Alchemy is one of those Middle Ages branches of the Arab ‘ilm who are not still well known by scholars. This is because of its inner difficulty, caused both by the subject itself and by the typology of the text. I would like to give in this article a short introduction about this discipline and about its most known Arab author, Ğābir Ibn Ḥayyān (whose authorship, and even existence, is notoriously doubtful); then we will move on to an insight on the actual corpus and its peculiarities and finally a short presentation of the project on the corpus (relating to the Thesaurus Linguae Arabicae project) will be given to the reader.

1. Alchemy: hints on its history and its different traditions

Alchemy is a very interesting field of study in the Middle East area during the Middle Ages. It is part of the al-ḥikma\(^2\) “the wisdom” of this golden period for the Arab world. In fact, the knowledge of Alchemy, rather than being strictly scientific, is deeply linked to philosophy and γνῶσις, and this is openly detectable through the layers in the lexicon that we will later analyse.

Arabic Alchemy has been estimated for a long time as being the younger sibling of hellenic tradition, but we must reconsider this position. Indeed they are related and entwined, but the Ğābirian corpus and the Arabic tradition did improve and deepen the studies in this field within the VIII–XI centuries, giving birth to a specified lexicon and widening concepts of the Great Work.

If we do try to set in time and place the birth of Arabic Alchemy we will have to face several problems. As we said it does have some kind of relationship with the Greek χηµεία, but we will also find out that there was a sort of alchemic core in the Middle East, especially in Iran, Iraq and in the Syriac area. As a matter of fact we do find texts in Syriac and Coptic language. These former alchemists

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1. Roma Tre Università.
after the islamisation of the Mediterranean area would have met and exchanged their knowledge with Arabs, giving birth to a brand new tradition that is represented by the Ġābirian corpus.

The Greek texts that scholars such Berthelot, Ruska and others like Ruelle were able to gather are a group of books’ fragments written during a very long period, starting from the III/IX century up to the Middle Ages, and those texts suffered manipulation, mistakes in their transcription and were treated in order to partly disguise their essential meanings. Moreover these texts aren’t strictly technical and the interpretation is quite painful to any reader, both for the philosophic aura given by the first alchemists so to hide to the unprepared ones the deeper meanings of their passages and for the interpretation given by the latest alchemists to the symbols created by their masters, that leads to a completely detached-from-reality reading.

For what concerns Arabic Alchemy the corpus is outrageously vaste, and, despite the criptic and exoteric use of words, the chemical procedures are well explained as well as the alchemic materials and instruments. In fact the main difference between the two kinds of alchemy is that the Arabic one wants to openly discuss and explain the theory and tries to keep its secrets by spreading and hiding the doctrine in a huge quantity of material, the so called tabdid al-‘ilm.

Moreover the Ġābirian works are very detached from the origins of Greek Alchemy, and his references to the hermeticsians and gnostics are rarely direct and most of them may be considered as literary mémoires of the ancient philosophers taken from later sources. In his works, by the way, we do find references to the most ancient writers such as Democritus, and the very same Ġābir says that he refers to Phytagogoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotile and even Homer, Diogenes, Porphyry and Apollonius of Thyana, in Arabic Balīnās.

On the contrary some of the modern Greek works on alchemy are likely to have been inspired and influenced by the Ġābirian writings and the theory of the Four Elements and not only in the main ideas, but also the technical structure of the text and the terms used in the treatises.

So we can say, in conclusion that Ġābir’s work was, of course, influenced by the Greek alchemists, but it is fundamental to know that he developed his own theories such as the theory of the balance, which were themselves the bases for a further and deeper development of the Alchemic knowledge.

2. ĠĀBIR IBN ḤAYYĀN, THE ARAB ALCHEMIST (?)

Abū Mūsā, or Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ġābir Ibn Ḥayyān al-Kūfī al-Ṣūfī, the latin Geber, is known as the most important and the most prolific alchemist of the Arabic tradi-

5. Ibidem. Kraus reports Berthelot edition at an anonymous alchemist which title was Travail des quatre éléments, which dating is uncertain.
tion. Hundreds of texts and treaties are said to have been written by this author, who probably lived in the II century of Ḥiǧra (viii a. D.).

Of course the existence of this personality is quite sure, historically I mean. He seems to be born in Tus, in Iran, and his father was a druggist of Kufa called Azdī. He was most certainly for all this life the disciple of the Ǧa’far al-Ṣādiq, the shiite imām, who was both his philosophical and practical master.

Although for a very long period the whole alchemic corpus has been linked to this author – even by other alchemists, such as al-Rāzī (d. 313/925), al-Mağrīṭī (iv/x century) and Ibn Umayl (d. 349/960) and historians like Ibn Ṭahir al-Maqdisī and Ṣā’id al-Andalusī (iv/x century) – it is practically impossible that he was the only one who wrote and elaborated those theories.

In fact, there are some treaties dedicated to the Barmakids and which must have been written after the death of Ǧa’far in 765. As Lory says, moreover, some “éléments ultra-chiites présents dans le corpus [sont] un indice flagrant que la date de leur rédaction ne pouvait être antérieure à la fin du IXe siècle”.

All those informations lead us to the comprehension that it is hard to believe that the author of the so called Ǧābirian corpus is just one, but more likely we should face the fact that this corpus has been developed and written by a sort of school of alchemists who worked from the fifties of the IX century to the fifties of the X century, as Kraus suggests.

3. The Ǧābirian Corpus and its Specificities

As we anticipated the corpus ascribed to Ǧābir is vaste, eclectic and copes with a wide range of subjects such as mathematics, philosophy, astronomy and astrology, music, medicine and – of course – magic and religion.

The corpus was divided by Kraus into different collections:

– the CXII books (al-kutub al-mi’ā’ wa-al-ṭiḥnā ’āṣar), that contains texts with references to greek savants like Zosimus, Democritus and Hermes;
– the LXX books (al-kutub al-saba’ūn), where is given an explanation of the alchemical teaching of this master;
– the CXLIV books, known most widely as Kutub al-mawāzīn, in which the philosophical grounds of alchemy are explained;
– the D books (al-kutub al-ḥansumī’ā’), which groups manuscripts investigating on more specific themes of the Book of the Balances.

8. We can find linguistics elements such as the name given to the imām, nāṭiq, instead of ṣāmiṭ, that reveal this kind of link with the Karmanians and the Fatimid isma’īlis (cf. EI s. v. “Djābir Ibn Hayyān”).
10. Of course we will continue here to talk about the Ǧābirian corpus.
11. Cf. ibidem, p. 16.
As Kraus maintained, when we cope with the Ġābirian corpus we must face two kinds of problems concerning their history: religious issues and problems raised by the history of science. We sketched out before that the texts do have a link to the Shia, in fact "Ǧābir proclaimed the imminent advent of a new imam who would abolish the law of Islam and replace the revelation of the Kuran by the lights of Greek science and philosophy"12, a point of view which was common in the the Shi‘i extremism (ġulār) in the latest years of the III/IX century, and this is also reflected in the use of terminology13 strictly connected with Karmatianism as we mentioned before.

Moreover there are problems related to the history of sciences in Islam. The vastness of subjects included in the corpus takes its inspiration in ancient science, but Ġābir created a new defined and clear-cut form of alchemy that avoids ermetisms and clearly explains procedures14. We must also underline that Ġābir was introduced to the scientific terminology by Hunayn Ibn Ishāq, the most famous and important translator of the Greek science, who was born in 192/80815, this leads us to believe even more strongly that the corpus wasn’t written before the III/IX century.

In addition to that, we can underline Ġābir’s use of grammatical terminology and his use of the nisba: he uses the words ǧulāṭi, rubā‘i and ǧumāṣi when he wants to talk about the triliteral or quadriliteral or quinquiliteral form of the verb, whereas his presumed contemporary grammar didn’t use this kind of derivation16 which was first used by Ibn al-Sarrāq in the early X century.

What we should focus on, and deeply analyse, is the multiplicity of layers and uses of the words in this specific corpus. For Ġābir, in fact, even if he avoids the ellenic style and rethoric, the use of words is very important:

Le Corpus Jâbiri en apporte également de nouveaux développements à la question des rapports entre langue et pensée, langue et réalité. Le langage symbolique était très cultivé par les alchimistes alexandrin [...]. Chez les alchimistes arabes, et Ġābir en particulier, l’usage de l’exotérisme se modère, et sa raison d’être apparaît mieux : il cherche à saisir l’évolution des phénomènes matériels en tant que flux de l’esprit. Dès lors, l’emploi des concepts et leur contenu usuel volent en éclats pour laisser place à la révélation de leur sens vertical.17

This kind of language was meant to let only the right ones into the deepest meanings of the alchemic texts; in fact, what is peculiar in this lexicon is that every basic term of the alchemic procedure can be read at several different levels.

13. Cf. the word takrīr, used both to mean the reiterations in the alchemic procedures, and to express the meaning of reincarnation.
16. For a deeper and interesting case study, see Lancioni, 1997.
Words are not specific concepts, instead they create a range of symbolisms and interactions. Even in the Book of Definitions (Kitāb al-Ḥudūd) the author doesn’t give the reader any hint on the signification of basics like ḥawhar ‘subsance’. It is all about correspondances and instability of the concepts that flows like the reality flows in its nature. This kind of language is made up to stimulate the reader/alchemist to find the meaning both in the concrete experience and into his inner world, and in order to do so every word doesn’t exist just for itself but in a bundle of relationship with what surrounds it.

Just in order to give an example of this kind of multi-layering, here is a list of meanings and correspondences of the word mīzān “balance”, the main principle in Ġābir’s philosophy. Mīzān is – or better, could be:

(a) specific gravity (references to Archimedes); (b) the σταθµός of the ancient alchemists, meaning the measure in a mixture of substances; (c) a speculation on the letters of the Arabic alphabet, which are connected with the four elementary qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry). [...]; (d) mīzān is also the metaphysical principle par excellence, a symbol of the scientific monism of Ġābir. In this sense it is opposed to the dualist principle of the Manichaeans. Neo-Platonic speculations on the One do not seem to have been without influence here; (e) lastly, mīzān derives from an allegorical explanation (ta’wil) of the Qur’anic references to the weighing at the day of judgment.18

Furthermore, when we approach the Ġābirian corpus we will find some words translated, transliterated or adapted from Greek. This is not even slightly a minor issue in the analysis of the corpus. As a matter of fact some words were just transliterated as falsafa, and we may find it easier to recognise them with the right terms of analysis, e.g. their length; but other words, like the Greek Οὐσία “subsV
able to gather information from a wider range of sources, to have a general idea of the concept we are studying and last but not least make a list of concordances of a word in the whole corpus.

So, given this little insight on the peculiarities of the corpus one can easily understand why Arabic alchemy has been like an off-limits topic for scholars for a very long time. Our aim and purpose is to ease the approach to this field by digitalising and tagging as much texts as possible in a relatively short period and using the newest technologies to analyse the corpus.

To this end it is necessary to think about the meaningful tags and the meaningful way of tagging. As we pointed out in the previous paragraphs it would be interesting and useful to tag words which are difficult to recognise at first sight, e.g. translations from Greek, technical words related to the alchemic procedures and materials and key words who appear to link different text e.g. the sentences “as we said...”, “as we thought...” or “as mentioned in...”.

Those tags would give the reader both a wider and a deeper coup d’œil on the Ġābirian corpus. Of course what would be important is to tag not only isolated forms, but to create also a reseau of decontextualised words, so we will take into consideration not only the actual verb in the sentence we are analysing, but also his root so to create a complete lexicon of the alchemic corpus.

4. THE ALCHEMIC CORPS IN THE THESARUS LINGUAE ARABICAE

Paul Kraus, with his lifetime study of Ġābir, managed to gather and classify almost 3000 manuscripts which were only partly edited. In order to create a digitalised corpus to help and deepen studies on Arabic Language and lexicon, I tried to find the majority of the edited texts of Ġābir’s œuvre. So this is a – hopefully – complete list of them.

In: Tadbīr al-ikṣīr al-‘aṭam, edited by Pierre Lory⁴⁰:

(i) Kitāb al-lāḥūt; (ii) Kitāb al-bāb; (iii) Kitāb al-ṣalāţin kalima'; (iv) Kitāb al-manāḥ;
(v) Kitāb al-hadāţ; (vi) Kitāb al-ṣaţīţ; (vii) Kitāb al-‘aşara'; (viii) Kitāb al-na’ūţ;
(ix) Kitāb al-‘ahad; (x) Kitāb al-sa‘b’a'; (xi) Kitāb al-tabdīr al-arkān wa al-ṣāţīţ;
(xii) Kitāb al-manfa‘a‘a'; (xiii) Kitāb hakt al-astār; (xiv) Kitāb al-ṣaţīţ.

These texts were edited together by choice of Lory because of their main theme: the preparation of the Supreme Elixir which will make possible to turn metals into gold, but they come from different collections:

– the first ten are from “The LXX books” collection, and represent the core ideas further developed in the following sixty chapters of the same collection;
– Kitāb al-tabdīr is an isolated treaty discovered after the death of P. Kraus, and it is impossible to give it a specified place inside the Ġābirian corpus;
– Kitāb al-manfa‘a‘a‘a‘ was classified and analysed by Kraus, but it was impossible to place it inside the corpus, moreover, another 15 lines extrait was edited by Holmyard;

Kitāb ḥatk al-astār wasn’t properly situated in the corpus by Kraus, who nevertheless suggest it to be part of the “Five hundreds books”;

Kitāb al-ṣafī is part of the “Five hundreds books”.

Others manuscripts were edited by Kraus in the Muḫtār rasā’il, an “Essai sur les idées scientifiques dans l’Islam”:

(i) Kitāb ʾiḫrāq mā fi al-quwa ilā al-fī; (ii) Kitāb al-ḥudūd; (iii) Kitāb al-māġid; (iv) Al-ḡazāʾ al-awwal min kitāb al-ahḡār ‘alā raʾi Balinās; (v) Al-ḡazāʾ al-ṭānī min kitāb al-ahḡār ‘alā raʾi Balinās; (vi) Al-ḡazāʾ al-rābīʾ min kitāb al-ahḡār ‘alā raʾi Balinās; (vii) Nuḥbāʾ min kitāb al-ḥawaṣṣ al-kaḥīr; (viii) Al-muqālaʾa al-ṭālā; (ix) Al-muqālaʾa al-ṭānīyā; (x) Al-muqālaʾa al-ḥāmisā; (xi) Al-muqālaʾa al-ḥāmisā ʿaṣar; (xii) Al-muqālaʾa al-sābīʾa ʿaṣar; (xiii) Al-muqālaʾa al-ḥāmisā wa al-ašarīn; (xiv) Ḍit’a ʿṣāfīrīn min kitāb al-ḥawaṣṣ; (xv) Ḍit’dā al-ḡazāʾ al-awwal min kitāb al-sirr al-maḥnīn; (xvi) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-taṣrīf; (xvii) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-ṭaṣrīf; (xviii) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-mayzān al-saḥīr; (xix) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-sābīʾī; (xx) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-ḥaṃsīn; (xxi) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-ḥaḥṣi; (xxii) Kitāb al-rāḥab; (xxiii) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-ḥāṣil; (xxiv) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-taqādim; (xxv) Ḍuḥb min kitāb al-ʾiṣṭimāl.

Moreover we have the work of Haq, *Names, Natures and Things* in which is edited the Kitāb al-ʾAḥḡāʾ, “The book of stones”.

Although those texts are less than a minor part of the Ġābirian complete work, this may be the perfect starting point to create an alchemic corpus because of the possibility to scan and elaborate the material digitally.

Of course the final goal is to have the whole corpus in a database to query for, and investigate, words and concepts. The present project is meant to be the first step towards that direction. Alchemy will reveal its secrets only to those who are ready for them, only to those who have the knowledge to fully and deeply understand its meanings. Naturally we are not willing to – and most probably we would not be able to – unveil all enigmas of this discipline, but we firmly believe that this kind of text must be represented in the *Thesaurus* for its peculiarities and its challenging nature.

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References


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