call the triad nameless makes it “impossible de déterminer avec certitude quelle triade Zosime pouvait avoir en tête” (Mertens, *ibid.*). All these possibilities are left open and unconfirmed as “nameless” and encompassed in one single doctrine attributed to Hermes:²⁴⁴ its enormous capacity to contain reminds one of the attributes of the letter omega listed in the beginning of *Omega*.

A certain ambition for totality gets stronger as the text progresses:

καὶ οὕτως, φησί, νοήσας καὶ πολιτευσάμενος θεάσθη τὸν θεοῦ υἱὸν πάντα γινόμενον τῶν ὁσίων ψυχῶν ἔνεκεν, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἐκσπάσῃ ἐκ τοῦ χώρου τῆς εἰμαρμένης ἐπὶ τὸν ἀσώματον.

²⁴³ The triadic formulas listed by Jackson are *CH* 8 2-3 and 5 (the Father, the world, and man), *Asclepius* 10 (God, the world, and man), and *CH* 13 18 (where I see no clear establishment of a triad from the way the passage is written, but where Jackson identifies one of “God, *Logos*, and the All”, *ibid.*).

²⁴⁴ Mertens (1995, p. 76 n. 36) makes a brief comparison between this passage and two from the *Poimandres*: ὁ ἔννοος ἄνθρωπος ἀναγνωρισάτω ἑαυτὸν (*CH* 1 21.10) and ὁ νοήσας ἑαυτὸν εἰς αὐτὸν χωρεῖ (*CH* 1 21.2). Of the αὐτὸν from the second passage, it is hard to tell from the context whether it refers to “him(self)” (ὁ νοήσας ἑαυτὸν) or “Him” (God) – an attractive form of ambiguity considering the Zosimean passage to be discussed.

ὄρα αὐτὸν γινόμενον πάντα, θεόν, ἄγγελον, ἄνθρωπον παθητόν· πάντα γὰρ δυνάμενος πάντα ὅσα θέλει γίνεται. καὶ πατρὶ ὑπακούει· διὰ πάντος σώματος διήκων, φωτίζων τὸν ἐκάστης νοῦν, εἰς τὸν εὐδαίμονα χῶρον ἀνώρμησεν ὅπουπερ ἦν καὶ πρὸ τοῦ τὸ σωματικὸν γενέσθαι, αὐτῷ ἀκολουθοῦντα καὶ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ ὀρεγόμενον καὶ ὀδηγούμενον εἰς ἐκεῖνο τὸ φῶς. (*Omega* 7 64-74)

And having thus thought and behaved, he says, you will behold the son of God becoming everything for the sake of the pure souls so that he could draw it [the soul] out of the region of destiny to the incorporeal region. Behold him becoming everything – God, angel, vulnerable person. For being all-mighty, he becomes all the things that he wants to become. And he obeys his father: by pervading the whole body, illuminating the mind of each [soul], he sends it to the happy place where it was even before the corporeal element came into being, following him, and yearning and being guided by him towards that light.

The above is yet another compound of ideas friendly towards Christian Gnosticism and Hermetism that is not easily untangled.²⁴⁵ Yet it may bring some level of clarification regarding the “corporeal” vs. “incorporeal” dichotomy in relation to the letter omega from the opening lines of the text, one which points to a Christian direction. If the spiritual man sees the son of God (possibly Jesus Christ) and is guided to the incorporeal realm, where he once lived “before the corporeal element came into being”, the end is also the beginning: according to a passage in *Revelation* 21:6, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (ἐγὼ τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος).²⁴⁶ The formula has been believed to refer to either Christ’s or God’s infinitude; in either case, the expression has an all-embracing sentiment that is emphasised in Zosimus’ passage above, where forms of πᾶς occur no fewer than five times.

For all the Stoic, Hermetic and Christian-gnostic hints dropped so far, it seems that Zosimus is fairly invested in erasing his footprints. This is even more the case in the following passage,²⁴⁷ which is possibly the most convoluted of the whole treatise:

²⁴⁵ The strong eclecticism of *Omega* is discussed in more detail in 3.2 below.

²⁴⁶ See also *Revelation* 1:8 and 22:13.

²⁴⁷ This passage has also been edited and translated by Letrouit (1995, pp. 38-39).

καὶ βλέψαι τὸν πίνακα ὃν καὶ Βίτος γράψας,²⁴⁸ καὶ ὁ τρίσμεγας Πλάτων καὶ ὁ μυριόμεγας Ἑρμῆς, ὅτι Θώυθος²⁴⁹ ἐρμηνεύεται τῇ ἱερατικῇ πρώτῃ φωνῇ ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος, ἐρμηνεὺς πάντων τῶν ὄντων καὶ ὀνοματοποιὸς πάντων τῶν σωματικῶν. οἱ δὲ Χαλδαῖοι καὶ Πάρθοι καὶ Μῆδοι καὶ Ἑβραῖοι καλοῦσιν αὐτὸν Ἀδάμ, ᾧ ἐστὶν ἐρμηνεία γῆ παρθένης καὶ γῆ αἱματώδης καὶ γῆ πυρρὰ καὶ γῆ σαρκίνη. ταῦτα δὲ ἐν ταῖς βιβλιοθήκαις τῶν Πτολεμαίων ἠϋρηνται ὧν²⁵⁰ ἀπέθεντο εἰς ἕκαστον ἱερόν, μάλιστα τῷ Σαραπεῖω, ὅτε παρεκάλεσεν Ἀσενᾶν τὸν ἀρχ(ιερέα) Ἱεροσολύμων πέμψαντα Ἑρμῆν ὃς ἠρμήνευσε πᾶσαν τὴν Ἑβραῖδα Ἑλληνιστὶ καὶ Αἰγυπτιστί. (*Omega* 8)

And look at the tablet which Bitos has written, and the thrice-great Plato, and the infinitely great Hermes, that²⁵¹ Thoth was designated²⁵² in the first sacerdotal language the first human, interpreter of all that exists and maker of names of all corporeal things. But the Chaldeans, the Parthians, the Medes and the Hebrews call him Adam, which means virgin land, blood-like land, flame-coloured land, and fleshy land. These things have been found in the libraries of the Ptolemies, which they put into each [of their] temple[s],²⁵³ especially the Serapeum, at the time when [Ptolemy?]²⁵⁴ asked Asenas, the archpriest of Jerusalem, who had sent Hermes, who translated all the Hebrew into Greek and Egyptian.

The challenging language of the passage (see nn. 248-254) and the great variety of names and information here “baldly summarised” (Fowden, 1993, p. 151) in eleven lines have been a source of great struggle for scholars: quite ironically, a passage about language, interpretation and translation poses a number of linguistic, interpretative, and translation

²⁴⁸ Although one would expect a conjugated verb after the relative pronoun ὃν (in this case, ἔγραψε), Mertens (1995, p. 82 n. 45 with further references and bibliography) points out that the use of participles instead of conjugated verbs is found in papyri and elsewhere in Zosimus (e.g. *Memoir* 7 3.21 & 3.24).

²⁴⁹ Mertens (1995, p. 86 n. 49) notes that this spelling of Thoth does not seem to be attested elsewhere; she supposes that this might be “la forme grecisée de Θωούθ” (*ibid.*). She lists an astounding amount of other variants of this Egyptian name in Greek (*ibid.* with further bibliography).

²⁵⁰ ὧν looks like a mistakenly attracted relative, which should be αἷς and be governed by ταῖς βιβλιοθήκαις.

²⁵¹ Jackson (1978, p. 47 n. 38) points out the elliptical quality of this particular passage and understands ὅτι as “look at the tablet that Bitos wrote, and (what) Plato and Hermes (wrote, and you will find) that etc” (*ibid.*). Mertens (1995, pp. 82-83 n. 45) gets to a similar conclusion by more detailed means, proposing that ὅτι could depend on βλέψαι, “qui régirait alors deux constructions différentes, et si l’on a suppléé (ὁ ἔγραψαν) devant ὁ τρίσμεγας, on peut aussi le rattacher à ce verbe, avec le sens de « à savoir que »”.

²⁵² Mertens (1995, p. 86 n. 50) is suspicious about ἐρμηνεύεται here, arguing it might be a scribal interference resulting from the proximity of both Ἑρμῆς and ἐρμηνεύς. She reasonably proposes καλεῖται as an option, as it is used twice about Thoth elsewhere in *Omega* (*ibid.*). I have chosen to keep ἐρμηνεύεται in light of this passage’s connection with an account from Iamblichus (soon to be discussed in more detail in this chapter) whereby a Bitys translates (and therefore interprets) a Hermetic teaching from hieroglyphs inscribed in an Egyptian temple (to which Zosimus’ τῇ ἱερατικῇ πρώτῃ φωνῇ may refer), and have followed Jackson (1978, p. 27) in translating the verb as “is designated” – a more general option than “is interpreted” or “is translated” that maintains the ambiguous quality of the passage.

²⁵³ Mertens (1995, p. 89 n. 54) suggests this interpretation for the expression ἕκαστον ἱερόν, literally “each temple”.

²⁵⁴ The subject of the clause is not made explicit, but has been argued to be Ptolemy II due to the mention of the Ptolemies in the passage and the resemblance between Zosimus’ story and that of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek according to the *Letter of Aristeas* (see Jackson, 1978, p. 48 n. 41 and Mertens, 1995, pp. 88-89 n. 53). This connection will be discussed further in the body of the text.

problems. The relationship between Bitos, Plato and Hermes is not made clear here, and Zosimus again seems to play with expectations by giving Plato an epithet that is nearly identical to Hermes' (ὁ τρίσμεγας) and creating a new one for Hermes himself (μυριόμεγας – Chapter IV will demonstrate throughout *Memoirs* 10-12 that Zosimus has a special taste for inventive compounds). The jumbling together of a number of different peoples, the identification of Thoth with Adam, and a chaotic clause about translations involving three languages, the archpriest of Jerusalem, and Hermes almost seem like a vivid comment on miscommunication among cultures and something getting lost in translation.

This “rather desperate exhibition of syncretism” (Fowden, 1993, p. 151) on Zosimus’ part is nonetheless less random than it first appears. A great number of scholars (see Mertens, 1995, p. 83 n. 46 with further references and bibliography) has made a convincing link between Zosimus’ Bitus and the Bitys mentioned by Iamblichus (*Myst.* VIII 4.266-6.268): this Bitys would have been a prophet who learned a doctrine by Hermes about the ascent to regions that lie beyond fate in inscriptions that he would have found in hieroglyphic characters in an Egyptian sanctuary and translated for King Ammon. The thematic similarities with *Omega* are many and provide an explanation as to why Hermes is at the top of the hierarchy here implied by Zosimus (Βίτος... ὁ τρίσμεγας Πλάτων... ὁ μυριόμεγας Ἑρμῆς – the alchemist goes from no epithet to a mostly ambitious one). The link between the passages also brings some context to the “thrice-great Plato”, albeit not too satisfactorily, in that “Bitys and Iamblichus provide a vital link between Hermetism and late Platonism” (Fowden, *ibid.*, p. 153). Plato also mentions through Socrates a story of how the god Theuth discovered letters and introduced them to King Ammon (*Phdr.* 274d; see Fowden, *ibid.*, p. 37 n. 115). This story is clearly not the same as Iamblichus’ but related in its focus on the instruction of king Ammon in relation to the written language and to the wisdom of Hermes/Theuth (see Jackson, 1978, p. 47 n. 38).

As a matter of fact, a lot remains to be said about the noticeable focus on language found in *Omega* 8. There are quite a few instances where Zosimus is playful with language: Thoth is designated the first human in the first language (τῆ... πρώτη φωνῆ ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος); the common wordplay between Ἑρμῆς and ἑρμενεύς (*RHT* 1:268 n. 2) might suggest an etymological connection between the terms (see *Hermetica* 4:120), especially in a context that mentions “the first language”; the name-maker of all things corporeal (ὀνοματοποιὸς πάντων τῶν σωματικῶν) is attributed names by a vast multitude of corporeal beings (οἱ δὲ Χαλδαῖοι καὶ Πάρθοι καὶ Μῆδοι καὶ Ἑβραῖοι καλοῦσιν αὐτὸν Ἀδάμ – Egyptians and Greeks are to be included further along in *Omega* 9 and 16, respectively); the name-maker (ὀνοματοποιός), alongside the “nameless” (ἀκατονόμαστον) triad, shows a mystifying attentiveness on Zosimus’ part to the elementary act of naming that is the stuff of language.

This playfulness should not be mistaken for shallowness, for there are other occasions in *Omega* 8 where Zosimus’ play with language is pertinent to the very matter at hand. It does not seem pointless that a passage about different peoples, different languages, and the acts of naming and interpreting makes such an emphatic and inconsistent use of ἑρμηνεύω and related words (i.e. ἑρμενεύς and ἑρμηνεία). The term is used both in the sense of “interpreting” (ἑρμηνεία) and of translating (ἡρμήνευσε), and in other instances the sense is unclear (ἑρμηνεύεται and ἑρμηνεύς). Struggles with ambiguity and finding precise meaning at the core of the acts of interpreting and translating manifest in the very term that expresses the acts themselves.

The interpretations of Adam’s name (γῆ παρθένοσ καὶ γῆ αἱματώδης καὶ γῆ πυρρὰ καὶ γῆ σαρκίνη, *Omega* 8.81-82) suggest similar linguistic artfulness, as Scott argues:

The name Adam is the Hebrew word *ādām*, ‘man’, which is (or sounds as if it were) derived

from a root meaning ‘red’. πυρρά, ‘red’, would suggest αίματῶδης,²⁵⁵ and thence σαρκίνη; and this explanation of the name is in agreement with the Gnostic doctrine that follows, according to which Adam stands for the σάρξ or σῶμα. [Professor Margoliouth writes: ‘The interpretation of *Adam* as γῆ παρθένος is clearly a combination of the derivation from the Hebrew *adamah* = γῆ (Philo ed. Mangey i. 62) and from the Greek ἀδμής = παρθένος. Hesychius gives ἀδάμα· παρθενική γῆ. (*Hermetica* 4:121)

Scott then lists passages from Josephus (*Ant.* I. i. 2), Olympiodorus (*CAAG Gr.* 89) and Eusebius (*Pr. ev.* 11.6.10ff) where similar associations between Adam and land are made (*ibid.* 121-122), while Mertens (1995, p. 88 n. 52) mentions more parallels with the *NHC*. Not only does the passage make a lot more sense in light of wordplay between Hebrew and Greek words (the starting point of which often seems to be the Hebrew: *ādām* ‘man’ = [ὁ πρῶτος] ἄνθρωπος; possibly *adom* ‘red’ = πυρρά and *dām* ‘blood’ = αίματῶδης; *adamah* ‘land’ = γῆ), it also causes the text’s means of expression to interact with its subject matter of Hebrew being translated into Greek (ὃς ἠρμήνευσε πᾶσαν τὴν Ἑβραϊδα Ἑλληνιστί, *Omega* 8.85-86).²⁵⁶

The commission of translations from the Hebrew via the archpriest of Jerusalem and the fact that they can be found in the libraries of the Ptolemies and the Serapeum very clearly resonate with the anecdote about how the Septuagint would have originated according to the *Letter of Aristeas*. Thus the unidentified subject of the phrase has been thought to be Ptolemy II (see n. 254 above), while other unresolved incongruencies of *Omega* in relation to this text have been put under a bad light in an at times unproductive way. Scott (*Hermetica* 4:121) says that Zosimus’ account is “an inaccurate version of the Jewish legend about the origin of the Septuagint”; that naming the archpriest of Jerusalem “Asenas” (quite probably

²⁵⁵ “Possibly some may have thought that the name Adam was derived from the Hebrew word *dām*, ‘blood’” (*ibid.* n. 1).

²⁵⁶ Detailed identification of wordplay between Egyptian and Greek and/or Hebrew goes way beyond my competence and the scope of the present thesis. However, Zosimus’ linguistic awareness and playfulness do make such an investigation look promising.

an Egyptian name)²⁵⁷ instead of *Aristeas*' "Eleasar" was due to a "slip of memory" (*ibid.*) on Zosimus' part; that "the seventy-two translators have been reduced to one" (*ibid.*), and that the translation of Hebrew books into Egyptian "is a baseless addition" (*ibid.*) – all this, Scott argues, amounts to a "curiously circuitous description of the Book of Genesis" (*ibid.*) that proved that "Zosimus had not himself read Genesis, and did not know much about it" (*ibid.*; Letrouit, 1995, p. 39 expresses a less harsh judgement).

It seems unfair to reduce these peculiarities in *Omega* to products of ignorance, forgetfulness, and inaccuracy in relation to a story which is in itself unreliable. For rather than exposing who the first human is according to one particular (and by that time, already canonical) book like *Genesis* or one particular story like *Aristeas*, what Zosimus is clearly invested in is offering a highly eclectic account of the first human that hardly distinguishes Greek pagan, Hermetic, Egyptian and Christian Gnostic notions and characters – however clumsy the outcome of such ambitious endeavour may be at times. Edwards (2015, p. 156) says of Zosimus that "it would be as perverse to doubt as it would be credulous to believe all his citations": more constructive than seeing Zosimus' inconsistencies with external sources as mere errors or as unattainable niche references is to consider his overwhelmingly aggregative attitude towards ways of knowing and cultures, and what that can tell us about Zosimus' presentation of alchemical knowledge. In this case, it seems meaningful that an Egyptian would add an apparently Egyptian name (Asenas – see n. 257) and the Egyptian language to a story that has the Hebrew and Greek cultures at the forefront.²⁵⁸

What follows these very complicated eleven lines may look slightly less daunting to the reader, but still maintains a strong focus on language accompanied by a resistance to

²⁵⁷ *RHT* 1:268 n. 6. Ασεννέθ is a priest's daughter who the Pharaoh gives Joseph to marry (*Genesis* 41:45) – see Scott (*Hermetica* 4:122).

²⁵⁸ It is also interesting that the name Asenas sounds like a Hellenised version of the name of an Egyptian character (Ασεννέθ) who marries a Hebrew one (Joseph): the three cultures involved in Zosimus's story might be brought together in one name (and, as the present discussion proposes, names are an important point of discussion in *Omega*).

rigid doctrinal and cultural affiliation. After reinforcing the idea that the same first human has different names according to different peoples and, as already mentioned, presenting himself explicitly as an Egyptian (“the first human is called Thoth among us and Adam among them”, ὁ πρῶτος ἄνθρωπος [ὁ] παρ’ ἡμῶν Θωὺθ καὶ παρ’ ἐκείνοις Ἀδάμ, *Omega* 9.87-88), Zosimus adds that the first human has also been called by the language of the angels (τῆ τῶν ἄγγέλων φωνῇ αὐτὸν καλέσαντες, 9.8-89).²⁵⁹ Others, however, have spoken about him “symbolically, through the four elements of the whole sphere, in terms of the body” (οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ συμβολικῶς διὰ τεσσάρων στοιχείων ἐκ πάσης τῆς σφαίρας αὐτὸν εἰπόντες²⁶⁰ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα, 9.89-91). The contrast between angels and the body and the fact that what the first human was called by the angels’ language is not specified evokes the opposition between incorporeal and corporeal language from the beginning of *Omega* (see Mertens, 1995, pp. 90-91 n. 58).

The mention of the four elements (τεσσάρων στοιχείων, *Omega* 9.90) may set an expectation that Zosimus is at last turning to more practical discussions about acting upon matter. Yet he plays with language to talk about language once again by using στοιχεῖον in the sense of “letter” – without forgetting its physical meaning of “element” nonetheless:

τὸ γὰρ ἄλφα αὐτοῦ στοιχεῖον ἀνατολὴν δηλοῖ, τὸν ἀέρα· τὸ δὲ δέλτα αὐτοῦ στοιχεῖον δύσιν δηλοῖ, τὴν (γῆν, τὴν) κάτω δύσασαν διὰ τὸ βάρος· (...) τὸ δὲ μ(ῦ) στοιχεῖον μεσημβριανὴν δηλοῖ, τὸ μέσον τούτων τῶν σωμάτων πεπαντικὸν πῦρ τὸ εἰς τὴν μέσην τετάρτην ζώνην. (*Omega* 9.91-96)

For his letter alpha would signify (sun) rising, the air; and his letter delta would signify setting of the sun, the earth, that sinks down because of its weight; (...) the letter mu would signify midday, the middle fire of these bodies that is able to soften in the fourth middle zone.

²⁵⁹ Zosimus again uses a participle instead of a finite verb (see Mertens, 1995, p. 90 n. 58 and n. 248 in the present thesis). This will happen again two lines down with εἰπόντες.

²⁶⁰ See n. 259 above.

Jackson (1978, p. 48 n. 46) points out that “the acrostic puzzle” whereby the first alpha corresponds to the first letter of “rising” (ἀνατολή) and “air” (ἀήρ), the delta to the first letter of “setting” (δύσις) and the mu to the first letter of “midday” (μεσημβρία) is “possible only in Greek” (*ibid.*). Jackson adds that the absence of the second alpha in Zosimus’ equivalencies when it is precisely the second letter from Adam’s name that does not have a correspondent in Hebrew (Mertens, 1995, p. 91 n. 59) can only be a coincidence, and Mertens (*ibid.*) concurs. Yet the strong suggestion of wordplay involving Hebrew and Greek in *Omega 8* is encouraging evidence for one to at least ponder over this coincidence. After all, skipping the second alpha seems convenient when the letter’s possible associated element (‘water’, ὕδωρ) does not start with an alpha and thus does not suit Zosimus’ associative mechanism, and the lack of this letter in the Hebrew word for ‘Adam’ makes a good enough alibi for the fault in the mechanism, with the added bonus of further acknowledging Zosimus’ debt to notions transmitted in the Hebrew language.²⁶¹ In this sense, it is interesting that the same associations between the letters of Adam’s name and the cardinal points also appear in the third book of the *Sibylline* oracles (*Sib.* 3.24-26; see Mertens, 1995, p. 91 n. 59), a work deeply rooted in Hellenistic Judaism (see Lightfoot, 2007). This, combined with other elements from the passage that may be traced back to Aristotle for describing a figure that has just been given an Egyptian and a Hebrew name, would contribute greatly to the forceful plurality Zosimus has been building in the text.²⁶²

Zosimus goes on to refine his exposition regarding the first human in a way that preserves the two main features of *Omega* that have been emerging: exploration of (and

²⁶¹ Jackson (1978, p. 48 n. 43) says that “in late Jewish circles Hebrew was (...) held to be the language spoken by the angels”, implying that what Zosimus might mean by ἡ τῶν ἁγγέλων φωνή was Hebrew. However, his point gets somewhat lost when he uses two Christian sources as evidence (namely *1 Corinthians* 13:1 and *2 Corinthians* 12:4), neither of which say that Hebrew is the language of the angels (as pointed out by Mertens, 1995, p. 90 n. 58).

²⁶² The supplement γῆ can be justified not only because it agrees with the notion of four elements mentioned by Zosimus (also found in Aristotle), but also because Zosimus’ κάτω δύσσασαν διὰ τὸ βάρος resembles what Aristotle says about earth’s heaviness and tendency to move downwards (*Cael.* A 269^a33-35 - 269^b36 & Δ 311^b19-20; see Mertens, 1995, p. 92 n. 59).

sometimes experimentation with) language and overt cultural eclecticism, both of which are often intertwined. Zosimus' concise reaffirmation of the different names of the first human according to the Chaldeans, the Parthians, the Medes, and the Hebrews, on the one hand, and according to the Egyptians on the other ("in this way, then, the flesh-made Adam according to his visible surrounding formation is called Thoth", οὕτως οὖν ὁ σάρκινος Ἀδάμ κατὰ τὴν φαινομένην περίπλασιν Θωὺθ καλεῖται, *Omega* 10.97-98) may come with one such instance: as demonstrated by Mertens (1995, p. 93 n. 60), the term περίπλασις echoes not only God moulding Adam (ἔπλασεν *Genesis* 2:7), but also Hephaistos' moulding Pandora (πλάσσει, *Hes. Op.* 70 – this will be relevant soon) and Plato's description of surrounding a soul with a human form (περίπλασον, *Resp.* 588d). But the strongest language-related twist of the passage is when Zosimus reveals that the man inside the flesh-made Adam, "the spiritual man" (ὁ δὲ ἔσω αὐτοῦ ἄνθρωπος ὁ πνευματικός, 10.98-99) has two different names: a noble one, which Zosimus does not know for the time being and only Nikotheos, the undiscovered one, knows (τὸ μὲν οὖν κύριον ἀγνοῶν διὰ τὸ τέως· μόνος γὰρ Νικόθεος ὁ ἀνεύρετος ταῦτα οἶδεν, 10.100-101); and a common one, which is "Phos" (τὸ δὲ προσηγορικὸν αὐτοῦ ὄνομα Φῶς καλεῖται, 10.101-102)²⁶³ – the obsession with names known and unknown reappears, as well as that with giving more than one name to the same subject. Most importantly, a long-acknowledged pun on 'man' (φῶς) and 'light' (φῶς) expressing the duality between "corporeal" and "incorporeal" takes Zosimus' attentiveness to language to a new level.²⁶⁴

It becomes more and more difficult to trace Zosimus' notion of the first human back to one particular source, sometimes due to his general descriptions, sometimes due to his

²⁶³ The rendition of κύριον and προσηγορικόν as "noble" and "common" respectively is from Mertens (1995, pp. 94-95 n. 62), who identifies in the pair of terms yet another opposition between the "incorporeal" and the "corporeal" languages.

²⁶⁴ The pun is the reason behind Mertens' editorial choice of not accenting φῶς, besides the fact that in Zosimus' time, she points out, it was common to write without accentuation (1995, p. 96 n. 64).

erratic mention of names. The name Nikotheos points to a lost apocalypse mentioned by Porphyry – a topic discussed in more detail in the next section; the notion of an inner man can be found in many a place, including Plato (*Resp.* 589a), the New Testament (*Romans* 7:22-23; *2 Corinthians* 4:16; *Ephesians* 3:16), the Hermetic corpus (*CH* 13 7), and others.²⁶⁵ The tale from *Omega* 11 about Phos being in Paradise (ἦν Φως ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ, 11.104) and then, being blown through by Fate, being persuaded into clothing himself with “their” Adam (διαπνεόμενος ὑπὸ τῆς εἰμαρμένης, ἔπεισαν αὐτὸν... ἐνδύσασθαι τὸν παρ’ αὐτῶν Ἀδάμ, 11.104-106)²⁶⁶ and therefore being enslaved (δεδουλαγωγημένου αὐτοῦ, 11.108-109) strongly resonates with Christian Gnostic and Hermetic notions (*Secret Book of John*; *CH* 1 15 – see Mertens, 1995, p. 98 n. 72), but this is soon followed by an expansion of the Prometheus-Epimetheus allegory:

τὸν ἔξω ἄνθρωπον δεσμὸν εἶπεν ὁ Ἡσίδοτος, ὃ ἔδησεν ὁ Ζεὺς τὸν Προμηθεῖα. εἶτα μετὰ τὸν δεσμὸν ἄλλον αὐτῷ δεσμὸν ἐπιπέμπει τὴν Πανδώραν ἣν οἱ Ἑβραῖοι καλοῦσιν Εὐάν. ὁ γὰρ Προμηθεὺς καὶ Ἐπιμηθεὺς εἷς ἄνθρωπός ἐστι κατὰ τὸν ἀλληγορικὸν λόγον, τοῦτ’ ἐστι ψυχὴ καὶ σῶμα· καὶ ποτὲ μὲν ψυχῆς ἔχει εἰκόνα ὁ Προμηθεὺς, ποτὲ δὲ νόος, ποτὲ δὲ σαρκὸς διὰ τὴν παρακοὴν τοῦ Ἐπιμηθέως ἣν παρήκουσεν τοῦ Προμηθέως τοῦ ἰδίου (νοῦ). φησὶ γὰρ ὁ νοῦς ἡμῶν· ὁ δὲ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ πάντα δυνάμενος καὶ πάντα γινόμενος, ὅτε θέλει, ὡς θέλει, φαίνεται²⁶⁷ ἐκάστῳ. (*Omega* 12)

Hesiod called the outer man a bond, with which Zeus has bound Prometheus. Then after the bond he sends him another bond, Pandora, whom the Hebrews call Eve. For Prometheus and Epimetheus are one man according to the allegorical discourse, that is soul and body; and at one time Prometheus has the image of soul, at another time of intellect, and at another time of flesh because of the disobedience of Epimetheus in which he disobeyed Prometheus, his own intellect. For our intellect says: the son of God, who is all-mighty and all-becoming, appears to each person when he wants, in the way he wants.

The intertwining of a pagan and a biblical story by the addition of Eve and the son of God

²⁶⁵ For further references, see Mertens (1995, p. 94 n. 61), who points out all the references made above.

²⁶⁶ The plural subject of ἔπεισαν... αὐτῶν and the following ἐκαυχῶντο (*Omega* 11.108) is not mentioned. Mertens (1995, pp. 97-98 n. 68) follows Reitzenstein (1904, p. 104), who adds οἱ ἄρχοντες in his text. In fact, the *Secret Book of John* talks of the creation of Adam being due to Yaldabaoth and his commanders (*Secret Book of John* 15.1-1910) – see Mertens (*ibid.*) with further references and bibliography.

²⁶⁷ I follow Scott here; Mertens has φαίνει.

(ὁ δὲ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) is then brought to a climax as Jesus Christ is said to take Adam where the men called Photes are (Ἀδὰμ προσῆν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ὄς) ἀνήνεγκεν ὅπου καὶ τὸ πρότερον διῆγον φῶτες καλούμενοι, 13.121-122). The explicit mention of Jesus Christ has made some scholars feel suspicious and consider the whole passage as a Christian interpolation (see Mertens, 1995, p. 101 n. 80). The scepticism is understandable (and it has been shown before with regard to the Prometheus and Epimetheus story too – see above), but the action of eliminating names from *Omega* for the sake of inner cohesion seems counterproductive: most of the text would be gone.

The mention of Christ is accompanied by a progressively less expository and more atmospheric tone, until it reaches that of prophecy. An obvious atmosphere of secrecy is created around Christ's work: he carried off his own Photes secretly (λάθρα τοὺς ἰδίους φῶτας συλήσας, *Omega* 13.124-125); until now and the end of the world, he will come to carry off his own secretly and manifestly (ἕως ἄρτι καὶ τοῦ τέλους τοῦ κόσμου, ἔπεισι λάθρα καὶ φανερᾶ συλῶν τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ, 13.126-127), advising them secretly and through the intellect (συμβουλεύων αὐτοῖς λάθρα καὶ διὰ τοῦ νοῦς αὐτῶν, 13.128): they kill their own Adam (τὸν ἑαυτῶν Ἀδὰμ ἀποκτείνουσι, 13.131-132) – i.e. the flesh-made Adam/Epimetheus, i.e. the body (see above). This is when the prediction regarding the “mimic daimon”, mentioned in the previous subsection, comes in: he would come claiming to be the son of God, but is actually without form both in soul and body (λέγων ἑαυτὸν υἱὸν θεοῦ, ἄμορφος ὢν καὶ ψυχῇ καὶ σώματι, 14.135-136). Stroumsa (1984, pp. 142-143) and Mertens (1995, p. 104 n. 89) associate Zosimus' “mimic daimon” with the “mimic spirit” (ἀντίμιμον πνεῦμα) found in Gnostic literature (Böhlig, 1968, p. 174). The first two aforementioned scholars also rightly draw attention to the more specific connection with Yaldabaoth from the *Secret Book of John*: similarly to Zosimus' ἀντίμιμος δαίμων, “the epithet ἄμορφος is applied to Sophia's offspring, i.e., Yaldabaoth (*Secret Book of John* 10:1-

7)” (Stroumsa, *ibid.*, p. 143); Yaldabaoth is also full of jealousy (*Secret Book of John* 10.19-13.13 – Zosimus later describes the “mimic daimon” as jealous – see below); and he is also a liar, claiming to be the only God (*Secret Book of John* 10.19-13.13).

Yet Zosimus’ prophetic grandeur might still be tarnished by less ennobling pursuits. In his very fragmentary *Final Count*,²⁶⁸ Zosimus criticises certain methods for obtaining tinctures from what seems to be a rival school in a way that is slightly reminiscent of *Omega* and this particular anecdote. He talks about certain “guides” (ἔφοροι, *Final Count* 6.7), and how their goodwill determined the efficacy of timely tinctures (τούτου <δ’> ἕνεκεν καὶ καιρικᾶς, ἐπειδὴ κατὰ καιροῦς ἐνήργουν τῇ θελήσει τῶν δοκοῦντων <δαμόνων>, *Final Count* 6.7-9) – something rather similar to Zosimus’ criticism of how those who rely on their personal daimon are subjected to Fate in *Omega* (see above) – which indeed fits nicely with Festugière’s addition of δαμόνων to the text. Very much like Zosimus’ mimic daimon, “guides” are associated with jealousy (φθονοῦντες, *Final Count* 7.22; see below) and falsity: “and so they want to do this also to you, woman, by means of their pseudo-prophet” (ὥστε <τοῦτο> καὶ σοὶ θέλουσιν ποιῆσαι, ὦ γύναι, διὰ τοῦ ψευδοπροφήτου, *Final Count* 7.36-37), Zosimus warns Theosebeia. Therefore, Zosimus’ account of the mimic daimon may as well be an elaborated, inflated instance of the much-attested self-presentation of alchemists as prophets (see Mertens, 1989a, pp. 260-266 and 2002, p. 169 and Chapter I) – their rivals would by extension be false ones.

The prophetic passage is also still woven with the thread of language. Zosimus first predicts that the daimon’s falsity would backfire as those who have become wiser through their understanding of the real son of God (οἱ δὲ φρονιμώτεροι γενόμενοι ἐκ τῆς καταλήψεως τοῦ ὄντως υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, 14.136-137) would give the daimon their Adam to be killed while taking their own luminous spirits safely into their own place, where they

²⁶⁸ The Greek edition of the *Final Count* used here is Festugière (*RHT* 1:363-368).

were before the world came into being (διδόασιν αὐτῷ τὸν ἴδιον Ἀδὰμ εἰς φόνον, τὰ ἑαυτῶν φωτεινὰ πνεύματα σφύζοντες (εἰς τὸν) ἴδιον χῶρον, ὅπουπερ καὶ πρὸ κόσμου ἦσαν, 14.137-139). The alchemist then combines language and secrecy again saying that:

πρὶν ἢ δὲ ταῦτα τολμῆσαι τὸν ἀντίμιμον, τὸν ζηλωτὴν, πρῶτον ἀποστέλλει αὐτοῦ πρόδρομον ἀπὸ τῆς Περσίδος μυθοπλάνους λόγους λαλοῦντα καὶ περὶ τὴν εἰμαρμένην ἄγοντα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους. εἰσὶ δὲ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ ἑννέα, τῆς διφθόγγου σφζομένης, κατὰ τὸν τῆς εἰμαρμένης ὄρον. (*Omega* 14.140-145)

But before the mimic, the jealous one, ventures on these things, he first sends off before him a precursor of himself from Persia who tells fictitious tales and tells people about Fate. His name has nine letters, preserving the diphthong, according to the pattern of Fate.

Language and subject matter are again intertwined here: the unnamed precursor will tell people about Fate (τὴν εἰμαρμένην) through the things he says (λαλοῦντα), and the number of letters in his name coincides with the word that denotes where he will lead people (τὴν εἰμαρμένην). The supposition that the solution to the riddle is the Persian Mani (Μανιχαῖος) is not the only possible one. Grimes points out (2015, p. 190) that, in the Syriac corpus, Zosimus “claims that wise Solomon knows of a nine-lettered name that gives him power over the daimons” (see *CMA* 2:12.5) and alludes to “a mystery of the nine letters” that “is the common key of visible things, as it says in the *Book of Names* and in the *Book of Amulets*” (*CMA* 2:9.1; Grimes, 2015, p. 190). A nine-lettered riddle also occurs in the *Sibylline Oracles* (1.175; Grimes, 2015, p. 190) – this is the second parallel between them and *Omega* (see above), the solution of which, like Zosimus’, remains mysterious.

Zosimus indeed moves away from Persia when regrouping the sources of his teachings (Mertens, 1995, p. 111 n. 96) while paradoxically keeping them dispersed. He says that these things about the luminous human and his guide – the Son of God – and about the earthly Adam and his guide – the mimic – are said only by the Hebrews and the sacred books of Hermes (καὶ ταῦτα μόνοι (οἱ) Ἑβραῖοι καὶ αἱ ἱεραὶ Ἑρμοῦ βίβλοι περὶ τοῦ φωτεινοῦ

ἀνθρώπου καὶ τοῦ ὀδηγοῦ αὐτοῦ υἱοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ γηγίνου Ἀδάμ καὶ τοῦ ὀδηγοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀντιμίμου, *Omega* 15.147-150). The use of “only” (μόνοι) in the sentence clearly separates Zosimus’ Hebrew/Hebraic and Hermetic learning from what he would have learned from the Greeks: they “call the earthly Adam Epimetheus, who is advised by his own intellect, that is, his brother, not to take the gifts from Zeus” (οἱ δὲ Ἑλληνας καλοῦσιν γήϊνον Ἀδάμ Ἐπιμηθέα **συμβουλευόμενον** ὑπὸ τοῦ ἰδίου νοῦ, τοῦτ’ ἔστι τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ, μὴ λαβεῖν τὰ δῶρα τοῦ Διός, *Omega* 16.152-154). While Prometheus’ action echoes Jesus Christ’s action towards the people he will counsel (**συμβουλεύων** αὐτοῖς λάθρα καὶ διὰ τοῦ νοῦς αὐτῶν, 13.128; see above) and point to a Gnostic/Hermetic influence, Prometheus’ following action of interpreting everything and advising those who have “intelligent ears” (in contrast to those who only have “corporeal ears”, who belong to Fate – πάντα ἐρμηνεύει καὶ πάντα συμβουλεύει τοῖς ἔχουσιν ἀκοὰς νοεράς· οἱ δὲ τὰς σωματικὰς ἔχοντες μόνον ἀκοὰς τῆς εἰμαρμένης εἰσί, 16.156-157) is strongly reminiscent of both Gnostic passages and what Prometheus says in Aeschylus. In Aeschylus, it was Prometheus who put intellect and mind in mortals – before then, they would hear but not listen (ἔννους ἔθηκα καὶ φρενῶν ἐπηβόλους... | οἱ πρῶτα... | κλύοντες οὐκ ἤκουον, *Prom.* 444-8, see Mertens, 1995, p. 112 n. 97). Here Aeschylus joins Hesiod and Homer among authorities alluded to by Zosimus who could have strong associations with ‘Greekness’.²⁶⁹

Zosimus then returns to a topic possibly long-forgotten by the reader – those who made fun of the great book *On Furnaces* (ὅσοι... χλευάζοντες [ἢ] τὴν μεγάλην περὶ καμίνων βίβλον, 17.160-162) – and makes it slightly difficult to piece it together with the long-winded lecture developed up to this point. He says that these people understand nothing that “the poet” says: “but in no way do the gods give [everything?] to humans at once... and so

²⁶⁹ In spite of Hesiod’s reference to his father moving from Cyme into Greece (*Op.* 635-640). More speculative but potentially pertinent is that, in a treatise where Zosimus argues against views associated with the Persian Zoroaster (and possibly speaks about the Persian Mani with contempt), he precisely alludes to the Greek tragedian who fought against the Persians.

on” (οὐδὲ τὸν ποιητὴν κατανοοῦσι λέγοντα· ἀλλ’ οὕτως ἅμα θεοὶ δόσαν ἀνθρώποισι καὶ τὰ ἐξῆς, 17.161-163) – the quotation from Homer²⁷⁰ is followed by the following statement:

καὶ οὐδὲν ἐνθυμοῦνται οὔτε βλέπουσι τὰς τῶν ἀνθρώπων διαγωγὰς ὅτι καὶ εἰς μίαν τέχνην ἄνθρωποι διαφόρως εὐτυχοῦσι καὶ διαφόρως τὴν μίαν τέχνην ἐργάζονται... (*Omega* 17.164-166)

... and they do not even ponder on or see people’s pursuits: people succeed in different ways in regard to one craft and work at one craft in different ways...

The quotation from Homer, together with this statement, seems to be implying that no person can “have it all”, i.e. either that no one can succeed in every single aspect of the alchemical art, or that people do not have to succeed in the very same way, and therefore there are many different ways to approach a craft that is nonetheless one (τὴν μίαν τέχνην). To an extent, this idea seems to align with Zosimus’ all-encompassing exposition about the first human so far: different peoples and cultures may have given the first human different names and discussed the first human’s nature in different ways, but they all discuss the first human nonetheless, as well as humankind’s goal to overcome the changeability of Fate and go back to where they once belonged.

Zosimus then illustrates his point by making a comparison between his τέχνη and another one, that of medicine, and abruptly turns his attention to the reader while maintaining some familiarity in making writings his focus. Zosimus acknowledges the digressive nature of the comparison (ἐγὼ δὲ ἐπὶ τὸ προκείμενον ἐλεύσομαι, 19.190) and, getting back to the subject of instruments, reprimands the addressee for her request to learn about such things (see subsection above) by quoting “the Philosopher”: “I have passed over

²⁷⁰ Scott (*Hermetica* 4:133) and Mertens (1995, p. 114 n. 99) refer to *Odyssey* 8.167-168, but it might be a quotation from *Il.* 4.320: ἀλλ’ οὐ πως ἅμα πάντα θεοὶ δόσαν ἀνθρώποισιν, in which case the πάντα would be omitted (this is in fact suggested by Scott).

these things in silence purposely, given that they are bounteously laid out in my other writings as well” (ταῦτα ἐκὼν παρεσιώπησα διὰ τὸ ἀφθόνως αὐτὰ ἐγκεῖσθαι καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἄλλαις μου γραφαῖς, 19.195-197). The quotation seems meaningful in a text where so many things are left nameless and/or unexplained, and where written references are mentioned with such subtlety and yet with such frequency. Indeed, there seems to be more about books in relation to withheld knowledge and *Omega* than meets the eye, and this is what the next section investigates.

3.2) The context

(i) Hidden books, secret teachings: evidence in Greek and Syriac

When it comes to the overarching theme of secrecy in alchemy and other non-normative crafts such as magic and astrology, the lines between fact and fiction are overwhelmingly blurred. On the one hand, there is more than enough evidence about such practices being prohibited and harshly punished to justify a genuine need to keep knowledge secret and books hidden. On the other hand, these works can embellish the otherwise perfectly plausible practices of secrecy, oaths, and of hiding written records to such an extent that one starts to become suspicious of them having any factual grounds. The following tries to navigate these tricky waters not with the intent of telling fact from fiction, but of providing context to some of Zosimus’ ways in *Omega*, in particular with regard to the aura of secrecy he builds around Nikotheos.

Zosimus’ constant withholding of information and terminology in *Omega* should not be completely dissociated from the fact that Zosimus’ interests and those of his opponents were under a great shadow of censorship around the alchemist’s time. Zosimus’ derogatory comments about magical practices are very much aligned with policy that was in place

throughout the Roman empire in the late third and early fourth centuries CE, and even before: the interpretation of the *Lex Cornelia* put forward by the legal expert Julius Paulus, according to whom no one was allowed to have books on magic in their households – if found, they could be burned – and mere knowledge of magic was not allowed (*libros magicæ artis apud se neminem habere licet: et penes quoscumque reperti sint, bonis adeptis, ambustis his publice.... non tantum huius artis professio, sed etiam scientia prohibita est, Pauli Sententiae 5.23.18*), became authoritative in 327-328 CE (Edmonds, 2019, p. 387). As mentioned by many (see above), if Zosimus' ominous comment about the precursor from Persia really is about Mani, his choice of tone and of not saying his name may be a silent acknowledgment of Diocletian's edict for the persecution of Manicheans. At the same time, Zosimus' own Christian-Gnostic inclinations were not, and indeed would never come to be, the norm. Furthermore, as previously discussed in the present thesis, although Zosimus sets his own practices apart from magical ones, his attack on magicians in *Omega* and much other evidence suggests that adepts of activities that can be denominated 'magical' were also engaged in activities that may be considered 'alchemical', and that a strong distinction between both practices in antiquity is often inappropriate: in short, Zosimus could not rest assured that his own approach to alchemy would not be read as a form of 'magic' by others (see **1.2** in Chapter I). In short, from whatever angle one looks, Zosimus' discussions in *Omega* were subject to highly threatening scrutiny.

If the circulation of alchemical writings was a risky enterprise around Zosimus' time, it is not surprising for tension among practitioners to arise with regards to how it should be transmitted. Zosimus raises the issue of written versus oral transmission in a text that survives only in Syriac:

Le livre se compose de vingt-quatre sections ; chacune de celles-ci a son nom propre, ou lettre, ou traité. Elles sont expliquées par la voix des prêtres. (...) On trouve dans ce livre les arts exposés dans des milliers de paroles. (...)

« Je sais que cela ne t'échappe pas, à toi (femme) ; tu le sais, car tu es de ceux qui voudraient cacher l'art, si on ne l'avait pas écrit. C'est pourquoi vous avez formé une assemblée et établi des serments vis-à-vis les uns des autres. Mais toi (femme), tu as mis tes disciples à part de la multitude, tu les a réunis en petits groupes, et tu les a instruits ouvertement. Cependant tu dis que ce livre ne peut être acquis qu'en secret. Si les mystères sont nécessaires, à plus forte raison faut-il que chacun possède un livre de chimie (koumi), qui ne soit pas tenu caché. Sache donc, ô femme ! que d'après le Philosophe les auteurs des commentaires ont parlé seulement de l'argent teint en or ; mais le livre de chimie qu'ils ont caché annonçait que le plomb, l'étain, le fer et l'argent seraient teints en or, et chacun de ces métaux pour lui-même (...). » (CMA 2:238-239)

The book-hiding motif appears here in a very practical context in which these books would contain quite mundane information about dyeing techniques.²⁷¹ A new aspect also appears: a secret gathering during which, after the taking of an oath, disciples would learn from Theosebeia (quite similar to Amnael and Isis in *Isis to Horus* – see Chapter I). She would be hiding the books in order to maintain the mysteries, a principle with which Zosimus seems to disagree.

Elsewhere, however, Zosimus talks of even more serious measures regarding the preservation of such mysteries:

οὕτως ποίει ἄχρις ἂν ἡ αἰθάλη μὴ ἀναπέμπηται καὶ (...) ἔχε τὸ μυστήριον ἀμετάδοτον, ὃ οὐδεὶς τῶν προφητῶν ἐτόλμησε μυσταγωγῆσαι τῷ λόγῳ, ἀλλὰ μόνον τοῖς νεύμασιν αὐτῶν ἐμυσταγῶουν. τοῦτο γὰρ τὸ κεφάλαιον ἐκάλεσαν ἐν ταῖς λοξαῖς γραφαῖς λίθον τὸν οὐ λίθον, τὸν ἄγνωστον καὶ πᾶσι γνωστόν, τὸν ἄτιμον καὶ πολύτιμον, τὸν ἀδώρητον καὶ θεοδώρητον. (*Mem.* 13 1.10-18)

Proceed like this until the sublimated vapor is no longer sent up and [you will] have the mystery that cannot be imparted, which no one among the prophets dared to speak of to their initiates with words, but they only indicated through their nods. For in their ambiguous writings they called this crucial product the stone and not a stone, the unknown and known to all, the dishonourable and the highly honourable, the one not given and given by god.

²⁷¹ Although the statement that the books are “explained by the voice of priests” may sound distant from the world of technical pursuits, it is known that many technical activities were among the responsibilities of the Egyptian priesthood; see Martelli (2013, pp. 63-69) and Grimes (2018, esp. pp. 69-76).

Whether the writings from these προφήται are the same as the ones from the priests that Zosimus mentions in the Syriac passage, one cannot know. At the same time, there is a similarity between the two passages in the sense that both comment on a tension between two means of communication: in the Syriac passage, between written and oral instruction; in the Greek passage, between verbal and gestural expression. Furthermore, the very idea of gestural expression implies that these προφήται would be transmitting alchemical knowledge in person, just like Theosebeia.

The use of initiation-related vocabulary (μυσταγωγῆσαι and ἐμυσταγώγουσιν) seems to suggest that such encounters would have taken place in temples, and this is supported by yet another passage in Zosimus briefly discussed before (see **3.1** above):

Ἐώρακα εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν Μέμφιδος ἀρχαῖον κατὰ μέρος κειμένην τινὰ κάμινον ἣν οὐδὲ συνθεῖναι εὗρον οἱ μύσται τῶν ἱερῶν. Ἔρρωσο. Πολλοὶ μὲν οὖν ὀργάνων κατασκευαῖ γεγραμμένοι εἰσὶν τῇ Μαρίας, οὐ μόνον ὑδάτων θείου, ἀλλὰ καὶ κηροτακίδων εἶδη πολλὰ καὶ καμίνων. Τὰ οὖν τοῦ θείου ὄργανα πρὸ πάντων ἀναγκαῖον ἐκδοῦναι, μάλιστα ἐπειδὴ καὶ αὐτῶν πρὸ πάντων χρεῖα. (*Mem.* 7 2.8-14)

I saw inside the old temple at Memphis a furnace lying in pieces which even the initiates did not find a way to put together. Farewell. Then, many constructions of instruments have been written about by Maria, not only for sulphurous waters, but also many types of hot plates and furnaces. Therefore, it is necessary to expound the instruments of sulphur before anything else, especially since these are a necessity before anything else.

Here are the μύσται that would have learned techniques from προφήται such as those in the previous passage; the presence of a furnace at the very temple reinforces the idea that the instruction/initiation would take place there. However, it seems like the initiates were not fully instructed and hence unable to repair the piece of equipment. Zosimus implies that such information could be found in the writings of Mary, which proves the need to expound (ἐκδοῦναι) the knowledge she has transmitted in the written word.

This passage, confronted with the previous ones, seems to suggest that alchemical knowledge at the time of Zosimus would at times only be imparted via face-to-face interaction (such are the cases of Theosebeia's gatherings and the gesturing of the προφήται), but at others only via writing.²⁷² These two mediums, in any case, would be mediated by the figures of the priests (see n. 271 above):

Beaucoup d'autres veulent donner leur nom aux recettes ; personne ne les en empêche. Mais ils sont blâmés par les prêtres, par ceux qui possèdent les livres. Les prêtres en font lire une copie dans les sanctuaires des temples. Tout le monde sait que ces livres sont d'Hermès et d'autres auteurs égyptiens. (*CMA* 2:226)

If these accounts are true, this would be a rather sophisticated system to protect alchemical knowledge. With certain pieces of information being imparted only in written records and others only orally (or even silently) in secret encounters, if an intruder managed to access either a book or a meeting, at least part of the alchemical knowledge would be kept safe. The use of ambiguous language, referred to by Zosimus in *Memoir* 13, could be yet another impediment for the understanding of alchemical procedures on the part of the unwanted uninitiated.

Yet, it would be just as naïve to see all instances of the secrecy theme in ancient alchemy simply as an ordinary fact of life turned into legend. The Introduction discusses the fantastical story in Ps.-Democritus where books left by a master (who is said to have been involved with practices that could easily be seen as magical) are found inside a temple column that mysteriously breaks, giving the alchemical formula "Nature conquers nature" a mysteriously reverential status. Chapter I shows a Hermetic-like dramatisation of transmission of alchemical knowledge that includes angelic apparitions and oaths of secrecy

²⁷² For early alchemy's focus on written tradition, see Martelli (2011) and n. 19 in the Introduction.

between angel and goddess that forcefully portrays alchemy as a sacred craft (ἱερὰ τέχνη). Zosimus could have left the spiritual insights that only Nikotheos knows completely unmentioned in *Omega*, but the partial disclosure seems like a good opportunity to make the reader curious about more exclusive sources of knowledge.

A broader contextualisation of secret knowledge must include Hermetism (see Chapter I). While the two Hermetic book titles mentioned by Zosimus in the text have not yet been found or identified (see n. 234 above), the previous section has mentioned some parallels between Zosimus' notions in *Omega* and other known Hermetic writings, including *Poimandres* (= CH 1) – a text mentioned by Zosimus himself in his *Final Account* (RHT 1:308; see n. 337 below) that is also relevant to Zosimus' *Memoirs* 10-12 discussed in the next chapter. In particular, Zosimus' mention of the “sacred books of Hermes” (αἱ ἱερὰ Ἑρμοῦ βιβλίοι, *Omega* 15.147-148) reminds one of a Hermetic work already discussed in Chapter I, namely the *Korè Kosmou* (= CH 23). There, Isis tells her son Horus how Hermes, who got to know everything, wrote the things he apprehended, and, having written them, hid them (ὁ πάντα γνοὺς Ἑρμῆς... καὶ γὰρ ἃ ἐνόησεν ἐχάραξε καὶ χαράξας ἔκρυψε, CH 23 5.16-19). Isis later goes back to the dramatic scene where Hermes separates from his books:

ἀλλ' οὐ καθήκον ἀτελῆ τὴν ἀπαγγελίαν, ὃ τέκνον, ταύτην με καταλεῖψαι, εἰπεῖν δ' ὅσα τὰς βίβλους κατατιθέμενος ἐξείπεν Ἑρμῆς. ἐξείπε γὰρ οὕτως· “ὧ ἱερὰ βιβλίοι, τῶν ἀφθάρτων αἱ τετεύχαστέ μοι χειρῶν, ἃς τῷ ἀφθαρσίας φαρμάκῳ χρίσας ἐπικρατῶ, ἀσαπείς παντὸς αἰῶνος καὶ ἀφθαρτοὶ διαμείνατε χρόνους, ἀθεώρητοι καὶ ἀνεύρετοι γιγνόμεναι παντὶ τῷ τὰ γῆς ταύτης παροδεύειν μέλλοντι πεδία, ἄχρισ οὐ γέρον οὐρανὸς συστήματα ὑμῶν ἄξια τεκνώσεται, ἃς ψυχὰς ὁ δημιουργὸς προσηγόρευσε”. τοσαῦτα εἰπὼν τὰς βίβλους καὶ τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ κατευξάμενος ἔργοις ἰδίαις τεμενίζεται ζώναις. (CH 23 8)

But it was not befitting, child, for me to leave this narrative unfinished, but rather to say everything Hermes spoke when putting down the books. For he spoke in this way: “sacred books, those that have encountered my incorruptible hands, the ones which I hold having anointed them with the potion of incorruptibility, remain undecaying and incorruptible through the period of all eternity, being unseen and undiscovered to all destined to travel in the plains of this earth until the old heaven begets structures worthy of you, those who the demiurge has called ‘souls’.” Having said these things about the books and having made a prayer to his works, he receives a sanctuary in his own zones.

Hermes' ἱεραὶ βίβλοι are not the only parallel between *Omega* and the *Korè Kosmou*. Not only is one of Nikotheos' epithets, ἀνεύρετος (*Omega* 10.101), the exact same word Hermes uses when addressing his books (see ἀνεύρετοι above), Nikotheos' other epithet, κερυμμένος (*Omega* 1.4) is also parallel to how Isis describes Hermes hiding his writings (see ἔκρυψε, *CH* 23 5.18-19).²⁷³

If the attributes given to Nikotheos in *Omega* are ascribed to Hermes' writings in the *Korè Kosmou*, one wonders if Zosimus' epithets may refer metonymically to Nikotheos' writings rather than the man himself. At the same time, the way in which Hermes “receives a sanctuary in his own zones” (ἰδίαις τεμενίζεται ζώναις, *CH* 23 8.21) is slightly reminiscent of how the spiritual man, whose noble name only Nikotheos knows (*Omega* 10.100-101), departs from the corporeal region and goes to the benevolent region where he once belonged. There are thus two possible interpretations of Nikotheos' epithets: one is that they refer to an allegedly hidden written work attributed to Nikotheos; another is that they refer to Nikotheos as one of the *Photes*, one of the spiritual people who kill their own Adam (τὸν ἑαυτῶν Ἀδάμ ἀποκτείνουσι, 13.131-132) to live in the place where they once belonged. Despite the similar themes with *Omega*, however, the *Korè Kosmou* cannot be used to confirm that the best interpretation is the former rather than the latter – the possibilities are to be further explored in the evidence in Coptic.

²⁷³ That Ps.-Democritus' master would only reveal the books to his son after his first age (εἰ τὴν πρώτην ὑπερβρῆ ἡλικίαν, *PM* 3, 50-51) also finds similarities with the story told in the *Korè Kosmou*. Tat was at the same time Hermes' son and heir of his father's lessons (ὁ Τάτ, υἱὸς ὁμοῦ καὶ παραλήπτωρ τῶν μαθημάτων τούτων, *CH* 23 5.22-23), but Hermes would not deliver his doctrine in full because of his son's young age (Ἑρμῆς... ἀπελογεῖτο... ὡς οὐδὲ τῷ παιδί παρέδωκεν ὀλοτελεῖ θεωρίαν διὰ τὸ ἔτι τῆς ἡλικίας νεοειδές, *CH* 23 7.2-4). At the same time, just as in the *Natural and Secret Questions* the knowledge transmitted in the master's books are later revealed to a larger circle that includes Ps.-Democritus and other disciples, in the *Korè Kosmou* Hermes asks his books to remain undiscovered until beings worth of them come about – the ones the demiurge addressed as “souls” (see *CH* 23 8.16-19 above), not to mention again those who will discover Hermes' hidden writings (οὗτοι τὰ κρυπτά, φησὶν Ἑρμῆς, τῶν ἐμῶν ἐπιγνώσονται γραμμάτων πάντα, *CH* 23 66.11-12). Hence, both texts bring the idea of a temporary hiding of books which would first be revealed to family and then to a wider, albeit restricted, audience.

(ii) Hidden books, secret teachings: evidence in Coptic

Others have stepped outside Greek evidence for an answer. Yet a Greek passage is a convenient starting point: Jackson (1978, p. 40 n. 4; 1990, pp. 250-251), Mertens (1995, pp. 55-57 n. 4; 2002, p. 173) and many others remind us of Porphyry talking about many different Christians – some sectarians – “who brought forth revelations of Zoroaster, Zostrianus, Nikotheos, Allogenes, Messos and other such figures” (γεγόνασιν... τῶν Χριστιάνων πολλοὶ μὲν καὶ ἄλλοι, αἰρετικοὶ δέ...²⁷⁴ ἀποκαλύψεις τε προφέροντες Ζωροάστρου καὶ Ζωστριανοῦ καὶ Νικοθέου καὶ Ἀλλογενοῦς καὶ Μέσου καὶ ἄλλων τοιούτων, *Life of Plotinus* 16.12-18). Of these five revelations, two are widely believed to have emerged in the famous collection of Coptic papyri found in a sealed jar in the Egyptian city of Nag Hammadi in 1945, namely *Zostrianus* (NHC 8.1) and *Allogenes* (NHC 11.3) – *Allogenes* also mentions Messos a number of times. The collection also includes three Hermetic texts (NHC 6.6-8) and three copies of the *Secret Book of John* (NHC 2.1, 3.1, and 4.1), which not only mentions a *Book of Zoroaster* that might have been the one referred to by Porphyry, but also has multiple thematic similarities with *Omega*, some of which are mentioned in the close reading above and discussed below.

Before investigating the textual evidence *per se*, the circumstances of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi scriptures, and what has been made of them, deserve special attention in a section dedicated to the motif of hiding books and knowledge. Pagels (in Meyer, 2007) reports how James M. Robinson pieced together a remarkable story of how the scriptures were found:

²⁷⁴ On scholarly discussions about whether αἰρετικοί refers to Christians or pagans, see Jackson (1990, pp. 254-255).

Robinson conducted interviews with people from the towns and villages in the Nag Hammadi area, in particular Muhammad Ali of the al-Samman clan, a resident of al-Qasr, and from the interviews he pieced together a fascinating account of how the Nag Hammadi codices were uncovered. (...) As Robinson has reconstructed the story, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library took place in about December of 1945, when several Egyptian fellahin, including Muhammad Ali, his brothers Khalifah Ali and Abu al-Magd, and others, were riding their camels to the Jabal al-Tarif in order to gather *sabakh*, a natural fertilizer that typically accumulates around there. (...) As they were digging, they unexpectedly came upon a large storage jar buried by the boulder, with a bowl sealed on the mouth of the jar as a lid. (...) In his account of what transpired, Muhammad Ali has suggested to Robinson that he paused before removing the lid or breaking open the jar, out of fear that the jar might contain a *jinni*, or spirit, that could cause trouble if released from the jar. It seems that Muhammad Ali also recalled stories of hidden treasures buried in Egypt, and his love of gold overcame his fear of *jinn*. He smashed the jar with his mattock, and indeed something golden in color and glistening in the sunlight – fragments of papyrus, we might conclude – flew out of the jar and disappeared into the air. And when he looked into the broken jar to see what remained, he found only a collection of old books – the codices of the Nag Hammadi library. (Pagels in Meyer, 2007, p. 3)

On the one hand, this shows that there is no need of great historical distance for an ambience of embellished, legend-conferring spectacle to emerge around a tale of gaining access to books so far inaccessible, for one reason or another. On the other hand, Muhammad Ali's hunch about "hidden treasures buried in Egypt" (see above) is not too far-fetched. These writings are believed to be Coptic translations "by Christian monks who treasured them as holy books in the library of one of the oldest monasteries in Egypt" (*ibid.*, p. 6),²⁷⁵ until Athanasius, the archbishop of Alexandria, "sent out an Easter letter all over Egypt in the spring of 367, ordering believers to reject what he called 'illegitimate and secret books'" (*ibid.*; *Festal Letter 39*) – from which warning the aforementioned monks would have "saved and protected over fifty texts from their library by sealing them in a heavy jar and

²⁷⁵ "Jean Doresse rightly noted that the region where the Nag Hammadi Codices were discovered is well-known for its connections with 'the most ancient traditions of Coptic monasticism'" (Lundhaug & Jenott, 2015, p. 22). In the case of the Nag Hammadi Library specifically, Wisse (1997, p. 147) observes that "documents used as cartonnage to stiffen the leather cover of Codex VII include monastic letters among which is one from Pachomius to Paphnoute (...) The three scribal colophons that survive at the end of Codices I, II, and VII conform to the pious scribbles found in monastic manuscripts. The Coptic dialect in which most of the tractates were written is Sahidic, the orthographic convention created in fourth century monastic scriptoria". All of Lundhaug & Jenott (2015) is dedicated to, as the book title puts it, "the monastic origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices". Full access to the book was not possible due to the library closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

burying them away from the monastery walls” (*ibid.*, p. 7). Very much like the evidence from the previous subsection, the lines between fact and fiction become blurred.

The above could be judged as an amusing but irrelevant comparison to the matter at hand if it were not for a few facts. One fact is the noticeable geographical proximity between Nag Hammadi and Zosimus’ Panopolis (see map in Fowden, 1993, p. 12). Another fact is that the first copy of the *Secret Book of John* ever to emerge to public knowledge before the other three from Nag Hammadi belongs to the Berlin Gnostic Codex 8502, bought in 1896 by Carl Reinhardt in no other city than Akhmin (Pagels in Meyer, 2007, p. 2) – or, as it would have been referred to in ancient Greek, Panopolis. A further fact is that Zosimus mentions two names (Zoroaster and Nikotheos) that in Porphyry are associated with subversive revelatory literature that Plotinus would have been acquainted with in his time and circles – whether that includes Rome, Alexandria, his hometown Lycopolis (quite close to Panopolis as well), or even Persia (Porphyry says that Plotinus joined the Roman army in an expedition to Persia prepared by Emperor Gordian III in order to learn Persian philosophy – see *Life of Plotinus* 3) is not known. Most importantly, Zosimus mentions the Hebrews and the sacred books of Hermes together ((οἱ) Ἑβραῖοι καὶ αἱ ἱεραὶ Ἑρμοῦ βιβλίοι, *Omega* 15.147-148), when the Nag Hammadi Library displays Hermetic texts alongside texts that can be evidently traced back to Hebrew scriptural origins. All this amounts to a strong indication that Zosimus was exposed to collections of revelatory literature of a very similar type to that of Nag Hammadi that were circulating more or less secretly and that would contain scriptural texts of both Judeo-Christian and Hermetic inclination.²⁷⁶

One of the thematic parallels between *Omega* and this collection goes back to Nikotheos’ epithets (κεκρυμμένος, ἀνέυρετος). Jackson (1990, p. 270) points out that “there

²⁷⁶ “Through which channel did the Gnostic myth (and Jewish traditions?) reach Hermetic milieus? It does seem probable that the syncretism evidenced by the Nag Hammadi library is not a phenomenon of the 4th century (the dating of the library) but one that goes back at least to the 3rd century” (Stroumsa, 1984, p. 143).

are ‘Hidden Ones’ aplenty in the extant apocalypses from Nag Hammadi” – some of which appear, quite interestingly, in *Zostrianus* and *Allogenes* (*NHC* 8.1 and *NHC* 11.3, respectively; see above). Jackson adds that “one expects such language in apocalyptic contexts, or wherever it is a question of the revelation of previously hidden secrets” (*ibid.* pp. 270-271). This is very much the case in the *Secret Book of John*, the title of which might possibly unify the hypothesis that some of these books may actually have been hidden to some in their time and the fact that the knowledge it shares is presented as secret:²⁷⁷ after receiving his revelation “of the mysteries... hidden in silence” (*Secret Book of John* 1),²⁷⁸ John hears from his Saviour (very probably Jesus Christ)²⁷⁹ that “I have told you everything for you to record and communicate secretly to your spiritual friends. This is the mystery of the unshakable generation” (*Secret Book of John* 31).

Yet the points of connection between *Omega* and the *Secret Book of John* go way beyond a generic secrecy motif.²⁸⁰ This is unsurprising not only because the first copy of the text that happened to emerge did so, coincidentally or not, in Zosimus’ city, but also because of the evident popularity the work enjoyed in antiquity, manifested in its survival in “no fewer than four separate manuscripts, a huge number of copies compared with what we have for most Gnostic texts” (Turner in Meyer, 2007, p. 103), and possibly in the fact that “in the three Nag Hammadi codices, *Secret Book of John* is always the first tractate copied into the codex” (*ibid.*). A notable similarity is the “enslavement of the human race through the origination of fate” (*ibid.*, p. 105), which is denominated with a Coptic term clearly linked with the Greek term used in Zosimus: *širmamenē* (Meyer, 2007, p. 130 n. 134; *Secret Book*

²⁷⁷ Alternatively, the title could be a literary device to explain why those familiar with the better-known gospel of John have not previously heard of this version.

²⁷⁸ The English translation of the *Secret Book of John* used here is Meyer (2007, pp. 107-138).

²⁷⁹ The tone of caution is due to the fact that only two copies of the *Secret Book of John* explicitly identify the Saviour with Jesus Christ (namely *NHC* 2.1 and 4.1) – though this may simply be due to the fact that these copies are longer.

²⁸⁰ As mentioned before (see n. 161 above), Charron (2005, esp. pp. 448-452) has argued for close parallels between the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* and the *Secret Book of John* (esp. *NHC* 2.1).

of *John* 28). The Coptic work also draws attention to the acts of (not) naming and keeping names secret that have been identified as a major feature of *Omega*: “The One is unutterable... unnamable” (*Secret Book of John* 3).²⁸¹ The most striking passage in that regard concerns the story of how Barbelo (who came forth as the Forethought of the Father) conceives:

The Father gazed into Barbelo, with the pure light surrounding the Invisible Spirit, and his radiance. Barbelo conceived from him, and he produced a spark of light similar to the blessed light but not as great. This was the only Child of the Mother-Father that had come forth, the only offspring, the only Child of the Father, the pure light. (...) The Child asked to be given Mind as a companion to work with, and the Spirit consented. The Invisible Virgin Spirit set the true, divine Self-Generated over everything and caused all authority and the truth within to be subject to it, so that the Child might understand everything, the one called by a name greater than every name, for that name will be told to those who are worthy of it. (*Secret Book of John* 7)

The Child resonates with Zosimus’ spiritual person in a number of ways. The Child is identified with light, just as one of the names of the spiritual person is Φως. The Child asks for Mind (the text actually uses the Greek word νοῦς here; see Meyer, 2007, p. 112 n. 29), the use of which is one of the defining features of Zosimus’ spiritual person. Most importantly, the Child is “called by a name greater than every name, for that name will be told to those who are worthy of it” – which strongly reminds one of the spiritual person’s “noble name”, which only Nikotheos knows (τὸ μὲν οὖν κύριον... μόνος γὰρ Νικόθεος ὁ ἀνεύρετος ταῦτα οἶδεν, *Omega* 10.100-101).

Other less direct and more speculative points of connection are no less interesting. When Barbelo appears as the Father’s Forethought, the term that describes the entity is the Greek πρόνοια (see Meyer, 2007, p. 110 n. 14), the meaning of which is quite close to the

²⁸¹ Note also the similar dichotomy from *Omega*, despite the negationist take: “The One is not corporeal and it is not incorporeal” (*Secret Book of John* 3).

interpretation of Prometheus' name as "Forethought" (West, 1966, p. 309; Mertens, 1995, p. 72 n. 31) certainly at play in Zosimus' *Omega* when Prometheus has "at one time... the image of soul, at another time of **intellect**" (καὶ ποτὲ μὲν ψυχῆς ἔχει εἰκόνα ὁ Προμηθεύς, ποτὲ δὲ **νόος**, *Omega* 12.115-116). There might also be more to the similarity between Zosimus' envy-fuelled "mimic daimon" (ἀντίμιμος δαίμων, *Omega* 14.133) and Yaldabaoth from the *Secret Book of John* mentioned in the close reading above than the general Gnostic notion of the "mimic spirit" (ἀντίμιμον πνεῦμα). His name in Greek would be Ἰαλδαβᾶθ – a nine-letter name with a diphthong, very much like that of the mimic daimon's precursor from *Omega*. This diphthong, unlike that of the suggested Μανιχαῖος (see above), would follow the pattern of εἰμαρμένη set by Zosimus (κατὰ τὸν τῆς εἰμαρμένης ὄρον, 14.144-145) more closely in the sense that the diphthong of both Ἰαλδαβᾶθ and εἰμαρμένη falls on the first syllable. This is not to argue that this is the solution to Zosimus' riddle, especially when the Mani solution provides a much better explanation for the Persian connection in the passage. Yet in a context where many similarities between Zosimus' work and the *Secret Book of John* are noticeable and Zosimus is constantly displaying doctrinal eclecticism and wordplay (which are at times connected – see close reading above), it is not impossible to imagine this as a well-used opportunity to nod gently to more than one reference.

The similarities between *Omega* and the *Secret Book of John* led Doresse to suggest that a presumably lost revelation by Nikotheos mentioned in Porphyry might have been the source for the *Secret Book of John* (Doresse, 1958, p. 285; see Mertens, 1995, p. 96 n. 65 & 2002, p. 173) – which now leads us to the evidence involving Nikotheos himself beyond *Omega* and Porphyry. Quite interestingly, Nikotheos is mentioned alongside Enoch "as an envoy of illumination" (Jackson, 1990, p. 273) in two different texts in two different languages. These mentions occur in the Coptic *Homilies* (68.17) and, most strikingly, in a Middle Persian Manichean fragment (M299a line 5) found in present-day Xinjiang

(Northwest China). These two instances are not to be dismissed considering the Enochian connections in the *Letter from Isis to Horus* and Zosimus' allusions to its contents discussed in Chapter I,²⁸² as well as the clues dropped in Zosimus' *Omega* pointing to revelatory literature associated with Persians, Medes, and Parthians.²⁸³

Yet the most robust evidence for a better understanding of Zosimus' Nikotheos is still a Coptic Gnostic treatise (known as the *Untitled Treatise*) from the Bruce Codex (fourth century?).²⁸⁴

There is again another Twelve surrounding the head (of the Deep). Upon them is a diadem: rays (ακτιν) they cast forth to the Worlds (κοσμος) around them from the Light of the Only-begotten (μονογενης) who is hidden in (the Deep): this same for whom all seek. The spoken word, indeed (μεν = μην), (exists) to cause us to comprehend (χωρι) him through those who excel in uttering these things. And (ηδη = ηδε) as far as we are concerned, it is not possible in any other to apprehend (νοι) them, that is to say, (of) ourselves. To speak of him indeed (μεν = μην), with a tongue of flesh (σαρξ), even as he is, this is impossible. For (γαρ) they are great ones who excel in powers (δυναμις), to cause them to learn through an inborn thought, (εννοια) after which they follow. (...) They did homage, namely, the Powers (δυναμις) of the mighty Aeons (αιων), to the power (δυναμις) of Marsanes (μαρσανης), saying: Who is this who beheld these things with his own eyes, that is, concerning him who in this manner was revealed? Nicotheos (νικοθεος) spake concerning him, he had seen him, for he is one who was in that place. He spake and said: He *IS*, even the Father, who excels all perfection (τελιος): he revealed the invisible (α'ορατος), perfect (τελιος) Triple-Power (τριδυναμις). They saw him, each one of the perfect (τελιος) men, they spake concerning him, whilst they gave him glory, each after (κατα) his own manner. (*Untitled Treatise* 21-23)

²⁸² It is worth observing that the myth of angels having intercourse with women also appears in the *Secret Book of John* (29-30).

²⁸³ "Around 220 one Alcibiades arrived (in Rome) with an apocalypse which, he claimed, a certain righteous man, Elchasai, had received from the Seres of Parthia (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 9.13.1)" (Jackson, 1990, p. 257). This textual mobility could also have happened the other way around. Based on an account from the late eighth-early ninth century 'Abbāsīd court astrologer Ibn Nawbaḥt, Van Bladel (2009, pp. 29-47) argues that the third-century Sasanian emperor Šāpūr I may have commissioned translations of Greek texts into Middle Persian that would include the "pseudo-Persian, indeed pseudo-Zoroastrian works (...) in circulation in Greek in the mid-third century" (*ibid.*, p. 44) such as the ones mentioned in Porphyry (see above), under the misconception that such translations were a way of restoring their own Iranian heritage (*ibid.*, p. 43). Therefore, the Middle Persian fragment mentioned above could be an instance of this ideological move, as "it shows that Nicotheus, one of the authors of the books associated by Porphyry with Zoroaster, was known in Sasanian Iran and was possibly known to Mani himself in the third century. It is also noteworthy in this connection that (...) Mani sent his apostle Patteg on a missionary journey to Egypt. While visiting Alexandria, Patteg must have learned something about the intellectual climate of Egypt. Could he have returned with information about this ancient prophet Nicotheus, or with a book of Hermes?" (*ibid.*, p. 46). Indeed, further investigation of Mani's envoy(s) to Egypt could cast some light on the prophecy-like prediction about a precursor coming from Persia in *Omega* 14. For the moment, strong evidence of circulation of texts between Iranian and Egyptian territories suffices.

²⁸⁴ The translation is Baynes (1933), who indicates any use of Greek words in the treatise.

Jackson (1990, p. 261) navigates the text's convolutedness by suggesting that the following could be the author's perspective:

He is, in effect, admitting that he is one of the ordinary humans who are incapable of describing the Father's Only-begotten Son (...). He is further admitting that he is dependent for his description of those Beings upon the superior humans – Marsanes and Nikotheos and, later on in chapter 7, Phosilampes – who achieved the vision of them, the vision that enabled the privileged seers to vouchsafe the revelation of the secrets of those Beings to mankind. (Jackson, 1990, p. 261)

Marsanes in fact appears as a prophet who experienced a revelation in a Nag Hammadi writing (*NHC* 10, the title of which is also *Marsanes*; see Jackson, 1990, p. 262 n. 19 with further references and bibliography). Jackson's interpretation of the passage also allows tighter connections between the passage from the *Untitled Treatise* and *Omega* to be drawn here. The impossibility of talking about the Only-begotten with a "tongue of flesh" (see above) reminds one of Zosimus' corporeal language (Zosimus' outer or corporeal human is also called flesh-made Adam – ὁ σάρκινος Ἀδάμ, *Omega* 10.97) in contrast with the incorporeal language. This limitation of the "tongue of flesh" or the "corporeal language" also agrees with how Zosimus says that only Nikotheos knows what the letter omega means in the incorporeal language (*Omega* 1.2-4), which in turn agrees with the fact that, according to the author of the *Untitled Treatise*, it was Nikotheos who spoke (i.e. employed language, possibly 'incorporeal'?) concerning the Only-begotten.

There are also connections between the Only-begotten from the *Untitled Treatise* and the spiritual person from *Omega* to be reflected upon, as well as their relatedness with Nikotheos. On the one hand, both the Only-begotten and the spiritual man are made objects of knowledge to which Nikotheos had exclusive access. Both figures are also connected

with light: “...the light of the Only-begotten” (see above) is also present in Zosimus’ “spiritual and luminous human” (τῷ πνευματικῷ καὶ φωτεινῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, *Omega* 13.131), one of whose names is also “man/light” (Φῶς – see n. 264). On the other hand, an earlier passage from the *Untitled Treatise* talks of an “Adam of the Light”, who Baynes (1933, p. 60 n. 9) associates with Adam’s spiritual, luminous man from *Omega*, but is described in a similar way to Nikotheos: “Adam (αδαμ), who is of the Light, is in that place” (*Untitled Treatise* 16 – cf. “Nikotheos... was in that place” above). Likewise, an attribute given to the Only-begotten corresponds to one of the epithets Zosimus attributes to Nikotheos himself: “the Only-begotten (μονογενής) who is hidden” (Νικόθεος ὁ κερυμμένος, *Omega* 1.4).

This could suggest that, although the Only-Begotten and the spiritual man are made Nikotheos’ objects in the *Untitled Treatise* and *Omega*, respectively, they could at some level be identified with Nikotheos himself. By different means,²⁸⁵ Jackson (1990, p. 263) makes the same supposition regarding the *Untitled Treatise*: “Nikotheos attained the vision of the Father’s Only-begotten Son because he *is* the Father’s Only-Begotten”. Jackson mentions Elchasaite and Jewish-Christian traditions whereby:

(...) the heavenly Revealer and Savior – whether called the Holy Spirit, the Great or the Hidden power, the Only-Begotten, the Son of God, the Christ, the True Prophet (...) – was held to have undergone successive incarnations in elect prophetic human receptacles (...), in whose righteous spirits the heavenly spirit found a ‘Kinsman’. (...) The revelations such prophetic figures gave, or were held by followers to have given, were, in effect, self-revelations, revelations granted by and whose content was the Spirit and the Power that had come to be in them and *was* them. (Jackson, 1990, p. 268)

Jackson does not show how this reasoning also works well with *Omega*. The key idea Zosimus shares in *Omega* 7 is that the spiritual man, who has learned to know himself, will have also learned to know God (τὸν πνευματικὸν ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐπιγνόντα ἑαυτὸν ..., καὶ

²⁸⁵ Jackson gets to this conclusion by looking into peculiarities of the Coptic text.

θεὸν ἐπιγνόντα, *Omega* 7.58-62); that the spiritual man, who searches only for himself, by using his intellect will see the Son of God, or Only-begotten (δὲ διὰ μόνου τοῦ ζητεῖν ἑαυτὸν... νοήσας καὶ πολιτευσάμενος θεάσῃ τὸν θεοῦ υἱόν, *Omega* 7.61-65) – note that in the *Untitled Treatise* Nikotheos attains his vision of the searched-for Only-begotten (“the Only-begotten... for whom all seek”) from learning “through an inborn thought, (εννοια) after which they follow” (*Untitled Treatise* 22): “he had seen him, for he is one who was in that place” (*ibid.*). In *Omega*, that place would be none other than the so-called “incorporeal region”, the light into which the spiritual man of light would be led, returning to the happy region where he once was (εἰς τὸν εὐδαίμονα χῶρον ἀνώρμησεν ὅπου περ ἦν... ὁδηγούμενον εἰς ἐκεῖνο τὸ φῶς, *Omega* 7.71-74). In conclusion, Nikotheos would have accessed his own inner, spiritual man by means of his νοῦς and taken this path away from the region of Fate into the incorporeal region himself (ἐκ τοῦ χώρου τῆς εἰμαρμένης ἐπὶ τὸν ἀσώματον, *Omega* 7.66-67) – and this is what grants him both his knowledge of all things incorporeal and his epithets, which “imply the seer’s having been carried off or assumed into the heavens (...) and the consequent impossibility of finding him any more on earth” (Jackson, 1990, pp. 271-272; see also Reitzenstein, 1904, p. 268).

This could possibly discard the hypothesis put forward in the previous subsection via a comparison with hidden books mentioned in the *Hermetica*, i.e. that Nikotheus’ epithet could apply to hidden writings rather than the man himself. However, it so happens that Zosimus ascribes the doctrine regarding the spiritual man’s return to the luminous incorporeal region to a Hermetic work (*Omega* 7.57). Both hypotheses – the hidden books or the hidden man – are inescapably connected by the fact that both Zosimus’ *Omega* and the Coptic *Untitled Treatise* have connections with Porphyry’s account of revelations that were frowned upon and with the Nag Hammadi Collection that contains revelations of different kinds, including Hermetic ones. One way or another, Zosimus seems to have

become acquainted with Hermetism and the figure of Nikotheos by means of eclectic book collections full of spiritual ambition of the likes of the Nag Hammadi Codices – collections which were nonetheless circulating less freely than others in the fourth century. Accordingly, the tendency towards linking multiple but fairly like-minded doctrines from *Omega* can be explained not only by Zosimus' astoundingly eclectic taste, but also by the very versatility of these collections that have certainly left a mark on the alchemist's style.

Final remarks

The above attests to the cultural complexity from which Zosimus emerges as an artfully eclectic author whose interests go way beyond technical practice beneath a veneer of mystic opacity. It is often extremely difficult to specify the exact references made by Zosimus: alongside the already much-lamented dating difficulties are lack of extensive textual evidence (the hoped-for emergence of an ancient revelatory text where Nikotheos is a key figure would be an invaluable source for a better understanding of Zosimus' spiritual views) and the way in which the very eclecticism of Zosimus' milieu entails a great number of thematic but not necessarily linguistic parallels among texts that does not quite quench the classicist's thirst for crystal-clear intertextuality. Yet it is hoped that the present chapter has demonstrated that Zosimus is of no less interest to the philologist. If enough attention and patience is dedicated to *Omega*'s prolix versatility, one finds a work that reflects upon language as the means whereby Zosimus tries to negotiate, harmonise and preserve more or less communicable ideas belonging to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in a most inventive way.

In the case of Zosimus' *Omega*, a better way of describing the contextual links here presented might be 'interdoctrinality' or even 'interspirituality' in relation to pagan Hermetic and so-called Judeo-Christian 'Gnostic' notions alike. Such relationships are made

possible by the underlying eclecticism already observed in the cases of the *Letter from Isis to Horus* (where two Egyptian *dramatis personae* found in Hermetism learn alchemy in an Enochic-like setting) and the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (where expectations of a Plato-inspired philosophical dialogue take one to sermonic speeches involving an Egyptian ruler and a Persian magus), cultural eclecticism which emerges as a robust feature of early alchemical texts – one that greatly informs their style. This is here reinforced by cross-linguistic evidence in Greek, Coptic and Middle Persian signaling how far-reaching (albeit discreet for the sake of self-protection) the influence of revelatory literature involving Nikotheos must have been in the first centuries of our era, an influence to which Zosimus bore witness. In fact, Zosimus' *Omega* could be interpreted as an expression of the material finding from the Nag Hammadi Library: a vessel (see Edwards, 1992) where variegated doctrines and perspectives from diverse cultural heritages are contained by what brings them together: their search for a spiritual way (see n. 95) through knowledge and their attempt not to be obscured by an ominous cloud of censorship coming from various fronts.

Chapter Four

Zosimus of Panopolis' dream visions: *Memoirs* 10-12

4.1) The texts

(i) Dating, transmission, overview

As the period in which Zosimus lived can only be conjectured approximately, it is not possible to be exact about when *Memoirs* 10-12 would have been written. In terms of transmission, *Memoir* 10 has the most complicated and knotted history of the three texts. In **M'BA**, *Memoir* 10 follows *Memoir* 9, but in **M** it appears between two treatises by the anonymous Philosopher and sayings attributed to Agathodaimon and Hermes (Mertens, 1995, p. 212). **M'** and **B** only feature the first paragraph of the text – a strange coincidence given that other texts from **M'** and **B** do not suggest that they belong to the same manuscript tradition (*ibid.*; see Introduction). According to Mertens (*ibid.*, pp. 212-213), this may be due to the scribe realising that they had already copied the text in the case of the former, and to the overall more technical stance of the manuscript in the case of the latter (see Introduction), as Zosimus' dreams only start in the second paragraph.

Memoir 10 is also given different titles by different manuscripts. **M** features “By the Divine Zosimus, on Excellence” (Ζωσίμου τοῦ θεοῦ περὶ ἀρετῆς), **M'** and **B** “on the Composition of Waters” (περὶ συνθέσεως ὑδάτων), and **A** a combination of the two: “By Zosimus, (on?) Excellence, (or?) on the Composition of Waters, First (Lesson)” (Ζωσίμου ἀρετῆς περὶ συνθέσεως ὑδάτων (πρᾶξις) α').²⁸⁶ The term πρᾶξις is supplied by means of comparison with the titles of *Memoirs* 11 and 12 (both of which have only been transmitted

²⁸⁶ “On” and “or” follow Prof. Hutchinson's suggestions: Ζωσίμου (περὶ) ἀρετῆς (ἢ) περὶ συνθέσεως ὑδάτων (πρᾶξις) α'.

in **A**): *Memoir* 11 is entitled “Second Lecture by Zosimus” (Ζωσίμου πρᾶξις β´), and *Memoir* 12 “Third Lecture by Zosimus” (Ζωσίμου πρᾶξις γ´), respectively.

It has been stressed in the Introduction that the present thesis is not an edition of the texts here selected, nor is it focussed on editorial *minutiae* which, considering the complexity of the manuscript tradition of early alchemical texts considered, deserve to be treated as problems in their own right. That said, it might be worth making two brief observations. One is that, although **M'** and **B** at large do not appear to belong to the same manuscript family, the fact that they transmit the exact same passage from *Memoir* 10 under the same title suggests that it might be possible that the scribe of **B** had some contact with the tradition of **M'**, be that direct or not. Another observation is that the attribution of *Memoirs* 11 and 12 to Zosimus could be put in doubt by a number of peculiarities about them. Their much shorter length in comparison with *Memoir* 10, the fact that they are transmitted only in **A**, and the fact that they often repeat themes already found in *Memoir* 10 lead to some level of suspicion. Equally, it might have been the case that the very repetitiveness of *Memoirs* 11 and 12 has led the scribes of **M**(´) and **B** to leave authentic Zosimean material aside. While questions of authenticity remain open, the following approaches *Memoirs* 11 and 12 as works by Zosimus, but puts more focus on *Memoir* 10.

Memoirs 10-12 can be summarised as follows:

***Memoir* 10**

§ **1.1-6**: Zosimus starts by listing a number of general expressions that seem to allude to alchemical practice, and states that these stages are natures neither foreign nor imported, but rather nature herself – which is uniform – that possesses the solid parts of the metals and the liquid extracts of the plants.

§ **1.7-16**: Mertens provides two versions of the passage based on manuscript variations: ‘a’ follows **M'**, **B**, **A**, and **L**, and ‘b’ follows **M**. The first half of both versions

talks about a search (ζήτησις) in slightly different ways while using very similar language. The two versions of the second half are identical in the beginning and talk about the influence of the moon on nature according to chronological measures. Then, they vary: something (a word seems to be missing here in both versions – Mertens suggests “the search”) either lays as a foundation (ὑποβάλλει – version ‘a’) or appropriates (ὑποβάλλεται – version ‘b’) the waning and waxing through which nature either “withdraws” (ὑποφεύγει, ‘a’) or “rides” (ἰππεύει, ‘b’).

§ 2.17-25: Having said these things, Zosimus falls asleep. In his dream, Zosimus sees a sacrificing priest standing on top of an altar in the shape of a jar that has fifteen ladders. Zosimus also hears the voice of a priest from above claiming to have succeeded going down and up the steps.

§ 2.25-43: Zosimus asks the priest who he is, to which he replies he is Ion, the sacrificing priest of the innermost sanctuaries, who claims to endure an unendurable act of violence. The priest proceeds to graphically describe how someone became his master by opening him wide with a dagger and taking off his scalp with a sword. The master also entangled the priests’ bones and flesh and burned him thoroughly with the fire going through his hand. Zosimus sees, among other things, the priest vomiting his own flesh and turning into a mutilated homunculus. Waking up from fear, Zosimus asks himself if that is not the position of the waters.

§ 3: Zosimus falls asleep again. He sees the same jar-altar, this time filled with bubbling water and countless people. Zosimus interacts with a homunculus in an attempt to understand what he sees. As they have this conversation, Zosimus sees a man of copper holding a lead tablet who leads the people in the punishments. The homunculus informs Zosimus that the copper man is the same man who in his previous dream vomited his own flesh.

§ 4: Zosimus wakes up again and asks himself the cause of this vision, and associates it with “the white water”, to which he attributes a number of other names. He then breaks into what Mertens (1995, p. 221 n. 31) has called “une espèce d’hymne rempli d’effets de rhétorique” while speaking of the method through which one transforms nature.

§ 5: Zosimus instructs an unidentified, dear friend (φίλτατε) to build a temple and, while holding a sword, find its entrance, where a serpent is to be found guarding it. Zosimus’ instructions that follow have many parallels with elements from his first dream: the addressee should become the serpent’s master, remove its skin, take its flesh with its bones and separate them member by member, reunite them and only then enter the temple. There, the copper man is no longer to be found; he became a silver man, and then, if the addressee so wishes, a gold man.

§ 6: Zosimus announces that this preamble is an introduction to his addressee’s opening of the flowers of words to follow. This preamble also is, among other things, revelations of hidden words that become manifest. He then makes general statements about excellence and nature.

§ 7: Zosimus instructs his friend not to communicate such excellence clearly to anyone, as silence teaches excellence. He states that it is beautiful to see the transformations of the four metals into perfect gold.

§ 8: The closing paragraph is a recipe that uses salt, sulphur, and vitriol to produce a vinegar. These substances would overpower the white-looking copper and produce that which is called gold (ὁ λεγόμενος χρυσός, 8.146-147). This is how, Zosimus says, by overpowering matter, one holds the uniform species away from the multiple species.

Memoir 11

§ 1.1-14: Zosimus is going up and down stairs and gets lost in the process; he then falls asleep and, meeting a homunculus, tells him that he got lost.

§ 1.14-24: The homunculus takes Zosimus to the punishments. As Zosimus observes him, the homunculus is thrown into his punishment and is burned up by the fire. Zosimus is terrified, and as he wakes up, he interprets that this man, who looks similar to the guide from his second dream in *Memoir 10*, is actually the copper man, who must be thrown into the punishments.

§ 2.25-50: Zosimus starts moving again, and once again gets lost. He meets an old man dressed in white called Agathodaimon, who Zosimus hopes will help him find his way. Agathodaimon is also thrown into the punishment. Zosimus narrates the horrible scene and enquires of the man as his eyes get filled with blood about what he is undergoing. The man replies that he is the copper man. Zosimus wakes up, scared, and gathers from his dream that it is necessary to project the copper.

Memoir 12

§ 1.1-7: Zosimus again contemplates the altar shaped like a phial, this time called divine. He sees an august-looking figure dressed in white celebrating the terrible mysteries who is identified as the priest from the innermost temples and whose tasks are described.

§ 2.8-18: Zosimus falls asleep. Zosimus goes up the third step and sees someone approaching with a big knife; behind this person, someone else brings a person with their arms connected in their back and dressed in white, whose name is “the culmination of cinnabar”. The person holding the knife tells Zosimus to cut one of the other two characters’ heads, to sacrifice their bits of flesh so that they are cooked by the instrument and go through the punishment.

§ 2.18-24: Zosimus wakes up, and says that those occupied with such things are the liquids of the metallic art; the man holding the large knife says to Zosimus that he has gone through the going down the seven steps, and another person (it is unclear which of the two) says that the craft has been fulfilled while the coppers were projected through the liquids.

(ii) The form: the allegorical dream

Allegorical readings are quite inviting when one is confronted with outlandish narratives in the context of technical literature. Yet the previous chapters have shown that these texts are doing much more at a literary level than simply creating vivid codes for ingredients and procedures. A dimension of the mystery is preserved in that ancient alchemists have been quite efficient in making their language malleable enough for it to potentially mean a number of things. To an extent, their texts behave like warm metal alloy waiting for the reader to give it the shape they find more appealing.

Zosimus' dreams represent the epitome of this malleability. They also show, out of all the texts addressed in this thesis, possibly the most intricate handling of the literary potentiality alchemical practice provides. The following argues that this is due to two main facts. One is that these dreams are openly identified as allegories, and showcase a perceptive use of features that have been found to be common among allegories in general.²⁸⁷ The other is that, despite referring to his dreams as allegorical, Zosimus protects their obscurity by presenting them in a chaotic, slightly nonsensical setting that is typical of dreams.

Zosimus hints at allegorical interpretation from his very first dream. There, the alchemist is confronted with a sacrificing priest standing on top of an altar shaped like a phial (ἱερουργόν τινα ἐστῶτα... ἐπάνω βωμοῦ φιαλοειδοῦς, *Mem.* 10 2.17-18) containing fifteen ladders (δεκαπέντε κλίμακας... εἶχεν ὁ... βωμός, *Mem.* 10 2.19-20); he also hears a voice from above (φωνῆς ἄνωθεν ἤκουσα, 2.20) claiming to have completed the action of going down and up these ladders (πεπλήρωκα τὸ κατιέναι με ταύτας τὰς... κλίμακας καὶ ἀνιέναι με τὰς... κλίμακας, 2.21-23). The voice inside the altar-phial says: "I am Ion, the

²⁸⁷ The theoretical framework here used to discuss allegory is from Quilligan (1979).

priest of the innermost sanctuaries” (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ Ἴων²⁸⁸ ὁ ἱερεὺς τῶν ἀδύτων, 2.28-29). Shortly after the priest’s gory description of an intolerable violence he underwent (someone dismembered him, separated his flesh and bones, and then reassembled him), Zosimus wakes up from fear (φοβηθεὶς διωπνίσθην, 2.41) and considers the meaning of his dream by saying: “isn’t the position of the waters this way?” (μὴ οὕτως ἄρα ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν ὑδάτων θέσις; 2.41-42). As there is no mention of waters in the dream itself, this comment immediately prompts the reader to stay alert to the possibility that this and Zosimus’ following dreams may mean something ‘other’ (ἄλλος) than they first appear.

This allusion to allegory may lead to a number of responses on the part of the reader, most of which make literary investigations at large superfluous. One of them is to assume that Zosimus’ dreams are essentially ‘codes’ to be cracked rather than texts to be enjoyed as they are. Another possible response is to put emphasis on the choice of religious themes and to interpret technical endeavours as a version of spiritual ambition. Yet another response is to explore the constituent polysemy of this particular narrative and, rather than trying to establish a hierarchy among its potential meanings, relishing the interpretive complexity attained by the narrative’s possibilities. After making a short review of allegorical interpretations of Zosimus’ dreams that illustrate the first two approaches, the following argues that the third approach is the one that best handles the specific case of Zosimus’ *Memoirs* 10-12, and the one that best appreciates their literary achievements.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the view that allegory in alchemical literature always amounts to a ‘code’ to be cracked is common among historians of science. It is when introducing Zosimus’ dreams that historian of science Principe (2013, p. 18) uses the German term *Decknamen*, “cover names”. These “cover names”, Principe explains, would

²⁸⁸ Mertens (1995, p. 36 n. 14) has chosen this accentuation because Ἴων may be the participle of ἰόω and mean “the one who makes the *ios*” (*ibid.*) – a mysterious but often mentioned substance in alchemical writings (see below).

have two purposes: “they maintain secrecy, but they also allow for discreet communication among those having the knowledge or intelligence to decipher the system” (*ibid.*). Applied to Zosimus’ dreams, this would mean that “the actors, places, and actions described are personified *Decknamen* woven into a coherent and extended narrative” (*ibid.*) that allegorically refer to practical alchemical procedures.

Principe does not break down what these *Decknamen* in Zosimus’ dreams would really signify in technical terms. His confidence in the view that the elements of Zosimus’ dreams are codes is based mainly on Zosimus’ waking interjections (Principe, 2013, pp. 18-19), such as that regarding the “position of the waters” (ἡ τῶν ὑδάτων θέσις, see above) or when Zosimus wakes up from sleep in *Memoir 12* and says the following about the characters featured in his latest dream: “those occupied in these things are the liquids of the metallic art” (οἱ περὶ ταῦτά εἰσιν τὰ ὑγρὰ τῆς μεταλλικῆς, *Mem.* 12 2.20). Berthelot and Ruelle have a short footnote at the beginning of their translation of *Memoir 10* saying that “tout ceci est la description mystique de diverses opérations chimiques de distillation, de sublimation, de coupellation, accompagnées de grillages, d’effervescences et de changements de couleur” (CAAG Transl. 117 n. 3), but do not give any details about how these many procedures would fit into the characters or the narrative.

Mertens (1995) seems to have been the first to consider the gritty details of how the allegory could work on a technical level. Of the phial-shaped altar, she says that the evidence points to the phial being the top part of an alembic or top of a hot plate (*kērotakis*; see Introduction n. 15). Her choice of the latter as the most probable option is partly based on the reference to the going up and down the ladders mentioned above, which could evoke “un mécanisme de circulation des substances qui se volatilisent dans l’appareil à *kērotakis*” (Mertens, 1995, p. 217 n. 10). At the same time, Mertens admits that Zosimus’ waking remarks about his dreams are hardly any help: of both aforementioned comments on the

“position of the waters” and “the liquids of the metallic art”, she laments that it is not possible to infer what they refer to precisely (*ibid.*, p. 219 n. 18 and p. 230 n. 13). It becomes clear why so many scholars before Mertens have dodged the task of getting to the specifics of what technical procedures Zosimus’ dreams may allegorise (apart from the simple fact that ancient alchemical procedures in general cannot be fully known; see Introduction): the unpacking of the technical concerns of *Memoirs* 10-12 is made extremely difficult not only from the standpoint of Zosimus’ odd dreams, but also from his vague technical comments while awake.

Despite these difficulties, Grimes (2018, pp. 127-153) has recently put forward an interpretation of Zosimus’ dreams that proposes to decode both their technical procedures and spiritual beliefs and demonstrate how these two are ultimately intertwined. While she acknowledges the distressing effect these texts provoke (“the imagery is violent and grotesque, giving the impression that the narrator is trapped in a nightmare from which he cannot escape”, *ibid.*, p. 127), she reassures the reader, claiming that “when the symbolism is decoded it becomes evident that this text is describing a spiritual purification, both for the metals and for the alchemist” (*ibid.*). In terms of the metallurgical procedures to which the dreams may relate, Grimes (2018, p. 135) proposes that “the technical procedure alluded to in this allegory is for coloring a copper-lead alloy, probably using a *kērotakis*” (a nod to Mertens), and colouring it gold (*ibid.*). This is inferred from a number of elements from the dream-text: as summarised above, Zosimus encounters a copper man holding a lead tablet; later on, in a waking state, Zosimus says that the copper man will become a silver man and finally a gold man (*Mem.* 10.5 113-118), which Grimes associates with “a sequence of color transmutations – blackening, whitening, yellowing, and sometimes reddening” (Grimes, 2018, p. 135). Zosimus’ dreams also show people burning alive inside the phial-altar, when

elsewhere Zosimus himself describes the *kērotakis* as having a phial on top of it, and the instrument is believed to have been used for heating up products (see Introduction n. 15).²⁸⁹

Grimes' argument that Zosimus' dreams would relate to this sequence of colour transmutation is problematic for two reasons. The first problem is that the four-stage blackening-whitening-yellowing-reddening/*iosis* model, put forward by Hopkins (1934, pp. 92-103) as a method adopted by the Greco-Egyptian alchemists, is actually a feature of medieval rather than ancient alchemy.²⁹⁰ As Grimes herself points out, "while these colors and procedures are mentioned in the Greco-Egyptian alchemical texts, they are not discussed as stages of transmutation" (2018, p. 48). It is contradictory, then, that Grimes here adopts the sequence she claimed to be absent from ancient alchemy for her interpretation of an ancient alchemical writing. The second problem is that the linearity required to support this model simply cannot be sustained across Zosimus' dreams. For instance, Grimes says that the homunculus wearing a red robe in Zosimus' first dream in *Mem.* 11 1.8-9 (τινα ἀνθρωπάριον ἡμφιεσμένον στολὴν ἐρυθράν) "could indicate the reddening stage" (*ibid.*, p. 135), i.e. the fourth and last stage; in the following, Zosimus wakes up and falls asleep again, and encounters in dream an old grey-haired man exceedingly white (πεπολιωμένον γηραιὸν λευκὸν πάνυ, *Mem.* 11 2.29-30) called Agathodaimon (τὸ δὲ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκαλεῖτο Ἄγαθοδαίμων, 2.31-32). Grimes then says that "these dreams refer to the whitening stage of the *kērotakis* process, as Agathodaimon's dazzling white appearance suggests" (*ibid.*, p. 147), i.e. the second stage.

²⁸⁹ Grimes does not mention the passage from Zosimus' *Memoir 7* where he says that the clay vessel covering the phial on top of the *kērotakis* has a hole in order for you to see whether whitening or yellowing has taken place (ὄπην ἔχει τὸ ὀστράκινον ἄγγος καλύπτον τὴν φιάλην τὸ ἐπὶ τὴν κηροτακίδα, ἵνα περιβλέπη εἰ ἐλευκάνθη ἢ ἐξανθώθη, *Mem.* 7 6.43-45), even though it would help her case in associating this instrument with the colour transmutations she identifies in Zosimus' dreams.

²⁹⁰ Hopkins' confusion is probably due to relying only on Berthelot and Ruelle's *CAAG*, where texts from different periods are at times jumbled up with little discretion. In fact, one finds an account of alchemical practice consisting of these four stages in the *Book of Comarius*, edited as being the first half of the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* (see Chapter II), but now known to be a separate and later text.

In spiritual terms, Grimes argues that the sacrificial images from Zosimus' dreams "are 'intellectual sacrifices' that were being promoted in Zosimos's day, whereby philosophers offered their thoughts and research to the gods" (*ibid.*, p. 152). The goal would be "god-making, purging the soul from its baser qualities so that spiritual and technical excellence can be achieved" (*ibid.*, p. 151). Grimes refers to another Zosimus passage (from the *Final Count* – *RHT* 1:367) where he urges Theosebeia to stay seated at her home, rest her body and calm her passions so that God will come to her; Grimes then connects this passage to what the copper man urges the people burning inside the phial-altar to do in Zosimus' second dream from *Memoir* 10. According to her, the copper man "tells those seated in the boiling waters to calm themselves, just as Zosimus recommends Theosebeia that she should calm her body and mind in order to transcend the agitations of the passions" (*ibid.*, p. 136). This is not correct: the copper man never asks them to calm themselves, but to sit (τοῖς ἐν ταῖς κολάσεσι πᾶσιν ἐπιτρέπω καθεσθῆναι, *Mem.* 10 3.63-64). Furthermore, there is not one single instance in *Memoirs* 10-12 where Zosimus refers to his own thoughts with the language of sacrifice or to the idea of purging himself from baser qualities. Such equivalences between the images from the dreams and Zosimus' own spiritual/mental state, to my knowledge, are never suggested throughout *Memoirs* 10-12.

All the above indicates that Zosimus' allegorical dreams do not necessarily target either specific, step-by-step technical procedures or spiritual exercises as these scholars have assumed and not quite managed to sustain. As to the question of what these dreams would be targeting instead, it seems that, apart from Mertens' effort in bringing out literary parallels between Zosimus' dream-narratives and other works of his time (1995, p. 211), an attempt at looking into Zosimus' texts as literature not descriptive of, but inspired by alchemical

practice, is yet to be made.²⁹¹ The following considers how Zosimus employs allegory and dreams as literary devices rather than codes, and how it results in effects that fit not only the way in which ancient alchemists in general experiment with their texts and the traditions they nod to in a way that both intrigues and confounds the reader, but also Zosimus' particularly de-centered style of writing about alchemists' goals.

Taking a literary approach towards an allegorical text from around Zosimus' time is arguably not a simple matter. This is because the literary history of allegory is a peculiar one, as Quilligan observes by comparing allegory with epic and satire:

The act of sitting down to read an allegory as an allegory remains a chore, primarily because we cannot easily use our experiences with other allegories to guide our expectations of the present text. We have no distinct generic expectations. (...) it is a bit like trying to read *Paradise Lost* without any direct knowledge of Homer or Vergil, aided only by reference to critical treatises on 'the heroic poem.' While it is possible to read and even to enjoy reading *Paradise Lost* this way, such an experience would be neither very complete, nor would it be the kind of reading the text itself asks for. (...) The problem of classifying allegory as a genre is a trifle more complicated than in the case of satire, because it is a genre of narrative which has no classical progenitors. Juvenal and Horace wrote satires, while allegory had to await the fourth-century Prudentius in order to bloom as a narrative genre. (Quilligan, 1979, pp. 16-19)

In other words, there is no clear 'canon' of the allegory in antiquity: it had not yet blossomed as a distinct literary tradition in its own right. As examples of allegory (*inuersio*), Quintilian mentions short passages from various poems, such as Horace's *Odes* and Vergil's *Bucolics* (*Inst.* 8.6.44-46). Allegory then is just a 'trope' or a 'figure of speech' rather than a textual category; its shy appearance does not make the former poems any less lyrical, or the latter any less pastoral. In the most expansive case, that of Plato's Cave, the allegory remains encapsulated within the philosophical dialogue.

²⁹¹ Although Mertens is highly welcoming of literary parallels, she still finds it plausible that "il y a dans ces songes une pratique opératoire sous-jacente" (1995, p. 211).

Even though allegory had not yet fully bloomed as a distinct type of text in Zosimus' time, it seems that *Memoirs* 10-12 point to its early beginnings in late antiquity: there are little gestures towards allegorical writings and allegorical interpretation. An indication of that is that both the imagery and the narrative from Zosimus' first dream in *Memoir* 10 (see above) have striking parallels with Jacob's dream in *Genesis* 28:10-19. There, the dreamer sees a ladder on which the angels of God ascended and descended (ἰδοὺ κλίμαξ... καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ ἀνέβαινον καὶ κατέβαινον ἐπ' αὐτῆς, *Gen.* 28:12), upon which the Lord stood (ὁ δὲ Κύριος ἐπεστήρικτο ἐπ' αὐτῆς, 28:13) and said "I am the God of your father Abraham" (ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ θεὸς Ἀβραὰμ τοῦ πατρός σου, *ibid.*). After the Lord tells Jacob the land on which he lies will be given to him and his offspring, Jacob wakes up (καὶ ἐξηγέρθη Ἰακώβ ἐκ τοῦ ὕπνου, 28:16), and considers the meaning of his dream by saying "The Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" (ἔστι Κύριος ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ, ἐγὼ δὲ οὐκ ᾔδειν, 28:16). He fears (καὶ ἐφοβήθη, 28:17).

One ultimately cannot prove that these parallels (namely, the going up and down ladder(s), someone being on top of it/them, an authoritative figure introducing itself with the ἐγὼ εἰμι formula²⁹² and the dreamer waking up in fear and making a short comment about the dream) were intended and, as far as I know, this is the first time they are ever mentioned in scholarship. Yet it is a well-known fact that Zosimus makes copious mentions of the Hebrews throughout his works (see Chapters I and III), and a lot can be added from a literary perspective if one considers these parallels not to be coincidental. For the nods to Jacob's dream suggest that Zosimus' dream is not a purely idiosyncratic figuration of his mind: it resonates not only with another writing that happens to be a dream, but also with a dream that happens to have been interpreted allegorically since at least the time of Philo (first century CE; see also Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 2.9.78). One particular

²⁹² This formula is discussed in 4.2 below.

allegorical interpretation of Jacob's dream, from the rabbinical collection *Midrash Rabbah* (vol. 1, *Genesis* 624-5), has prominent parallels with Zosimus' actual dream:

The *Midrash Rabbah* (...) allegorizes the ladder and its angels in terms of the temple and its cult. In this sense, the ladder represents the stairway leading to the altar; the fact that this ladder reached to heaven is taken to designate the upward wafting of sacrificial odors; the angels are the High Priests, ascending and descending the stairs to the altar. (Miller, 1994, pp. 102-103)²⁹³

The steps in Zosimus' dream culminate in an altar where a priest is, and Zosimus hearing a voice from above saying that they succeeded going down and up the ladder(s): the *Midrash Rabbah* interpretation considered, it is almost as if Zosimus' dream was shedding a layer of Jacob's dream. In short, given that Zosimus did not yet have an established canon of allegories available to gesture towards in the way that e.g. Virgil had Homer or Seneca had the Greek tragedians, engaging with a dream-text that was well-established by his time and had long been seen as allegorical may have been an alternative way of situating his own within a tradition, however incipient, of dream-texts that are read as allegorical, and of influencing the reader's experience as a result.

If these connections are not random, one moves further away from the notion of a code to that of polysemy, as allegorical interpretations of Jacob's dream show. For in Philo's "philosophical program of coordinating scripture with the tenets of Middle Platonism" (Miller, 1994, p. 100), on the one hand, there is a contrast between Haran, the place where Jacob had the dream – which would be "a coded term for... sensory perception (*aisthēsis*)" (*ibid.*) – and the word "place" (τόπος) Jacob uses when he wakes up to describe it ("The Lord is in this place", ἔστι Κύριος ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ), which would mean "a space filled by

²⁹³ I have not had direct access to this source as a result of the library closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many thanks to Prof. Edwards for checking his personal copy and confirming the interpretation reported by Miller.

the divine words (*logoi*) of God (...)" (*ibid.*). In other words, the allegory illustrates "an epistemological process whereby the forces of the human mind moving from sensory to divine wisdom are explored" (*ibid.*). In rabbinic interpretation, on the other hand, another interpretive route is taken, whereby the word "place" is related to other scriptural instances of the term until it "takes on dense religious overtones as a space of divine revelation and prayer" (*ibid.*, p. 101).

While allegorical readings are based on the general polysemy "inherent in the very words on the page" (Quilligan, 1979, p. 74), these two examples regarding Jacob's dream show the particular polysemic potential a vague term like τόπος unlocks, and the resulting variety of paths its readers can undertake. Zosimus makes acute use of this potential by interpreting his first dream as "the position of the waters" (ἡ τῶν ὑδάτων θέσις). While teasing the reader to look at his dream as an allegory of technical practice, Zosimus also throws them into a semantic pool where their task is to search and maybe find the meaning of θέσις. The facts that Zosimus' comment refers precisely to the dream which has parallels with Jacob's and that θέσις occurs at the exact same stage where Jacob's τόπος does (upon waking up) make the parallels between both passages seem less and less coincidental, and more likely to indicate in Zosimus' *Memoirs* 10-12 a careful use of language and manipulation of its readers that is typical of allegories.

Quilligan claims that a particular emphasis on language and the reader are at the core of what links allegorical narratives. With regard to language, she goes as far as saying that "allegorical narrative unfolds as a series of punning commentaries" (1979, p. 22), and Zosimus' θέσις once more comes in handy here. Immediately after asking himself if the position of the waters is not this way, Zosimus says: "and I seemed to persuade myself that I had understood well" (καὶ ἔδοξα πείθειν ἑαυτὸν νενοηκέναι καλῶς, *Mem.* 10 2.42-43). While "the waters" point to a technical interpretation of θέσις and therefore of Zosimus'

dream, “to persuade” (πείθειν) points to an argumentative interpretation of the word: in philosophical terms, θέσις can mean a position “assumed and requiring proof” or an “arbitrary determination” (*LSJ*). Hence θέσις can function as a pun that is both an indication that Zosimus’ dream is an allegory of a certain technical procedure and a commentary on the fact that allegorical meaning is in itself only a supposition, a hypothesis of which one can be persuaded or not. This exemplifies how, if “verbal artifacts are ultimately about the process of making them” (Quilligan, 1979, p. 15), “allegories are about the making of allegory in extremely particular ways” (*ibid.*).

As the following subsection will expose in more detail, this is one of many instances where the relationship between allegory and language comes at the forefront of *Memoirs* 10-12. For now, an example worth mentioning comes towards the end of *Memoir* 10, when Zosimus says that “this proem is an entrance of the flowers of words below being opened to you” (τοῦτο τὸ προοίμιόν ἐστιν εἴσοδος τοῦ ἀνοίγεσθαί σοι τὰ παρακάτω ἄνθη λόγων, *Mem.* 10 6.119-120). While “opening up flowers of words” seems like a perfect metaphor for allegorical interpretation, the statement is disorienting in its position, as it follows the dreams and precedes a straightforward recipe: one would expect that the “flowers of words” to be opened were the allegorical dreams rather than the technical procedures that may be allegorised. The statement almost seems to poke fun at the reader’s attempts at interpreting the text allegorically up to that point and make them question their competence as readers.

This opens up what modern discussions of allegory have identified as “the central paradox of the problem of allegory” (Quilligan, 1979, p. 20). The paradox is that “generic allegories form that class of works which is best not to study with the tools of allegorical criticism” (*ibid.*), i.e. that allegorical interpretations quite ironically may not be the best way of going about allegory. The above has shown the shortcomings allegorical readings of Zosimus’ dreams have in that interpreters try to convert an essentially inexact text into a

clear-cut account of what they as readers want to see. One of the risks of that, Quilligan observes, is that “we will lose in particular an appreciation of allegory’s deft manipulation of us as readers into a position of self-defining self-consciousness about the nature of our language’s power to shape us into what we are” (*ibid.*).

Indeed, the use of the second-person pronoun σοι in Zosimus’ statement about the “flowers of words” seems to incite self-consciousness on the part of the reader at the very moment when their assumptions about the text are confounded. It fits Quilligan’s point that “the final focus of any allegory is its reader, and that the real ‘action’ of any allegory is the reader’s learning to read the text properly” (*ibid.*, p. 24). The way in which Quilligan develops this notion is pertinent to Zosimus’ use of allegory:

Because allegory is (and always has been) the most self-reflexive and critically self-conscious of narrative genres, and because its purpose is always to make its reader correspondingly self-conscious, the reader necessarily belongs in its description. He is a definite component of the form. It is, in fact, this strange characteristic that most distinguishes allegory as a genre. Comedy, romance, satire, tragedy, and epic are all categories that classify works essentially according to the emotions they evoke. We laugh at comedy, wonder at romance, snort at satire, feel pity and terror at tragedy, and admire a hero after reading an epic. The works’ forms are designed to evoke these responses. After reading an allegory, however, we only realize what kind of readers we are. (Quilligan, 1979, p. 24)

There are moments in Zosimus’ *Memoirs* 10-12 where the reader as component of their form is not merely a possibility, but simply the best and perhaps only way of explaining why certain things are expressed in the way they are. The best example of that is when Zosimus instructs his reader to build a temple, look for its entrance (ζητει την εἴσοδον, *Mem.* 10 5.104-105), and kill the serpent that guards it, and to do to the serpent precisely what Ion says had been done to himself in Zosimus’ first dream (see above): the serpent is to be cut, dismembered, and have its flesh and bones reassembled. After doing that, “you will find there the searched-for thing” (εὐρήσεις ἐκεῖ τὸ ζητούμενον χρῆμα, *Mem.* 10 5.113). Zosimus

is urging his reader to replicate the allegory for themselves in what looks like a game of hide-and-seek (ζήτησις... εὐρήσεις). Yet the aim is called “thing” (χρῆμα): it might be whatever the reader is searching for in the reading process. Admittedly, Zosimus later suggests that the “thing” is the gold-man, but even then some room is left for the reader to decide whether that is in their interest or not: “if you want, you will have a gold-man” (ἐὰν θελήσῃς, ἕξεις χρυσάνθρωπον, *Mem.* 10 5.117-118). The stimulus for the reader to stay active and alert is persistent.

This stimulus is not restricted to Zosimus’ playing with allegory; it is also related to Zosimus’ presentation of his dreams as dreams. In this case, taking a literary approach towards ancient dream narratives is perhaps a simpler endeavour than it is with allegory. For apart from the fact that ancient authors have made profuse use of dreams in their narratives before Zosimus’ time, there was also some dream theorisation in antiquity (see section 4.2 below). Allegorical interpretations of dreams can also be found within literary texts from as early as Homer. In short, even though Zosimus as a dreamer is one step ahead of Jacob in considering his dream allegorical, Zosimus as a writer is far from being inventive in exploiting the allure of a dream with hidden meanings.

Yet there is something quite distinctive about the way in which Zosimus carries out his own exploitation of this resource, one that can be well illustrated by means of comparison with an allegorical interpretation from the *Odyssey*. In Book 19, Penelope confides in a beggar who she does not yet know is her husband Odysseus in disguise, but whom she began to trust after asking a series of questions. She asks the beggar to listen to and interpret her dream (ἀλλ’ ἄγε μοι τὸν ὄνειρον ὑπόκριναι καὶ ἄκουσον, *Od.* 19.535), according to which Penelope gladly watches the twenty geese she has in her house, until a great eagle comes down from the mountain, breaks all their necks and kills them (*Od.* 19. 536-543). Then the eagle, with the voice of a mortal man, tells Penelope:

‘θάρσει, Ἰκαρίου κόρη τηλεκλειτοῖο·
οὐκ ὄναρ, ἀλλ’ ὕπαρ ἐσθλόν, ὃ τοι τετελεσμένον ἔσται.
χῆνες μὲν μνηστῆρες, ἐγὼ δέ τοι αἰετὸς ὄρνις
ἦα πάρος, νῦν αὖτε τεὸς πόσις εἰλήλουθα,
ὃς πᾶσι μνηστῆρσιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφήσω.’

Be of good cheer, daughter of far-famed Icarus; this is
no dream, but a true vision of good which, you may be sure,
will find fulfillment. The geese are the suitors, and I, that
before was the eagle, am now again come back as your
husband, who will cast an ugly doom on all the suitors. (*Od.* 19.546-550)²⁹⁴

Not only is the allegorical interpretation provided within the dream itself, but Odysseus also confirms its validity in speech and deed: he tells Penelope that there is no way of interpreting this dream by “turning it aside” some other way (οὐ πως ἔστιν ὑποκρίνασθαι ὄνειρον | ἄλλη ἀποκλίναντ’, 19.555-556), and assures her that Odysseus himself has shown her how things turn out (19.556-557), as they indeed do in Books 20 and 21.

The impossibility of “turning” the dream in a different direction (ὄνειρον ἄλλη ἀποκλίναντα) – Murray interestingly translates the expression as “bend this dream aside” – is exactly what separates Penelope’s dream and Zosimus’ malleable dreams. The interpretation provided by the eagle/Odysseus specifies whom each character in the dream represents, and by extension what actions they will either take or be victims of (killing and being killed); this is then confirmed by the narrative that follows, leaving no room for the reader to consider alternative interpretations. In the case of Zosimus, these precise equivalences are never attained by either Zosimus’ comments or the subsequent recipe from *Memoir* 10.²⁹⁵ When Zosimus wakes up from a dream where he sees someone holding a large knife and another figure behind him carrying someone with their arms tied behind their

²⁹⁴ The translation is Murray (1919) modified.

²⁹⁵ As indicated above, of the three dream-narratives, only *Memoir* 10 is followed by a recipe.

back (εἶδον... ἐρχόμενον κατέχοντα ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ μάχαιραν, καὶ ἄλλος ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ φέρων περιηγκωνισμένον τινά, *Mem.* 12 2.10-12), he simply says: “those occupied in these things are the liquids of the metallic art” (οἱ περὶ ταῦτά εἰσιν τὰ ὑγρά τῆς μεταλλικῆς, *Mem.* 12 2.20, see above). No clarification is given regarding what exact liquids these characters represent, or to which activities the large knife and the strange disposition of the third figure may point: the reader is left with the vastly vague ταῦτα and in the grey area dreams often create.

The dissimilarities do not end there, for Penelope’s dream above, Jacob’s and in fact most ancient dream-narratives display a neatness that is notably absent from Zosimus’. While these other dreams clearly have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and their characters are easily distinguishable, Zosimus’ dreams are repetitive and the lines between their characters are often blurred. This is noticeable from the opening scene of *Memoir* 10, as the sacrificing priest (ἱερουργός, 2.17) Zosimus sees standing on top of the phial-altar is easily confused with Ion, the priest (ἱερεὺς, 2.28) of the innermost sanctuaries who is inside the phial-altar. This has created a need for Mertens (1995, p. 216 n. 8) to write a footnote to avoid the confusion which nonetheless carries through throughout dreams: in another dream from *Memoir* 10, Zosimus sees a copper man who is then identified with Ion (*Memoir* 10 3.70-73); in another dream from *Memoir* 11, the homunculus wearing a red robe is identified with the copper man (*Mem.* 11 1.20-22).

This striking feature has led Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, to challenge the possibility of an allegory altogether:

Although it looks as if this were a series of visions following one after the other, the frequent repetitions and striking similarities suggest rather that it was essentially a single vision which is presented as a set of variations on themes it contains. Psychologically at least, there is no ground for supposing that it is an allegorical invention. Its salient features seem to indicate that for Zosimos it was a highly significant experience which he wished to communicate to others. Although alchemical literature contains a number of allegories which without doubt

are merely didactic fables and are not based on direct experience, the vision of Zosimus may well have been an actual happening. (Jung, 1967, p. 66)

It is not possible to know for a fact whether Zosimus' dreams come from a genuine experience or not. However, assuming that the present discussion demonstrates that enough literary artifice has gone into them, Jung's point becomes all the more interesting. For reproducing the messiness and repetitiveness that is typical of real dreams (or maintaining them, in case they were real) makes Zosimus' own dreams seem more convincingly genuine than most dream narratives that survive up to his date, leading readers to consider their legitimacy as possible up to modern times. In fact, this literary achievement, alongside the blurring of the lines between his sleeping visions and his waking instructions (see the parallels between the violence done to the priest and the violence to be done to the snake above), brings Zosimus closer to the avant-garde modern surrealists than to the allegorists emerging in his own time. Zosimus' innovative approach to dreams is deeply underappreciated by approaches that try to 'decode' them into an orderly, sequential description of a technical or spiritual transformation.

Finally, beyond the literary distinction *Memoirs* 10-12 achieve by their way of making artful use of, on the one hand, language and their readers (as is typical of allegory), and, on the other hand, the tumultuous and muddled reality of actual dreams, they also complement some features of Zosimus' writing identified in the much more sober *On the Letter Omega* (see Chapter III). Dufault (2015, p. 243) claims that "if Zosimus sometimes felt the need to write allegorically rather than technically, it is probably because he thought that he could not make truth-claims". I would make a slight change in this statement and say that, at large, making truth-claims was not in Zosimus' interest. Despite Zosimus' attack on certain magical practices in *Omega*, his approach there has proven to be overtly eclectic and capable of accommodating readers from different cultural backgrounds. Hence the open-

endedness of his allegories conveniently fit Zosimus' *persona* as an aggregative, non-dogmatic type. Neither in *Omega* nor in *Memoirs* 10-12 is Zosimus particularly forceful about what readers should make of his claims, and no single, definite interpretation can be made dominant. One could even argue that the first human, who is also Thoth, Adam, and Prometheus/Epimetheus, and the copper man, who is also Ion, the red-robed homunculus, and Agathodaimon, are two sides of the same unmarked coin: the promotion of a common currency that could easily circulate across and be stamped by different readers and cultures.

(iii) Close reading

Memoir 10 (1.1-6) begins with the same disjointed, list-like style as the beginning of *Omega*. Zosimus lists a number of expressions that seem to point to phenomena that arise from alchemical practice: position/resting/placing of waters (θέσις ὑδάτων), movement (κίνησις), growth (αὔξησις), disembodiment (ἀποσωμάτωσις), embodiment (ἐπισωμάτωσις), separation of spirit from body (ἀποσπασμὸς πνεύματος ἀπὸ σώματος), and conjunction of spirit with body (σύνδεσμος πνεύματος μετὰ σώματος). Mertens (1995, p. 34 n. 1) convincingly proposes that the first three stages (θέσις, κίνησις, and αὔξησις) refer to what happens when a liquid is heated up in a container.²⁹⁶ Zosimus matter-of-factly says that all phenomena listed so far are not from natures foreign or imported (οὐ ξένων ἢ ἐπεισάκτων φύσεων), but rather nature itself, which is uniform (μονοειδῆς φύσις) and possesses the solid parts of the metals and the liquid extracts of the plants (κέκτηται τὰ τε στερεόστρακα τῶν μετάλλων καὶ τὰ ὑγρόδρυα τῶν βοτανῶν) – the confidence of the statement hardly matches its obscurity.

²⁹⁶ “D’abord immobile, le liquide se met alors à s’agiter, puis bouillonne en augmentant de volume” (1995, p. 34 n. 1).

As previously mentioned, the lines that follow (*Mem.* 10 1.7-16) have a few discrepancies among manuscripts and have led Mertens to edit them in two separate versions (1995, p. 35). The differences probably arise from a corruption of the passage that predates the manuscripts in question and the passage's unusual vocabulary (the latter may even be a collateral effect of the former). The first half of both versions roughly convey the same idea of unity prevailing over multiplicity. Version 'a' says that this abounding diversity of everything and the search are figured in this uniformity of multiple colours (ἐν τούτῳ τῷ μονοειδεῖ τῷ πολυχρώμῳ σχηματίζεται ἢ τοῦ παντὸς πολυύλικτος παμποικιλία καὶ ζήτησις, *Mem.* 10 1.7-11a): both πολυύλικτος²⁹⁷ and παμποικιλία do not seem to be attested elsewhere, and πολύχρωμος is rare. Version 'b' says that the need to have a discussion on all things and the manifold search are preserved in this uniformity and multicoloured form (καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τῷ μονοειδεῖ καὶ πολυχρώμῳ σχήματι σφύζεται ἢ τῶν πάντων πολύλεκτος καὶ παμποίκιλος ζήτησις, *Mem.* 10 1.7-11b): πολύλεκτος is the only hapax in this case.²⁹⁸

The second half develops the idea with fewer variations between versions, but poses challenges of its own:

ὄθεν καὶ σεληνιαζομένης τῆς φύσεως τῷ μέτρῳ τῷ χρονικῷ ὑποβάλλει (ὑποβάλλεται 'b') τὴν λῆξιν καὶ τὴν αὔξισιν δι' ἧς ὑποφεύγει (ἰππεύει 'b')²⁹⁹ ἢ φύσις. (*Mem.* 10 1.11-16a)³⁰⁰

Whence, as nature is subject to the moon in chronological measures, [the search] lays as a foundation (appropriates 'b') the waning and waxing through which nature withdraws (rides 'b').

²⁹⁷ Prof. Hutchinson suggests that πολυύλικτος may be an error for πολυέλικτος, "much-twisting, with many twists and turns".

²⁹⁸ πολύλεκτος could also be an error for πολυέλικτος (see n. 297 above).

²⁹⁹ The variation ὑποφεύγει and ἰππεύει seems to suggest that one of the scribes' mistakes comes from phonetic confusion, as these words have very different meanings, and may indicate that the corruption precedes the versions preserved by the extant manuscripts.

³⁰⁰ This passage is evidently incomplete. Prof. Hutchinson suggests that ὑποφεύγει might be caused by τὴν λῆξιν ("through which nature withdraws") and that there might be a missing καὶ and a verb caused by τὴν αὔξισιν. The translation above tries to convey the most reasonable solution to the text we have.

If the term αὔξεις in *Mem.* 10 1.1 seemed to refer to the dilation of a liquid when heated up, here it seems to refer to the waxing phase of the moon: one can see the tendency to use the same word in the same writing for very different purposes already spotted in *Omega* (see Chapter III). Mertens plausibly suggests that the formerly mentioned “search” (ζήτησις) is the implied subject of the sentence, but the precise meaning of the search Zosimus refers to is nearly as unclear as that of his neologisms.

Having said these things, Zosimus falls asleep (καὶ ταῦτα λαλῶν ἀπεκοιμήθην, 2.17). It seems that, to an extent, Zosimus’ inarticulate statements from above reflect the alchemist’s semi-awake, mumbling state, and that his comment about the moon subtly contributes to a nocturnal, ‘bedtime’ setting. This shift makes the reader revisit how the text had been interpreted before as their reading progresses— a phenomenon mentioned above that is going to happen a number of times in *Memoirs* 10-12. Zosimus’ first dream is as follows:

καὶ ὄρῳ ἱερουργόν τινα ἐστῶτα ἔμπροσθεν μου ἐπάνω βωμοῦ φιαλοειδοῦς. ἔνθα δεκαπέντε κλίμακας πρὸς ἀνάβασιν εἶχεν ὁ αὐτὸς βωμός· ἔνθα ὁ ἱερεὺς ἴστατο. καὶ φωνῆς ἄνωθεν ἤκουσα λεγούσης μοι· “πεπλήρωκα τὸ κατιέναι με ταύτας τὰς δεκαπέντε σκοτοφεγγεῖς κλίμακας καὶ ἀνιέναι με τὰς φωτολαμπεῖς κλίμακας. καὶ ἔστι καὶ ὁ ἱερουργῶν καινουργῶν με ἀποβαλλόμενος τὴν τοῦ σώματος παχύτητα· καὶ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἱερατευόμενος πνεῦμα τελοῦμαι”. καὶ ἀκούσας τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ φιαλοβωμῷ ἐστῶτος, ἠρώτων μαθεῖν παρ’ αὐτοῦ τίς ὑπαρχει· ὁ δὲ ἰσχυρόφῶνως ἀπεκρίνατό μοι λέγων· “ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ Ἴων, ὁ ἱερεὺς τῶν ἀδύτων, καὶ βίαν ἀφόρητον ὑπομένω”. (*Mem.* 10 2.17-29)

And I see a sacrificing priest in front of me on top of an altar in the shape of a jar. There, the same altar had fifteen stairs going up. There the priest stood. And I heard a voice coming from above saying to me: “I have fulfilled my going down the fifteen darkly-glimmering steps and my going up the steps blazing with light. And the sacrificing priest is creating me anew by throwing away the thickness of the body and, being a priest by necessity, I am finally made spirit.” And having listened to the voice of the one standing in the phial-altar, I begged to learn from him who he was. And he answered with a weak voice, saying: “I am Ion, the priest of the innermost sanctuaries, and I am suffering an unendurable act of violence.”

Zosimus' dream has more than enough confusion to sound like an actual dream. Firstly, the phial-altar is an example of a common phenomenon in dreams (called “disjunctive cognition”) whereby the dreamer sees an object/subject that is between two objects/subjects.³⁰¹ The puzzling image is complemented by the fact that the jar-altar has fifteen ladders. The implausibility of the idea has prompted Mertens (1995, p. 216 n. 7) to suggest that by κλίμακας Zosimus meant “steps” rather than “ladders”, yet the jar-altar – as well as the description of its stairs with the paradoxical adjective “dark-glimmering” (σκοτοφεγγεῖς) – seems to be preparing the reader precisely for the bizarre. Secondly, another disorienting yet common dream trait that features here is the lack of a clear distinction between characters. Zosimus introduces a sacrificing priest standing on top of the altar (ἱερουργόν τινα ἐστῶτα... ἐπάνω βωμοῦ, 2.17-18) and another figure standing in the altar (ἐν τῷ φιαλοβωμῷ ἐστῶτος, 2.26) who then presents himself as a priest (ἐγὼ εἰμι... ὁ ἱερεύς, 2.28-29). The similarity of the vocabulary with which the characters are described makes the separation between the two extremely difficult (see subsection above), and nearly impossible in the phrase ἔνθα ὁ ἱερεύς ἴστατο (2.20; does ἔνθα refer to the top of the altar or its interior?). In short, Zosimus' opening scene is quite a realistic depiction of a dream in how it embraces its characteristic muddled absurdity – even if it narrates a genuine dream, Zosimus handles language in a very artful way in order to capture the disorientation of an essentially visual experience in writing.

Ion then proceeds to describe the unendurable act of violence he underwent:

“ἦλθε γάρ τις περὶ τὸν ὄρθρον δρομαίως καὶ ἐχειρώσατό με μαχαίρα διελὼν με, διασπάσας κατὰ σύντασιν ἁρμονίας καὶ ἀποδερματώσας πᾶσαν τὴν κεφαλὴν μου τῷ ξίφει τῷ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ κρατουμένῳ. τὰ ὅστέα ταῖς σαρκῖν συνέπλεξεν, καὶ τῷ πυρὶ τῷ διὰ χειρὸς κατέκαιεν ἕως ἂν ἔμαθον μετασωματούμενος πνεῦμα γενέσθαι. καὶ αὕτη μού ἐστιν ἡ ἀφόρητος βία”. καὶ ὡς

³⁰¹ The hypothesis put forward by Blechner (2013, p. 169) to explain this phenomenon is that “wherever disjunctive cognitions occur, the two aspects of cognition that are disjunctive are handled in different brain systems where mutual integration is suppressed or shifted during sleep”.

ἔτι ταῦτά μοι διελέγετο καὶ ἐξεβιαζόμεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ λέγειν, ὥσπερ αἷμα γεγονασιν οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἤμεσεν πάσας τὰς σάρκας αὐτοῦ. καὶ εἶδον αὐτὸν ὡς τούναντίον ἀνθρωπάριον κολοβὸν καὶ τοῖς ὁδοῦσιν ἑαυτοῦ ἑαυτὸν μασσώμενον καὶ συμπύπτοντα. καὶ φοβηθεὶς διωπνίσθη καὶ ἐνεθυμήθη· “μὴ οὕτως ἄρα ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν ὑδάτων θέσις;”. καὶ ἔδοξα³⁰² πείθειν ἑαυτὸν νενοηκέναι καλῶς. (*Mem.* 10 2.29-43)

“For someone came running around dawn and conquered me by tearing me apart with a knife, breaking me apart according to the tension of my joints, and skinned all my head with the sword he held. He interwove my bones with my flesh and burned me with the fire in his hand until I learnt, by a change of body, to become spirit. And this is the unendurable act of violence I experienced.” And as he was still saying these things to me and I was pressing him into speaking, his eyes became like blood and he threw up all his flesh. And I saw him contrariwise as a mutilated homunculus, and he was chewing himself with his own teeth and collapsing. And feeling terrified I woke up and thought to myself: “Isn’t the position of the waters this way?” And I seemed to persuade myself that I had understood well.

Zosimus here exploits the duality of the corporeal and the incorporeal in a much more colourful, literary way than he does in *Omega*. The passage implies the liberation of the inner man from the outer man by using the same alchemical image of separation between bodily/solid (σῶμα) and spiritual/gaseous (πνεῦμα).³⁰³ The main difference is that while *Omega* describes this process in a more intellectual, self-reflective way (there, the spiritual man manages to leave the body by means of self-knowledge, *Omega* 7), *Memoir* 10 offers a visceral, upsetting version of the experience: it is no surprise that the agonising action of fire is absent from the former and present in the latter. The approach of the same general doctrine plays to the strengths of each medium of presentation: in the expository treatise it is sober and moderate, in the visual dream narrative it is graphic and spectacular.

As Zosimus wakes up, he asks himself whether the dream is equivalent to a technical procedure which turns out to be the first one he mentioned before falling asleep (see θέσις ὑδάτων, *Mem.* 10 1.1), one which is closely followed by the separation of the spirit from the

³⁰² The use of ἔδοξα following Zosimus’ dream is suggestive, as it can also mean “I had a dream, a vision”: it is the language of (dream) revelation to be discussed in the following section. Beneath the most logical interpretation (“I seemed to persuade myself that I had understood well”) used in the translation above, could there be a suggestion that the dream itself expresses Zosimus’ understanding? On ἔδοξα specifically, see n. 339 below.

³⁰³ Cf. *CMA* 2:159 and Philonenko (1992, pp. 654-655).

body (ἀποσπασμὸς πνεύματος ἀπὸ σώματος, *Mem.* 10 1.2-3). However, as discussed in the previous subsection, it is extremely difficult to get anything more substantial out of a polysemous term like θέσις from such a strange narrative. While one is given enough to grasp that the spiritual transformation of the priest is parallel to some chemical transformation, there is not enough information for a thorough understanding of either the technical procedures or the spiritual transformation that takes place. In fact, Zosimus himself is hesitant about his interpretation and has to persuade himself that he understood well. As neither alchemical nor spiritual knowledge is put forward in full, the reader is somewhat left in limbo.

Given that Zosimus often adopts ‘descriptive language’ (Pinkster, 2005, p. 240) typical of technical literature (see Harris-McCoy, 2012, p. 11) and has opted for the more lucid format of the treatise elsewhere, the choice of this abstruse form of expression (the detailed interpretation of which is withheld) hardly seems pointless. Different types of text serve different purposes that go far beyond containing information, and in the case of *Memoir* 10, its lack of full disclosure combined with such provocative imagery can be either arresting or repellent to the reader. In any case, it has the force to drag the reader away from a passive state of mere receptacle for information into one of active engagement with the text, of search for its value or lack thereof.

As Zosimus falls asleep once more (καὶ πάλιν ἀπεκοιμήθη), the reader is given hope that the coming dream might clarify the first one:

καὶ εἶδον τὸν αὐτὸν φιαλοβωμὸν καὶ ἐπάνω ὕδωρ κοχλάζον καὶ πολὺν λαὸν εἰς αὐτὸν ἄπειρον ὄντα. καὶ οὐκ ἦν τις ἵνα ἐρωτήσω αὐτὸν ἔξω τοῦ βωμοῦ. καὶ ἀνέρχομαι ἐπὶ τὸ ιδέσθαι τὴν θεάν εἰς τὸν βωμὸν καὶ ὁρῶ πεπολιωμένον ξυρουργόν³⁰⁴ ἀνθρωπάριον λέγοντά

³⁰⁴ Mertens (1995, p. 220 n. 21) observes that ξυρουργός is a hapax and explains: “les mots en -ουργός, lorsque le premier terme du composé est un nom d’objet ou matière, désignent la personne qui fabrique cet objet ou qui travaille cette matière (...). Ξυρουργός peut donc signifier soit « fabricant de rasoirs », soit « personne qui travaille avec un rasoir », c’est-à-dire « barbier », tandis que ξηρουργός doit s’appliquer à une « personne qui

μοι· “τί σκοπεῖς;” καὶ ἀπεκρινάμην αὐτῷ ὅτι θαυμάζω τοῦ ὕδατος τὸν βρασμὸν καὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων συγκαιομένων καὶ ζώντων. καὶ ἀπεκρίνατό μοι λέγων· “αὕτη ἡ θεὰ ἦν ὄραξ εἰσοδός ἐστιν καὶ ἐξοδος καὶ μεταβολή”. ἐπηρώτησα οὖν αὐτὸν πάλιν· “ποία μεταβολή;”. καὶ ἀπεκρίνατό μοι λέγων· “τόπος ἀσκήσεως τῆς λεγομένης ταριχείας· οἱ γὰρ θέλοντες ἀνθρωποὶ ἀρετῆς τυχεῖν ὧδε εἰσέρχονται καὶ γίνονται πνεύματα φυγόντες τὸ σῶμα”. ἔλεγον οὖν αὐτῷ· “καὶ σὺ πνεῦμα εἶ;”. καὶ ἀπεκρίνατό μοι λέγων· “καὶ πνεῦμα καὶ φύλαξ πνευμάτων”. (*Mem.* 10 3.44-59)

And I saw the same jar-altar, and on its upper part boiling water, and multiple people inside it – they were countless. And there was no one there I could question outside the altar. And I go up into the altar to see the sight and I see a grey-haired homunculus with a razor saying to me: “what are your thoughts”? And I answered to him that I was amazed at the boiling up of the water and of the people burning up while remaining alive. And he replied to me by saying: “The sight that you see is the entrance and the exit and the change”. I then inquired of him again: “What change?”. And he replied to me saying: “[this is the] place of the practice called preserving. For the people who want to attain excellence come in here and become spirits, having escaped the body”. And I said: “and you are a spirit?”. And he replied to me saying: “both a spirit and a guardian of spirits”.

The reappearance of the phial-altar and the motif of leaving the body to become spirit suggests a sense of continuity or at least of connection between Zosimus’ two dreams. The fact that the phial-altar is filled with boiling water reinforces the proposition of Mertens (1995, p. 34 n. 1) that θέσις could mean “resting”: the waters would be immobile in the first dream, and the action of fire sets them in motion and makes them dilate in the second one (θέσις, κίνησις, αὔξησις; see *Mem.* 10 1.1 above). Yet this dream is no less absurd than the first in that it fits countless people into one single phial, accompanied by the also curious figure of a homunculus with a razor. Despite being confronted with such an outrageous spectacle, Zosimus maintains an investigative posture in an attempt to rationally understand what he sees. Funnily enough, the behaviour is reciprocated by the otherworldly homunculus, and their cross-questioning has a slight philosophical flavour. Still, Zosimus struggles to grasp yet another paradox he faces, namely that the people burn up in the altar and still manage to remain alive. The homunculus’s reply is not particularly helpful: his

travaille dans le sec ». Comme il n’est pas question dans le reste du texte de travailler sur des matières sèches, j’ai opté pour χειροργός, que j’ai traduit « manipulant un rasoir » afin de préserver l’ambiguïté du terme”. My translation follows Mertens’s.

aphoristic description of the sight (“the entrance, the exit and the change”, εἴσοδος... καὶ ἔξοδος καὶ μεταβολή) is as earnest as it is fuzzy.

As Zosimus presses the homunculus to clarify what is meant by μεταβολή, the homunculus adopts more technical language and says that that is the place of the practice called “preserving” (ταριχεία) – an idea which, in the context of “change”, sounds (again) paradoxical at first. While ταριχεία may refer to ‘pickling’ or ‘salting’ (and salt does appear in the recipe at the end of *Memoir* 10), the fact that the practice is associated with the people leaving their bodies has led Grimes (2018, p. 137) to associate the term with the preservation of dead bodies. This might be reinforced by the way in which the dream unfolds:

καὶ ἐν τῷ ὁμιλεῖν ἡμᾶς ταῦτα καὶ προστίθεμένου τοῦ βρασμοῦ καὶ τοῦ λαοῦ ὀλολύζοντος, εἶδον ἄνθρωπον χαλκοῦν δέλτον μολυβδίνην κατέχοντα ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ· καὶ ἐξεῖπεν τῇ φωνῇ βλέπων τὴν δέλτον· “τοῖς ἐν ταῖς κολάσεσι πᾶσιν ἐπιτρέπω καθεσθῆναι καὶ ἕκαστον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ λαβεῖν δέλτον μολυβδίνην καὶ χειρὶ γράφειν καὶ τὰς ὄψεις (ἔχειν) ἄνω καὶ τὰ στόματα ὑμῶν ἀνεωγμένα ἕως ἂν ἀυξήσῃ ἡ σταφυλὴ ὑμῶν”. καὶ τῷ λόγῳ τὸ ἔργον ἠκολούθει. καὶ λέγει μοι ὁ οἰκοδεσπότης· “ἐθεώρησας, ἐξέτεινας τὸν ἀχένα σου ἄνω καὶ εἶδες τὸ πραχθέν”. καὶ εἶπον ὅτι εἶδον καὶ λέγει μοι ὅτι τοῦτον ὃν εἶδες χαλκάνθρωπον καὶ τὰς ἰδίας σάρκας ἐξεμοῦντα, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἱερουργῶν καὶ ἱερουργούμενος, καὶ αὐτῷ ἐδόθη ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ ὕδατος τούτου καὶ τῶν τιμωρομένων. (*Mem.* 10 3.59-73)

And as we spoke these things to one another and the boiling up increased and the people cried aloud, I saw a copper man holding a lead tablet in his hand. He declared out loud³⁰⁵ as he looked at the tablet: “I command everyone in the punishments to sit and each to take a lead tablet in their hand, write and hold your eyes up and mouths open until your uvulas have grown”. And the work followed the word. And the master of the house says to me: “you contemplated, you stretched out your neck upwards and you saw the deed”. And I said that I saw and he says to me, “The man that you saw as a copperman and vomiting his own flesh – this man is both the sacrificing priest and the one who is sacrificed, and to him is given the authority over this water and the ones who are punished.”

³⁰⁵ The passage seems to imply that the copper man spoke with a loud voice: (μεγάλῃ) seems like a possible addition before τῇ φωνῇ.

Grimes unpacks the strange instructions given by the copperman by identifying some similarities between them and elements from related Egyptian embalming and statue-making rituals:

Embalming rituals involved an Opening of the Mouth ritual similar to the one performed on divine statues, in which the priest spiritually animates the corpse and opens its eyes and mouth so that it will be serviceable to the soul in the afterlife (...). The copper man in Zosimos's allegory alludes to these rituals when he tells the metallic people (future statues) in the boiling waters to 'keep their eyes upward and their mouths open until their grapes are grown'. In the Opening of the Mouth ceremony for statues, a priest offers the statue a container of grapes, representing the eye of Horus (...). In Zosimos's allegory, the grapes have not yet been grown; the eye of Horus is sometimes associated with the moon, which is the alchemical symbol for silver and perhaps here refers to the anticipated whitening stage. (Grimes, 2018, pp. 137-138)

While some of these associations are not particularly convincing, others might be worth at least considering. One of them is Grimes' interpretation of σταφυλή as 'bunch of grapes' rather than 'uvula', as it reinforces her connection between the dream imagery and the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The connection might be valid in light of a text from the Syriac tradition where Zosimus describes how to make and colour anthropomorphic statues (CMA 2.224-225;³⁰⁶ see Grimes, 2018, p. 34), but Zosimus' Egyptian background may not go as far as where the evidence regarding the grapes would lead us.³⁰⁷ At any rate, an Egyptian backdrop for the imagery could also account for other oddities from both of Zosimus' dreams so far. Egyptian underworld narratives include decapitation and dismemberment, as well as people being boiled alive in cauldrons (Grimes, 2018, p. 136). Likewise, the fact that "the condemned souls in the underworld are guarded by knife-wielding demons who stoke the fires of the cauldrons of annihilation" (*ibid.*, p. 137)

³⁰⁶ For an English translation of this passage, see Hunter (2002, pp. 657-658).

³⁰⁷ Grimes's hypothesis (p. 138 n. 67) relies on Lorton (1999, p. 71), who in turn refers to Otto (1960, vol. 2, pp. 9 and 98), both of whom refer to a ritual performed in the eighteenth dynasty of the New Kingdom – far too many centuries before Zosimus for the association to be taken for granted.

according to some Egyptian funerary texts may be echoed in the homunculus with a razor, who also identifies as a guardian (*ibid.*).³⁰⁸

As for Grimes's more problematic associations, they at times either miss things more immediately available in the narrative or move too far away from it. For instance, she pushes the associative game too far in linking the σταφυλή with a supposed whitening stage, for reasons already explained above. This conjecture also overlooks the potential pun that would actually make Grimes's connections with statue-making rituals more convincing and Zosimus' imagery more artful: σταφυλή could ambiguously refer both to 'uvula', as the people have their mouths open, and 'grapes', as the instructions might nod to the Opening of the Mouth ritual. The "growing" or "dilation" (αύξηση) of the uvulas/grapes also echoes the third technical term from the opening lines of *Memoir* 10 (αύξησις) – the same word can now gain a ritualistic layer on top of the technical (1.1) and the lunar one (1.15).

Yet as Zosimus wakes up from these visions (καὶ ταῦτα ἐμφαντάσθεις διωπνίσθην πάλιν, 4.74), he does not provide the reader with the satisfaction of confirming that the dream represented αύξησις or specifying its workings. Rather, after giving false hopes of encountering a logical explanation for what he saw ("and I asked myself: what is the cause of this vision?", καὶ εἶπον πρὸς ἑαυτόν· τίς ἡ αἰτία τῆς ὀπτασίας ταύτης; 4.74-75), Zosimus slips into his first paradox in a waking state by asking whether that is not the white water, which is also yellow – the boiling, divine/sulphurous one (μὴ ἄρα τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ ὕδωρ τὸ λευκόν, τὸ καὶ ξανθόν, τὸ κοχλάζον, τὸ θεῖον; 4.76-77).³⁰⁹ The anaphora of the question sets the rhetorical tone which gets more and more expansive as Zosimus expands his own interpretation:

³⁰⁸ These demons "oversee the destruction of these souls, which prepares them for the state of non-being" (*ibid.*). However attractive these connections are, the following section shows that the imagery from Zosimus' dreams also has noticeable parallels with a vision narrated by Plutarch.

³⁰⁹ The ambiguity of the term ὕδωρ θεῖον was often exploited by ancient alchemists (see Mertens, 1995, pp. 163-167). See n. 177 above.

καὶ ἤϊρον ὅτι μᾶλλον καλῶς ἐνόησα, καὶ εἶπον ὅτι καλὸν τὸ λέγειν καὶ καλὸν τὸ ἀκούειν, καλὸν τὸ δίδόναι καὶ καλὸν τὸ λαμβάνειν, καλὸν τὸ πενητεῦειν καὶ καλὸν τὸ πλουτεῖν. καὶ πῶς ἢ φύσις μαθάνει δίδόναι καὶ λαμβάνειν; δίδωσι ὁ χαλκάνθρωπος καὶ λαμβάνει ὁ ὑγρόλιθος. δίδωσι τὸ μέταλλον καὶ λαμβάνει ἡ βοτάνη. δίδουσιν οἱ ἀστέρες καὶ λαμβάνει τὰ ἄνθη. δίδωσιν ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ λαμβάνει ἡ γῆ. δίδουσιν αἱ βρονταὶ τοῦ ἐκτροχίζοντος³¹⁰ πυρός.³¹¹ καὶ συμπλέκονται τὰ πάντα καὶ ἀποπλέκονται τὰ πάντα. καὶ μίσγονται τὰ πάντα καὶ (ἀπο)συντίθενται³¹² τὰ πάντα. καὶ κινῶνται τὰ πάντα καὶ ἀποκινῶνται τὰ πάντα. καὶ βρέχει τὰ πάντα καὶ ἀποβρέχει τὰ πάντα. καὶ ἀνθεῖ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐξανθεῖ τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ φιαλοβωμῷ. ἕκαστον γὰρ μεθόδῳ καὶ σηκώματι καὶ οὐγκιασμῷ τετραστοίχῳ. ἡ τῶν ὄλων συμπλοκὴ καὶ ἀποπλοκὴ καὶ ὁ πᾶς σύνδεσμος ἄνευ μεθόδου οὐ γίνεται. ἡ μέθοδος φυσικὴ ἐστὶν καὶ φυσῶσα καὶ ἐκφυσῶσα καὶ τὰς τάξεις τηροῦσα [τῆς μεθόδου], αὔξουσα καὶ λήγουσα. καὶ τὰ πάντα, ὡς ἐν συντόμῳ, σύμφωνα τῇ διαίρεσει καὶ τῇ ἐνώσει τῆς μεθόδου μηδὲν ὑπολειφθείσης ἐκστρέφει τὴν φύσιν. ἡ γὰρ φύσις στρεφομένη εἰς ἑαυτὴν στρέφεται. καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ τοῦ παντὸς κόσμου τῆς ἀρετῆς φύσις καὶ σύνδεσμος. (*Mem.* 10 4.77-99)

And I discovered that I had understood better, and I said that it is good to speak and good to listen, good to give and good to take, good to be poor and good to be rich. And how does nature learn to give and take? The copperman gives and the liquified ore takes. The mine gives and the pasture takes. The stars give and the flowers take. The sky gives and the earth takes. The thunderbolts give some of the fire spinning out. And all things are interwoven and all things are separated. All things are mixed up and all things are disaggregated. All things are mixed and all things are unmixed. Everything makes wet and everything makes dry. And everything blossoms and loses its bloom in the phial-altar. And each thing is according to a method and a measure per ounce of the four elements. Without method, the intertwining of everything and their separation and all unity does not come into being. The method is natural and blows up and blows away watching over the ordinances, growing and ceasing. And all things, to put it concisely, which are in harmony with the taking apart and the turning into one without ignoring the method, transform nature. For nature, when it is changed, is changed into itself. And this is the nature of the excellence of the whole cosmos and what joins it together.

Through a profuse use of antithesis and anaphora showcasing “the circularity of natural processes” (Dufault, 2015, p. 241), Zosimus moves “from specific exchange processes to higher levels of abstraction” (*ibid.*). The rhetorical show climaxes with the most maximalist image possible: the unity of the cosmos. In fact, this passage seems like a more ambitious and elevated version of the ideas suggested in the highly convoluted *Mem.* 10 1.7-16 that

³¹⁰ If the term as it appears in **M** is correct, ἐκτροχίζω is a hapax (Mertens, 1995, p. 222 n. 33). Prof. Hutchinson suggests it might be an error for ἐκτροχάζοντος, “rushing out”.

³¹¹ There might be a missing καὶ λαμβάνω here.

³¹² συντίθενται in the manuscripts; suggestion by Prof. Hutchinson, considering the pairs of opposite verbs in the passage (see Sext. Emp. *Pyrrh.* 1.212).

precedes Zosimus' first dream, where Zosimus talks about the unity that pervades the multiple. Nature is here pervading opposite processes similar to the waning and waxing of the moon nature passes through in *Mem.* 10 1.14-16a. It makes one wonder whether the method mentioned above relates to the "search" mentioned in the earlier passage, or even whether the method was the object of Zosimus' search for understanding – the betterment of which was provided by his dreams (μᾶλλον καλῶς ἐνόησα) and expressed through the refinement of his writing.

The connectedness of things to which Zosimus pays tribute above also appears in how the passage itself connects to others from *Memoir* 10, providing satisfying displays of wit. The interweaving of things (συμπλέκονται τὰ πάντα, 4.85-86; ἡ τῶν ὅλων συμπλοκή, 4.91-92) is described with "the exact same textile metaphor seen in the case of the weaving (*sumplotē*) of Ion's flesh and bone" (Dufault, 2015, p. 242): metaphors of interweaving are interwoven with one another. In the second dream, Ion is revealed to be the copperman (see *Mem.* 10 3.70-72 above), who also features here. The statement that "the copperman gives and the liquified ore takes" in the context of connected processes connects two terms (χαλκάνθρωπος... ὁ ὑγρόλιθος) that are detachable compound words (probably) created by Zosimus – language itself reflects the principle that all things can be interwoven and separated, and becomes the alchemist's second laboratory for mixtures to be created.³¹³

While the above may provide some insight into the possible rationale behind Zosimus' dreams, a lot remains unexplained. On the one hand, the larger principle of nature working by means of the 'x gives and y takes' formula brings some level of clarification about the sacrificial imagery applied to Ion/the copperman: he is here placed in the 'giving' category (δίδωσι ὁ χαλκάνθρωπος), suggesting that the self-sacrifice may signify that "il se

³¹³ Also interesting is the relation between the process that the copperman undergoes as a character (the interweaving of two bodily parts – flesh and bones) and the process that forms the term describing him (the interweaving of two linguistic parts – 'copper' and 'man'). Language also mirrors craft here, too.

dégage de lui des substances volatiles quand on le traite dans l'appareil" (Mertens, 1995, p. 222 n. 33). The 'receiving' category given to the "liquified ore" (λαμβάνει ὁ ὑγρόλιθος) could then refer to quicksilver "par allusion à la capacité que possède ce métal de happer les autres métaux pour s'amalgamer avec eux" (*ibid.*). On the other hand, Zosimus' eulogy of natural principles does not bring us fully back to the empirical world of facts. The alchemist does not yet fully let go of allegorical and metaphorical language: the copperman is still talked about literally as a man made of copper; the phial is still simultaneously an altar that "blossoms and loses its bloom". The phrase "the method is natural and blows up and blows away..." (ἡ μέθοδος φυσική ἐστὶν καὶ φυσῶσα καὶ ἐκφυσῶσα) serves the purpose of rhetorical amplification through alliteration and repetition much better than of explaining how the method works.

Zosimus brings his earnest tone to an abrupt stop and shifts to a conversational one. He acknowledges both the reader and the fact that he might just have gotten a bit carried away: "in order that I not write you too much, dear friend (...)" (καὶ ἵνα μὴ διὰ πολλῶν σοὶ γράφω, φίλτατε..., 5.100). The instructions to the reader that follow are baffling:

κτίσαι σοὶ ναὸν μονόλιθον ψιμυθοειδῆ, ἀλαβαστροειδῆ, Προκοννήσιον, μήτε ἀρχὴν ἔχοντα μήτε τέλος ἐν τῇ οἰκοδομῇ, πηγὴν δὲ ἔσωθεν ἔχοντα ὕδατος καθαρωτάτου καὶ φῶς ἐξαστράπτου ἡλιακόν. περιέργασαι δὲ πόθεν ἢ εἴσοδος τοῦ ναοῦ, καὶ λαβὲ ἐπὶ χεῖράς σου ξίφος καὶ οὕτως ζήτηε τὴν εἴσοδον. στενόστομος γάρ ἐστὶν ὁ τόπος ὅθεν ἐστὶν ἡ ἀνοιξὶς τῆς ὁδοῦ καὶ δράκων παράκειται τῇ εἰσόδῳ, φυλάττων τὸν ναόν. καὶ τοῦτον χειρωσάμενος, πρῶτον θύσον καὶ ἀποδερματώσας αὐτὸν καὶ λαβὼν τὰς σάρκας αὐτοῦ μετὰ τῶν ὀστέων διέλης μέλη μέλη· καὶ συνθεῖς μέλος μέλος μετὰ τῶν ὀστέων πρὸς τὸ στόμιον τοῦ ναοῦ ποίησον ἑαυτῷ βάσιν καὶ ἀνάβηθι καὶ εἰσελθε καὶ εὐρήσεις ἐκεῖ τὸ ζητούμενον χρῆμα. τὸν γὰρ ἱερέα τὸν χαλκάνθρωπον, ὃν ὄρας ἐν τῇ πηγῇ καθήμενον καὶ τὸ χρῆμα συνάγοντα, ἐκεῖνον δὲ³¹⁴ οὐχ ὄρας χαλκάνθρωπον· μετέβη γὰρ τοῦ χρώματος τῆς φύσεως καὶ γέγονεν ἀργυράνθρωπος· ὃν μετ' ὀλίγον ἔαν θελήσης, ἔξεις χρυσάνθρωπον. (*Mem.* 10 5.100-118)

Build a temple for yourself that is single-stoned, white lead-looking, alabaster-looking, of Proconnesian marble, having neither beginning or end in its structure,³¹⁵ having a source of purest water inside and flashing solar light. Investigate thoroughly how to get to the entrance, take a sword into your hands and thus look for the entrance. For there is a narrow place

³¹⁴ Prof. Hutchinson suggests that this participle could be deleted here.

³¹⁵ Mertens (1995, p. 223 n. 39) says that this phrase may mean that the temple is round: even when providing a physical description, Zosimus means of expression is abstruse.

where the opening of the path is, and a serpent lies at the entrance, guarding the temple. And having overcome it, first sacrifice it, and having flayed it and taken its flesh together with its bones, divide limb by limb. And once you have combined limb with limb together with the bones at the temple's mouth, make yourself a step, go up, get inside and there you will find the searched-for thing. For the priest, the copperman, whom you see sitting at the source and putting the thing together, you do not see him as a copperman. For he has changed his natural colour and has become a silverman, whom after a while, if you want, you will have as goldman.

Zosimus' waking instructions strangely borrow from his surreal visions while asleep. While the imagery of a dismembered and reassembled body echoes Ion's account in the first dream, the abstract entrance from the second dream's mysterious aphorism ("the sight that you see is the entrance and the exit and the change", αὕτη ἡ θεὰ ἦν ὁρᾶς εἰσοδός ἐστιν καὶ ἔξοδος καὶ μεταβολή; 3.52-53) reappears here as the concrete temple entrance – once again, the same word appears in a different context to serve a different purpose.

These parallels have led Mertens to suppose that the temple may be another way of referring to the alchemical apparatus featuring in the first two dreams.³¹⁶ Furthermore, the act of violence that both Ion and the serpent undergo and the fact that both are placed in a temple context may not be the only point of connection between the figures. The following extract of Zosimus mentioned by Mertens (1995, p. 40), presented in the manuscript as a diagram in the round shape of an ouroboros (the serpent biting its own tail), may be an important piece of the puzzle:

ἐν τὸ πᾶν καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ τὸ πᾶν καὶ εἰς αὐτὸ τὸ πᾶν· καὶ εἰ μὴ ἔχοι τὸ πᾶν, οὐδέν ἐστιν τὸ πᾶν.
εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἔχων τὸν ἰὸν μετὰ τὰ δύο συνθέματα. (*Mem.* 6)

The All is one and through it is the All and into it is the All. And if it does not contain the All, the All is nothing.
One is the serpent that has the *ios* after the two compounds.

³¹⁶ "L'appareil alchimique – qui est très vraisemblablement une kérotakis – est ici conçu comme un ναός. Une telle caractérisation est à rapprocher des termes empruntés au vocabulaire religieux que l'on a rencontrés dans le récit des songes ; on se souviendra en particulier qu'Iôn, enfermé dans l'appareil, était appelé « prêtre des endroits inaccessibles » (l. 29)" (Mertens, 1995, p. 223 n. 39).

The fact that this passage refers to the serpent as ὄφις rather than the *Memoir 10* term δράκων is no impediment for connecting the passages, as both terms are used interchangeably.³¹⁷ In her commentary to *Memoir 6* above, Mertens (1995, p. 183) argues that the use of ἰός here constitutes wordplay as it means both venom and rust/verdigris. More significantly, in alchemical texts ἰός often refers to “an enigmatic substance that plays a role in transmutation” (*ibid.*, p. 36). Ion’s name, thus, might hint at his connection with the serpent after Zosimus’ second dream through wordplay on the word for venom and the participle of ἰώω (referring to the process of making ἰός – *ibid.*, p. 36) – even though scholars struggle to know more about ἰός other than the fact that it was instrumental.³¹⁸ Furthermore, the connection between the ouroboros and the serpent from *Memoir 10* gets reinforced if Mertens is correct in supposing that the temple Zosimus describes is round (see n. 315 above).

There might be yet another layer to these considerations about Ion and the serpent, albeit a more conjectural one. ‘Ion’ was also the name of the treasurer and chamberlain of Apollo’s temple in Euripides’ *Ion*³¹⁹ and, as also seems to be the case with Zosimus’ Ion, this name derives from wordplay. The character is named this way because Ion was the first person Xuthus saw when he **left** the innermost temple (Ἴωνα δ’ ὀνομάζω σε τῆ τύχῃ πρέπον, | ὀθούνεκ’ ἀδύτων ἐξιόντι μοι θεοῦ | ἕχνος συνῆψας πρώτος, *Ion* 661-663) – the name is then the participial form of εἶμι, ‘I go’. The play also abounds in serpent imagery: in the

³¹⁷ E.g. in the Epidaurian Records (α 113-116 and β 70-78) and in Euripides’ *Ion* (23-25).

³¹⁸ Zosimus says that “one who makes *ios* knows what one is doing, and one who does not make *ios* does nothing” (ὁ γὰρ ἰὼν ποιῶν οἶδε τί ποιεῖ, καὶ ὁ μὴ ποιῶν ἰὼν οὐδὲν ποιεῖ, *Mem.* 9 3.62-63). See summary on ἰός and ἰωσις in Mertens (1995, pp. 183-184).

³¹⁹ Plays by Euripides are found among the Oxyrhynchus papyri, among which the tragedian is the fourth or fifth most represented author (Donovan, 1969, p. 6); nevertheless, no remnants of *Ion* seem to have survived (*ibid.*, pp. 5 and 93). As Chapter III has shown, Zosimus is no stranger to Greek literature, making mention of both Homer and Hesiod in *Omega*.

opening speech, Hermes says that, as Creusa reluctantly abandoned her son Ion (offspring of a rape by Apollo),³²⁰ she left the baby with a protective adornment that consisted of two snakes made of beaten gold (*Ion* 20-26); towards the end of the play, we learn from Creusa herself that the warp she made for the then new-born Ion had a Gorgon design (Γοργῶ μὲν ἐν μέσοισιν ἡτρίοις πέπλῳν, *Ion* 1421) and was fringed with snakes (κεκρασπέδωται δ' ὄφρασιν αἰγίδος τρόπον, *Ion* 1423); allusions to the snake-like creatures Hydra (*Ion* 91-92) and Cecrops (*Ion* 1163-1164) are also made.

One could add a few more parallels between the tragedy and Zosimus' narrative. Apollo asked Hermes to leave Ion at the entrance of his temple (καὶ θεὸς πρὸς αὐταῖς εἰσόδοις δόμων ἐμῶν, *Ion* 34), the exact place where the serpent is in Zosimus' dream. Both Euripides' Ion and Zosimus' serpent have a protective duty towards their respective temples (χρυσοφύλαξ, *Ion* 55; φυλάττων, *Mem.* 10 5.108). The Ions from both texts have storylines fraught with the tension of life and death pervaded by serpent themes. The Ion in the tragedy is nearly killed by his mother Creusa with one of the two drops of blood from the Gorgon she possesses: one nourishes life (νόσους ἀπείργει καὶ τροφὰς ἔχει βίου, *Ion* 1013) and the other one kills, being the venom of the Gorgon's snakes (κτείνει, δρακόντων ἰὸς ὧν τῶν Γοργόνας, *Ion* 1015). The Ion in Zosimus' dream narrative undergoes physical death that teaches him to leave the body and live as spirit, the means of whose bodily death is paralleled to that of the serpent.

For all these interesting parallels with Euripides' *Ion*, Zosimus' passage remains quite distinctive, and its linguistic fabric interweaves with other peculiar traits from *Memoir* 10 even more than first appears. Here Zosimus once more displays his appreciation for compound words (μονοειδής, φιαλοβωμός, and χαλκάνθρωπος above) when describing the

³²⁰ Similarly to the instructions given to the reader in *Memoir* 10, Apollo has to commit an act of violence towards a serpent after building a temple (see the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, esp. 247-374).

temple: the only non-compound adjective attributed to it is Προκοοννήσιος (5.101-102). The very image of the serpent’s limbs being separated (διέλης μέλη μέλη, 5.110) and then combined (συνθεῖς μέλος μέλος, 5.111) seems in dialogue not only with the alchemical operations of separating substances and bringing them together, but also with Zosimus’ linguistic process of bringing separate words together.³²¹ Referring to the entrance of the temple as its “mouth” (τὸ στόμιον τοῦ ναοῦ, 5.111-112) echoes those in the punishments inside the phial in Zosimus’ second dream, who were instructed to open their mouths (3.66 – yet another instance of similar or identical words reoccurring with a different meaning); the term can also mean the mouth of a vessel (*LSJ*), which reinforces the parallels between the temple and the alchemical apparatus referred to as the phial-altar (see n. 316 above). In short, the ways of entering the text are many, and it is up to the reader to make the access step for themselves (ποίησον ἑαυτῷ βάσιν) in order to enter and find “the searched-for thing” (εἴσελθε καὶ εὐρήσεις ἐκεῖ τὸ ζητούμενον χρῆμα).

Zosimus then adopts an explanatory attitude towards all the curious narrative presented so far:

τοῦτο τὸ προοίμιόν ἐστιν εἴσοδος τοῦ ἀνοίγεσθαί σοι τὰ παρακάτω ἄνθη λόγων· καὶ ζητήσεις ἀρετῶν καὶ σοφίας καὶ φρονήσεως, καὶ νοῦ δόγματα, καὶ μέθοδοι δραστικά, καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κεκρυμμένων ῥήσεων εἰς φανερόν γινομένων· καὶ τὸ πᾶν ὁ τῆς ἀρετῆς μεθοδεύει χρόνος. (*Mem.* 10 6.119-124)

This proem is an entrance of your opening up the flowers of words below, and searches of excellences, of wisdom and thought, and principles from the intellect, and active methods, and revelations of hidden words that come into light. And the time of excellence treats the all by method.

³²¹ Earlier in the text, Zosimus speaks first of an altar in the shape of a phial (βωμοῦ φιαλοειδοῦς, 2.18), which then is referred to as the phial-altar (ἐν τῷ φιαλοβωμῷ, 2.26); likewise, he first talks of a coppered man (ἄνθρωπον χαλκοῦν, 3.61) who he then refers to as the copperman (χαλκάνθρωπον, 3.70): the process of separate things becoming one features in the linguistic form itself.

For the third time in the text, Zosimus re-signifies the word “entrance” (εἴσοδος) and this time describes his own composition as an entrance: that may have been the exact moment when one of the hidden words has come into the light. It also seems that what has been read so far cannot be fully understood because it is not meant to be fully understood: this is only the doorway, and what lies beyond it is not yet to be given away entirely. The images from before are “searches of excellences” (see ζητήσεις ἀρετῶν above – note the echo of the excellence-searching people in the punishments in Zosimus second dream, 3.55-56), and their effect is precisely placing the reader in a searching mood. The use of the plural in this phrase seems to acknowledge the array of possibilities the text opens up for the reader to undertake through “active methods” (μέθοδοι δραστικάι) that are intellectual before they become practical.

Zosimus then turns the biggest aphorism of alchemy into a question (“and what is ‘Nature conquering natures?’”, καὶ τί ἐστὶν νικῶσα φύσις τὰς φύσεις, 6.124). His answer once more echoes what has come before. Nature is accomplished (ἀποτελεῖται – just as Ion says he is accomplished as spirit in the first dream: πνεῦμα τελοῦμαι, 2.25) and becomes dizzy and is pressed into the search (καὶ ἀποτελεῖται καὶ γίνεται ἰλιγγιῶσα καὶ ἐκθλιβομένη πρὸς τὴν ζήτησιν, 6.125-126): Nature almost sounds like a person. What follows indeed creates an affinity between Nature and what Ion and the people in the punishments undergo as living beings of flesh and bone. She eats up the particular matter of the species (τὴν οἰκείαν ὕλην τοῦ εἴδους κατασθίει, 6.127-128), which is somewhat reminiscent of Ion chewing himself with his own teeth (see 2.40 above). She thinks she is dead (θνήσκειν οἴεται, 6.129) and, punishing herself (διεκδικήσασα ἑαυτήν, 6.130), the suffering one becomes lighter than usual (κουφοτέρα ἑαυτῆς γίνεται, 6.131): the images of suffering and

self-punishment³²² are all too familiar at this point, and one might connect the image of nature's lightness with Ion's being made spirit by getting rid of "the thickness" of the body (ἀποβαλλόμενος τὴν τοῦ σώματος παχύτητα, 2.25).³²³ Most strikingly, nature possesses a mixture of its own limbs and the humid at the same time as the fire; and thus she is accomplished (μίζιν ἔχουσα τῶν ἰδίων μελῶν... καὶ τελεσφορεῖται, 6.131-132).³²⁴ The parallel with Ion and the serpent is blatant (τελεσφορεῖται also has a slight echo of Ion being made spirit – τελοῦμαι), and when applied to the more all-encompassing notion of 'Nature', the image seems like a general reflection on how alchemy heats up and mixes things, allowing images of dismemberment, reassembly, punishment, and near-death to emerge; it describes a method (and the word occurs quite a lot in the text) applied to things in nature in general rather than a specific procedure applied to specific ingredients.

Naturally, Zosimus proceeds to urge the reader to act upon nature. He stresses the importance of intellectual activity and concentration during technical undertakings and indicates how his narrative ties with the very beginning of the text by returning to the notion of oneness prevailing over multiplicity: "having clearly altered Nature in these thoughts of the mind, attend and consider her [i.e. Nature], who consists of many kinds of matter, as consisting of one" (ἐν τούτοις τοῖς νοήμασι τοῦ νοῦ σαφῶς ἐκστρέψας τὴν φύσιν ἐπίστηθι καὶ τὴν πολυῦλον ὡς μονόυλον λογίζου, 7.133-134 – see *Mem.* 10 1-2 above).³²⁵ Again, the use of compound words (πολύυλον...μονόυλον) could be seen as a linguistic mirror of the technical rationale of aiming for unity in the midst of plurality. Zosimus also adds that the

³²² The dream-narrative does not say explicitly that the people in the phial-altar are punishing themselves, but as they enter it willingly because they desire excellence (οἱ γὰρ θέλοντες ἀνθρωποὶ ἀρετῆς τυχεῖν ὄδε εἰσέρχονται, 3.55-56), the punishment is self-imposed.

³²³ The passage also has a clause that seems incomplete and corrupt, according to which Nature thinks to be dead whenever, speaking a barbaric language, she imitates something Jewish (ὅταν βαρβαρίζουσα μιμηταὶ οἶον ἰουδαϊκὴν ἔχοντος†, 6.129-130) – Mertens (1995, pp. 41 & 224 n. 46) suggests "the Jewish accent". Saffrey (in Viano, 2005, pp. 109-111) proposes the adverb ἀκόντως instead of the participle ἔχοντος. Despite its incompleteness, the passage also contributes to the personification of Nature.

³²⁴ One sees the influence of Aristotelean nomenclature on alchemy (Mertens, 1995, pp. 224-225 n. 46) – see Introduction.

³²⁵ See Viano (2005, p. 101).

reader, very much like himself, should never speak clearly about such excellence to anyone, lest they destroy themselves through speaking (μηδενὶ σαφῶς κατάλεγε τὴν τοιαύτην ἀρετὴν..., μήπως καὶ λέγων ἑαυτὸν ἀνεληξ, 7.135-137). The statement seems to confirm subliminally that what is important in *Memoir* 10 is not uttering explanations about the excellence it conveys, but to act it out – after all, the reader is invited to replicate Zosimus’ dream upon a serpent, learn excellence silently and appreciate the spectacle that unfolds before the reader’s/practitioner’s eyes: “for silence teaches excellence. It is beautiful to see the change of the four metals, lead, copper, silver, tin, until they become perfect gold” (ἡ γὰρ σιωπὴ διδάσκει τὴν ἀρετὴν. καλὸν ἰδεῖν τῶν τεσσάρων μετάλλων τὰς μεταβολάς, μολύβδου, χαλκοῦ, ἀργύρου, κασσιτέρου, εἰς τὸ γενέσθαι τέλειον χρυσόν, 7.137-140). It is a process of observation and active investigation, not one of theorisation and explanation.

Finally, Zosimus gets into recipe mode, but still takes opportunities to echo the less dry passages that came before. Having taken salt, the reader is to moisten the bright, “honeycomb coloured” sulphur, bind the strength of the two, add vitriol and make vinegar out of them (λαβὼν ἄλας, νότισον θεῖον τὸ ἀγλαΐζον, τὸ κηρομελές.³²⁶ δῆσον ὀποτέρων τὴν ἰσχύν, καὶ χάλκανθον μεσίτευσ, καὶ ποιήσον ὄξος ἐξ αὐτῶν, 8.141-143). The binding reminds us of the re-binding of the limbs Ion, the serpent, and Nature undergo. Likewise, the way in which these substances combined act upon the white-looking copper is described with a language of subjugation and necessity (“and step by step, you will subdue the white-looking lead in these by necessity”, κατὰ βαθμὸν δὲ ἐν τούτοις τὸν λευκοειδῆ δαμάσεις χαλκὸν ἀνάγκη) which coincides with how Ion, the copperman, is a priest out of necessity (ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἱερατευόμενος 2.25) and has someone subdue him (ἐχειρώσατό με, 2.30). Even the abstract notion of “step by step” (κατὰ βαθμὸν) seems to echo the going down and up ladders

³²⁶ κηρομελές is yet another hapax. κηρόμελι appears in a scholium on Theocritus (Mertens, 1995, p. 41 n. 49; see *LSJ*).

he mentioned to Zosimus. Just as the reader would first find the searched-for thing by entering the temple and seeing the copperman turned goldman, they now find, by the action of the three smokes (probably the three-substance evaporated vinegar), the white-looking lead turned into “the so-called gold” (καὶ εὐρήσεις...ὕπὸ τὰς τρεῖς αἰθάλας ἕξις γίνεται ὁ λεγόμενος χρυσός, 8.145-147). The extracting of the uniform species out of multiple ones through subjugation has come to completion (ἰδοῦ καὶ τὴν ὕλην δαμάζων ἀπέχεις τὸ μονόειδον τὸ ἐκ πολλῶν εἰδῶν, 8.147-148), and so has Zosimus’ composition.

The story may as well have ended there, but *Memoirs* 11 and 12 are obviously connected to *Memoir* 10. *Memoir* 11 starts with Zosimus saying that only just when he had got to the yearning for going up the seven stairs and contemplating the seven punishments, he concluded the path of going up in “one of the days” (μόλις ποτὲ εἰς ἐπιθυμίαν ἔλθων τοῦ ἀναβῆσαι τὰς ἑπτὰ κλίμακας καὶ θεάσασθαι τὰς ἑπτὰ κολάσεις καὶ δὴ ὡς ἔχει ἐν μιᾷ τῶν ἡμερῶν ἤμυσσα τὴν ὁδὸν τοῦ ἀναβῆναι, *Mem.* 11 1.1-3): the going up stairs and watching punishments quickly bring the reader back to the phial-altar from Zosimus’ dreams in *Memoir* 10. But this time the alchemist faces an additional challenge, apparently a self-imposed one. Having completed the journey, Zosimus returned several times into the path afterwards (he does not explain why) and, having gone back, loses the path completely (διελθὼν δὲ πολλάκις ἀνήλθον ἔπειτα εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν καὶ δὴ ἐν τῷ ἐπανέρχεσθαί με, ἀπέτυχον πάσης ὁδοῦ, 1.4-5): his redundant means of expression seems to replicate his redundant action of going through the path several times, causing the reader to be as lost in the text as Zosimus is in the story. Getting into great despondency, as he could not see from where to return, he becomes despondent (redundancy is still present) and falls asleep (ἐν ἀθυμίᾳ πολλῇ γενόμενος, μὴ ἰδόντος μου πόθεν ἀπελθεῖν, ἀθυμοῦντος δέ μου, ἐτράπην εἰς ὕπνον, 1.6-7). What so far seemed pretty certainly to be another one of Zosimus’ dreams actually was not, and the reader is made to feel even more lost.

What follows is also remarkably familiar:

καὶ θεωρῶ κατὰ τοῦ ὕπνου μου ξυρουργόν τινα ἀνθρωπάριον ἠμφιεσμένον στολὴν ἐρυθρὰν καὶ βασιλικὴν ἐσθῆτα καὶ ἰστάμενον ἔξω τῶν κολάσεων. καὶ λέγει μοι· “τί ποιεῖς, ἄνθρωπε;”. ἐγὼ δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἔφην· “ἵσταμαι ὧδε ὅτι πάσης ὁδοῦ ἀστοχίσας ὑπάρχω πλανώμενος”. ὁ δὲ λέγει μοι· “ἀκολούθει μοι”. ὧδε ἐξῆλθον, ἠκολούθουν αὐτῷ· πλησίον δὲ γενόμενος τῶν κολάσεων, θεωρῶ τὸν ὀδηγοῦντά με ἐκεῖνον ξυρουργὸν ἀνθρωπάριον· καὶ ἰδοῦ ἐνεβλήθη ἐν τῇ κολάσει καὶ ὅλον αὐτοῦ τὸ σῶμα ἐδαπανήθη ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρός. ἰδὼν ἐγὼ ἐξέστην καὶ ἐτρόμαξα ἀπὸ τοῦ φόβου καὶ διυπνίσθην καὶ λέγω ἐν ἑαυτῷ· “ἄρα τί ἐστὶ τὸ ὀρώμενον;”. καὶ πάλιν διεσάφησα τὸν λόγον καὶ διακρίνων ὅτι ὁ ξυρουργὸς ἐκεῖνος ἄνθρωπος ὁ χαλκάνθρωπός ἐστιν ἔχων ἐρυθρὰν ἐσθῆτα ἐνδεδυμένος, καὶ εἶπον· “καλῶς ἐπενόησα· οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ χαλκάνθρωπος· δεῖ δὲ πρῶτον ἐμβαλεῖν αὐτὸν εἰς τὰς κολάσεις” (*Mem.* 11 1.7-24)

And I see in my sleep a homunculus with a razor wearing a red robe and royal clothing, standing outside the punishments. And he says to me: “what are you doing, you there?”. And I said to him: “I am standing here because, having lost my way entirely, I am wandering”. And he says to me: “Follow me”. Thus I went out, following him. Once I got near the punishments, I see that homunculus with a razor leading me: and behold, he was thrown into the punishment and this whole body was consumed by fire. And beholding this, I was driven out of my senses and trembled from fear, and I was woken up and said within myself: “what is the vision about?”. And again I made the story clear, interpreting that that man with a razor is the copperman dressed in red clothing, and I said: “I understood well: this is the copperman; it is necessary to first throw him into the punishments”.

Once again, Zosimus is guided through his dream (ἀκολούθει μοι, ὀδηγοῦντά) by a homunculus with a razor while providing little guidance to the reader. One also finds a slight change to a familiar storyline: this time there is no multitude of people in the punishments, and it is the guide himself who (eventually) finds himself in them and has his body consumed by the heat. Zosimus’ visceral reaction does justice to the situation and believably replicates one waking up from a nightmare which, *Memoir* 10 considered, starts to look like a recurring one. When Zosimus says that he “again” (πάλιν) clarified the story, he makes it explicit that *Memoir* 11 is to be read in conjunction with *Memoir* 10, and his claims that his interpretation is clarifying (διεσάφησα) and that he understood well (καλῶς ἐπενόησα) are indeed as unconvincing as the ones from *Memoir* 10. In addition, the reader is thrown into even more

confusion when the homunculus with the razor and the copperman, separate figures in *Memoir 10*, are now one and the same.

Zosimus's soul is again seized with a yearning to go up (the third set of stairs this time: *πάλιν ἐπεθύμησεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου τοῦ ἀναβῆναι καὶ τὴν τρίτην κλίμακα*, 2.25-26), only to watch and confusedly commentate on another confusing vision. Getting near the punishments one more time, he once again loses his way and becomes desperate (*ὡς ἐγενόμην κολάσεων πλησίον, πάλιν ἐπλανήθην μὴ εἰδὼς τὴν ὁδὸν ἰστάμενος ἀπονεινοημένος*, 2.27-28), and again comes across an intriguing figure: “and again, in the same way, I see a grey-haired, all-white old man to the point that my eyes were blinded from his whiteness. His name was Agathodaimon” (*καὶ πάλιν τῷ ὁμοίῳ τρόπῳ θεωρῶ πεπολιωμένον γηραιὸν λευκὸν πάνυ ὥστε ἐκ τῆς πολλῆς λευκότητος αὐτοῦ οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἀπημαυρώθησαν. τὸ δὲ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἑκαλεῖτο Ἀγαθοδαίμων*, 2.29-32). Zosimus makes it clear himself that this new episode repeats many elements of his (semi-)awake state and dream earlier in *Memoir 11* (*πάλιν τῷ ὁμοίῳ τρόπῳ*), but there is one complicating difference. While in the first lines of *Memoir 11* Zosimus' wanderings lead the reader to believe the alchemist is dreaming, only to find out that he is not (and as he falls asleep, he contemplates the red-clothed homunculus – *θεωρῶ*, 1.7), now the reader is made to believe that Zosimus is not dreaming, only to find out that he may be (when he contemplates the white-looking man – *θεωρῶ*, 2.29):³²⁷ the vivid, sensory description of the encounter, which becomes even more atmospheric as Agathodaimon turns and gazes at Zosimus for the longest time (*στραφεὶς ὁ πεπολιωμένος ἐκεῖνος θεωρεῖ με ἐπὶ πλείστην ὥραν*, 2.32-33) contributes to a surreal, dream-like setting. It becomes progressively clearer that the reader

³²⁷ For this reason, Mertens (1995, p. 228 n. 10) believes that *τῷ ὁμοίῳ τρόπῳ* refers back to *κατὰ τοῦ ὕπνου μου* (see *Mem. 11 1.8* above).

is never allowed to be fully at ease and is constantly forced to stop and reevaluate their reading.

The uneasiness persists throughout the narrative. Agathodaimon is less generous than the red-robed homunculus, and instead of inviting Zosimus to follow him, just went his own way (ὁ δὲ πρὸς με οὐκ ἀνεστράφη, ἀλλ' ἤνυσεν τὴν ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ σπουδαίως, 2.34-36). Agathodaimon's fate is nonetheless identical to the one encountered by the homunculus: he is also thrown into the punishment (the phrasing is identical to 1.16: ἐνεβλήθη ἐν τῇ κολάσει, 2.38). Zosimus' reaction, in contrast to his last dream, is less humane and somewhat out of character:

ὁ οὐρανίων φύσεων δημιουργοί, εὐθὺς ὅλος ὑπὸ τῆς φλογὸς πυρίφλεκτος γέγονεν, ὧν καὶ τὸ διήγημα, ἀδελφοί, φρικτόν· ἐκ γὰρ τῆς πολλῆς βίας τῆς κολάσεως οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτοῦ πληρεῖς αἱμάτων γέγονασιν. ἐπηρώτησα δὲ λέγων αὐτόν· “τί ἐνταῦθα κατάκεισαι;”. ὁ δὲ μόλις ἀνοιξας τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ ἔφη μοι· “ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ μολυβδάνθρωπος καὶ βίαν ὑπομένω ἀφόρητον”. καὶ οὕτως ἐκ πολλοῦ φόβου διωπνίσθη καὶ ἐν ἐμοὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἠρεύνουν τοῦ πράγματος. καὶ πάλιν διέκρινα καθ' ἑαυτὸν καὶ εἶπον· “καλῶς ἐπενόησα ὅτι οὕτως δεῖ ἐκβαλεῖν τὸν μολυβδόν”. [καὶ ἀληθῶς τὸ ὄραμά ἐστιν περὶ συνθέσεως τῶν ὑγρῶν]. (*Mem.* 11.38-50)

Oh, creators of celestial natures, he immediately got entirely burnt by the flame; even telling of these things, brothers, is awful. From the great violence of the punishment, his eyes became full of blood. And I inquired of him saying: “why are you lying here?”. And only just opening his mouth, he said to me: “I am the leadman, and I am suffering an unendurable act of violence”. And thus I was woken up from great fear, and in myself I asked for the reason of this affair. And I again interpreted it in myself and said: “I understood well that it is necessary to throw the lead out thus”. [and in truth, the vision is about the resting of waters].

Zosimus suddenly sounds like an orator and, by addressing an audience (ἀδελφοί) and referring to what just occurred as a “tale” (διήγημα), is making his account appear less like a dream. Yet the reader is confronted with the same situation that, in *Memoir* 10, belonged to Ion's fate in the realm of sleep: Agathodaimon's eyes get filled with blood and he uses the exact same words used by Ion to describe his own violent fate (see *Mem.* 10 2.29).

Seen as a whole, there is enough room for questioning the extent to which the peculiar disorientation caused by *Memoir 11* originates from Zosimus' artfulness or erratic scribal transmission. Regarding the exclamation "Oh, creators of celestial natures" (ὦ οὐρανίων φύσεων δημιουργοί), Mertens (1995, p. 45) points out that it strongly resembles a passage from Ps.-Democritus (ὦ φύσεις φύσεων δημιουργοί, *PM* 15.150) in which a crowd is also addressed with a vocative of partnership (ὦ συμπροφῆται, *PM* 15.155). She also argues that the final gloss of the text ("and in truth, the vision is about the resting of waters", καὶ ἀληθῶς τὸ ὄραμά ἐστιν περὶ συνθέσεως τῶν ὑγρῶν) seems odd because there is no mention of waters in the dream (Mertens, 1995, p. 45 n. 19), and suggests that it originally belonged to *Memoir 12* (*ibid.*, p. 230 n. 13) and was misplaced (hence the brackets above).

Memoir 12 is approximately twice as short but just as confusing as *Memoir 11*. The sense of continuity from *Memoir 11* is established from the very beginning (see *πάλιν infra*):

καὶ πάλιν κατενόησα τὸν³²⁸ θεῖον καὶ ἱερὸν φιαλοβωμόν, καὶ εἶδόν τινα ἱεροπρεπῆ λευκοποδήρη ἐνδεδυμένον ἱερουργοῦντα τὰ φοβερὰ ἐκεῖνα μυστήρια καὶ εἶπον· "ἄρα τίς ἐστὶν οὗτος;". καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπέν μοι· "οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἱερεὺς τῶν ἀδύτων· οὗτος βούλεται αἱματῶσαι τὰ σώματα καὶ ὀμματῶσαι τὰ ὀμματα καὶ τὰ νενεκρωμένα ἀναστήσαι". (*Mem.* 12 1.1.-7)

And I again perceived the divine and sacred phial-altar, and I saw a sacred person dressed in a white robe that fell over his feet performing those terrifying mysteries and I said: "who is this one?". And he said to me in reply: "this is the priest of the innermost sanctuaries. He wants to make the bodies bloody, give eyes to those who do not have them, and resuscitate those who are dead".

The text unsettles the reader from the start by mixing both waking and dreaming language Zosimus has used in *Memoirs 11* and *12*: while the phial-altar was unambiguously a part of Zosimus' dream in *Memoir 10*, νοέω and compound verbs derived from it had so far been employed only in Zosimus' waking state (νενοηκέναι, *Mem.* 10 2.43; ἐνόησα, *Mem.* 10 4.78;

³²⁸ τὸ in Mertens (1995) by an error of the printers.

ἐπενόησα, *Mem.* 11 2.48) – the compound chosen here (κατανοέω) works cleverly in that it can refer to mental experiences as much as visual (*LSJ*). The setting is probably the most emphatically religious so far (τὸν θεῖον καὶ ἱερὸν φιαλοβωμόν, ἱεροπρεπῆ... ἱερουργοῦντα, τὰ... μυστήρια), but provides no clue as to the religious affiliation of the mysteries being performed. Zosimus also seems to be asking about a third character not mentioned elsewhere, yet another that borrows a theme from *Ion* (i.e. being the priest from the innermost sanctuaries): their very appearance is a part of the mysteries.

The little hope for clear resolution the reader may still have is not given in the last few lines of this puzzling sequence of narratives. Zosimus surprises once more by saying that only now he fell asleep (καὶ οὕτως πάλιν πεσὼν ἐκοιμήθη, 2.8), thus implying that the phial-altar was a reality. Yet the transition into dreaming is valid in that the experience gets more bizarre: Zosimus goes up the fourth set of stairs and sees from the eastern side someone approaching with a big knife; behind this person, someone else brings yet another person with their arms tied behind their backs and dressed in white, and beautiful in face, whose name is “the culmination of cinnabar” (εἶδον κατὰ ἀνατολὰς ἐρχόμενον κατέχοντα ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ μάχαιραν, καὶ ἄλλος ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ φέρων περιηγκωνισμένον τινὰ λευκοφόρον καὶ ὠραῖον τὴν ὄψιν οὗ τὸ ὄνομα [αὐτοῦ] ἐκαλεῖτο μεσουράνισμα κινναβάρεως, 2.10-14). The fact that part of the character’s name (“cinnabar”, κινναβάρεως) signals an alchemical procedure may compel the reader to find the technical significance behind his strange anatomy, while the more astrological connotation of “culmination” (μεσουράνισμα), alongside the previous reference to the side of the rising sun, may point to the moment in time when the procedure should take place rather than its nature.

Neither aspect, however, is made clear by the short development of the story. The man holding the knife simply orders Zosimus to “cut his head around, and sacrifice his carcass bit by bit, and his flesh bit by bit so that his flesh is first boiled by means of

instruments and then passes by the punishment” (περίτεμε αὐτοῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὰ κρέατα αὐτοῦ θύσον ἀνὰ μέρος καὶ τὰς σάρκας αὐτοῦ ἀνὰ μέρος ὅπως αἱ σάρκες αὐτοῦ πρῶτον ἔψηθῶσιν ὀργανικῶς καὶ τότε τῇ κολάσει παραπορευθῶσιν, 2.15-18). What he never says is which of the two other characters should experience this (“culmination of cinnabar” or the man carrying him),³²⁹ but Zosimus wakes up before this information is disclosed and concludes that “those occupied in these things are the liquids of the metallic art” (οἱ περὶ ταῦτά εἰσιν τὰ ὑγρά τῆς μεταλλικῆς, *Mem.* 12 2.20), which is not very helpful. Most surprisingly, the man holding the knife still talks to Zosimus after the alchemist had already woken up and says: “you have completed the descent of the seven stairs” (πεπληρώκατε τὴν κάτω ἑπτα κλίμακα, 2.21-22), and “the other one” (yet again, it is not stated which of the two) says that “with the throwing of the lead through all the liquids the craft has been completed” (ἅμα τῷ ἐκβαλεῖν τοὺς μολύβδους δι’ ὑγρῶν πάντων ἡ τέχνη πεπλήρωται, 2.22-24). For all one knows, the distinction between dreaming and wakefulness in *Memoirs* 11 and 12 could be arbitrary. In any case, insofar as the craft is complete, so is Zosimus’ journey (πεπληρώκατε/πεπλήρωται), but the reader’s is not. Very much like Zosimus in *Memoir* 11, they might need to wander, go through the same path and get lost many times within the text and, unlike Zosimus, never claim to have understood well, for the alchemist has thoroughly followed his own precept of not speaking clearly about such excellence (*Mem.* 10 7.135).

Yet this is the interpretative journey any reader of *Memoirs* 10-12 must undertake. While dreams and gestures towards technical interpretations are provided, the bridging between the two is left to Zosimus but ultimately to the reader alone. Zosimus does adopt an inquisitive attitude as his visions unfold, but he does not manifest a thirst for knowledge and a willingness to scrutinise in the way of an Oedipus. Rather, by using verbs of asking

³²⁹ Alternatively, it could be the case that the man holding the knife orders the man carrying “culmination of cinnabar” to cut his head, as the vagueness of αὐτοῦ leaves room for interpretation.

and observing here and there but not revealing the details of the riddling language of his visions, he teases the readers so that they play Oedipus' role themselves. Zosimus' *Memoir* 10-12, therefore, seems less concerned with the sheer transmission of practical knowledge and more invested in triggering a zest for or even a fear of alchemical knowledge as a whole. Their function is to either inspire or instigate rather than instruct. The reader is given enough to feel as if they have been given some access to this knowledge and to be curious about it, but not too much for the sense of secrecy, and consequently their curiosity, to disappear altogether. Left somewhere between disclosure and impenetrability, the reader is either drawn into the text in order to bring out something hidden inside of it or forced to leave at the entrance if too daunted by the quest.

4.2) The context

All previous chapters have demonstrated the eclectic style of the alchemical writings investigated in the present thesis. Chapter III is the first to contextualise this aspect in relation to a historical author and argues that, at least in the case of Zosimus, it is possible to associate this eclecticism not only with a stylistic preference, but also to the very versatility of some of the collections that would have been accessible to Zosimus in Egypt – something already signalled in the present chapter by the parallels between Zosimus' *Memoir* 10 and both Jacob's dream in *Genesis* and some storylines of Euripides's *Ion*. It is now time to look at how this style and background manifests in a more literary side of Zosimus than *Omega* allows us to see. The following contextualisation shows that, very much like *Isis to Horus*, *Cleopatra*, and *Omega*, for all the mystification that arises from an unusual mixture of elements, Zosimus' *Memoirs* 10-12 have varied enough features to strike

some as recognisable to pagan, Hermetic, Jewish and Christian readers – they have a similar ratio of strangeness and familiarity that would have looked curiously appealing to a wide audience.

(i) Everyday and oracular dreaming

Zosimus' first dream in *Memoir* 10 presents a number of similarities to pagan accounts of dreams from his predecessors. Like many representations of dreams in classical antiquity, Zosimus focuses on a single dream-figure (the same happens in *Memoir* 11): Agamemnon sees Nestor (*Il.* 2.23-34); Penelope sees her sister (*Od.* 4.787-841); Alcyone sees her dead husband (Ovid *Met.* 11.400-750). Zosimus hears a voice (φωνῆς... ἤκουσα), something often mentioned in other accounts of dreams (θείη... ὁμφῆ, *Il.* 2.41; θεοῖό... αὐδῆς, *Od.* 4.831; φωνῆ... βροτέη, *Od.* 19.545; *uocem*, Ovid *Met.* 11.671).³³⁰ The first dream in *Memoir* 10 is suggested to be triggered by Zosimus' thoughts and worries before falling asleep, and such is the case of Alcyone in Ovid and Penelope both in Books 4 and 19 of the *Odyssey*.³³¹

When it comes to ancient dream theory, it is useful to turn to the most exhaustive book on dreams in antiquity that has come down to us, namely Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* (hereafter *On.*, second-third century CE; see Harris-McCoy, 2012, p. 2).³³² However, it is not Artemidorus' meticulous categorisation of dreams that makes his work relevant for the present contextualisation. Kenaan (2016) has demonstrated how Artemidorus himself struggles to uphold his own strict model for categorising dream experiences, and the lack of a consensus among ancient authors about categories in which to place dreams (see Harris-McCoy, 2012, pp. 422-424 and Kessels, 1969) illustrates the challenges of imposing order

³³⁰ These two aspects – the singleness of the dream figure and the hearing of a voice – are mentioned by Dodds (1951, p. 105).

³³¹ On Homeric dreams, see Kenaan (2016).

³³² For fragments of works about dreams by Artemidorus' predecessors, see Del Corno (1969).

to an essentially messy experience.³³³ Rather, it seems more promising to observe how Artemidorus' articulation of the mechanisms involved in dream-making and of their possible effects on the dreamer relates to the case of Zosimus' dreams.

Artemidorus establishes two main categories of dreams: the ἐνύπνιον and the ὄνειρος. Although Zosimus' dreams in *Memoirs* 10-12 do not really fit into either of these categories, Artemidorus' ὄνειρος has some meaningful connections with Zosimus' dream experiences as he describes them:

ταύτη γὰρ ὄνειρος ἐνύπνιον διαφέρει, ἧ συμβέβηκε τῷ μὲν εἶναι σημαντικῶ τῶν μελλόντων, τῷ δὲ τῶν ὄντων. (...)

οἷον ἀνάγκη τὸν ἐρῶντα ὄναρ ἅμα τοῖς παιδικοῖς εἶναι δοκεῖν καὶ τὸν δεδιότα ὄραν ἃ δέδιε, καὶ πάλιν αὐτὸν τὸν πεινῶντα ἐσθίειν καὶ τὸν διψῶντα πίνειν (...). ἔστι τοίνυν ἰδεῖν ταῦτα καθυποκειμένων ἤδη τῶν παθῶν οὐ πρόρρησιν ἔχοντα τῶν μελλόντων ἀλλ' ὑπόμνησιν τῶν ὄντων.

(...) ὁ δ' ὄνειρος ἐνύπνιον τε ὡς ἐνεργεῖ ἄγων εἰς ἐπίστασιν προαγορεύσεως τῶν μελλόντων, καὶ μεθ' ὕπνον ἐνεργεῖς ἐπάγων τὰς ἐγχειρήσεις ἐγείρειν τε καὶ ὀρεῖναι τὴν ψυχὴν πέφυκε (...). (*On.*, 1.1)

For the *oneiros* differs from the *enhyption* insofar as it is characteristic of the former to be significant of things in the future, and of the latter to be significant of things in the present. (...) For example, it is inevitable that, in a dream, a lover imagines that he is with his boyfriend, and a frightened man observes the things he fears and, again, that a hungry man eats and a thirsty man drinks (...). It is therefore possible to see that these dreams, where the passions are already there, contain not a warning of things to come but a reminder of things that are.

(...) But the *oneiros*, which is also an *enhyption*, operates by making us attend to a prophecy of future events and, after sleep, it is by nature inclined to rouse and stir the soul by inciting active undertakings.³³⁴

Zosimus starts *Memoir* 10 awake by making vague statements about his technical procedures until he finally falls asleep and sees a phial-altar: from this perspective, his dreaming is simply a reflection of present concerns, and therefore an ἐνύπνιον.³³⁵

³³³ More generally, Brelich (1966, pp. 293-294) points out that “it is not possible to talk of a general Hellenic attitude towards dreams without differentiating among epochs, locales, and cultural or social environments”, and that one finds different takes on the dreaming activity even within the Homeric poems.

³³⁴ Text Harris-McCoy (2012), translation Harris-McCoy (modified).

³³⁵ It also fits Lucretius' view of dreams merely recreating “everyday occupations that express the dreamer's wishes and concerns” (*DRN* 4.962-72; see Kenaan, 2016, p. 196 n. 17)

Nonetheless, if we consider the fact that Zosimus wakes up twice asking himself a question and gaining understanding (*Mem.* 10 2.41-43 and 4.74-78; see also *Mem.* 11 1.19-24 and 2.45-49; *Mem.* 12 2.18-20), his dreams connect to Artemidorus' definition of an ὄνειρος in that they incited "active undertakings" after his sleep. While variations of verbs like ὀρῶ³³⁶ and ἀκούω are quite frequent in *Mem.* 10, many others show that Zosimus is not merely a passive spectator in his dreaming. The alchemist is insistently inquisitive about what he is witnessing: he wants to learn (μαθεῖν – see *On.* 1.2 above) who the man on the altar is, he presses him to speak (ἐξεβιαζόμεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸ λέγειν, 2.37) and is eager to ask questions (ἠρώτου; ἐρωτήσω). His interlocutors also engage with Zosimus' investigation, first asking him what his thoughts are (τί σκοπεῖς;), and later stating that Zosimus has contemplated and seen what has come to pass (ἐθεώρησας... καὶ εἶδες τὸ πραχθέν).

Also relevant to Zosimus' dreams is the fact that Artemidorus' ὄνειρος is the kind of dream that may be allegorical:

ἔτι τῶν ὀνείρων οἱ μὲν εἰσι θεωρηματικοὶ οἱ δὲ ἀλληγορικοί. καὶ θεωρηματικοὶ μὲν οἱ τῇ ἑαυτῶν θεᾷ προσεικότες. (...) ἀλληγορικοὶ δὲ οἱ δι' ἄλλων ἄλλα σημαίνοντες, αἰνισσομένης ἐν αὐτοῖς φυσικῶς τι [καὶ] τῆς ψυχῆς. (...) ὄνειρός ἐστι κίνησις ἢ πλάσις ψυχῆς πολυσχήμεν σημαντικῆ τῶν ἐσομένων ἀγαθῶν ἢ κακῶν. τούτου δὲ οὕτως ἔχοντος, ὅσα μὲν ἀποβήσεται χρόνου μεταξὺ διελθόντος ἢ πολλοῦ ἢ ὀλίγου, ταῦτα πάντα δι' εἰκόνων ἰδίων φυσικῶν τῶν καὶ στοιχείων καλουμένων προαγορεύει ἢ ψυχῆ, ἐν τῷ μεταξὺ χρόνῳ νομίζουσα ἡμᾶς δύνασθαι λογισμῷ διδασκομένους μαθεῖν τὰ ἐσόμενα. (*On.* 1.2)

Moreover, within the category of *oneiroi*, some are 'directly perceived' and some are 'allegorical'. Directly perceived dreams are those [whose outcomes] are identical to their appearance. (...) But allegorical dreams are those that signify different things through different images, since in these dreams the soul [in fact] naturally speaks in riddles. (...) An *oneiros* is a movement or composition of the soul, consisting of many forms, that is significant of future events, good or bad. And, because this is the case, whatever comes about after some time has passed, either a long or short while, the soul foretells it all through its own, natural images, also called its 'elements', holding that we, in the intervening time, are able to learn of these future events instructed by our rational faculty.

³³⁶ The use of sight-related vocabulary when reporting dreams is quite common in antiquity, e.g. Herodotus (1.108) and Virgil (2.270; 2.773; 3.150). See Harris-McCoy (2012, p. 11).

Zosimus' soul is in fact speaking in riddles – in the same way Cleopatra announced she would in *Cleopatra* (ἐν αἰνίγμασι δὲ ἄρξομαι τοῦ λέγειν, *Cleopatra* 75). Learning about future events by means of one's reasoning (see λογισμός above) is reminiscent of Kenaan's (2016, p. 211) argument regarding dreams in Homer: their “unsettled relation to the future” (*ibid.*) makes them serve as “triggers for hermeneutic activity” (*ibid.*). In the case of Zosimus' dreams, it is their unsettled relation to his technical searches that does so.

Artemidorus is not the only source where considerations about dreams that look into the future will find similarities with Zosimus'. Some of Zosimus' dreams also fit what Macrobius would later define as an oracular dream (see Harris-McCoy, 2012, p. 423):

et est oraculum quidem cum in somnis parens vel alia sancta gravisve persona seu sacerdos vel etiam deus aperte eventurum quid aut non eventurum, faciendum vitandumve denuntiat (Somn. 1.3.8)

It is indeed an oracle when in a dream a parent, or another important holy figure, or a priestly figure, or even a god openly announces what is to come about or not to come about, what is to be done or to be avoided.

In *Memoir* 10, Zosimus is confronted precisely with a *sacerdos* who functions as a kind of guide in Zosimus' dreams. In *Memoir* 11, Zosimus' second dream revolves around an encounter with none other than Agathodaimon – a figure who, very much like Hermes, lies somewhere between deity and “master of revealed wisdom” (Mertens, 1995, p. 44) in alchemical and Hermetic literature. Zosimus' interest in Agathodaimon showing him the straight way (ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦτον ἐπεμελούμην δεῖξαι μοι εὐθεῖαν ὁδόν, *Mem.* 11 2.34-35) again coincides with Macrobius' characterisation of a guiding, authoritative, and often divine figure that would appear in oracular dreams.

Evidently, there is more about the riddling oracular voice in general – not just oracular dreams – that connects with Zosimus’ as well as his readers’ experience of his dream visions. As has been suggested by Kindt (2017, p. 222):

It is interesting to note that the enigmatic voice not only provides a way into the superior knowledge of the gods, but also, to some extent, preserves and extends human uncertainty and the general openness of the future, for example in the form of the question put to the oracle, or in the difficulty of interpreting the response.

Zosimus’ encounters with mysterious priests (*Mem.* 10 and 12) and Agathodaimon certainly create a similar enigmatic atmosphere of access to superior, quasi-divine knowledge. Furthermore, his subsequent imprecise interpretations of his dreams once awake also help maintain this atmosphere undisturbed by preserving and extending the reader’s uncertainty about what they really mean, even if the uncertainty does not necessarily relate to future events.

While these comparisons are helpful for a better understanding of the enigmatic experiences Zosimus conveys in *Memoirs* 10-12, they certainly do not encompass the full scope of Zosimus’ points of reference. If forms of *voéō* (which appear in all of Zosimus’ waking remarks throughout *Mem.* 10-12: *Mem.* 10 2.43 and 4.78; *Mem.* 11 1.22 and 2.48; *Mem.* 12 2.19-20) are “the language of riddles” (Lightfoot, 2007, p. 386) in an oracular context, they have also been shown to be very present in the language of knowledge of Hermetism (see Chapter I), a self-confessed influence of Zosimus’ (see Chapter III). Other peculiarities of Zosimus’ dreams, such as the voice coming from above and the use of *ἐγώ εἰμι*, are also better explained by following the path of different traditions that are nonetheless far from being a novelty in the present thesis – these are further explored below.

(ii) Dreams and visions: traditions of revealed knowledge

The previous subsection started by listing similarities between Zosimus' first dream in *Mem.* 10 and other instances of dreams in classical literature; now it is time to point out the differences and consider to which literary environment these could point. One difference is that Zosimus interacts with strangers rather than recognisable characters. In that regard, Zosimus' experience is much closer to a number of accounts of revealed knowledge. These accounts, in turn, will prove to have other aspects that relate to Zosimus' dream visions.

The previous subsection mentioned the presence a language of knowledge in all of Zosimus' waking remarks (*νενοηκένας*, *Mem.* 10 2.43; *ἐνόησα*, *Mem.* 10 4.78; *ἐπενόησα*, *Mem.* 11 1.22, *Mem.* 11 2.48 and *Mem.* 12 2.19-20) that is also found in Hermetism (see Chapter I); but his very dreams bear similarities with the Hermetic dialogue *Poimandres* (*CH* 1), which has already been shown to have noticeable linguistic parallels with *Isis to Horus* (Chapter I) and with which Zosimus seems to have been acquainted.³³⁷ There, the narrator experiences a vision that is compared to a dream:

ἐννοίας μοί ποτε γενομένης περὶ τῶν ὄντων καὶ μετεωρισθείσης μοι τῆς διανοίας σφόδρα, κατασχεθεισῶν μου τῶν σωματικῶν αἰσθήσεων, καθάπερ οἱ ὕπνῳ βεβαρημένοι ἐκ κόρου τροφῆς ἢ ἐκ κόπου σώματος, ἔδοξα τινα ὑπερμεγέθη μέτρῳ ἀπεριορίστῳ τυγχάνοντα καλεῖν μου τὸ ὄνομα καὶ λέγοντά μοι, τί βούλει ἀκοῦσαι καὶ θεάσασθαι, καὶ νοήσας μαθεῖν καὶ γνῶναι; – φημί ἐγώ, σὺ γὰρ τίς εἶ; – ἐγὼ μὲν, φῆσιν, εἰμι ὁ Ποιμάνδρης, ὁ τῆς αὐθεντίας νοῦς· οἶδα ὁ βούλει, καὶ σύνειμί σοι πανταχοῦ. – φημί ἐγώ, μαθεῖν θέλω τὰ ὄντα καὶ νοῆσαι τὴν τούτων φύσιν καὶ γνῶναι τὸν θεόν· πῶς, ἔφην, ἀκοῦσαι βούλομαι. – φησὶν ἐμοὶ πάλιν, ἔχε νῦν σὺ ὅσα θέλεις μαθεῖν, κἀγὼ σε διδάξω. (*CH* 1 1-3)

Once, a thought occurred to me concerning the things that are, and my thinking got very much suspended, while my bodily senses were inhibited just as those in sleep get weighed down from satiety from a meal or fatigue from the body, I saw someone exceeding in infinite height who calls me by my name and says to me: “what do you want to hear and contemplate, and, having understood, to learn and come to know?”. And I said: “why, who are you?”.

³³⁷ Zosimus tells Theosebia in the *Final Count*: “having run to Poimenander and having been baptised in the mixing-bowl, return to your people” (καταδραμοῦσα ἐπὶ τὸν Ποιμένανδρα καὶ βαπτισθεῖσα τῷ κρατῆρι ἀνάδραμε ἐπὶ τὸ γένος τὸ σόν, *RHT* 1:308). Despite the spelling difference, it is widely believed that τὸν Ποιμένανδρα refers to the character of *CH* 1 (see *RHT* 1:281 n. 3), especially because the baptism in the mixing-bowl (βαπτισθεῖσα τῷ κρατῆρι) seems to allude to *CH* 4, also known as the *Mixing-Bowl* (*ibid.*). See Fowden (1993, pp. 122-123).

And he said: “I am Poimandres, the intellect of the supreme authority. I know what you want, and I am with you everywhere”. And I said: “I want to learn about the things that are, and to gain understanding about the nature of these things, and to come to know God. How I want to listen!”. And he said to me again: “Keep these things you want to learn in your intellect, and I will teach you.”

Just as in Zosimus’ case, the narrator of *Poimandres* encounters a stranger while in an altered mental state and when they have the subject-matter of the revelation in mind (τῶν ὄντων – Poimandres is about to reveal to the narrator how the things that are came about). As expected, the need to be intellectually active in order to learn is present in the same language of knowledge Zosimus uses both in *Omega* and *Mem.* 10-12 (ἐννοίας; διανοίας; νοήσας; νοῆσαι; ἔχε νῶ σῶ ὅσα θέλεις μαθεῖν): in good Hermetic fashion, one must apply one’s intellect in order to gain knowledge (γνῶναι happens twice above), which may even lead to knowledge of God – (νοῆσαι... καὶ γνῶναι τὸν θεόν). In that sense, the narrator of *Poimandres* is also reminiscent of Zosimus’ spiritual person from *Omega*, who dismisses the body (see κατασχεθεισῶν μου τῶν σωματικῶν αἰσθήσεων above) and learns to know God (τὸν πνευματικὸν ἄνθρωπον... θεὸν ἐπιγνόντα, *Omega* 7.58-62; see Chapter III).

There is another aspect of the *Poimandres* passage above that is worth mentioning and contextualising. It mentions the narrator’s act of listening (ἀκοῦσαι) twice: although listening to a voice is often mentioned in ancient dreams (see above), the fact that the narrator describes a vision rather than a dream may point to a broader knowledge revelation motif. The second-century astrologer Vettius Valens quotes his predecessor Nechepso saying: “I decided, then, (to gaze in prayer) all night long (up) to the sky, (...) and a shout sounded forth from heaven. Around its flesh a mantle of dark blue color was wrapped, stretching out darkness before itself” (ἔδοξε δὴ μοι πάννουχον πρὸς ἀέρα | (...) | καὶ μοί τις ἐξήχησεν οὐρανοῦ βοή | τῆ σάρκας [μὲν] ἀμφέκειτο πέπλος κυάνεος³³⁸ | κνέφας προτείων,

³³⁸ κυανόχροα MSS: -χρους Usener; Prof. Hutchinson suggests κυανόχρους πέπλος.

Val. 6.1.9)³³⁹ – this mysterious mantled figure’s commanding presence is similar to Poimandres’, whose infinite height probably means that the narrator would also hear his voice from above. At any rate, the voice from above in the astrological passage strikes one as similar to the opening scene of Zosimus’ very first dream (φωνῆς ἄνωθεν ἤκουσα λεγούσης μοι, *Mem.* 10 2.20-21).³⁴⁰

In other words, although Zosimus does seem to have known *Poimandres* (see n. 337 above), it seems more likely that the similarities between *Mem.* 10-12 and *Poimandres* result from them sharing a larger cultural backdrop (see Chapter I) of revealed knowledge. Another strong indication of that is the fact that both Ion and Poimandres use the “ἐγώ εἰμι style of self-revelation” (Lightfoot, 2007, p. 386):

ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ Ἴων, ὁ ἱερεὺς τῶν ἀδύτων (*Mem.* 10 2.28-29).
I am Ion, the priest of the innermost sanctuaries.

ἐγώ (...) εἰμι ὁ Ποιμάνδρης, ὁ τῆς ἀθθεντίας νοῦς. (*CH* 1 2.9-10)
I am Poimandres, the intellect of the supreme authority.

In the already much-mentioned dream of Jacob (see above), the ἐγώ εἰμι formula meets the aforementioned voice from above: for the God of Abraham self-reveals to Jacob (28:13) while standing on the top of the ladder (see above). Norden (1913, pp. 186-200) lists the formula’s numerous occurrences in both the Old and New Testaments.³⁴¹ Particularly

³³⁹ Scholars have different views about the text and the translation of this passage; see discussion in Heilen (2011, pp. 37-56), whose translation of the Greek I use above. A contentious topic is the exact interpretation of ἔδοξε in the astrological passage (note that the narrator of *Poimandres* uses ἔδοξα to describe his vision, and so does Zosimus in *Mem.* 10 2.42 – see n. 302 above). Heilen (*ibid.*, pp. 43-44) ponders the possibilities with caution, one of them being “I had a dream, a vision” (this is one of the verbs Artemidorus uses most often when referring to dreams – see Harris-McCoy, 2012, pp. 11-12), but the lacuna that follows makes the matter hard to resolve. Many thanks to Prof. Lightfoot for drawing my attention to the larger revelatory framework of this *Poimandres* passage during my Confirmation of Status interview, as well as mentioning the importance of the ἔδοξα/ἐγώ εἰμι motifs and referring me to relevant bibliography. The ἐγώ εἰμι formula is discussed in the following.

³⁴⁰ See also the beginning of an astrological papyrus fragment that mentions a voice coming to one (φωνή σοι ἔρχεται) and making astrological remarks (see Heilen, 2011, p. 48).

³⁴¹ That in *Exodus* 3:14 is particularly important, where God tells Moses: ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν.

interesting for the case of Zosimus and *Poimandres* is that the formula also occurs multiple times in the *Thunder* from the Nag Hammadi library (*NHC* 6.2) – a collection shown to feature a very similar type of spiritual eclecticism to that displayed by Zosimus in *Omega*, of which Hermetism was an undeniable part (see Chapter III).³⁴² In bearing witness to this kind of self-revelation, Zosimus gets closer to a prophetic type of the likes of Isis in *Isis to Horus* (see Chapter I) and Cleopatra in *Cleopatra* (see Chapter II):³⁴³ he is, like them, a receptacle of alchemical knowledge imparted by enigmatic figures (Annael in the case of Isis, Comarius in the case of Cleopatra, and a number of them in the case of Zosimus) who is now in charge of transmitting such knowledge himself (Isis to Horus; Cleopatra to Ostanos and the philosophers; Zosimus to his anonymous addressee in *Mem.* 10).

Yet all these prophetic types of alchemical, astrological, Hermetic and Early Christian literature are slightly different from those of the Old Testament. Barton (1986) argues for a noticeable shift in the prophetic theme that has been well summarised by Lightfoot (2007, p. 60):

Basing his work on texts mainly in the period 200 BC to AD 200, Barton argued that by or in this period a radical re-valuation of the classical prophets had come about. It was widely believed that the prophetic inspiration had ceased with Malachi, yet people continued to have revelations and to want to communicate them. To do so, in deference to the age's reverence for the past – the deeper the better – they assumed the personae of ancient sages and fathered pseudepigraphical works on them. But the prophets and seers that they conjured in these works behaved very differently from the 'writing prophets' of the Old Testament. (...) Much more interest was taken in the manner in which seers received their revelations, through dreams, visions, and frenzy; there developed an elaborate technology of communication with the divine. Prophets came to be imagined as mystics, *manteis*, and miracle-workers, and the sorts of information they were supposed to receive changed accordingly. They were imagined to have insight into the secret workings of the universe; often their revelations were not perspicuous at

³⁴² It is also interesting that, although the speaker of *Thunder* is never named, "many features in the text show that the person or entity speaking is a feminine being" (Poirier in Meyer, 2007, p. 367), and that "this characteristic explains why the tractate was at first compared with the Isis aretalogies" (*ibid.*) – see Chapter I, where *Isis to Horus* is compared with the *Korè Kosmou* (*CH* 23), where a type of aretalogy of Isis occurs.

³⁴³ Considering the similarities drawn between the figures of Isis and Cleopatra in the writings here addressed and the Sibyl (see Chapters I and II), it is worth mentioning that the Sibyl herself uses the "ἐγώ εἰμι style of self-revelation" (Lightfoot, 2007, p. 386; *Syb.* 1.137).

first sight, but in need of decoding. Wisdom shifted from something derivable from natural reason to something more esoteric and communicated through revelation.

An increased interest in the manner in which the revelations are received is certainly the case of Isis' prolonged ordeal with the angels in *Isis to Horus* (Chapter I). The recurrence to ancient sages appears in the particular case of Ostanes in *Cleopatra* (Chapter II), and in how Hermetic and alchemical literatures turn pagan deities (such as Hermes, Isis, and Agathodaimon) into sages that ambiguously lie between god and human (not unlike the Sibyl and Enoch – see Chapter I and Lightfoot, 2007, pp. 70-77).

Finally, some general comparisons with dream visions attributed to early Christians must be drawn. For although Zosimus is not presenting his dreams as visions that reinforce the teachings of Christ, Chapter III has shown that in *Omega* Zosimus openly shows displays of Christian belief. When it comes to the accounts that follow, one must be reminded that this is still a time when Christianity was at large decentralised. The state endorsement and the establishment of orthodoxy that would later confer on the Church the power to determine how one is allowed to believe were yet to come (see Chapter III).

It is in this context that a literary Christian work like *The Shepherd of Hermas* (late first-second century CE; see Miller, 1994, p. 131 with further references and bibliography) could feature a dream where an old woman at Cumae is first identified as the Sibyl (τὴν πρεσβυτέραν..., τίνα δοκεῖς εἶναι; ἐγὼ φημι· τὴν Σίβυλλαν, *Vis.* 2 8.1; see Lightfoot, 2007, p. 82) and still have scriptural status in the eyes of a bishop (Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 40.20.2).³⁴⁴ Even though this identification with the Sibyl is later denied (πλανᾶσαι, φησίν, οὐκ ἔστιν, *Vis.* 2 8.1), “what matters is that a vision of a Sibyl at Cumae, that is, one of the most famous pagan Sibylline sites, whose revelations are nevertheless for the ears of a

³⁴⁴ See Steenberg (2009), who argues in great detail that Irenaeus refers to *Hermas* by using the term γραφή in the specific sense of ‘scripture’ rather than the more general one of ‘writing’.

Christian, is at least plausible” (*ibid.*). A similar overlap of pagan and Judeo-Christian elements is potentially at play in Zosimus’ encounter with Ion, who presents himself with the elevated ἐγώ εἰμι formula (which by Zosimus’ time already carries considerable scriptural weight), but whose punning name may allude to Euripides’ Ion, a pagan character whose name also originates from a pun (see above). Also worth noting is that Hermas is assaulted by his dream vision after he falls asleep as he was walking towards Cumae (πορευομένου μου εἰς Κούμας..., περιπατῶν ἀφύπνωσα, *Vis.* 1 1.3) – something reminiscent of Zosimus’ wanderings followed by sleep in *Mem.* 11 and *Mem.* 12. By drawing a number of similar parallels, including the *Poimandres*, Miller (1994, p. 135) claims that late antique dreamers often “found themselves unexpectedly (and uncomfortably) confronted with an oneiric revelation whose images were too compelling to ignore”.

Some of the most vivid descriptions from Zosimus’ dreams also find parallels with another Christian dreamer. She is the *matrona* and martyr Perpetua, killed in Carthage on March 7, 203 CE (Miller, 1994, p. 148). Perpetua’s dreams allegedly come from a diary she kept in prison before her execution (*Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*).³⁴⁵ In Perpetua’s first dream, she sees a copper ladder of amazing length that reaches the sky (εἶδον κλίμακα χαλκῆν θαυμαστοῦ μήκους, ἧς τὸ μῆκος ἄχρις οὐρανοῦ, *Pass. Perp.* 4.3) – a more obvious instance than Zosimus’ of Jacob’s dream inspiring inspired dreams (see Miller, 1994, p. 155).

Yet Perpetua’s vision is not as awe-inspiring as Jacob’s, which nonetheless brings her dream closer to the ones reported by Zosimus. What she sees seems tainted by the fate she is about to face in her waking life: each of the sides of the ladder is filled with sharp, menacing objects like swords, spears, hooks, large knives, and skewers (ἐξ ἑκατέρων δὲ τῶν

³⁴⁵ The authenticity of Perpetua’s dream journal has been debated among scholars – see Miller (1994, p. 150 n. 13), who states that it is no longer regarded as a forgery.

τῆς κλίμακος μερῶν πᾶν εἶδος ἦν ἐμπεπηγμένον ἐκεῖ ξιφῶν, δοράτων, ἀγκίστρων, μαχαιρῶν, ὀβελίσκων, *Pass. Perp.* 4.3) ready to tear the flesh of careless persons who may try to climb it (ἵνα πᾶς ὁ ἀναβαίων ἀμελῶς καὶ μὴ ἀναβλέπων τοῖς ἀκοντίοις τὰς σάρκας σπαραχθῆ, *ibid.*). These objects could be seen either “psychologically as a reflection of Perpetua’s fear of being lacerated” (Miller, 1994, p. 155) or literally as “the actual *catasta*, or platform, upon which martyrs were tortured” (*ibid.*). One sees a potential for gore that in fact gets realised in the graphic punishments that appear throughout Zosimus’ *Mem.* 10-12, which become more charged when his Christian inclinations are considered. It also seems understandable that late ancient and Christian authors would have had such interest in Plutarch, whose description of the punishment of the wicked in his *De Sera Numinis Vindicta* aligns with the aesthetic of Perpetua and Zosimus.³⁴⁶

Nonetheless, it is not just in misery that Perpetua’s and Zosimus’ dreams meet. Once Perpetua manages to climb the ladder without getting injured by the cutting obstacles, she finds herself in a big garden and encounters a grey-haired man surrounded by many thousands of people dressed in white (καὶ εἶδον ἐκεῖ κῆπον μέγιστον, καὶ ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ κήπου ἄνθρωπον πολὺν καθεζόμενον...· περιεστήκεισαν δὲ αὐτῷ πολλαὶ χιλιάδες λευχειμονούντων, *Pass. Perp.* 4.8). The white-bright dazzlement of this encounter with an elderly man is as remarkable as Zosimus’ being nearly blinded by Agathodaimon’s whiteness after going up the third ladder (θεωρῶ πεπολιωμένον γηραιὸν λευκὸν πάνυ ὥστε ἐκ τῆς πολλῆς λευκότητος αὐτοῦ οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἀπημαυρώθησαν. τὸ δὲ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκαλεῖτο Ἀγαθοδαίμων, *Mem.* 11 2.29-32). In short, although Zosimus does not openly identify as a

³⁴⁶There are considerable parallels between Zosimus’ dreams and the vision Plutarch imposes upon Aridaeus/Thespesius in *De Sera* that deserve further investigation: Thespesius has a guide (ὁ τοῦ Θεσπεσίου ψυχοπομπός, 566b-c) who takes him to a to a large crater (κρατῆρα μέγαν, 566b) where they have a vision of people in the punishments (πρὸς τὴν θεάν τῶν κολαζομένων ἐτρέποντο) – one may think of Zosimus’ dream vision of souls being punished in the phial-altar in *Mem.* 10, also referred to by Zosimus’ guide as θεά (ἢ θεά ἦν ὄραξ εἴσοδος ἐστὶν καὶ ἔξοδος καὶ μεταβολή, *Mem.* 10 3.52-53). Some of the people in Plutarch’s crater have their bodies opened up and turned inside out (see *De Sera* 566c-567c) – the extremity of the process reminds one of the violent act Ion undergoes in *Mem.* 10. Cf. Dufault (2019, pp. 109-111).

Christian (possibly for the sake of self-protection, as Perpetua's case tragically exemplifies), his dreams do have a visual treatment that would have appealed to Christians of his time.

Final Remarks

Heraclitus is believed to have said that “the world of the waking is one and shared, but the sleeping turn aside each into their own world” (ὁ Ἡράκλειτός φησι τοῖς ἐγρηγορόσιν ἓνα καὶ κοινὸν κόσμον εἶναι, τῶν δὲ κοιμωμένων ἕκαστον εἰς ἴδιον ἀποστρέφεσθαι fr. 89 D; R56 LM; see Dodds, 1951, p. 118). What shared waking world does Zosimus' *Omega* reveal, and how does it relate to the sleeping, intimate world of Zosimus' *Mem.* 10-12? The present thesis has demonstrated that the world shared among the alchemical works addressed here is one that would be deeply misunderstood if interpreted as one-dimensional, concerned predominantly with technical, philosophical, or spiritual endeavours. The searches of the alchemist can be far-reaching, and so was Zosimus' work and that of the anonymous authors behind *Isis to Horus* and *Cleopatra*. Yet, it seems that they did not need to reach out too far in order to nurture such a wide array of interests and cultural references: alchemists (and, it seems, magicians and astrologers alike) did not necessarily have to travel long distances in order to draw from the pervasive cultural backdrop slowly built by the multiple cultural encounters around the Mediterranean but particularly in Egypt, where various pagan, Hermetic, and Judeo-Christian traditions coexisted and were perceived by alchemical authors as part of a shared cultural *koinē*.³⁴⁷

This ‘waking world’ does inform the ‘sleeping world’ of *Mem.* 10-12, which nonetheless places well-known formulas in an innovative setting. On the one hand, Zosimus employs elements that thrived in prophetic Judeo-Christian contexts – the ἐγώ εἰμι type of

³⁴⁷ See Fowden (1993, p. 213), who describes Hermetism as “part of a wider Mediterranean whole, a world with its intellectual as well as its linguistic *koinē*”.

revelation, allegorical dreams, and similar imagery to Jacob's dream of the ladder; a sense of intellectual determination to learn that comes with a language of knowledge also prolific in Hermetic texts and found in *Isis to Horus*; and figures like Ion and Agathodaimon, the characterisation of whom is versatile enough to appeal to both pagan and non-pagan audiences alike. On the other hand, the lack of linearity in the narrative and of a clear distinction among characters, as well as the abundance of extraordinary imagery (such as an object that is both altar and phial, a priest vomiting his own flesh, and a talking man made of copper) artfully construct the nonsensical atmosphere of an ordinary person's dream rather than a prophet's: what is absurdity in waking life turns into realism in the realm of dreams. *Mem.* 10-12 also seem quite inventive from a linguistic standpoint in their constant use of compounds not attested elsewhere. This may also reflect Zosimus' aggregative style of writing: a composite work interested in producing alchemical compounds abounds in compound words. Zosimus' determination to blur lines (between cultures, spiritual notions, and even between the waking and the sleeping worlds) manifests even at the lexical level of the words on the page.

Conclusion

What is, after all, the ‘searched-for thing’? The answer is not simple. As Chapter III has shown, Zosimus’ *On the Letter Omega* indicates that there was not just one way of approaching alchemy in Late Antiquity, and it would be misleading to try and impose a single objective on the texts here analysed, which in themselves are composite but evasive about their pursuits. At the same time, the very imprecision of the phrase ‘the searched-for thing’ used by Zosimus in *Mem.* 10 seems not only to capture the alchemist’s purposeful yet elusive ambitions that are made so intriguing to the outsider, but also to encompass some patterns that do emerge in terms of how these works portray their search for knowledge and spiritual progression.

One underlying ‘searched-for thing’ these texts demonstrate, in different ways, is experimenting through mixture – not unlike some of their tentative technical operations – of its literary choices. The *Letter from Isis to Horus* does so by composing a textured narrative of revealed knowledge. There, the unambiguously Egyptian Isis is styled as a prophetess who attains alchemical knowledge by means of an interaction with an angelic figure clearly evocative of Judeo-Christian prophetic scripture, especially *I Enoch*. At the same time, the scriptural framework of the narrative is modulated by the addition of themes and phrases shared with magical texts, and Isis’ transmission of knowledge to her son Horus has an unmistakably Greco-Egyptian Hermetic quality manifested in her language of knowledge. The *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* does it through its quirky mixture of philosophical dialogue, a ‘sermonic mode’, and biblical language, and similarly to the *Letter from Isis to Horus*, by staging knowledge transmission between figures evocative of different cultural associations – in this case, Egyptian and Persian. The treatise *On the Letter*

Omega does so by trying to harmonise ways of thought that are emphatically associated with a variety of peoples. *Memoirs* 10-12 do so by idiosyncratically reworking revelation and spiritual themes in such a way that the mysterious figures and scenes Zosimus encounters in his dreams are palatable for various audiences.

Another ‘searched-for thing’ present in these texts is a process of change, which nonetheless is not focussed on changing base metals to gold. Chapter I shows how this is produced in a prolongation of knowledge transmission and in a progression from $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ to $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ found elsewhere in Hermetism. Chapter II demonstrates how the progressive increase of biblical language in *Cleopatra* as the dialogue progresses seems to imply that the process of uniting body, spirit and soul, portrayed as alchemical, is parallel to that of an evangelisation, one which nearly culminates in a conversion of the dialogue itself. Chapter III investigates how Zosimus champions change by exposing the doctrine of the first human who, through self-knowledge, changes himself by letting go of his flesh, walking towards the light, and becoming just spirit. Chapter IV demonstrates that Zosimus’ dreams of transformation (in particular those of *Mem.* 10) are mirrored in the transformation and amplification of his own understanding of both technical processes and the order of the cosmos.

The above also reinforces two important arguments put forward by Grimes (2018) with regard to ancient alchemy. The first is that there are more productive ways of approaching alchemy other than Egyptian metallurgy combined with Greek philosophy: “early alchemists did not adhere to one particular school of thought” (Grimes, 2018, p. 55), nor do they seem to have approached alchemical knowledge in a systematically philosophical way. As the previous chapters have shown, their means of expression are a unique “amalgamation of religion, science, and magic” (*ibid.*, p. 23) that is by no means exclusively Greek. What the present thesis adds to Grimes’s discussion is the literary

dimension of such amalgamation. While Fowden argues for an intellectual and linguistic *koinē* for Hermetism (1993, p. 213), the present thesis demonstrates some of the literary implications of such *koinē* in the case of ancient alchemy. A particularly interesting case is that of Zosimus, whose discussions in *Omega* and dream visions in *Mem.* 10-12 reveal a strong relationship between language and subject matter, and language itself is sometimes made the protagonist of experimentation rather than technical endeavours.

The second point made by Grimes that this thesis reinforces and expands is that “there is a lack of evidence that Zosimus and other early alchemists believed they were literally transforming base metals into precious ones” (*ibid.*, p. 41), and that generally speaking producing actual gold is far from being at the centre of their searches. While Grimes argues for the importance of the technical aim of colouring metals among early alchemists and the spiritual aim of transforming the soul in Zosimus, the present thesis elucidates how the early alchemical texts selected here do more than just talk about metal alteration in an allegorical way. They dramatise the transmission and attainment of the *ἱερὰ τέχνη* in such a way that the craft appears connected with concerns that transcend technicality – progressive intellectual understanding in *Isis to Horus*, near-evangelisation of alchemical knowledge in *Cleopatra*, the liberation of the soul from the body in Zosimus’ *On the Letter Omega*, and the workings of the cosmos underlying technical and spiritual pursuits in *Memoirs* 10-12.

Another telling result of a closer look into these works is the numerous parallels with magical texts. This, again, shows that there is much more to ancient alchemy than a combination of recipes, Greek philosophy, and “*rêveries mystiques*” (*RHT* 1:219). Firstly, the interactions between alchemy and the noticeably bilingual collection of the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri (some of which contain passages both in Greek and Demotic by the same scribe; Bortolani, 2016, p. 1 n. 1) suggest that the Egyptian elements brought to

these alchemical texts are not merely legendary only because they are incorporated in a literary way. Secondly, the linguistic similarities identified in *Cleopatra* and *Omega* with *PGM 13* in particular, as well as their similar style of eclecticism, indicate that it is not a mere coincidence that the hand of this particular papyrus was identified with that of the proto-alchemical papyri (Brashear, 1995, pp. 3402-3404). Rather, this evidence corroborates Edmonds's claim (2019, p. 273) that the strong divide between ancient alchemical and magical texts is probably a modern distortion created by the separate editorial histories of these materials. Hence, more detailed comparative work between the early alchemical *corpus* and the Greco-Egyptian magical *corpus* (*PGM 13* especially) seems like a promising future implication of the present research. The inclusion of the Demotic magical papyri in such study could also be particularly illuminating with regard to overlooked links between ancient alchemy and a predominantly Egyptian background.

All the writings here addressed present similarities with the *Sibylline Oracles* in that they are clearly “trying to recreate an ethos of prophecy” (Lightfoot, 2007, p. 220). In Chapters I and II, this has been demonstrated in how the pagan female figures of Isis and Cleopatra are transformed into prophetess types surrounded by scriptural motifs (in the case of the former) and language (in the case of the latter). In the case of Zosimus, Chapter III draws attention to two parallels between Zosimus' language puzzles and the *Sibylline Oracles* (namely, the equivalences between the letters of Adam's name and the cardinal points and the riddle about the nine-lettered name); Chapter IV sets the ἐγὼ εἶμι formula used by Ion in its larger cultural backdrop of revealed knowledge to which the Sibyl also belongs. While some of these parallels have been long acknowledged by scholars, it seems that the dots had not yet been connected, and much more remains to be explored about the nature of the relationship between these two traditions that have a penchant for dressing pagan figures in scriptural garb.

Along these lines, these works also seem linked with early developments of Christianity both in Egypt and Ethiopia. Zosimus' writings and the Nag Hammadi Library are examples of late antique literature made in Egypt operating at the interface of early Christianity and Hermetism. While some general thematic links have been explored here, a deeper linguistic comparison between Zosimus' Greek *Omega* and the Coptic *Secret Book of John* is yet to be made. The allusions to *1 Enoch* in the *Letter from Isis to Horus* and the mention of Ethiopia in the *Dialogue of the Philosophers and Cleopatra* might indicate that early alchemical literature also had special links with Judeo-Christian textual traditions from the Aksumite Empire which deserve to be further investigated. In short, much knowledge regarding early alchemy will remain inaccessible if classicists limit themselves to the evidence written in Greek and within the confines of the Roman Empire – a limitation of which the present thesis is no less guilty, and to which the work on both Greek and Syriac evidence by Martelli (2013) is a rare and commendable exception.

To conclude, gold does not appear as the ultimate 'searched-for thing' in the four early alchemical writings here analysed. At the same time, the process of search, attainment and communication of knowledge expressed as these texts navigate and conciliate multiple ways of knowing from a number of backgrounds result in a tradition no less invested in wealth, even though it looks more cultural than monetary. Thus, early alchemy has proved to be an invaluable, but still underexplored territory for those willing to attain a richer understanding of the complexity of late antique thought. However, one must be warned against digging these mines with a single goal in mind, for their searches are bound to be many and long.

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