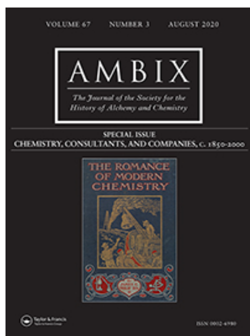

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Early Greek Alchemy, Patronage and Innovation in Late Antiquity

By Olivier Dufault, Pp. viii + 168, index. California Classical Studies: Berkeley, CA. 2019. £23.46. ISBN: 978-1-939926-12-8.

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adulterated food, and it is not up to chemists alone to determine which substances or practices are acceptable and which are not.

Cohen's book is a compelling read that combines colourful characters and fascinating geographies of commodities and cultures with important philosophical and intellectual discussions over what constitutes food or fraud. This book is a timely one as debates over food regulation and standards likely will dominate future trade talks between the US, Britain and other territories across the world.

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Early Greek Alchemy, Patronage and Innovation in Late Antiquity. By Olivier Dufault, Pp. viii + 168, index. California Classical Studies: Berkeley, CA. 2019. £23.46. ISBN: 978-1-939926-12-8.

Is it too much to state that Zosimus of Panopolis (fl. ca. 300 CE) is as foundational a figure for early Greek alchemy as Paul is for early Christianity? He is usually perceived as the one who most of all raised Greek alchemy from a wide array of recipes and techniques to a philosophico-technical system. The importance of Zosimus in the history of alchemy has resulted in a significant body of literature on his ideas and writings, as well as their transmission to later periods. Even so, Dufault's monograph has a fresh perspective to offer, making a learned effort to contextualise Zosimus in his intellectual and social milieu and to study the ways in which scholarly patronage influenced the development of alchemy.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 explores scholarly patronage from the late first to the fourth century CE, particularly the kind pertaining to scholars interested in *mageia*, an ambiguous term perceived both positively (as an intellectually appealing "Persian" or "Eastern philosophy") and negatively (as the practice of illegitimate rituals). This ambiguity, examined in Chapter 2, gave scholars the opportunity to conflate the legitimate form of *mageia* with witchcraft so as to criticise their peers who were interested in *mageia*. Chapter 3 discusses the character-type of the "learned sorcerer," the polemical use of which suggests tensions among client scholars who competed for patronage. He is depicted as a Greek-educated scholar of, for example, Egyptian, Jewish or Samaritan origin, whose activities were related to aristocratic banquets and included *paignia*, entertaining tricks that demonstrated one's knowledge of natural philosophy and could instigate discussion. Chapter 4 shows that client scholars could appeal to patrons by displaying their mastery of Eastern wisdom. The persisting stereotype of the learned sorcerer implies concerns about client scholars corrupting scholarly tradition.

Chapters 5–6 present Zosimus as a Greek-educated client scholar who addresses certain treatises to his patroness, Theosebeia, warning her not to be lured by the alchemical teachings of his opponents. In Chapter 5, Dufault describes the emergence of alchemical ideas in late antique literature and arrives at much the same conclusion as myself concerning the use of the terms "philosopher" and *cheimeutēs* ("alchemist").[1] He argues that alchemical authors were called "philosophers" and represented themselves as such rather than as "alchemists." On the other hand, the rare term *cheimeutēs* was usually used pejoratively, as in the case of

[1] Vangelis Koutalis, Matteo Martelli and Gerasimos Merianos, "Graeco-Egyptian, Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Alchemy: Introductory Remarks," in *Greek Alchemy from Late Antiquity to Early Modernity*, ed. E. Nicolaidis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 31–7.

the swindler John Isthmeus mentioned by John Malalas. Dufault then unfolds Zosimus' ideas, which attributed a soteriological purpose to alchemy, and argues that he must have been perceived as a Christian scholar whose literary background included Hermetic, Jewish, and Platonic elements. The final chapter shows that, for Zosimus, the correct practice of alchemy relied on Greek scholarship, especially the (pseudo-)Democritean tradition. In contrast, the "daimonic" alchemy of his rivals is presented as associated with *mageia*. Zosimus stressed that Greek education could help recover the forgotten ancient technology of fallen angels via the meticulous interpretation of the Democritean work. Linking alchemical practice to the Greek commentary tradition, he made it appealing to Christian, Greek-educated scholars. The patronage of Theosebeia contributed to the diffusion of his work.

The title of the book suggests that Dufault's two main axes of argumentation are patronage and innovation. Indeed, scholarly patronage is considered as a source of innovation leading to fields outside of classical *paideia*. However, while the concept of scholarly patronage is thoroughly explicated, the same cannot be said for innovation, except for a few distinct references (e.g., pp. 1, 4, 5). A clear historiographical approach to innovation would have made Dufault's argument more compelling. This would require at least a short discussion of: (a) the author's understanding of "innovation" and its relation to concepts such as "originality" and "novelty;" (b) the ways and senses in which "innovation" was perceived in late antiquity; and (c) the distinct typological criteria against which Zosimean alchemy is assessed as innovative (e.g., content, level of radicalness, diffusion).[2] Dufault has gathered most of the information required; all that was needed was its overt and systematic arrangement.

Interestingly, Dufault does not examine theurgy in the discussion of *mageia*. He only mentions it in the context of Zosimus' negative appraisal of Zoroaster's *mageia*, stressing that both Zosimus and Porphyry advised against blood sacrifices and ritualistic means for the soul to return to the divine, "i.e. that neither *mageia* nor *theourgia* could be effectively used for soteriological purposes" (p. 140; also n. 89). The absence of theurgy in the rest of the book is puzzling, given that it was often labelled as "magic" in late antiquity, a point which would have further served the author's argument about the breadth of meaning of *mageia*. Furthermore, since certain scholars have stressed similarities between aspects of theurgy and Zosimus' allegory and practices, one might expect Dufault to comment on these views.[3]

Dufault makes an excellent attempt to represent the intellectual background of Zosimus' alchemy. Nevertheless, the study of Zosimus' socio-cultural context cannot be limited to the institution of scholarly patronage. The study would benefit from greater consideration of other historiographical issues, such as the significance of the socio-cultural settings of Panopolis and Alexandria for the development of Zosimus' ideas, or, given the technical side of the Zosimean work, the various ways in which alchemy and the artisanal milieu interacted in Graeco-Roman Egypt.

The above comments do not reduce the value of Dufault's monograph. All in all, his attempt to reconstruct the intellectual and social setting of Zosimus is commendable. He offers a plausible explanation on how alchemical commentary was legitimised, why Zosimus' work was (partly) preserved, and why it enjoyed such an impact in later periods. At the same time, he

[2] See, e.g., Benoît Godin, *Innovation Contested: The Idea of Innovation over the Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Apostolos Spanos, "Was Innovation Unwanted in Byzantium?" in *Wanted: Byzantium. The Desire for a Lost Empire*, ed. I. Nilsson and P. Stephenson (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2014), 43–56.

[3] See, e.g., Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 153 n. 43; Daniel Stolzenberg, "Unpropitious Tinctures: Alchemy, Astrology & Gnosis according to Zosimos of Panopolis," *Archives internationales d'histoire des sciences* 49 (1999): 29–31; Kyle A. Fraser, "Zosimos of Panopolis and the Book of Enoch: Alchemy as Forbidden Knowledge," *Aries* 4, no. 2 (2004): 131 n. 22; Shannon L. Grimes, "Zosimus of Panopolis: Alchemy, Nature, and Religion in Late Antiquity" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 2006), 119–51.

convincingly deals with several matters of early Greek alchemy and Zosimus' writings. Thus, the book is a welcome and valuable contribution to the history of Greek alchemy.

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