

Stephanos von Alexandria – Ein spätantiker Alchemist am kaiserlichen Hof

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Stephanos of Alexandria — A Late Ancient Alchemist at the Imperial Court

First Treatise

The central concept is φύσις (physis). This means on one hand nature – e.g. natural conditions, attributes, talents, order and virtue – on the other hand being, essence and species. However, φύσις (physis), in alchemically context, means comprehending by observation, only possible through an arcane substance, which is only visible to the inner eye. Terms like magnesia, gold coral, copper, purple and odd numbers are mentioned.

Second Treatise

Stephanos presents geometry, music, anatomy of the human body and astronomy as a single unity of harmony. Furthermore, he describes the making of gold through fragmentation, trituration, blackening, whitening and eventual yellowing. He lists the chemical apparati, although he despise the use of them. At the end he writes about steam, ascending water and cleansing through sulphurous water. Intriguingly, sulphur and godly look, in the Greek language, etymologically the same (θεῖον (*theion*)).

Third Treatise

This chapter explains the material world, starting with ash, as a miraculous substance for colouration and healing, but also for regeneration of other substances and even rebirth. Air is described as breath of life and giver of soul. Copper is compared to humans, because both has soul and spirit. The godly sulphurous water is virginal feminine, which causes semen and rebirth. At last he mentions the etesian stone.

Fourth Treatise

Again, the concept of nature is discussed as the One in everything. Nature is precious but also worthless, unknown to many men but polyonomous, and she is the home of the soul. In addition, he discusses the art of the alchemist, which is to detach the soul from the body or the material.

Fifth Treatise

Stephanos begins this treatise with a prayer, that he could describe the secrets of the old philosophers, because the understanding of this chapter is only possible through god's aid. He elucidates the synergy of the four elements with four qualities, four body fluids, four metals, four seasons, twelve astrological signs, seven planets and three keys. The aspiration is to make the body bodiless and reverse.

fire	water	air	earth
silver, copper	gold	silver, gold, copper	slag
yellow bile	mucus	blood	black bile
warm, dry	cold, moist	warm, moist	cold, dry
summer	winter	spring	autumn
cancer, leo, virgin	capricorn, aquarius, fish	aries, taurus, gemini	libra, scorpio, sagittarian
navel → chest	knee → navel	chest → neck	feet → knee

The three keys presents the metaphorical way to disengage the spirit from the matter. Every time, the alchemist is trying to disengage the spirit from a matter, he is also disengaging his spirit from his body. Instead of death, the alchemist experience a refinement, betterment and purification. In addition, change of matter means change of the nature of the alchemist. The Alchemist is less a scientist, but more a philosopher of life.

Sixth Treatise

The first part contains a discussion of geometry and numbers. Furthermore, he illustrates the divisibility of substances, which are either dry (fire substance) or moist (air substance) steam. Stephanos concludes this chapter with a long discussion about the approach of true philosophers and alchemists: everything has to be analysed and verified thoroughly.

Seventh Treatise

Stephanos displays the philosophers and alchemists as almighty, because the only true way to understand the world is to analyse and observe. He despise the people who want to create gold, because they does not understand alchemy. He then lists many different new recipes.

Eighth Treatise

This treatise concentrates solely on the colouring. No body can colour on its own. Although, if the body was once coloured, it can colour other bodies. Important is, that the spirit can pass through the material and has the capability to colour. He then lists every substance that is capable of colouring other bodies.

Ninth Treatise

His last treatise is dedicated to emperor Herakleios, who probably was in the auditorium. He concludes all the important fundamental ideas of his alchemical writings and concepts. He explains the four elements with their attributes and qualities, the spirit which is responsible for the colouring and ascent to the sky through fire or heat, rot, and eventually the seven planets and their assignment to gods.

The Imperial Court

- 11th century: Codex Marcianus Graecus 299 (ancient Greek) → oldest conserved text
- 15th/16th century: Codex Monacensis Graecus (ancient Greek) → edition Julius Ludwig Ideler 1842
- ~1640: Codex Vindobonensis 11453 (Latin) comissioned by emperor Ferdinand III. of Austria rather a paraphrase than a translation
background: 30 years' war was at its last phase
financial situation was precarious
Ferdinand III. considered about selling

References: Maria Papathanassiou: Stephanos von Alexandria und sein alchemistisches Werk. Dissertation, Berlin 1992.
Rudolf Werner Soukup: Natur, du Himmlische! Die alchemistischen Traktate des Stephanos von Alexandria. Eine Studie zur Alchemie des 7. Jahrhunderts. In: Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften 12, 1992.