

# The solitude of the Orphan: Ġābir b. Ḥayyān and the Shiite heterodox milieu of the third/ninth–fourth/tenth centuries

Leonardo Capezzone\*

Sapienza – University of Rome

[leonardo.capezzone@uniroma1.it](mailto:leonardo.capezzone@uniroma1.it)

## Abstract

The community of Shiite alchemists gathered under the pen name of Ġābir b. Ḥayyān produced an important corpus first studied by Paul Kraus, who dated it between the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries. The religious, doctrinal and political issues of the corpus – especially in the last two collections – show that the Ġābireans were a real sectarian trend unknown to heresiographers. Kraus, along with some scholars after him, understood the Ġābirean community to be an expression of Ismaili thought. This paper aims to reconsider: a) the religious and political affiliation of Ġābir's alchemical community in the light of textual comparisons that show a close connection between the Ġābireans and the esoteric tenets characterizing the Shiite *ḡuluww* as mirrored in the heresiographic sources of the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries, and in the *Ġulāt* literary sources; and b) the last collection of the Ġābirean corpus as a polemical outcome specific to the Shiite milieu between the lesser and the greater Occultation of the twelfth Imam.

**Keywords:** Ġābir b. Ḥayyān, Early Shiite history, Islamic heresiography, Shiite heterodoxies, Politics and religion in Islamic middle ages

## Introduction

The community of Shiite alchemists gathered under the pen name of Ġābir b. Ḥayyān<sup>1</sup> produced an important corpus usually believed by scholarship to have been redacted between the third/ninth and fourth/tenth century.<sup>2</sup> The corpus deals not only with alchemy but also – especially in the last two collections

\* I wish to thank the anonymous readers for their relevant suggestions and remarks.

1 Henceforth references to Ġābir b. Ḥayyān will mean the plurality of the members of the Ġābirean community. My definition of the Ġābirean as a *community* strictly depends on the theoretical outline provided in T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970).

2 Cf. T. Delva, “The Abbasid activist Ḥayyān al-‘Atṭār as the father of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān: an influential hypothesis revisited”, *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 4, 2017, 35–61. As for other opinions on dating the Ġābirean *corpus* see D. de Smet, “Ja‘far-e Šādeq iv. Esoteric sciences”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica (EI)*, XIV/4, 362–3.

– religious, doctrinal, and political issues which led scholars to understand the Ġābirean community as a particular expression of the Shiite extremist milieu of that period.

The identity of the members, as well as the historicity of their activities, has always been protected by secrecy. Contemporary sources – with some important exceptions such as Ibn al-Nadīm – appear to have firmly shrouded the Ġābireans in silence, and they managed to escape completely the heresiographic view, as if they had no impact at all on the Shiite sectarian context which surrounded them. Secrecy and anonymity as social and literary devices of voluntary absence – or concealment – are not exclusive prerogatives of the alchemists' community. In general terms, they may be traced to a literary feature of the medieval Arabic culture whereby attributing a literary work to an author who has mastered the genre to which the work belongs represents a guarantee of authoritativeness and success.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the founding narrative according to which the alchemical corpus would have been authored by Ġābir b. Ḥayyān, the pupil of the sixth Imam Ġa'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/756), highlights both the powerful aspect of the Imam as a source of (salvific) knowledge, and Ġābir's existence as well as his writings dating back to the second/eighth century.<sup>4</sup> However, as regards the intellectual motives underlying the Ġābirean aim, the use of secrecy and anonymity is in many ways comparable to that of the tenth-century philosophical-scientific community known as *Iḥwān al-Šafā'*.<sup>5</sup>

The founding contribution to the study of Ġābir b. Ḥayyān's corpus is the work of Paul Kraus. Between 1935 and 1945 he published a collection of Ġābirean texts, followed by a seminal essay on Ġābir and Greek science.<sup>6</sup> Throughout his research Kraus highlighted the dependence of Arabic alchemical knowledge as reflected in Ġābir's corpus on the cultural traditions of late antiquity, so following a research paradigm which obscured the relationship between Ġābirean (and Arabic) alchemy and Chinese alchemy.<sup>7</sup>

The amount of data Kraus collected has revealed the existence of an alchemical school, established in the third/ninth century and developed during the fourth/tenth century, named after the alleged disciple of Ġa'far al-Šādiq and placed under the authority of the sixth Shiite Imam. Hence, the Ġābirean corpus

3 A. Kilito, *L'auteur et ses doubles. Essai sur la culture arabe classique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985).

4 Confusion over the early date of the Ġābirean corpus during the fourth/tenth century is recorded by Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. R. Tağaddud (Tehran: Marwī, 1391/1977), 420–1.

5 Y. Marquet, *La philosophie des alchimistes et l'alchimie des philosophes: Jābir ibn Ḥayyān et les Frères de la Pureté* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1988), where a connection between the members of the two communities is assumed.

6 [ps.] Ġābir b. Ḥayyān, *Muḥṭār Rasā'il*, ed. Paul Kraus (Paris and Cairo: Maktaba al-Ḥāngī, 1354/1936) (henceforth *MR*); P. Kraus, "Contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam. I. Le Corpus des écrits jabiriens" (henceforth "Contribution I"), 43, 1944, 1–214; Kraus, "Contribution à l'histoire des idées scientifique dans l'Islam. II. Jābir et la science grecque" (henceforth "Contribution II"), *Mémoires présentés à l'Institut d'Égypte*, 42, 1945, 1–406.

7 J. Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. V, 4, *China and the Arabic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 308–490, has demonstrated the increasing importance of organic alchemy, influenced by the Chinese alchemical culture, throughout the Ġābirean treatises.

was a work in progress and the outcome of investigations carried out over approximately a century. The apparent internal cohesion, as well as cross-references, suggests that it was constantly updated and rehashed to reflect continuity of thought, while remaining loyal to the rule – or method – of the voluntary dispersion of knowledge (*tabdīd al-ilm*).<sup>8</sup>

The chronology and internal organization of the corpus established by Kraus are based on Ibn al-Nadīm's source. As is well known, the bibliographer of Baghdad recorded that the Ġābirean treatises were gathered into four collections: the *Hundred and Twelve Books*; the *Seventy Books*; the *Books of Balances*; and the *Five Hundred Books*. The evolution of the corpus is more evident in the third and fourth collections: increasing importance is placed on the epistemological and theoretical aspect of the alchemical investigation, while treatises are devoted to religious, political and doctrinal issues close to the esoteric tenets characterizing the Shiite *ḡuluww* as mirrored in the heresiographic sources of the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries and in the few surviving *Ġulāt* literary sources produced in that period.

One Ġābirean treatise in particular – the *Kitāb al-Raḥma* – stands apart. Ibn al-Nadīm wrote that some sceptics of his time remained unconvinced that Ġābir had authored the whole corpus. They admittedly acknowledged that *Kitāb al-Raḥma* was the only treatise really authored by Ġābir b. Ḥayyān. Indeed, this text is not included in the list, and Ibn al-Nadīm only mentioned it in the biographical section.<sup>9</sup> Kraus considered the manuscripts of the *Kitāb al-Raḥma* as evidence of the continuous processing and rehashing of earlier materials, which was typical of the Ġābirean community. However, textual evidence led him to establish that the *Kitāb al-Raḥma* preceded the corpus. His attitude towards this ancient work was curiously close to that of the sceptics mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm; he actually deemed it separate from the whole Ġābirean corpus, and somehow extraneous to the issue of Ġābir b. Ḥayyān's historicity.

As for the community's belonging to the Shiite extremist wing, as reflected throughout the corpus in speculations about the figure of the Imam and the initiatory hierarchy of the epistemic access to his salvific knowledge, according to Kraus the Ġābireans' religious and political attitude may have been related to Ismailism or Qarmatism. The scholar's tragic death prevented him from developing such conjecture.<sup>10</sup> The Ġābirean connection with Ismaili doctrines has been discussed and accepted by scholars like Henri Corbin (to whom we shall return) and Yves Marquet, although this idea has been criticized in more recent research carried out by Pierre Lory.<sup>11</sup>

8 Cf. Kraus, "Contribution I", XXVII–XXX; P. Lory, *Dix traités d'alchimie. Les dix premiers Traités du Livre des Soixante-dix* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983), 242–4.

9 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 420. The treatise is published in M. Berthelot and O. Houdas, *La Chimie au moyen âge*, III, *L'alchimie arabe* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1893), 132–60 (French translation pp. 163–90); Kraus, "Contribution I", 5–9.

10 Kraus, "Contribution I", pp. XLVIII–LVII. P. Lory, *Alchimie et mystique en terre d'Islam* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1989), 155–62, collected and translated from German with some notes from Kraus' archive, where data were gathered on the hypothesis of an Ismaili/Qarmati affiliation.

11 Some terms of the question are reported by M. Brett, "The Mīm, the 'Ayn, and the making of Ismā'ilism", *BSOAS* 57/1, 1994, 25–37. Marquet, *La philosophie des alchimistes*,

Although the corpus shares cultural paradigms common to the Arabic Hermetic culture (which also imbued Ismaili natural philosophy) on which Kevin van Bladel shed new light,<sup>12</sup> scholarship has usually perceived and consequently depicted the Ġābirean community as if it were separate, or even entirely absent, from the religious and political debates and tensions that dramatically animated the Shiite scene between the end of the third/ninth and first decades of the fourth/tenth centuries – the critical period between the lesser and the greater Occultation of the twelfth Imam. Thus, the Ġābireans and their corpus seem to be worlds apart in the historical space: although some of the later treatises of the corpus have a firmly politico-religious aim, which could suggest the Ġābireans were a real sectarian trend, coeval heresiography does not seem to have recognized their actual existence. The dating of the corpus has always been evaluated in relation to external elements and factors, while no attempt has been made to contextualize the activities of the Ġābirean community within the history of early Shiism.

On the contrary, this paper focuses on the presence of this alchemical community in the complex Shiite context of the fourth/tenth century, marked by the concealment of the twelfth Imam. In that period, a conflict between orthodox and heterodox doctrinal visions began to develop. The latter represented the expression of an élite, and hence advocated the superiority of the hermeneutic and esoteric interpretation of the charismatic knowledge of the Imam, to which scholars of early Shiism have turned their attention in recent years.<sup>13</sup> In this context the sectarian milieu of the *ġuluww* is described by the heresiography of the end of the third/ninth and beginning of the fourth/tenth century

---

p. 132, sees a possible Qarmatī–Ismaili influence; see also Y. Marquet, “À propos de la secte des auteurs jābiriens”, *Studia Islamica* 73, 1991, 127–35. Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, pp. 155–62, expresses doubts about those views, and leans towards an ultra-Shiite understanding of the politico-religious convictions of the Ġābirean community.

12 K. Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

13 The conflict between normative and esoteric expressions of Shiism in the first centuries has been studied from different points of view: H. Halm, *Die islamische Gnosis. Die extreme Schia und die 'Alawiten* (Zurich: Artemis, 1982); M.A. Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le shi'isme originel* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1992); M.A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Silent Qur'an and the Speaking Qur'an. Scriptural Sources of Islam between History and Fervor* (translated by Eric Ormsby, New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 2016, especially pp. 97–115); H. Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1993): on *ġulāt* and *mufawwiḍa* 21–9; on the spread of *mufawwiḍa* literature 33–6; on the period of the lesser *ġayba* 59–105. A.A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981); A.J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000). Moreover, studies dedicated to the birth and development of Nuṣayri doctrines, especially focused on al-Ḥaṣībī and his circle, complete the understanding of the *ġulāt* presence within the Shiite landscape of the third/ninth–fourth/tenth centuries: M.M. Bar Asher and A. Kofsky, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawī Religion. An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Y. Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawīs: An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

(ps. al-Nāṣi' al-Akbar, al-Nawbaḥtī, al-Qummī),<sup>14</sup> with various doctrinal fronts claiming the intellectual (and political) legacy of the vanished Imam and its correct interpretation. A line of esoteric thought can be recognized among these various fronts. Shiite Imamite heresiography of the fourth/tenth–fifth/eleventh centuries traces this line back to some of the most intimate disciples of Ġa'far al-Šādiq (such as Abū'l-Ḥaṭṭāb and Mufaḍḍal ibn 'Umar al-Ġu'fī).<sup>15</sup> This same line is more evident in texts such as *Umm al-Kitāb* (UK), *Kitāb al-Ḥaḥft wa'l-aẓilla* (KHA) and *Kitāb al-Širāṭ* (KŞ) (all written between the third/ninth–fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries). These texts emanate from an exegetical climate centred on the soteriological knowledge of the Imam which even permeates the doctrinal treatises of the Ġābirean corpus: a common paraphrase reflecting an identical and shared religious and speculative disposition can be obtained by epitomizing the former and latter series of texts.

I shall seek to highlight some features of what can be defined as a Shiite style of thought, common to the surviving esoteric texts and the last production of the Ġābirean community, which early heresiography has long been concerned with. The first common feature is a historical issue that marked the origins of Shiite *ġuluww*: the transfer of the Alid Imam's charisma to people who had no genealogical ties with the Prophet Muḥammad's family. Heresiographers understood that issue as a link between the early appearance of heterodoxy (e.g. the extremism professed by Abū'l-Ḥaṭṭāb) and the spread of doctrines such as those of the *mufawwiḍa* or *muḥammisa* sects in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> The convergence of the manifold meanings of this theme into the symbolism of a particular figure, the Orphan (*yatīm*), can be observed over time.

## 1. The Shiite *ġuluww* and the transfer of the Imam's charisma outside the Alid genealogy

The spread of religious propaganda centred on a non-genealogical, spiritual transmission of the imamate occurred with the revolt of 'Abd Allāh b. Mu'āwiya, which broke out in 126/744. While not a fully-fledged doctrine, it was based on the transfer of the Imam's religious charisma to an element outside of the Prophet's family, and was therefore extraneous to the genealogical link that gave rise to the conception of the passage of the Imamate and of political-religious charisma itself. The earliest heresiography provides a narrative of the spread of a set of beliefs relating to the heresy of 'Abd Allāh b. Harb.<sup>17</sup>

14 In general, on Imami Shiite heresiography see J. Van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere. Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), I, 206–79.

15 al-Naḡāšī, *Kitāb al-Riḡāl*, ed. M.J. al-Nā'inī (Beirut: Dār al-aḍwā', 1408/1988), II, 359–61.

16 Modarresi, *Crisis and Consolidation*, 21–8; W. Madelung, "Mukhammisa", *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (EI) 2, VII, 517–8; M. Asatryan, "Moḡammisa", *Elr* online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mokammisa-sect>.

17 (Ps.) al-Nāṣi' al-Akbar, *Uṣūl al-niḥal*, in J. Van Ess, *Frühe mu'tazilitische Häresiographie: zwei Werke des Nāṣi' al-Akbar* (gest. 293 H.) (Beirut and Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1971), 36–40; al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-Maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, ed. M.J. Maškūr (Tehran: Mu'assasat-i Maṭbū'ātī 'Aṭā'i, 1963), 39–43; al-Nawbaḥtī, *Firaq*

According to the heresiographers, those beliefs would have been divulged by close disciples of Ġāʿfar al-Šādiq.<sup>18</sup> The main themes of these descriptions are: Messianism, the belief in the pre-existence of the souls of the Imams in the form of shadow (*aẓilla*); the antinomian exegetical tendency according to which knowledge of the word of the Imam frees people from the burden of the Law; and a gnosis founded on the ascent or descent of the soul which approaches or moves away from the saving knowledge of the Imam and experiences a path of transmutation (*tanāsuḥ*) through mineral, vegetable, and animal forms. The esoteric texts that appear to stem from the dissemination of these doctrines are the *UK*, *KHA*, and *KŞ*.<sup>19</sup>

*Tanāsuḥ* seems to be the keyword indicating a heterodox style of thought that unifies the sectarian phenomena of *ġuluww* described by the heresiographers.<sup>20</sup> A comparison of the surviving texts emanating from the esoteric context linked to the transmission of the most intimate disciples of Ġāʿfar al-Šādiq, the accounts of the heresiographers, and the Ġābirean treatises that deviate from alchemical concerns and instead show a more markedly doctrinal approach, allow us to construct a common paraphrase, taken from the same religious and epistemological horizon. This case may represent a process of intertextuality.

The term *tanāsuḥ* hints at this intertextuality. This word does not occur in the *Kitāb al-Raḥma*, the earliest treatise attributed to the Ġābireans, despite the fact that the text deals with the problem of the transmutation of bodies when they are

- 
- al-šīʿa*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul: Staatsdruckerei, 1931), 29–35. On the myth of *sabaʿiyya* as a heresiographic pattern: W. al-Qadi, “The development of the term *Ghulāt* in Muslim literature with special reference to the Kaysāniyya”, in A. Dietrich (ed.), *Akten des VII. Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1976), 295–319; S. Anthony, *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Sabaʿ and the Origins of Shiʿism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 243–4, 309–10. On *ḥarbiyya*, see P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 92–5.
- 18 They are Ġābir b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī and Ġābir b. Yazīd al-Ġuʿfī: al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, p. 43; al-Nawbaḥtī, *Firaq al-šīʿa*, p. 31. Cf. L. Capezzone, “Pre-existence and shadows: a gnostic motif, or a literary one?” in I. Hassan (ed.), *La littérature aux marges du ʿadab. Regards croisés sur la prose arabe classique* (Lyon and Beirut: Diacritique Éditions – Presses de l’Institut Français du Proche Orient, 2017), 336–56.
- 19 *Umm al-Kitāb* = *UK*, ed. W. Ivanow, *Der Islam* 23, 1936, 1–132; *Kitāb al-Haft wa-l-aẓilla* = *KHA*, ed. ʿĀ. Tāmīr, I. ʿA. Ḥālifa (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1970). *Kitāb al-Širāt* = *KŞ*, in L. Capezzone, “Il *Kitāb al-Širāt* attribuito a Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī. Edizione del ms. unico (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale ar. 1449/3) e studio introduttivo”, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 69, 1995, 295–416; S. Anthony, “The legend of ʿAbdallāh ibn Sabāʿ and the date of *Umm al-Kitāb*”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 21/1, 2011, 1–30; E.F. Tidjens, “Der mythologisch-gnostische Hintergrund des *Umm al-Kitāb*”, *Acta Iranica* 7, 1977, 241–526. H. Halm, “Das ʿBuch der Schatten’: Die Mufaḍḍal-Tradition der Ghulat und die Ursprünge des Nusairiertum. I”, *Der Islam*, 55, 1978, 219–66 (henceforth: “Das ʿBuch der Schatten’ I”); Halm, “Das ʿBuch der Schatten’: Die Mufaḍḍal-Tradition der Ghulat und die Ursprünge des Nusairiertum. II” (henceforth: “Das ʿBuch der Schatten’ II”), *Der Islam*, 58, 1981, 15–86; Halm, *Die islamische Gnosis*, 113–99, 240–74; 128–61; M. Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and Their Beliefs* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris / The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017).
- 20 Cf. Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin*, 313–5.

subject to certain alchemical operations.<sup>21</sup> The aforementioned heresiographic texts seem to recognize it as the keyword of doctrines developed by the extreme sectarianism that stirred up the political and religious panorama between the second/eighth and fourth/tenth centuries – the period in which the Ġābirean corpus was redacted. However, when the heresiography quotes heterodox statements, issues concerning state transitions and transmutations of the soul frequently revolve around the verb *intaqala* and the verbal nouns of the root N-Q-L: precisely in the sense in which they occur in Ġābir. On the other hand, textual findings regarding the term *tanāsuḥ* are highly recurrent in the *KHA* and *KṢ*, which heresiographers may have used as sources.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in those texts the term *tanāsuḥ* always occurs within a semantic field that places it not only in inferential but also synonymical relationship with the term *tarkīb* (structure, compound). Moreover, in a passage from the Ġābirean *Kitāb al-Ḥaḡar* the author speaks of “some of our books (*kutubunā*) on *tanāsuḥ*”.<sup>23</sup> None of these texts survive today. However, the Persian alchemist al-Ṭuḡrā’ī (d. 514/1121) recorded a long fragment from a *Kitāb al-Iṣtimāl* repeatedly cited in the Ġābirean corpus.<sup>24</sup> The main themes of this fragment are: time, the periodic cycles that mark the history of humanity, and the laws of the transmigration of souls. According to Ġābir, souls have a celestial origin, but they have lapsed and fallen into a state of admixture (with matter) (*al-mīzāğ* – a widespread concept in the *KHA* and *KṢ*) that involves the world of generation and corruption. The author does not explain the causes of the fall, but frames them within the law of necessity. Fallen souls have to take on a number of forms to purify themselves from corruption and ignorance.<sup>25</sup> The outcomes of this process of transmigration (*mash* and *rash* – other very frequent terms in the *KHA* and *KṢ*) depend on the soul’s insistence on error and sin, or on its choice to emancipate itself from ignorance. Ġābir lingers on the second alternative, which allows the soul to reacquire its original form along an ascending path marked by transmutations (*intiḡāl*, *takrīr*) capable of purifying the structure of the body.

In the *incipit* to his version of the Ġābirean text, al-Ṭuḡrā’ī thus writes:<sup>26</sup>

This text is interwoven with difficult metaphors (*rumūz*), because in the literal sense it is written in the language of the supporters of the transmigration of souls (*mubannā ‘alā kalām ahl al-tanāsuḥ fī-l-zāhir*). In a

- 21 Technical data on the early date of the *Kitāb al-Raḡma* are found in Kraus, “Contribution I”, 5–9; Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. V, 4, 435.
- 22 If al-Qummī, *Maḡālāt*, p. 42, can reproduce a fragment of the heterodox speech on the progression of knowledge intended as refinement and purification, placing it in alchemical similitude with a purification process, it is very likely that this also depends on a process of intertextuality in progress.
- 23 *Kitāb al-Ḥaḡar*, in *The Arabic Works of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān* (henceforth *AW*), ed. E.J. Holmyard (Paris: Geuthner, 1928), 15–42: 17.
- 24 *Kitāb al-Iṣtimāl*, in *MR*, 548–55. For its mentions throughout the Ġābirean corpus, see Kraus, “Contribution I”, 165.
- 25 Cf. also *Kitāb al-Ḥawāṣṣ* (*MR*, 378) and *Kitāb Uṣṭuqus al-uss al-tānī* (*AW*, 100). Both treatises belong to the collection of the *Hundred and Twelve Books*, which is earlier than that of the *Book of the Balances* and includes (according to the Ġābireans) the *Kitāb al-Iṣtimāl*.
- 26 *Kitāb al-Iṣtimāl*, in *MR*, 548.

figurative sense, however, [it alludes] to the teaching of the [alchemical] Art. Indeed, I have the doubt that many readers will be misled by this book, will not understand its enigmas (*mağzāhu*) and will dissolve them in the light of their outward sense.

Is *tanāsuh* a metaphor?<sup>27</sup> The *KHA* and *KŞ* seem to use this term in the exegesis of some Quranic verses, adopting it according to the descriptive model it provides: a similitude between the processes of physical transformation and the evolutionary cycles of the soul. Knowledge of the Imam is salvific: the *KHA* and *KŞ* repeatedly state that the sin of ignorance, punished with the gradations of the *tanāsuh*, can only be healed by recognizing the Imam. Through the assumption of his redemptive knowledge, human beings can rediscover their original integrity. In his *Kitāb al-Mulk*, Ġābir declares the correspondence between the supreme elixir, which allows the transmutation of base metals into silver and gold, and the Imam. They share the power to purify, reconstitute, and heal the soul from its malaise.<sup>28</sup>

Know, o brother, that the water, when it is thoroughly mixed with the Tincture and the Oil, coagulates, fixing itself in a look similar to a coral grain. When it has reached this step, and has become a docilely and fusible matter which cerifies, by now able to penetrate all metals, well, if it is really like that, it is the Imam. [. . .] For God, for my teacher – God preserve him! I never revealed [this procedure] in any of my books, except in one, called *Kitāb al-Mawāzīn*. There I had spoken in such a way that no one could understand or sense the meaning. Those who had come to do this through their direct experience could not fully understand its meaning, except for one word. It may be that whoever came to the material achievement of the Work understood me. My word is: unless God grants you the joy of seeing the Imam. Who has never performed the operation will never understand what I am talking about. But I said this – for my teacher Ġa'far al-Şādiq, peace be upon him – in a clear and eloquent way, without symbols or enigmas, nor metaphorical expressions, as scholars usually do, and as I myself did in my books. I have done this so that my teacher – on him be peace – knows that I was neither ungenerous nor enigmatic in my words. Perhaps thanks to my effort, he will free me from the corruption of this world.

Therefore, in its metaphorical constructs Ġābirean speech recognized that the risk of an interpretative drift was to be avoided. The gap between Ġābir's utterance and al-Ṭuğrā'ī's reading is at the very least disconcerting. When Ġābir adopts a metaphor he follows a stylistic code that produces clarity and rejects the enigma, which may be understood by those who share the same images

27 Cf. T. Kuhn, "Metaphor in science", and R. Boyd, "Metaphor and theory change: what is 'metaphor' a metaphor for?", both in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), respectively pp. 409–19 and 481–532.

28 *Kitāb al-Mulk*, in Berthelot-Houdas, *La Chimie au Moyen Âge*, III, 94–5. On the relationship between Imam and elixir cf. Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, 59 ff.



of knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Thus, a process of intertextuality occurs in both the Ġābirean texts and the esoteric texts, which allows at least a unified paraphrase – which even those who remain outside the stylistic and epistemic code (the medieval heresiographer and the modern reader) could achieve. When al-Qummī, in his *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*, reports the terms of a cognitive progression toward the Imam, marked by the passing of tests, he may have had before him the *Kitāb al-Ištimāl* as well as some passages of the *KŞ* or *KHA*.<sup>30</sup>

Some of them do not believe that these verses [of the Quran] have a meaning of dispensation. Indeed, they believe that to every precept corresponds a sanction, and that the ultimate goal [of a discipline] is the passing of a test (*imtiḥān*). When a believer passes [the test], he can be considered free from the burden of impositions (*saqaṭat ‘anhu al-miḥna*). Therefore, it is not enough that the faithful be proficient and in a state of ritual purity, if he does not learn in depth the principles of the doctrine, because he will not pass his trial, and his knowledge will not experience progress in wisdom (*lam yuḥsin fī l-ḥikma iḥtibāruhu*). Just as pure gold, though purified through an acidic substance (*ḥall*) and fire [may still contain] some slag, so the faithful examined by his lord may still reveal impurities and concretions. This is why the faithful experiences and investigates (*yaḥtabiru wa-yaftišu*), and when he really gets cleansed and perfected, he can consider himself free from the prohibitions that bind others.

In the *KŞ* we read:<sup>31</sup>

When the believer has reached the seventh step and with it he will have achieved its path, then it will emancipate itself from the bond of the adoration. He will be free, and emancipated (*ṣāra ḥurran wa-muḥarraran*). He can do without discipline (*fa-staḡnā ‘alā al-ta’līm*) since he knows what is given to know, sees what is given to see, and hears what is given to hear. He will find what he aspired to, and finally he will be free from the burden of the quest.

Similarly, the same epistemic framework can be grasped by drawing a parallel between the initiatory hierarchy established in the *KŞ* and that resulting from the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, at the top of which Ġābir places the Prophet, the Imam, and then the *yatīm*, the Orphan, followed by the rank of the Threshold (*bāb*).<sup>32</sup>

29 I take the notion of images of knowledge (connected with that of body of knowledge) from Y. Elkana, *Anthropologie der Erkenntnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).

30 al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 42.

31 *KŞ*, 327; but see the entire passage at 324–30. Cf. H. Halm, “Courants et mouvements antinomistes dans l’islam medieval”, in G. Makdisi, D. Sourdel and J. Sourdel-Thomine (eds), *La notion de liberté au Moyen Âge. Islam, Byzance, Occident* (Pennsylvania and Paris: Dumbarton Oaks Colloquia IV (12–15 October 1982), 1985), 135–41: 138.

32 *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, in *MR*, 489–500; cf. P. Kraus, “Les dignitaires de la hiérarchie religieuse selon Ġābir ibn Ḥayyān”, in *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 41, 1942, 83–97.

## 2. The principle of the Orphan

The transfer of charisma outside of the Prophet's family places particular emphasis on the Orphan. The role and rank of the Orphan (*yaṭīm*) are magnified in the *UK*, the *KHA*, and the *KŞ*, making it one of the key figures of the initiatory hierarchy of proximity to the Imam's redemptive knowledge. One of the later treatises of the Ġābirean community – the *Kitāb al-Māğid* contained in the last collection of the corpus, the *Five Hundred Books* – is devoted to the precedence of the three 'Ayn-Mīm-Sīn principles ('Alī-Muḥammad-Salmān) and the subordination of the principle of *Sīn* to that of 'Ayn.

Henry Corbin based his approach to the *Kitāb al-Māğid* on Kraus' hypothesis about the Ġābirean community's affiliation to Ismailism. The three doctrinal principles of 'Ayn, Mīm, and Sīn were thus interpreted by Corbin's hermeneutic sensitivity in light of an Ismaili-oriented reading.<sup>33</sup> However, Heinz Halm has shown that this nucleus of doctrines revolving around the supremacy of Muḥammad, 'Alī and Salmān (of which, as we shall see, the *Kitāb al-Māğid* gives an exposition that implicitly re-emerges in the heresiography) was unknown in the context in which Fatimid Ismailite propaganda spread between the third/ninth and the fourth/tenth centuries.<sup>34</sup>

Let us return to some sources that describe the Shiite heterodox landscape in Baghdad during the fourth/tenth century. One of them is Mas'ūdī. In one passage of his *Murūğ al-ḡahab* the doctrines of the *tanāsuh* and the *tafwīd* (i.e. "entrustment", an echo of the emanationist doctrines, with which God entrusted the creation to the five members of the Prophet's family) are attributed to sectarian groups who believe that members of the Prophet's family pre-existed in shadow form (*aẓilla*). Two of these sects are of interest to us: *muḥammadiyya* and 'ilbāniyya ('ilbā'īyya):<sup>35</sup>

This error was supported by many of their authors, and also by the most subtle of their theologians, who belonged to the *muḥammadiyya*, 'ilbāniyya or even to other sects. Among these, we should remember Ishaq b. Muhammad al-Naḥā'ī, called al-Aḥmar, well-known for his book entitled *Kitāb al-Şirāf*. This book has been refuted by al-Fayyāḍ b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad in his book entitled *al-Qusṭās*, and by al-Nahkīnī. Those authors belong to the *muḥammadiyya*, and have refuted the tenets of [the sect of the] 'ilbāniyya, which are professed in the *Kitāb al-Şirāf*.<sup>36</sup> We have already had [elsewhere] the opportunity to talk about *muḥammadiyya*, 'ilbāniyya, *muğīriyya* and all the other heterodox doctrines, such as those of the entrustment (*tafwīd*), or the mediation

33 H. Corbin, "Le 'Livre du Glorieux' de Jābir b. Hayyān", in *Eranos Jahrbuch* 18, 1950, 47–114.

34 H. Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre des frühen Ismā'īliyya* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978), 142–68; cf. Brett, "The 'Ayn, the Mīm".

35 al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūğ al-ḡahab*, ed. Ch. Barbier de Meynard and A. Pavet de Courteille (Paris: Imprimerie Imperiale, 1861–77), III, 262–8.

36 The text mentioned by al-Mas'ūdī is not the same *KŞ* we are concerned with here: see M. Asatryan, *Controversies*, 97, 105.

(*waṣā' it*); we have already refuted them all and also the ones who preach the transmigration of souls (*tanāsuh al-arwāh*) in animal species, whether they are Muslims or wise men from ancient Greece, or India, or they are dualist, Zoroastrians, or Christians. We already gave our arguments against the heretics who have preceded us or who live in our time, in the year 322 [933–4].

To better understand this doctrinal framework it is useful to take a step forward to al-Šahrastānī.<sup>37</sup>

The 'Albā'iyya are the followers of al-'Albā' b. Dīra' al-Dawsī, who set 'Alī above the Prophet, saying that Muḥammad had been sent by 'Alī, whom he called a divine being [...]. Some believe in the divinity of both 'Alī and Muḥammad, but for them 'Alī is superior; these are called the 'Ayniyya. Others who consider them both divine put Muḥammad first; these are called the Mīmiyya. Some others believe in the divinity of all five Companions of the Cloak: Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, all of them equally imbued with the spirit of God.

Al-Mas'ūdī describes, during a period of crisis brought about by the concealment of the twelfth Imam, some Shiite orientations speculating on a gnosis focused on the pre-existence of members of the Prophet's family, and their demiurgic function. The scenario seems to be split between *muḥammadiyya* – or *mīmiyya*, as specified by al-Šahrastānī – which favours the absolute superiority of Muḥammad's prophecy, and 'ilbāniyya/'albāniyya,<sup>38</sup> or 'ayniyya, which instead exalts the role of 'Alī and believes in the pre-eminence of the *wilāya* over the *nubuwwa*, the interpreter of the Law over the legislator and the heir of the prophecy over the prophet himself. The surviving esoteric texts – especially the *KṢ* – are unequivocally aligned on the principle of 'Ayn, and formulate with unusual clarity (which perhaps testifies their early dating) the terms of the theological framework on which this priority is based: the dependence of *ism* = Name / Signifier = *Mīm* = Muḥammad upon *ma'nā* = Sign / Signified = 'Alī.<sup>39</sup>

The heresiographic texts make no mention of a third paradigm, that of the Threshold (*bāb*) which permits access to the Word and its Meaning. In the *UK*, the earliest of the texts containing the (alleged)<sup>40</sup> teaching of the fifth and sixth Imams Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ğa'far al-Šādiq, the emergence of this paradigm is clearly evident and centres around Salmān. Indeed, al-Qummī proves he is aware of the existence of doctrines revolving around the theme

37 al-Šahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, ed. W. Cureton (London: Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1864), I, 134.

38 Cf. al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 59; 'Alyā'iyya according to Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*, 157–61.

39 *KṢ*, 378–83.

40 On the historicity of the second–third/eighth–ninth century *ḡulāt* texts: T. Bayhom Daou, "The second-century Šī'ite ḡulāt: were they really gnostic?", *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 5, 2003–04, 13–60: 19 ff.

of spiritual adoption. In the long paragraph dedicated to the sect named *muḥammisa*, he writes:<sup>41</sup>

They believe that [...] God Almighty manifested himself to his creatures throughout all cycles and periods; he made himself visible to them in the form of light and urged them to accept the message of his unicity, but they refused. He became visible through the threshold of the prophecy (*min bāb al-nubuwwa wa-l-risāla*) but the creatures still refused. He then became visible through the threshold of the Imamate (*min bāb al-imāma*), and they accepted. Then God Almighty granted the Imamate and destined those who shared the pure substance of Muḥammad to be made of light. [...] But the sign (*ma'nā*) was always one: it was Salmān, threshold of the Prophet, who manifested himself together with Muḥammad in each of his epiphanies among the Arabs and the Persians. Other thresholds had manifested themselves together with Muḥammad in various shapes, forming [the hierarchy] of the Thresholds, the Orphans (*aytām*), the Nobles (*nuḡabā'*), the Leaders (*nuqabā'*), the Elects (*muṣṭafiyūn*), the Competents (*muḥtaṣṣīn*), the Examiners (*mumtaḥinīn*), and the Believers (*mu'minīn*).<sup>42</sup> The sign of the Threshold is Salmān, and he is the messenger of Muḥammad, and is connected to him, while Muḥammad is the Lord (*al-rabb*). The sign of the Orphan is Miqdād. He is so-called because he is close to the Threshold, but stands in solitude because he is not joined to the first two (*li-qurbihi min al-bāb wa-tafarrudihi bi-l-ittiṣāl minhumā*). The Orphans are two, the minor and the major: the greater is Miqdād, the lesser is Abū Ḍarr.

As described in the heresiography, the initiatory approach to the Imam's esoteric knowledge proceeds according to a paradigm of epistemic access based on the symbolism of the adoption and assumption of the Imam's legacy of knowledge by a figure totally extraneous to the Prophet's offspring. Emphasis is placed on figures that exalt this extraneousness through the paradigmatic condition of the stranger or the Orphan, symbolized by archetypal figures of the conversion to Islam such as Abū Ḍarr, al-Miqdād, and Salmān, who were among the first companions of 'Alī: all three are characterized by a condition of extraneousness and liminality. An intense elaboration at both a hagiographic and at a symbolic and mythological level had developed around them.<sup>43</sup> Shiite heterodoxy makes them symbolic steps of the initiatory hierarchy towards the Imam's knowledge. Al-Nawbaḥtī and al-Qummī, relying on the same source, denounce these

41 al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 56–7.

42 Cf. UK, 92, ff. 73–4; KHA, 45–8; KŞ, 325–7.

43 On Salmān, see the classic L. Massignon, "Salmān Pāk et les prémices spirituelles de l'Islam iranien", in *Opera Minora* (Beirut: Dar al-Maaref, 1963), I, 443–83, and J. Horowitz, "Salmān al-Fārisī", *Der Islam* 12, 1922, 178–83; A.J. Cameron, *Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī: an Examination of His Image in the Hagiography of Islam* (London: Royal Asiatic Society Books, 1973); G.H.A. Juynboll, "al-Miqdād b. 'Amr", *EI2*. According to Imamite Shiism, the three characters have the status of apostles (*ḥawāriyyūn*): al-Kaššī, *Iḥtiyār ma'rifat al-riḡāl*, ed. 'A.M. al-Ḥa'irī (Bombay: al-Maṭba'a al-Muṣṭafawiyya, 1317 AH), 4–18.

doctrines, based on a deviant exegesis of Q. 89: 15–6, and replied with what they considered to be the correct interpretation of Q. 89: 17–9:<sup>44</sup>

So they interpret God's word: "When his Lord tries him through honour and blessings, he says, 'My Lord has honoured me', but when He tries him through the restriction of his provision, he says, 'My Lord has humiliated me'. Yet, it is the very word of God that denies them, and replies to them, showing the evidence of the error in which they incur: "No indeed! You [people] do not honour orphans", – that is the Prophet – "you do not urge one another to feed the poor" – that is the legitimate Imam (*al-imām al-waṣī*) – "you consume inheritance greedily".

All of this is relevant to the Ġābirean problem, because exalting the role of the Orphan is the focus of the initiatory (and political) ideology that emerges from the treatises included in the last collection of the corpus, the *Five Hundred Books*. If the corpus was complete, as Kraus proposed, by the fourth/tenth century, the Ġābirean treatise entitled *Kitāb al-Māğid* could be one of the first attestations (if not the earliest) of a principle of the *Sīn* (actually unknown to heresiographers) alongside the principles of the 'Ayn and Mīm, polemically addressed to the only other contemporary claim founded on the triad 'Ayn-Mīm-Sīn and on the charismatic role of the *bāb*, originating from al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Ḥasībī (d. 346/957) and his circle between the lesser and the greater Occultation.<sup>45</sup>

Some treatises of the last two collections of the Ġābirean corpus thus provide important clues to establishing the religious (and political) position of the Ġābirean community within the context of the conflicts and tensions that arose in the aftermath of the proclamation of the twelfth Imam's concealment. In this context, several fronts within the Shiite community contended with each other for the intellectual, religious and political legacy of the Imamate. These treatises give rise to a self-referential vision of the messianic role of the alchemist/scientist. On a theoretical basis, the Ġābirean community – identifying itself in the figure of the Orphan, the supreme epistemic access to the Imam's knowledge – declared itself to be the legitimate heir of the contested legacy. In cultural terms, the community participated in the main philosophical debates that overcame the boundary between the Sunnis and the Shiites: the problem of the law (*ṣarī'a* vs. *nomos*) and the problem of how to acquire knowledge – which the Ġābireans imagined could be reproduced. In operative terms, the

44 al-Nawbaḥtī, *Firaq al-šī'a*, pp. 33–4; al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 46. On the common source: W. Madelung, "Bemerkungen zur imamitischen Firaq-Literatur", *Der Islam* 43, 1967, 37–52.

45 A similar "trinitary" doctrine concerning Muḥammad, 'Alī, and Salmān, where a presence of the principle of the *Sīn* stands out beside those of the *Mīm* and the 'Ayn, is attested only in another *ḡulāt* expression such as that of al-Ḥasībī: see. M. Moosa, *Extremist Shiites. The Ghulat Sects* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 342–51; M.M. Bar Asher and A. Kofsky, "An early Nuṣayrī theological dialogue on the relation between the *Ma'nā* and the *Ism*", in *Le Muséon*, 108, 1995, 169–80; Bar Asher and Kofsky, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawī Religion. An Enquiry into its Theology and Liturgy*, 7–42; Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawīs*, 73–80.

Ġābirean Utopia came to conceive of the creation of a creature capable of reproducing the supreme quality of the Imam: a legislative disposition (*nāmūsī al-ṭibāʿ*).

### 3. The political–philosophical issue of knowledge

The brain and its faculties was one of the main issues debated in the Arab–Islamic intellectual scene of the fourth/tenth century.<sup>46</sup> In that same period, philosophical thought was concerned with another significant problem: understanding the divine Law according to the Platonic sense of the *nomos*. Knowledge and its acquisition lie at the very heart of Shiite epistemology: knowledge of the Imam was in itself a theory of cognition. The late antique cultural legacy led in ambivalent terms to a physical and religious approach to the debates on the modalities of the intellect. The long passage in the *UK* in which the Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir describes the hierarchy of the senses in correspondence to an initiatory hierarchy formed by certain characters depending upon their different approach to the Imam is an aspect of these investigations.<sup>47</sup>

In the *KṢ* – an excellent allegory of knowledge – the Imam Ġāfar al-Šādiq describes a theory of perception according to which the senses form an apparatus that acts as a filter of the intellect (*ʿaql*), which is the substance giving the senses the right order (*al-ḡawhar al-mudabbir*). The *širāṭ*, namely the path to knowledge, is accessed through the senses and the intellect. Cognitive experience is expressed through language, which translates the processes of the intellect into action. The senses, driven by the will, are the interpreters and translators of the ordering substance. Language is brought back to the level of *zāhir* (the realm of appearance) while the intellect belongs to the level of *bāṭin* (the realm of esoteric knowledge). Those aware of the logical processes underpinning the modalities of knowledge acquire an increase in perception that consolidates self-consciousness (*zāda fī mawḡūdihi*): alongside the theory of perception, a theory of happiness and health is thus outlined.<sup>48</sup>

Ġābir is aligned with this configuration of knowledge, which in religious terms originates from the Imam and returns to the Imam. Nonetheless, the Ġābireans widen the boundaries of the investigation, conceiving of a “scientific” answer to a religious–philosophical dilemma – indeed, one that is consequential, albeit disruptive, to the progression of the desires that alchemy allows its pupils (a consequence of increased self-consciousness?): the artificial generation of human beings.<sup>49</sup> This problem is systematically addressed in the *Kitāb al-Taḡmīr* and in the *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf*.<sup>50</sup> However, artificial generation seems to

46 See below, n. 51.

47 *UK*, 44, ff. 300–1.

48 *KṢ*, 337–41.

49 On the artificial generation of living beings in medieval Islamic occult sciences cf. L. Saif, “The cows and the bees: Arabic sources and parallels for pseudo-Plato’s *Liber Vaccae* (*Kitāb al-Nawāmīs*)”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 79, 2016, 1–47.

50 The two treatises belong to the third collection, the *Kutub al-mawāzīn*, but the issue is already somewhat anticipated with the creation of minerals in *Kitāb al-Sabʿīn* (in *MR*, 461–2), included in the earlier collection of the *Seventy Books*. On artificial generation

be just one outcome that leads to further different perspectives: in the *Kitāb al-Taḡmī*, the assembling of a human body is linked to the problem of knowledge, its acquisition, and the physiological devices that determine it. Ġābireans share the classical Galenic tripartite brain theory, and pay special attention to which of the three parts is the most suited to generate knowledge acquisition processes: the part in which imagination (*ḥayāl*) lies; the part where thought (*fikr*) resides; or the part devoted to memory (*ḍikr*).<sup>51</sup> They are especially interested in learning how knowledge manifests through cognitive competence and language (*wuqū' al-'ilm lahu wa-l-nuṭq*).<sup>52</sup> However, behind the aim of creating brain faculties lies a political project. The Ġābireans sought to give life to an intelligent creature “endowed with life (*ḥayy*), penetration (*ḥādd*), imagination (*ḥayūl*), and with a legislative attitude (*nāmūsī al-ṭibā'*)”. They clearly state that they were able to generate law-bearing beings (*tawlīd aṣḥāb al-nawāmīs*).<sup>53</sup>

What sources do the Ġābireans refer to explicitly? Pseudepigraphic texts, such as a *Kitāb al-Tawlīd* attributed to Porphyry, or a pseudo-Platonic *Kitāb al-Nawāmīs*.<sup>54</sup> Despite the apparent modernity of the project, the Ġābirean library contains texts belonging to a Hermetic – or better pseudo-Hermetic<sup>55</sup> – tradition closely linked to the *physika dynameis* literature and theurgical procedures of late antiquity, with which the body of knowledge informing the *Kitāb al-Taḡmī* is still imbued. But a shift in the operative axis regarding the legislative nature of the creature also reveals a commitment, and the Ġābireans' participation in issues that engaged the fourth/tenth-century political philosophy, in search of a conciliation (as in the case of al-Fārābī) between the *nomos* of the Greek philosophical tradition and the *ṣarī'a* contained in the Islamic revelation. In this period, Islamic political philosophy inspired by Plato<sup>56</sup> had in fact led

---

and the relationship between Greek and Ġābirean alchemy cf. Kraus, “Contribution II”, 102–34.

51 Tenth-century Islamic medical and philosophical thought is concerned with the theory of the tripartite brain: cf. the Ġābirean view in *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf*, in *MR*, 371–4, *Kitāb al-Taḡmī*, in *MR*, 369–80, and Iḥwān al-ṣafā', *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), III, 376, al-Fārābī, *Mabādi' arā' ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila (al-Fārābī on the Perfect State)*, a revised text with introduction, translation and commentary by Richard Walzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 178–85, 244–7. As regards the Greek medical tradition in which that issue was rooted see Kraus, “Contribution II”, 116–9; L. Capezzone, “Knowing, remembering, imagining: approaches to the topic of memory in medieval Islamic culture”, in Y. Tzvi Langermann and R.G. Morrison (eds), *Texts in Transit in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2016), 85–100. Cf. al-Fārābī, *Risāla fī l-'aql*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938), 100.

52 *Kitāb al-Taḡmī*, in *MR*, 370–1.

53 *Kitāb al-Taḡmī*, in *MR*, 343. As is usual, the Ġābireans describe the experiment as if it had already been carried out and had succeeded.

54 Cf. D. Pingree, “Plato's hermetic Book of the Cow”, in R. Prini (ed.), *Il Neoplatonismo nel Rinascimento* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1993), 133–45 (133–4); R. Prini, “From Hermes to Jābir and the Book of the Cow”, in *Magic and the Classical Tradition*, ed. C. Burnett and W.F. Ryan (London: Warburg Institute, 2016), 19–28.

55 Cf. van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*, 238; Kraus, “Contribution I”, 212.

56 On the complex question of al-Fārābī's reading of Plato, see. G. Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne. Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi*,

*falsafa* to investigate, on the one hand, the correlation between the concept of law and the philosophical status of those who promulgate laws and, on the other, the recognition in Islamic terms of the political significance of the divine revelation.<sup>57</sup>

We know from Ibn al-Nadīm that the last collection, the *Five Hundred Books*, had been planned in view of a refutation against the philosophers (*naqdan 'alā' l-falāsifa*).<sup>58</sup> Of course, we do not know against which philosophers the controversy was targeted – the ancients or the moderns.<sup>59</sup> However, the current use, also contemplated by Ġābir, which distinguishes between the term *ḥukamā'* (referring to an ancient wisdom, with which alchemists were in contact), and the term *falāsifa* (usually applied to pure Greek philosophy, but also to the great masters of the alchemical Art) seems to denote a specific direction of the polemical intent. Moreover, the Ġābireans share the philosophical–political framework of the debates on the relationship between politics and intellect: the laws (*nawāmīs*) those texts refer to are explicitly related to political government (*siyāsa*).<sup>60</sup>

Faced with the bewilderment experienced within the Shiite community after the disappearance of the Imam, the challenging response provided by the Ġābirean community seems to be aimed at overcoming the historical person of the Imam – not denying him, but instead reacting to his absence – which made the correct application of the *šarī'a* impossible to accomplish. This leans towards what we might even call science-fiction *ante litteram*. Nonetheless, it enhances the redemptive role of science (alchemy) and the political function (in the Platonic sense) of the elite of scientists: they can generate a creature that is not the Imam, but that reproduces the brain mechanisms, giving rise to a complex body capable of offering salvation through the law. At least so they declare, adhering to the semiotic system of the alchemical communication according to which the experiment is always described, without having been achieved.

---

*Avicenna und Averroes* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 67–77, 207–62, 290–96 (on the Arabic tradition of a pseudo-Platonic *Book of Laws*).

57 R. Walzer, “al-Farabi’s theory of prophecy and divination”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, 1957, 142–8; J. Macy, “Prophecy in Alfarabi and Maimonides: the imaginative and rational faculties”, in S. Pines and Y. Yovel (eds), *Maimonides and Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986), 185–201.

58 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 423.

59 In the *Kitāb al-Taḡmī'*, in *MR*, 369, Ġābireans explicitly intend “philosophers” to mean those who are concerned with artificial generation (*a'nī bi'l-falāsifa aṣḥāb al-takwīn al-ḥāṣṣa*). According to Kraus, “Contribution II”, 103–34, the Ġābireans address their confutation to some representatives of Hellenistic theurgical thought. In fact, they base their theories on the authority of (pseudoepigraphic) works by authors such as Porphyry, Plato, Homer, and so on, possibly using those authorities of the past with a political aim directed, as we shall see, at some contemporary debates.

60 *Kitāb al-Taḡmī'*, in *MR*, 370. When defining the specific quality of the head of their ideal city, Iḥwān al-Šafā' also distinguish between the figures of Imam, the bearer of *šarī'a* (*wāḍi' al-šarī'a*), and the bearer of *nomos* (*wāḍi' al-nāmūs*): *Rasā'il*, IV, 130–48. Cf. I.R. Netton, “Brotherhood versus Imāmate: Iḥwān al-Šafā' and the Ismā'īlis”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2, 1980, 253–62.



#### 4. The political perspective of the Ġābirean community

Paul Kraus deemed the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn* to be one of the Ġābirean texts that best illustrates the alchemical community's affiliation to Ismailism.<sup>61</sup> Here the Ġābirean writers offer their vision of the history of the Imamate. There are no particularly discordant positions with respect to the current views: the controversial cases of Muḥammad b al-Ḥanafīyya and the succession of Ġa'far al-Šādiq are examined. According to the Ġābireans, who speak here in the first person (*fa-naqūlu*), with regard to the appointment of Ismā'īl followed by a rethinking in favour of Mūsā al-Kāzīm, the sixth Imam would have acted according to his cognitive faculties.<sup>62</sup> Ġābir does not seem to deny the legitimacy of the Imams after al-Kāzīm, although he admits that some Imams were more important than others. The implicit position of the Ġābirean community stands firm in acknowledging the absolute charisma of Ġa'far al-Šādiq, and seems to accept the legitimacy of al-Kāzīm's Imamate as a consequence of that charisma. A passage from the treatise reports the opinion of a group (*tā'ifa*) according to whom, if the order of the Imamate kept stable (*mustaqīm*) by the first six Imams had been followed by a period of disorder and confusion, it would have been marked by the emergence of an Imam vicar with the status of *nāṭiq*. Instead, again according to this group, Ġa'far al-Šādiq revealed his knowledge of a final order (*šaddada al-'ilm wa-nazarahu*) in such a way as to render useless the advent of a vicar to fulfil the role of *nāṭiq*.<sup>63</sup> Ġābir emphasizes the unlikelihood of such an assertion without adding anything else. Given that, for him, the Imamate is primarily a question of *'ilm*, his objection can be interpreted as an act of exclusive dependence on the sixth Imam.<sup>64</sup> In the following passage, Ġābir suggests that the person (*šaḥṣ*) who acquires total knowledge and is able to unify both the eloquent and silent dimension (*ḡāmi' al-nuṭq wa-l-šamt*) is represented by the same Ġābirean corpus. The internal consistency of the corpus leads us to read this statement within the framework of the Ġābirian mimesis, which sees the Imam saying to his pupil "Kneel in front of me, o Ġābir, because in truth you shall kneel to yourself". Or when Ġābir, now a teacher, tells one of his disciples: "If you know the reasons of the order I have given to my books, you will be Ġābir".<sup>65</sup> The

61 *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, in *MR*, 489–500. Here I refer to chapters 36–38 of the treatise. Kraus, "Les dignitaires de la hiérarchie religieuse", compared the Ġābirean terminology to that of the *UK*, then considered to be an Ismailite text. Now we know, also thanks to texts such as *KHA* and *KŠ*, that such terminology was common to all the movements of Shiite *ḡuluww*.

62 *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, in *MR*, 499. On the views on the Imamate presented in this treatise, cf. Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, 84–102.

63 *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, in *MR*, 493–4.

64 Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, 102–4, comes to similar conclusions, but exclusively framed from an eschatological perspective. My opinion is that this treatise, like the others studied here, is religiously and politically connected to the controversial Shiite climate during the lesser and the greater *ḡayba*.

65 Respectively: *Kitāb Iḥrāḡ mā fī l-quwwa ilā l-fi'l*, in *MR*, 79; *Kitāb al-Māḡid*, in *MR*, 116. Cf. P. Lory, "Ésotérisme shi'ite et alchimie. Quelques remarques sur la doctrine

Ġābirean political view leads to an apocalyptic dimension in *Kitāb al-Bayān*:<sup>66</sup>

This person, o brother, will appear only in a moment that will make inevitable profound mutations (*intiḡalāt*), when the sciences will be neglected, the religions will be corrupted, the disorder will be unchallenged. It will be then that a total reFOUNDATION will manifest itself: then, the first renewal that [that person] will bring will be the composition of books on the sciences, and the demonstration of the irrefutable proofs they contain. Then, that person will raise his sword, and with the sword will reform the souls of those who cannot get enhanced, and need to be induced in a cycle of purification (*takrīr*),<sup>67</sup> since they are incapable of purifying themselves with the sciences.

We might question whether that person, transposed here in an apocalyptic dimension, is the same person who in the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn* embodied the attributes of explicitation and silence, evidently destined to establish the *nomos/nāmūs*.

The *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn* is a text fundamental to understanding the political–religious views of the Ġābirean community. The progression of the names designating the degrees of the initiatory hierarchy (55), as indicated in the list that opens the treatise, does not correspond to the exact position they occupy in the hierarchy. This is specified only later, when the author comments on the attributes of each degree. In the first list the Orphan (*yatīm*) is ranked twentieth, but in the comment he appears according to the real succession thus illustrated:<sup>68</sup>

Some claim that each of these people holds the knowledge of the Imam; this would allow them to become Imams. The most acute discernment is proper to those who possess reason: that is their definition of Imam, for which [the Imam] is the one who in addition to possessing a complete knowledge also knows how to put it into practice. However, other people [of the hierarchy] do not act [by virtue of that knowledge] nor can they impose it. The Veil is composed of two persons: one is good, adorns himself with that knowledge and with the company of men, and if questioned he transmits [his knowledge] showing himself gently; the other is evil, hides [knowledge] and is arrogant. The Orphan is educated by the Imam (*tarbiyat al-imām*),<sup>69</sup> and is always bound to him. It is veiled, and only

---

de l'initiation dans le Corpus Jābirien", in M.M. Amir-Moezzi (ed.), *L'ésoterisme shi'ite. Ses racines, ses prolongements* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 411–22.

66 *Kitāb al-Bayān*, in *AW*, 12. See the translation by P. Kraus, "Dschābir ibn Ḥajjān und die Ismā'īliyya", 3. *Jahresbericht, Forschungs-Institut für Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften*, 1930, 23–42; the one by Marquet, *L'alchimie des philosophes*, 97–8, and the one by Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, 99–100.

67 The three scholars mentioned above translate *takrīr* as "reincarnation".

68 *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, in *MR*, 490. See the French translation by Kraus, "Les dignitaires de la hiérarchie religieuse", 88–90, which differs from mine in some passages.

69 Kraus, "Les dignitaires de la hiérarchie religieuse", 88: "l'Adopté de l'imām".

the Imam can see him. The Threshold (*bāb*) is the operator of the great Work, which can only be explained by the words [of the Prophet]: “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Alī is the key”. It is good to clarify how every Prophet, Imam, Orphan and Threshold can be defined as such, and then to proceed with other people. [...] Not all Imams have to deal with an Orphan, even if there have been Imams in connection with an Orphan: that is not the image (*ṣūra*) of Ḥasan, Ḥusayn and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya in relation to ‘Alī, who was instead in that particular relationship with the Prophet, while instead ‘Alī was an Orphan. Likewise, there was no Threshold between them, whereas ‘Alī was a Threshold. These two figures [the Orphan and the Threshold] represent two distinct virtues (*faḍlān*), even if their personifications (*aṣḥāṣ*) coincide. The subsequent Imams [after ‘Alī] learned from their Thresholds. This is why Ḥusayn was preferred by some to Ḥasan, because the latter learned from his father, while the first learned as much from his father as from Ḥasan. And although it was said that Ḥasan had learned from the Prophet, from ‘Alī, and from Salmān, yet Ḥusayn had learned from all three, and furthermore from his brother. [...] As to the difference between the Prophet and the Imam, the first speaks, the second is silent. The Prophet commands, and the Veil is commanded, the Imam is commanded but knows what has been commanded, while the Veil does not know the command received as a whole. The Prophet acts, governs and commands, while the Orphan does not act, does not govern and does not command, the Imam is silent and speaks, while the Orphan does not keep silent and does not speak, and does not know the command received as a whole. The Veil is commanded, while the Orphan is not. The Prophet is multiple (*ḡāmi‘*), the Threshold is unique. The Imam rules, while the Threshold is a guide. The Threshold knows, the Veil does not know. The Threshold is joined (*muttaṣil*), but the Orphan is alone (*munfaṣil*). The Threshold is fixed, the Orphan is in movement.

Deciphering the very meaning of the attributes with which the mutual relationship between the first four figures of the hierarchy are defined is not an easy task. One can, however, grasp the historicity of such a vision by comparing it with the heresiographical record: “the Threshold is joined, but the Orphan is alone”, writes Ḡābir; “He is called Orphan because he is close to the Threshold, but stands in solitude, since he is not joined [to the Threshold and the Prophet]”, writes al-Qummī, recognizing in this image one of the *muḥammisa* tenets.<sup>70</sup> However, there are precise indications on the paradigmatic functions of ‘Alī, who here seems to indicate that both the figures of the Orphan and the Threshold converge into the same person. The Ḡābirean formulation of the priority of the principle of the ‘*Ayn* focuses on this point.

In my opinion, this text should be read coherently with the refutative aims underpinning the entire collection of the *Five Hundred Books* (according to Ibn al-Nadīm). This can also be understood by looking at the opinions reported

70 al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 59.

at the beginning on the nature of the Imam's knowledge. In particular, the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn* should be placed in parallel to the *Kitāb al-Māğid*, entirely dedicated, as we have seen, to formalizing the three principles 'Ayn - Mīm - Sīn, and to prioritizing the 'Ayn over the other two on the basis of the numerical value of the letters that make up the names of the three paradigm characters.

The interpretations of this treatise converge on a fundamental point, which I too endorse: *māğid* is the symbolic representation of the *yatīm*, of the Orphan reaching its highest degree in the hierarchy of knowledge not by virtue of a genealogical link with the Imam and the Prophet's family, but due to the absolute intellectual dependence that binds him to the Imam. This would explain the view of *māğid* as the archetype of those who aspire to become Ġābir<sup>71</sup> – or to cover the political role reserved for the Imam.<sup>72</sup> The demonstration of the priority of the 'Ayn over the Sīn through the relationship between the alphabet and numerology seems to be an even more sophisticated, cryptic version of the theory described in the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*: 'Alī, the prototype of each Imam, also includes in himself the Threshold and Orphan paradigms. The absolute dependence of the Orphan on the Imam creates a relationship of exclusive privilege according to which the Orphan is implicitly superior to the Threshold. Such superiority of the *yatīm* over the Bāb is demonstrated by describing the close analogy between these two figures and those of the 'Ayn and the Sīn: being a direct emanation of the principle of the 'Ayn, the Orphan is the immediate holder of the Imam's knowledge. This privilege is recalled in a minor treatise of the same collection, the *Kitāb al-Ḥalīl*, where the authors implicitly refer to the passages on the Orphan in the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn*, and thus write: "We have already spoken about the attributes of the Orphan, saying that he was instructed by the Imam. He is his delegate (*nā'ib*), and later (*ba'd*: after his concealment?) he takes his place (*qāma maqāmahu*) as if he were his son."<sup>73</sup>

As we have seen, an affirmation stands out with all its disturbing weight among the functions the Ġābireans assign to the top of the hierarchy: "The Threshold is the operator of the great Work". If everything converges towards a parallel between the two ranks of the Threshold and the Orphan – as the final statement of the passage quoted here shows – which are distinct in function but unified in a single person, is it perhaps possible to perceive between the lines a declaration directed against someone who claims, in turn and at that time, the role of *bāb* for himself? If the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn* implicitly refers to the refutation of the Sīn priority contained in the *Kitāb al-Māğid*, is it perhaps possible to identify the target of the Ġābirean discussion as someone who, at that time, in the Shiite esoteric hierarchy of the after-*ğayba*, claimed the role of *bāb* by exalting the paradigm of the Sīn? The confutative aim of the last Ġābirean collection was likely directed against someone perfectly able to understand the alchemical perspective from which the Ġābireans launched its claim to primacy.

71 Marquet, *L'alchimie des philosophes*, 104–10; Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, 83–94.

72 However, the suggestion made by Lory, *Alchimie et mystique*, pp. 82–3, is of great value: that the Ġābirean community, although identified in the rank of the Orphan, does not assign it any function or public engagement in the Shiite reformed establishment.

73 *Kitāb al-Ḥalīl*, in M.'A. Abū Riḏā, "Risālatān falsafiyatān li-Ġābir ibn Ḥaiyān", *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamischen Wissenschaften*, 2, 1985, 75–84: 81.

## 5. Contextualizing the last Ġābirean treatises

The *Sīn* paradigm, to which the supremacy of the figure of the *bāb* corresponds, could have been another answer to overcoming the crisis following the disappearance of the twelfth Imam. During the period of minor concealment (260/874–329/941), when relations between the Imam and the Shiite community were managed by the four *sufarā'*, a harsh confrontation divided the orientations of Shiism.<sup>74</sup> At the top of the *wikāla* governing the Shiite community, the elitist tendencies related to *muḥammisa* stood against a front whose goal was to stress the theological-judicial nature of the Imam's knowledge, and was possibly more willing to provide answers to the doubts raised by the masses.<sup>75</sup> In this period, marked by Ibn al-Furāt's powerful pro-Shiite visirate, a tendency emerged, which Abū Ġa'far al-Ṭūsī defined as *bābawīyya*. The challenge against the government of the *sufarā'* came from the bureaucratic apparatus at the highest level of the Shiite community.<sup>76</sup> Among the most important supporters of this elitist current was a prominent Shiite theologian, Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Šalmaġānī (d. 322/934), who claimed the right to be the privileged representative (*bāb*) of the concealed Imam. After having been protected by some powerful Shiite families

- 74 E. Kohlberg, "From Imāmiyya to Ithnā 'Ashariyya", *BSOAS* 39, 1976, 521–34; V. Klemm, "The four *sufarā'* of the Twelfth Imām. On the formative period of the Twelver Shi'a", in E. Kohlberg (ed.), *Shi'ism* (The Formation of the Classical Islamic World 33, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 135–52; J.M. Hussain, "The role of the Imamite *Wikāla* with special reference to the First *Safir*", *Hamdard Islamicus* 5, 1982, 25–52. J.M. Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background* (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain, 1982); Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin*, 245–64; S.A. Arjomand, "The crisis of the Imāmate and the institution of occultation in Twelver Shi'ism: a sociohistorical perspective", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, 1996, 491–515; S.A. Arjomand, "Imam *Absconditus* and the beginnings of a theology of occultation: Imami Shi'ism circa 280–90 A.H./900 A.D.", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 117, 1997, 1–12; H.A. Abdulsater, "Dynamics of absence. Twelver Shi'ism during the Minor Occultation", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 161/2, 2011, 305–34.
- 75 According to M.A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam. Beliefs and Practices* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 225: "the 'theological-legal-rational' movement, which continues to this day, began to dominate, thus marginalizing the original 'esoteric non rational' current". For a discussion on labelling and categorizing the two fronts see Abdulsater, "Dynamics", 321 and n. 106.
- 76 Al-Kaššī, *Iḥtiyār*, 321–2 (*fī l-ġulāt fī waqt 'Alī b. Muḥammad*), seems to recognize the existence of this current during the Imamate of 'Alī al-Hādī, and reports the case of 'Alī b. Ḥasaka and his disciple al-Qāsim b. Yaḡfīn, both supporters of the divinity of the Imam, and their claim to the role of *bāb*. This claim emerged from within the *wikāla* apparatus (on which see Hussain, *The Occultation*, 79–98, Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation*, 12–16). According to this source, the Imam 'Alī al-Hādī condemned this form of extremism supported by al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Bābā al-Qummī (mentioned in the *isnād* of KṢ, 381, see L. Capezzone, "Una nuova fonte per lo studio dell'eterodossia islamica: il *Kitāb al-širāṭ* attribuito a Mufaḍḍal b. 'Umar al-Ġu'fī", *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 67, 1993, 265–71: 270), companion of the tenth and the eleventh Imams, and disciple of Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Numayrī (d. 270/883–4). The latter self-proclaimed himself *safir* and *bāb* of the concealed Imam (al-Kaššī, *Iḥtiyār*, 323, Hussain, *The Occultation*, 103–5; Halm, "Das 'Buch der Schatten' II", 72–9; Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawīs*, 6–16; Abdulsater, "Dynamics", 312–3).

of Baghdad,<sup>77</sup> he was forced into exile in Ma‘laṭāyā (northern Iraq), and was then arrested and put to death with some of his followers.<sup>78</sup>

Ibn al-Nadīm includes al-Šalmaġānī among the names of the philosophers who dealt with the speculative aspects of alchemy (*al-falāsifa allaḡīna takallamū fī l-šan‘a*),<sup>79</sup> emphasizing its prominent place in alchemical practice. This source is the only one to mention the four titles of his alchemical works, which include a comment (*šarḥ*) on Ġābir b. Hayyan’s *Kitāb al-Raḥma*.<sup>80</sup> We know that a conceptual *topos* denoting the strong doctrinal dualism of al-Šalmaġānī – who conceived of reality as a succession of pairs of opposites – is represented by the idea of *ḡidd*, the demonic and adversative principle which informs his emanationist metaphysics. The term also occurs in the lexicon of the *KŠ*, which currently uses it in a perspective that likely recalls the doctrine of the opposites as the sources attribute it to al-Šalmaġānī.<sup>81</sup> In the *Seventy Books* collection, Ġābir uses it to indicate negative physical qualities inherent in the elementary structure of substances.<sup>82</sup>

Dedicating a comment to the earliest text of the Ġābirean corpus could represent a very precise choice connected to the history and evolution of that school. The same inclination (shared by many, as Ibn al-Nadīm wrote) to deem the *Kitāb al-Raḥma* the only treatise actually authored by Ġābir b. Ḥayyān, pupil of Ġa‘far al-Šādiq, may underlie such a choice. If this were the case, this choice could have been dictated by less philological than ideological reasons. Writing a commentary on the first text of a corpus that had undergone an evident evolution over time, with such important epistemological developments and so profoundly marked by autonomy of thought within the entire Shiite episteme, could mean questioning such an evolution and development: in other words, it could mean a return to the origins of the school.

Throughout the last treaties – the *Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn* and the *Kitāb al-Māġid* in particular – the Ġābirean community developed a system of relations among the Shiite hierarchical figures which strongly regulated the function of the *Bāb* and of the *Yatīm* – a figure tasked with implementing the reform announced by the *Kitāb al-Bayān*, and with which the Ġābirean elite identifies.<sup>83</sup> The hierarchy as imagined by al-Šalmaġānī may have had to adhere to an immobile structure

77 L. Massignon, “Recherches sur les Shi‘ites extrémistes à Bagdad à la fin du troisième siècle de l’hégire”, *Opera Minora*, I, 523–36; Newman, *Formative Period*, 23–6.

78 al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ġayba* (ed.), Mūsawī, Qumm, 1408 AH, 214–28. Hussain, *The Occultation*, 126–30; Newman, *The Formative Period*, 23–5; Abdulsater, “Dynamics”, 317–30.

79 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 419, mentioning him as al-‘Azāqīrī. Cf. the same source, at 423, where the *Five Hundred Books* collection is depicted as a refutation of the philosophers (*naqḡ ‘alā l-falāsifa*).

80 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, 425, under the entry Ibn Abī l-‘Azāqīr.

81 Fragmentary elements for a tentative reconstruction of al-Šalmaġānī’s doctrines, as reported by sources such as Yāqūt’s *Iršād al-arīb* or al-Ṭūsī’s *Kitāb al-Ġayba*, have been gathered by Charles Pellat, “Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Shalmaghānī”, *EF*. Cf. the hostile portrait given by Louis Massignon, *La passion d’al-Hallaj martyr mystique de l’islam*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, *sub index*.

82 E.g. in *Kitāb al-Hudā*, in *L’élaboration de l’élixir suprême. Quatorze traités de Jābir ibn Ḥayyān sur le Grand Œuvre alchimique*, ed. Pierre Lory, 5.

83 See above, n. 66.

whose apex was the *Bāb*. The refutation of the *Sīn* priority formulated in the enigmatic *Kitāb al-Māğid* – highly obscure for all those outside such a semiotic code – may have been perfectly understandable to the alchemist al-Šalmağānī.

## Conclusion

The absolute secrecy under which the Ğābireans chose to operate makes it difficult, but not impossible, to locate them in their historical space. In the last treatises of the corpus – where the alchemical concern leaves more room for the political–religious attitude – this community explicitly claimed control of the political and intellectual legacy of the hidden Imam, and presented itself as the *yatīm*, a figure also known to other *ğulāt* doctrinal views that marked the struggling Shiite panorama between the lesser and the greater Occultation. In this controversial climate, they disputed and came into conflict with other *ğuluww* groups, resorting to a common language focused on the transfer of the Imam's charisma to a figure extraneous to the Alid family, in order to affirm the pre-eminence of their intellectual role. The Ğābirean project, which aimed to generate an artificial imam in a laboratory, was their own response, disconcerting yet consistent with their salvific view of science, to the absence of the Imam. However, the legislative function of the artificial imam would no longer have been linked to the *šarī'a* (only possible with the living Imams), but to the *nāmūs*. Again, the Ğābireans left a trace that allows us to place them in a precise historical and cultural space: from their perspective, they actually participated in a philosophical–political debate on *šarī'a* vs. *nomos*, specific to the fourth/tenth century, inaugurated by al-Fārābī.