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## The Ideas of Pseudo-Empedocles in Baghdad Mysticism of the 9th–10<sup>th</sup> Centuries: An Influence of Nestorian Intellectual Tradition

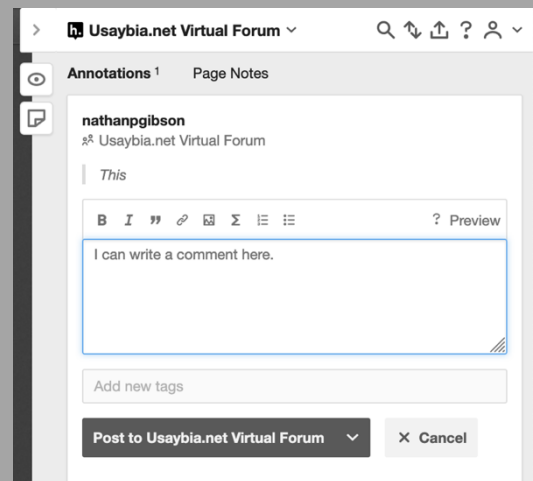
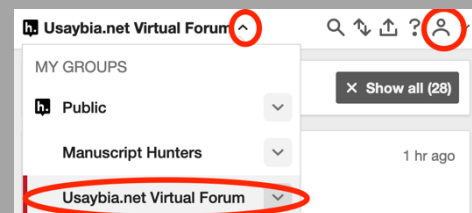
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**THE IDEAS OF PSEUDO-EMPEDOCLES IN BAGHDAD MYSTICISM OF  
THE 9<sup>TH</sup> - 10<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES:  
AN INFLUENCE OF NESTORIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION**

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Abstract

The early 'Abbasid epoch was famous for adaptation of Greek science through the intellectual work of Syrian scholars. The Nestorian centre of learning and intellectual work, the monastery Dayr Qunnā near Baghdad had a special patronage. In the 'Abbasid epoch this centre trained personnel for the state administration. The most eminent figure in Islamic tradition who probably was influenced by Dayr Qunna was the eminent Baghdad Sufi master al-Ḥallāj. Some researchers even found him a hidden Christian. Really some points of al-Ḥallāj's teaching about divine love, annihilation of human spirit in God and incarnation (*ḥulūl*) of the divine nature (*lāhūt*) in the human nature (*nāsūt*), and unity with God (*ittiḥād*) have clear parallels with Syrian Christianity. His cosmological doctrine has a number of parallels with the ideas of the pseudo-Empedocles that gained popularity in Syrian monasteries. The crucial al-Ḥallāj's cosmological points were promoted by Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Daylamī in the *Kitāb 'atf al-alif al-ma'lūf 'alā l-lām al-ma'tūf*. Al-Daylamī was a disciple of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī and belonged to the tradition cultivated the cosmological ideas of the pseudo-Empedocles. In 'Abbasid epoch this tradition comes from Dayr Qunnā. The *Comment to Aristotle's Metaphysics* written by Mattā b. Yūnus al-Qunnā'ī, the eminent representative of the local scientific tradition shows this tendency. We can reconstruct the crucial points of the Arab partisans of pseudo-Empedocles according to several texts of al-Shahrastānī, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, al-Daylamī and al-Ḥallāj. For example, the presence of five emanations and four elements which are moved by love and strife; the passionate love as the most important divine attribute. The *materia prima* appeared through this attribute.

The early 'Abbasid epoch became famous for adaptation of Greek science through the intellectual work of Syrian scholars. In the 10<sup>th</sup> c. the Nestorian centre of learning and intellectual work, the monastery Dayr Qunnā had special patronage. This monastery was situated at 90 km from Bagdad on the left side of the Tigris. It was founded by Mar 'Abdā at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In the 'Abbasid period this centre

trained personnel for the state administration. Some influential Nestorian clans of secretaries of the 9<sup>th</sup> - early 10<sup>th</sup> cc. like Banū Makhlad and Banū 'l-Jarrāḥ came from this monastery. In 'Abbasid epoch the ideas of the pseudo-Empedocles acquired popularity there.

Pseudo-Empedocles or the Arabic Empedocles links with the elaboration of Miguel Asín y Palacios. According to him, the Pseudo-Empedocles tradition was explored by scholars in Islamic Spain (Ibn Masarra ideas and Jewish Spain philosophy). The scholars find some links between pseudo-Empedoclean and Ismā'ili philosophical ideas. For example, al-Shahrastānī preserved his ideas probably through Ismā'ili doctrine. The vivid image of Empedocles was created by Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Daylamī in the *Kitāb 'atf al-alif*, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a in the *Ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'*, al-Shahrastānī in the *Kitāb al-milal wa 'l-nihal*, al-Qifī in the *Ta'rīkh al-ḥukamā'*, and al-Shahrazūrī in the *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ wa rawḍat al-afrāḥ*. Asín's theory of the pseudo-Empedocles met with criticism. The critics showed that Asín identified various Neoplatonic and Hermetic content with the pseudo-Empedocles. According to scholars such as al-Shahrastānī, the content of Arabic Empedocles was an unorganized compilation.<sup>1</sup>

The first scholar who assumes the link between Dayr Qunnā and some Islamic mystics was L. Massignon.<sup>2</sup> But his hypothesis based on an unclear foundation.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, we have no information on personal contacts of some mystics with Dayr Qunnā's scholars. Thus this hypothesis is discussable under the details of the ideas themselves. The transfer of the pseudo-Empedocles concept is a marker of this

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<sup>1</sup> De Smet D., *Empedocles Arabus. Une lecture neoplatonicienne tardive*. Brussel: KAWLSK, 1998. De Smet D., "The Influence of the Arabic Pseudo-Empedocles on Medieval Latin Philosophy: Myth or Reality?" in *Across the Mediterranean Frontiers: Trade, Politics and Religion, 650-1450* (International Medieval Research. Vol. 1), eds D.A. Agius and I.R. Netton. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1997. P. 225-234; Stern, S.M., "Ibn Masarra, Follower of Pseudo-Empedocles - an Illusion" in *Actas IV congreso de estudios arabes e islamicos*. Coimbra-Lisboa. 1 a 8 de Setembro de 1968. Leiden: Brill, 1971. P. 325-337; Kingsley P., *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Massignon L., «Interferences philosophique et percurs metaphysique dans la mystique Hallajienne: notion de "l'Essentiel Desire" in *Opera minora. Textes recueillis classés et présentés avec une bibliographie par Y. Moubarac*. T. 2. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1969. P. 226-253.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Kraemer J.L., *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age*. Leiden: Brill, 1992. P. 221.

influence.

The most eminent figure in Islamic tradition who was influenced by Dayr Qunnā was al-Ḥallāj, the eminent Baghdad Sufi master. It is particularly interesting that we have no information on personal contact of al-Ḥallāj with Dayr al-Qunnā's scholars. However, some of his partisans and scholars who were close to him have been associated with Dayr Qunnā. Among his patrons were Ishāq b. 'Alī and Muḥammad al-Qunnā'i. Ishāq b. 'Alī later became a secretary of al-Khāqānī, the vizier of al-Muqtadir. Unfortunately, we know nothing about the ideas of Ishāq b. 'Alī and Muḥammad al-Qunnā'i. Ishāq b. 'Alī was arrested as his disciple. Some scholars suppose that even suppose that al-Ḥallāj was a hidden Christian.<sup>4</sup> The roots of his doctrine came from the earlier Sufi tradition, but some points of his teaching about divine love, the annihilation of the human nature in God and incarnation (*ḥulūl*) of the divine nature (*lāhūt*) in the human nature (*nāsūt*), and unity with God (*ittiḥād*) have clear parallels with the doctrine of Syrian Christianity. For example, al-Ḥallāj used the famous Christian metaphor of the mixing water with wine (i.e. the mixing of the two natures in Christ).<sup>5</sup> However, this influence is a special problem. Some of these parallels probably connect with Dayr Qunnā's ideas.

The central idea of the pseudo-Empedocles was the unity of the human soul and God as the final goal for human being. This unity is achieved with ascetic life. But this idea was very popular in Islamic mysticism too. For example, al-Ḥallāj took this basic principle from his teacher Sahl al-Tustarī. I don't presume that al-Ḥallāj's unity depends on the pseudo-Empedoclean doctrine.

Al-Ḥallāj's cosmological ideas were promoted by Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Daylamī in the *Kitāb 'aṭf al-alif al-ma'lūf 'alā l-lām al-ma'tūf*. These ideas have a number of parallels with pseudo-Empedocles ideas that gained popularity in Syrian monasteries.

Al-Daylamī describes Empedoclean ideas in this manner: "Empedocles said: the first principle (*mabda'*) created by the Demiurge (*al-mubdi' al-awwal*) was a (couple):

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<sup>4</sup> Arnaldez R., *Hallaj ou la religion de la croix*. Paris: Plon, 1964; Hatem J. *Hallaj et le Christ*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005, Blum G., *Die Geschichte der Begegnung christlich-orientalischer Mystik mit der Mystik des Islams*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 2009 (Orientali Biblica et Christiana. Band 17). S. 527-566.

<sup>5</sup> *Dīwān al-Ḥallāj*, ed. K.M. al-Shaybī. Baghdad: al-Maktaba al-Waṭaniyya, 1404/1984

Love (*maḥabba*) and Strife (*ghalaba* sic!). They created the simple spiritual substances, and the bodily simple substances, and the bulky compound substances”.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Daylamī stressed that al-Ḥallāj separated from other *shaykhs* because he indicated love as an attribute of the divine essence. This separation led to breaking with them. Al-Ḥallāj pointed to the union of lover (*muḥibb*) and beloved (*maḥbūb*) in a state of ultimate love (*maḥabba*). In this process, the attributes of the lover are destroyed in the beloved, or human nature is destroyed in Divine one.

In the first passage from the *‘Aṭf al-ma’lūf*, that refers to al-Ḥallāj’s cosmological ideas of, al-Daylamī derived al-Ḥallāj’s teaching from the doctrines of Greek philosophers on fundamental love (*maḥabba aṣliyya*). This love was the first creation of the True God and originated from the Intellect and natural Love as a catalyst for the Intellect. Al-Daylamī enumerated the [pseudo]-Empedocles, Heraclitus of Ephesus and Ephesus school (the school of Heraclitus’ successors). He supposed that al-Ḥallāj was the successor of their ideas.<sup>7</sup>

The question is the following: is a real ground for comparison of constructs of the pseudo-Empedocles with al-Ḥallāj’s cosmological ideas, or the comparison of al-Daylamī is farfetched?

Al-Daylamī was a disciple of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, who belonged to the tradition cultivated the cosmological ideas of the pseudo-Empedocles. Al-Tawḥīdī was very ingrained in the ideas of Nestorian scholars. For example, he reported the famous debate between Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus and Abū Sa’īd al-Sīrāfī on the merits of logic and grammar in the *Kitāb al-Imtā’*.<sup>8</sup> Massignon stressed the link between al-Tawḥīdī and al-Ḥallāj, because al-Tawḥīdī’s friend Zayd b. Rifā’a was a pupil of Abū Bakr al-Shiblī, the famous Sufi *shaykh* of Baghdad and the follower of al-Ḥallāj.<sup>9</sup> But this fact is not proof for this link. I suppose that some ideas of al-Ḥallāj and al-Tawḥīdī may perhaps have a similar origin, without a link between them. In this time the ideas of the pseudo-Empedocles acquired popularity in Dayr

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Daylamī Abū ‘l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, *Kitāb ‘aṭf al-alif al-ma’lūf’ alā l-lām al-ma’ tūf*, éd. J.C. Vadet. Le Caire: IFAO, 1962. P. 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Massignon, *Interférences philosophique*. P. 231-239.

<sup>8</sup> Vagelpohl U., “The ‘Abbasid Translation Movement in Context Contemporary Voices of Translation” in *‘Abbasid Studies II. Occasional Papers of the School of ‘Abbasid Studies Leuven 28 June-1 July 2004*, ed. J. Nawas. Leuven: Peeters. 2010. P. 256.

<sup>9</sup> Massignon, *Interférences philosophique*. P. 241.

Qunnā. The *Comment to Aristotle's Metaphysics* written by Mattā b. Yūnus al-Qunnā'ī, the eminent representative of the local scientific tradition demonstrates this tendency. According to some accounts, Mattā b. Yūnus (d. 328/939) and his pupil Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 364/974) were the teachers of Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī al-Mantiqī (the Logic), the eminent Islamic philosopher. This scholar remained in Baghdad for the rest of his life, under the patronage of the new Buyid power. Abū Sulaymān's *Risāla fī 'l-kamāl al-khaṣṣ* shows a bundle of the old ideas which will be developed by Sufism. For example, union (*ittiḥād*) with the essences of the celestial bodies from old astral cults of the Sabians; Nestorian union with the human nature (*nāsūt*) of the Christ; the philosophical idea of union with the Active Intellect etc.<sup>10</sup> These ideas reflect the background of Dayr Qunnā thought which could have been a source for several scholars resided in Baghdad.

The famous geographer Abū Zayd al-Balkhī (d. 322/934) may have belonged to this tradition. He was an expert on Greek tradition and the founder of Islamic geographical tradition based on Hellenistic science. He was the founder of the school of terrestrial mapping in Baghdad. Al-Istakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal belonged to this school. Abū Zayd al-Balkhī was one of the closest disciples of an eminent philosopher al-Kindī. During the years which he spent in Iraq, al-Balkhī studies philosophy, astrology and astronomy, medicine and natural science. We have no information about al-Balkhī's connections with Dayr Qunnā's tradition, although Massignon tried to tie him to this tradition. Al-Balkhī was also interested in the doctrine of al-Ḥallāj in the spirit of Hellenized Christianity. It is interesting that he wrote one of the most concise and precise descriptions of the doctrine of al-Ḥallāj. According to al-Balkhī, al-Ḥallāj taught that the mystic raises his body in obedience possesses his soul, reaches the stage of approximates to God (*mutaqarribūn*). And when there was nothing left of the human nature, the spirit of God was embodied in him, from which was Jesus, son of Mary. His actions become an act of God.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, some scholars like Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī and al-Tawḥīdī

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<sup>10</sup> Massignon, *Interférences philosophique*. P. 241-242.

<sup>11</sup> al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Viae regnorum. Descriptio dictionis moslemicae auctore Abu Ishak al-Farisi al-Istakhrī*, ed. M.J. De Goeje (BGA 1). Lugduni Batavorum, 1870. P. 148-149; al-Ḥallāj al-Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr, *Kitāb al ṭawāsīn par Aboū al Moghiṭh al Ḥosayn Ibn Manṣoūr al-Ḥallāj. Texte Arabe [...] avec la version persane d'al-Baqlī*, Pub. par L. Massignon. Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1913. P. 135.

developed the idea of the *philosophia pirennis* (*ḥikma khālida*). This idea was evolved by al-Tawḥīdī on the wisdom of the nations and later by al-Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl. The eminent Andalusian Peripatetic philosopher and Sufi Ibn Sabʿīn (d. 1269-1271) and his disciple al-Shushtarī (610/1212-668/1269) who was burned for adherence to the doctrine of incarnation (*ḥulūl*) reckoned al-Ḥallāj in the Greek tradition. They brought al-Ḥallāj and some other Sufis and Peripatetics like al-Ghazālī, al-Shiblī, al-Suhrawardī, Ibn Masarra, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd into line with Hermes Trismegistus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others. Apparently, the reason for this comparison was his knowledge of some of the Hellenistic ideas. This idea of the *philosophia pirennis* was developed by Miskawayh who on the basis of pre-Islamic Iranian tradition.

According to Ibn al-Faraḍī, al-Ḥallāj's intimate follower al-Nahrajūrī (d. 330/941) was the teacher of eminent Andalusian philosopher Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931).<sup>12</sup> Ibn Masarra studied in Baghdad. His original works, except of a group of passages in the works of Ibn ʿArabī and Ibn Ḥazm, were discovered about fifty years ago. Ibn al-Qifī attributed to Ibn Masarra the development of pseudo-Empedocles ideas and its transfer to Muslim Spain. These ideas have spread there as a doctrine of Almerian philosophical tradition that combined Peripatetic and Sufi ideas. Ibn Masarra perhaps acquired this knowledge in the course of communication with Baghdad Sufis. At the same time, his ideas were rejected by followers of “moderate” Sufism. A group of Baghdad Sufis closed to al-Ḥallāj, al-Shiblī and some other persons were the followers of ecstasy and found themselves into direct confrontation with some Sufi *shaykhs* who were followers of moderate mysticism. Some ideas of Baghdad Sufism (like the phenomenon of divine will (*irāda*)) surely entered into Ibn Masarra's philosophy. Dayr Qunnā's ideas perhaps become a part of the intellectual background of Muslim Spain in this way. On the other hand, Asín who proposed this theory was criticized. Asín's Ibn Masarra isn't very coherent.<sup>13</sup> But this criticism has been weakened after discovering Ibn Masarra's original works.<sup>14</sup> I maintain only some elements of the pseudo-Empedocles from Baghdad in his thought, but not a whole

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<sup>12</sup> Ibn al-Faraḍī ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad, *Taʾrīkh ʿulamāʾ al-Andalus*, ed. by Rūḥiyya ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suwayfī. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyya, 1417/1997. P. 323-324.

<sup>13</sup> Arnaldez R., “Ibn Masarra” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Leiden: Brill, 1971. Vol. 3. P. 868-72.

<sup>14</sup> Stroumsa S., Sviri S., “The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra and his Epistle on Contemplation” in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 36 (2009). P. 201-253.

content.

On the other hand, the scholars find some links between pseudo-Empedoclean and Ismā‘ili philosophical ideas. For example, al-Shahrastānī preserved his ideas probably through Ismā‘ili doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Iranian philosopher al-‘Āmirī said that Empedocles influenced all *bāṭinī* philosophers and mystics.

The main points of the Arab partisans of pseudo-Empedocles can be reconstructed according to several texts of al-Sijistānī, al-Shahrastānī, al-Tawḥīdī, al-Daylamī, and al-Ḥallāj. Massignon was the first to propose marking out some Arabic Empedoclean theses. But some of them are not coloured by specific Empedoclean ideas. For example, the recognition of God as a being ineffable and unknowable to formal logic is common for Islamic mysticism. The point that “God is movement and rest” was not supported by Islamic texts. Massignon also asserts that the crucial point of this influence is technical symbolism (*rumūz*). But *rumūz* are used also in Shi‘a and Isma‘ili ideas that were under influence of Hellenistic doctrines too.<sup>16</sup> The Empedoclean points reflect the cosmological realm. Human nature connects to this dimension:

1. The presence of five emanations. There are four elements that moved by love (*maḥabba*) and strife (*ghalaba*). The source of this doctrine is the ideas of Empedocles on four elements, moved by love (φιλία) and strife (νεῖκος). These essences provide perpetual motion in the world. But the number of elements changes. For example, one passage of al-Ḥallāj from the *Tafsīr* of al-Sulamī mentions six elements and six emanations. In al-Ḥallāj and al-Daylamī cosmology, we find a term the secrets (*asrār*). These secrets play the part of elements with features that existed among the Muslim followers of pseudo-Empedocles: “Secrets remove from God, ascend to Him, keep in Him, but are not necessary for Him.”<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the isolation of God from secrets is stressed. The second emanation is Intellect (‘aql), the third is the world Soul (*nafs*), the fourth is Love (‘ishq), the fifth is nature (*ṭabī‘a*).

2. God is infinite compared to His attributes, which have a hypothetical being. Among these attributes, we find power (*qudra*), love (*maḥabba*), passionate love (‘ishq), wisdom (*ḥikma*), greatness (‘azama), beauty (*jamāl*), and greatness (*jalāl*).

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<sup>15</sup> Kingsley *Ancient Philosophy*. P. 379.

<sup>16</sup> Massignon *Interférences philosophique*. P. 243-244.

<sup>17</sup> al-Ḥallāj *Kitāb al ṭawāsīn* P. 60.



The passionate love like *‘ishq* (ἔρως) or desire-*mashī’a* (θέλημα) is the most important attribute, because God shows his being for the word with it. It is an originative source for all forms (*ṣuwar*). The *materia prima* came into existence with this attribute as a result of a combination of love with a limit (*ḥadd, infirād*).

3. Asceticism is a method of approach to God. Purification of the soul serves for the ascension to the divine Absolute.

Already D. de Smet noted that “only the points of matter as the first creature and of love and strife as contradictory principles might be specific to the Arabic Empedocles”.<sup>18</sup> Asceticism as a method of approach to God should be added to these points. These Empedocles ideas were a bridge to the latter tradition. It is important that according to al-Shahrastānī, the *materia prima* of the Arabic Empedocles is a hypostasis and the initial potentiality. The matter is not directly associated with the form, it is the seed of all subsequent beings. The entire creation is generated out of matter by the antithetic action of love and strife.<sup>19</sup> This discrepancy with Dayr al-Qunnā’s Empedocles probably shows another line.

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<sup>18</sup> De Smet *The Influence of the Arabic Pseudo-Empedocles*. P. 229.

<sup>19</sup> De Smet *The Influence of the Arabic Pseudo-Empedocles*. P. 233-234.