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Hathor's Alchemy: The Ancient Roots of the Hermetic Art

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## Book Reviews

Hathor's Alchemy: The Ancient Roots of the Hermetic Art. By ALISON M. ROBERTS. Pp. 336, illus., index. Northgate: Brighton. 2019. £27. ISBN: 978 0 95 242333 1.

“Does alchemy have an Egyptian origin?” (*L'alchimie a t elle une origine égyptienne?*). This was the title of a seminal 1983 paper by the French Egyptologist F. Daumas, who underlined a critical issue that any attempt to answer this question is bound to address: the earliest alchemical literature is packed with references to ancient Egypt, its temples and priests, but this abundance contrasts with the lack of ancient Egyptian technical texts dealing with the dyeing and metallurgical procedures described in that literature. Almost thirty years later, Alison M. Roberts devotes a monograph length study to the same question. She offers a beautifully crafted volume to her readers: its pictures and drawings seem to mirror the colourful realm of ancient alchemy, whose practitioners were deeply concerned with a wide variety of dyeing techniques. These practices, however, do not represent the main preoccupation of the author.

Roberts argues that Graeco Egyptian alchemy has been (mis)interpreted through a “Greek Gnostic lens” that failed to magnify the Egyptian lore inherited by ancient and medieval authors (pp. 180–85). The main target of this criticism is A. J. Festugière's definition of alchemy as a set of craft recipes tinged with Gnostic and Greek philosophical ideas. In fact, since the 1980s, Festugière's hellenocentric approach has been overturned by important studies on the Egyptian roots of the Hermetic literature, including the so called technical *Hermetica*. Without discussing this recent literature, such as G. Fowden's or S. H. Aufrère's ground breaking monographs (only quoted in the final bibliography), Roberts seeks to restore the Egyptianness of alchemy by taking a similar, yet more slippery path. On the one hand, she stresses the role played by Egyptian rites and templar practices in framing the idea of a sacred art, introduced by ancient alchemists to refer to the umbrella of dyeing crafts described in their works. Already in the sixth century CE, the alchemist Olympiodorus claimed that the ancient Egyptians “ritualized” alchemical procedures, as Roberts rightly points out (p. 190). On the other hand, Roberts downplays the technical procedures described in the alchemical texts, which she rigidly contrasts with the sacred art of Egyptian origin. This opposition, however, is built on old and much debated assumptions, in particular the alleged dichotomy between a practical (or exoteric) and a spiritual (or esoteric) alchemy, which fostered biased interpretations of ancient alchemical texts.

The first half of the book (parts 1–3, pp. 1–175) is strictly Egyptological and focuses on religious and ritual texts dealing with the journey of the sun god Ra during the daylight hours. Part one provides a detailed description of the *Book of Day* as preserved in Ramesses VI's tomb at Thebes as well as of the ritual scenes in Nefertari's and Ramesses II's temples at Abu Simbel. Part two is fully devoted to Hathor's templar complex at Dendara. Little attention is here devoted to its technical inscriptions, such as the text on the making of statues engraved on the walls of the so called “House of Gold.” Instead, Roberts insists on the pivotal role played by the goddess Hathor in the multifaceted set of myths and rites on the cyclical transformations of the sun god. This material, enriched by astrological influences, responded to cosmological ideas of death and rebirth, ageing and rejuvenation, whose possible link with alchemy is not explicitly discussed in these sections. The metallurgical aspects of Hathor's activity and sphere of influence are introduced in part three of the book, which deals with copper as a transformative agent in many aspects of the Egyptian solar mythology.

The relevance of this material for the history of alchemy is addressed in the second half of the book (parts 4–5, pp. 176–271), which discusses Graeco Egyptian, Arabic, and Latin alchemical texts. Roberts takes into account sources that have rarely been investigated from this perspective and relies on up to date editions and studies, from which she quotes and comments on passages of clear Egyptological interest. For instance, Zosimus' *Book of Sophe* mentions a heavenly and an earthly sun, which Roberts compares with the similar imagery developed in the Egyptian *Book of Day* (pp. 205–6). Olympiodorus' alchemical commentary associates the four colours of the alchemical transformations (black white yellow purple) with constellations (the Great Bear) and moments of the day (dawn, mid day, and sunset). Roberts discusses this pattern by drawing a comparison with the chromatic changes that, according to the Egyptian ritual texts, the sun god undergoes in his daily journey (pp. 190–91). Along with these useful comparisons, this section juxtaposes quotations extracted from texts belonging to quite distant cultural milieus, from Ibn Umail's symbolic treatises to Sufi literature and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The reader is sometimes overwhelmed by the number of cross references to very diverse sources, whose interpretations often remain open to question. The allegorical language of these writings, Roberts argues, ultimately rephrases an Egyptian sacred knowledge, which cannot be reduced to metallurgical or proto chemical practices: it rather deals with the cycle of cosmic and human changes that is regulated by the revitalising and transformative forces mastered by the goddess Hathor in the Egyptian myths about the daily journey of the sun god.

In a nutshell, Roberts' book is a stimulating and provocative study, which offers to its readers a very rich selection of both Egyptian and alchemical sources. Many elements discussed in this volume certainly contribute to an understanding of the link between the sacredness of ancient alchemy and Egyptian templar practices and rituals. However, more balanced investigations will be necessary to bring ancient (al)chemical crafts back into the picture.

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