

## The Pseudo-Aristotelian and Pseudo-Apollonian Hermetica in Arabic and Latin

Charles Burnett 27 March 2024

Philosophy In the Middle Ages, whether written in Arabic, Greek or Latin, is largely regarded as Peripatetic – the development of the works of Aristotle, from logic, through natural science to metaphysics, finessed with Plato and supplemented with the works on mathematics. University education in philosophy is marked by a series of glosses and commentaries on Aristotle's works (al-Farabi, Ibn Bājja, Averroes, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas and so on), culminating in the eleven volumes of all of Aristotle with all the commentaries of Averroes published in 1550-1552 in Venice. The origins and the development of this tradition can be traced in detail, and involves no divine revelation or demonic participation. But there was an alternative curriculum in which Hermes takes the authoritative position of Aristotle and which can be traced from the mists of antiquity. The origins of this curriculum are described in one of the texts of this tradition, *k. al-Madhitīs* (probably the μαθητής, 'learner') in Arabic:

A Creator-figure, Hādūs, instructed Admānūs (i.e. Adam) in logic and *kalām* (speaking about God), 'the hidden sciences' (*al-'ulūm al-khafīyya*), and 'subtle operations' (*al-a'māl al-laṭīfa*, fol. 13r), the cultivation of all manner of plants, knowledge of all the benefits and harms that are in the moving animals (*'ilm al-manāfi' wa-al-maḍārra kullihā allatī fī al-ḥaywān al-mutaḥarrik*, fol. 15r), and the secrets concealed (*maknūn*, fol. 15r) in the spiritual forces established in their limbs (*fī rūḥāniyyātihā al-murakkabati fī a'ḍā'ihā*, fol. 15r). He showed him the uses of plants and trees, teaching him the rewards reaped from their powers, and he informed him of the secrets of mining ore, extracting metals and combining them one with another. This knowledge was summarised as the knowledge of 'all the obvious and hidden operations' (*jamī' al-a'māl al-zāhira wa-al-bāṭina*, fol. 13v). One may note here that this knowledge was preeminently practical, and we learn that it involved the making of *nayranjāt*, a word which took on a specific meaning later in the story, but which could have still retained its original Persian meaning as 'magic' (*nīrank*). The first *nīranj* prepared Admānūs for learning everything that Hādūs taught him.

The spelling Admānūs (and his companion *Haywānūs*, equivalent to Eve) suggests Middle Persian, and parallels to this tradition can be recognized in Zoroastrian ideas. It is highly likely that this knowledge was thought to have passed through Persian until it reached Arabic. This knowledge was passed on from generation to generation, until it was received by Hermes whose books were, in turn, taken up by Aristotle and form the basis of his instruction of his royal pupil, Alexander the Great. Hence it is called by modern scholars the Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetic tradition. These books survive in a large number in Arabic, where their origin is repeatedly mentioned. E.g. in *k. al-Istijlab*, a work on catching animals without spears or nets, but by appealing to their spiritual forces alone, we hear that the contents are ‘what Hermes explained of the hidden secrets of subtle /L 22r/ wisdom that Hadus had imparted to Adam’.

These books appear under the names of *Madhātīs* (μαθητης), ‘The book of Hermes on the crafts involving moving animals (*fī ṣanā`i` al-ḥayawān al-mutaḥarrika*), the *Kitāb al-Madītīs*, interpreted by Aristotle the Sage, and mentioned by Aristotle to Alexander the King in *al-Iṣṭamātīs*, *al-kitāb al-maknūn* (‘The Concealed Book’), and *al-kitāb al-makhzūn* (‘The Treasured Book’), repeatedly in the *kitāb al-Ustūṭas*. They travel together in the manuscripts and are usually accompanied by no other work except excerpts from the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-Safā`*) which draws heavily from them. Among them we have a situation of books within books, for example:\*

*k. Ilal al-rūḥāniyyāt* (abbreviated as *k. al-Madītīs/Madhātīs*)  
 whose first part is *k. al-Ustūṭas/Istūṭās*  
 which contained two sections of *k. al-makhzūn*: lunar mansions and *k. istijlāb/al-arba` al-nīranjāt*

However, the precise relationship between these books, their order of priority and their date is still to be worked out. All that can be said for certain is that they predate the *Ikhwān al-Safā`* and the *Ghāyat al-Hakīm* of the ninth and early tenth century, and may represent the oldest Hermetic texts in Arabic literature. Their contents could be divided into two parts: one theoretical, the other practical:

- 1) The theory gives both a chronology of the history of the world from its creation to the present day: involving vast lengths of

time during which spiritual forces coalesce to form the planets, in succession, and finally, with a great burst of power (resulting from the all the planets except Saturn were in their exaltations) Hadus himself appears and, by a concentration of thought, produced Admanus. Then there is are the descriptive sections, which describe the relationship between the megacosm and the microcosm. The megacosm has as its outermost component the firmament under which is the corporeal sphere of the twelve signs of the zodiac. The seven planets, which are ‘spiritual’ entities, act as ‘doors’ through which the spiritual power of the firmament passes to the signs of the zodiac and to the earth. Man’s head corresponds to the firmament, his chest to the sphere of the twelve signs, and his feet to the earth. Through the seven ‘doors’ of his head – two eyes, two ears, two nostrils and mouth, which are assigned to each of the seven planets, the spiritual influx passes into the chest, where it rules the seven interior organs, the heart, the stomach, the lungs, the liver, the spleen and the two kidneys. In each of these organs resides one psychological faculty, such as intelligence, anger, love, etc. Spiritual forces dominate throughout these accounts.

- 2) Much of the Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetic is taken up with practical instructions. These can be divided into three major sections on \*lunar mansions, *nairanjāt* and talismans. The sections on lunar mansions give instructions of what to do, or to avoid doing when the moon is in each of its mansions, including the making of *nairanjāt*, \*but also giving the character of the baby born at that time (e.g. ‘whoever is born on this day, if he is male, he is wicked, immoral and a spendthrift, and he will not be praised for anything. If the child is female, she is immoral, concealing her dissolute life, a favourite among men and desirous of them): a combination of elections (*ikhtiyarat*) and birth horoscopy.
- 3) The sections on *nairanjāt* give examples how to make *nairanjāt* for particular purposes (love, hate, ). The *nīranj* is the operation of mixing and cooking a carefully chosen and precisely measured range of ingredients. ‘Spirit’ (in the form of fumes) rises out of this mixture and is conveyed through the air to the spiritual

forces inside other living beings. The power of this spirit can be increased by chanting, which embodies the spirit of the voice, which is independent of the meaning of the words.

- 4) Finally, there is the making of talismans, which involve bringing the celestial spirit into terrestrial objects. In Thābit ibn Qurra, examples are given of summoning spirits (Be present. Oh Spirit...). A version of talismanry without spirits and suffumigations etc. relies entirely on the effects of planetary configurations. But nevertheless these celestial effects are described as the ‘soul’ of the talisman which is a mere useless body until the practitioner introduces the soul.

\*Some texts of this corpus were translated into Latin. The *k. al-Istijlab* was translated as the *Liber de quatuor confectionibus* probably by John of Seville in \*Toledo. \*A whole book called the *Liber Antimaquis* (‘the book of spiritual activities of the works of Aristotle... which is the book of the secrets of Hermes’) which is largely a translation of the Arabic *kitāb al-Istamāīs*, and the book of the Moon.

\*What is noticeable is that we are talking about a practical tradition. This is reminiscent of a division of natural science that is alternative to the eight divisions of the Peripatetic tradition, and which has an Arabic source, but is best known in a Latin tradition. This was referred to in the translation from Arabic known as *On the Rise of the Sciences* (‘De ortu scientiarum’), and mentioned by Toledan scholars in the twelfth century.

A sense of a unity body of knowledge, attributed to Hermes, is also gained by looking at the work of the the Latin author and translator, Hugo Sanctelliensis. The story of Hugo is interesting. \*Hugo was a cleric working through the agency of a bishop of Tarazona and his cleric Hugo Sanctelliensis. On the instruction of Michael, bishop from 1119-1151, Hugo visited the library of the last of the Islamic kings of Saragossa, who were in exile in the castle of \*Jueda Jalón (on a tributary to the Ebro river), and was introduced to the ‘more secret depths’ (*inter secretiora bibliotece penetralia*) of the library, where he found (or was given) manuscripts of works attributed to Hermes and

Apollonius, which he proceeded to translated. It is significant that, on the first page of one these translations of a manuscript which could well have been written within Hugo's lifetime and under his supervision, we have a vivid portrayal of the transmission of science:\*

Here we can see most of the sciences is included, but it may be significant that the term 'philosophia' is not used, but only scientia and sapientia, that scientia is superior to sapientia, that theorica and practica are the two divisions of sapientia, and that such a focus is given to music.

But it is evidently the intention to focus the reader's attention on the whole of science and its divisions, so that he/she can see how the wisdom of Hermes and Apollonius fits in.

\*Both Hermes and Apollonius in this frontispiece are an amalgamation of European and Oriental myths.

The texts that Hugo translated range through astronomy and astrology, and other predictive arts (geomancy and divination by sheep's shouldblades) to cosmology and anthropology. In most cases we can recognize the Arabic origins of these works, but what is special about Hugo's versions is that he gives descriptions of the texts and reasons for translating them. He is establishing a way of thought that he finds in his Arabic sources, and which he seeks to pass on the Latins. This is 'the Hermetic way' and is represented by the following texts:

First are those on astrology:

- 1) For any astrological calculation it was necessary to have accurate tables to predict the positions of the planets and the fixed stars. Thus, it is probably not by chance that the work Hugo explicitly mentions as that for which his master, Michael of Tarazona, sent him to Rueda Jalon to fetch, was [Ibn al-Muthannā's commentary on a work on](#) how to use the Indian astronomical tables of al-Khwarizmi.

- 2) There follows the *Tetrabiblos* of Ptolemy, the Classical (2<sup>nd</sup> century) work on astrology, which sought to provide the physical and cosmological reasons for astrological doctrine. It included among different accounts the ‘Egyptian’ division of the ‘terms’ of each of the signs of the zodiac, compiled by Hermes, which became the standard method. Hugo’s version is based on an Arabic text which was distinctly manipulated to suggest the divine origin of the truths of astrology, and may have been the responsibility of al-Kindi, since it was used by the astrologer Abū Ma‘shar, his pupil. \*Hugo further emphasised this divine origin, referring to astrology as seeming to happen ‘by some divineness’ (*quadam divinitate videtur contingere vel accidere*), where Ptolemy only writes ‘and grasping it is impossible because of its subtlety, its spirituality and its distance from the senses and from the corporeal level.
  
- 3) Next comes *The Hundred Words (Centiloquium)* attributed to Ptolemy, whose 51<sup>st</sup> ‘word’ was Hermes’ method for predicting the time of the birth of a child. This text emphasises the importance of the refined soul, open to divine influence, in making accurate predictions, or discovering secrets. This idea is encapsulated in the first aphorism that ‘the secret of the stars comes from you (the astrologer) and the stars, and in the summary of the argument of the first few aphorisms that the ‘Sapiens dominabitur stellas’.
  
- 4) Added to this is the ‘book by Aristotle containing the sum of the 255 volumes of the Indians on all questions relating to birth horoscopes and anniversary horoscopes, among whose authorities were, allegedly, ‘thirteen books of Hermes which they call the books of the secrets of nativities and interrogations... and another eight books by the same author... concerning what the inner mind is deliberating and what issue those thoughts will have...’ (Burnett and Pingree 1997: prol. 18). Later in the same text we read that ‘Hermes is the leader in this teaching, just as he is in all other disciplines’ (Burnett and Pingree 1997: III i 9.22), that he is ‘the most skilled of the astrologers’ (III ii 2.43) and that ‘people think he is the same as Buzurjmihir’, the Persian sage (III iv 2.1). One can see here not so much the transmission of wisdom from Ancient Egypt, as from Persia, and beyond that, from India—a line of transmission of occult texts that we can actually trace. The fourth book of the the *Liber Aristoteles* (on the *Revolutions*) can be shown to be a translation by a

work of Andarzghar ibn al-Farrukhan, meaning (in Persian) the ‘wise advisor <called> the son Farrukhan (a distinctly Persian name)., but is given an awe of antiquity by being attributed, by Hugo, to Buzurjmihir, the Persian sage who was the counsellor of the Persian king Khusrau I, Anushirvan, of the sixth century AD.

- 5) While the *Liber Aristotilis* is on the interpretation of birth horoscopes and those case on every anniversary of the birth, Hugo also translated (or revised) translations of seven Greek and Arabic authorities on astrological questions (interrogations), including Aristotle (again). Note that this work, which appears in several guises in Latin (with an implied Arabic source) is also attributed to Ptolemy, but it makes sense to include it rather in the Pseudo-Aristotelica of my ‘alternative tradition’. Prominent among these sources is ‘Umar ibn al-Farrukhan, another astrologer of Persian origins (note the name al-Farrukhan again), who translated the *Tetrabiblos* and Dorotheus’s *Carmen astrologicum* (?) from Persian into Arabic, and who explained the ability of the astrologer in the following way (in Hugo’s somewhat flowery language):

\*Celestis enim circuli vis divina et efficacie proprietates sub ipsius hora questionis ad querentem intelligenciam et mentem quadam similitudine videtur referri. Querentem, inquam, circuli motus ad interrogandum compellit. Nam est humana condicio celestium tam siderum quam circulorum affectus ordinem et progressus debite quasi cuiusdam dilectionis vinculo imitari non cessat (‘Umar ibn al-Farrukhā, *The 138 Chapters*, in the *Liber novem iudicum*).

The divine force and the property of efficiency of the celestial circle at the time of the question itself seems to be passed on to the intelligence and mind of the questioner by a certain similarity. For the movement of the circle compels the questioner to put his question. For the human condition does not cease to imitate the order of the affections (*affectus*) and both the celestial stars and of their orbits, by the bond, as it were, of a certain love (*dilectio*).

A special branch of astrology was that of weather forecasting which was carried out by the observance of the movements of the stars. Hugo chose to translate a text which he introduces as ‘the book of rains produced by an ancient astrologer of the Indians called Jafar, but then abbreviated by Mercury of Cyllene’ (Burnett

2007). Here Hermes is called by his Latin name ‘Mercury’, but Hugo shows his knowledge of Greek mythology, in which the God Hermes was born in a cave on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. The subject-matter, significantly, is based on the Indian doctrine of the lunar mansions and their influence on the weather.

The second category is divination by other means than astrology. Hugo, following the *Centiloquium*, would agree that one did not need astrological knowledge to predict the future, but rather ‘divine inspiration’, and he would have known from Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, the divination could be made from all four elements. He thought he recognized, in the Arabic divination by sand (*ilm al-raml*) what Isidore had called ‘geomantia’ (‘divination by earth’), and his term—geomantia—soon became the standard term for geomancy (explain the principle of geomancy). Geomancy stands out as being the preeminent form of divination in which the state of the mind (the ‘intentio’ or *damīr*) of the geomancer becomes primarily important. This *damīr* evidently is the state closely related to the *vis animae* in the *Centiloquium* and hence is open to divine inspiration. This is pointed out by Hugo himself who, in the preface his geomancy claims that Human beings, although they have descended to the rank of mortals, nevertheless retain in the form of images what they knew before they were born: ‘God has poured a kind of intellectual notion of things into the secret place (*arcanum*) of men’s hearts’.

On what would seem to be a more mundane level, Hugo also translated two books on divination by the shoulder-blades of sheep. One of these begins ‘Incipit Liber Amblaudii et Hermetis...’ ‘Here begins the book of Amblaudius and Hermes... This book, whose author is said to have been Amulbarhis among the Chaldeans, but Hermes among the Greeks...’ This Latin translation closely corresponds to an Arabic text attributed to al-Kindī (whose name may have been corrupted into ‘Amblaudius’), but which in turn depends on a text attributed to ‘Hirmis al-hakīm’—Hermes the Philosopher, of which one chapter survives in Arabic.

At the heart of his translations, however, is the most philosophical of these works, is ‘On the Secrets of Nature’ written by Apollonius of Tyana. Apollonius of Tyana was a magician and healer who lived in Syria at the same time as Jesus Christ, around whom many legends developed, and to whom several pseudepigrapha were attributed. In the text translated by Hugo he is said to have

discovered the book in a cavern under a statue of Hermes. In this cavern he found another image of Hermes, before which there was a book (the book 'On the Secrets of Nature' itself) and in the hands of which was an emerald tablet. The first volume of *On the Secrets of Nature* covers God and creation, the circles of the planets, the fixed stars, minerals and vegetables; the second, animals, and especially man. Included in the book are questions about nature, such as the origin of thunder and lightning, whether trees are male and female, why are thorns necessary. The purpose throughout the book is to point out the underlying unity in all nature, and the bonds connecting all things. Conspicuous is what we may call 'a biological approach' to nature: the elements are alternately male and female, and from the mating of the male elements, fire and air, with the female ones, earth and water, are born everything generated in the universe.

The text ends with the emerald tablet containing the words which became one of the canonical texts of alchemists in the Arabic and Latin world: a set of enigmatic sayings beginning:

\*Higher things from lower things, lower things from higher things, the operation of wonders (*prodigia*) from the One, just as all things draw their source from one and the same thing...

\*

It may not be by chance that the *Asclepius*, the first work of the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum*, also ends with a hymn.

The frontispiece of *On the Secrets of Nature* would naturally introduce the whole corpus of Hermetic works translated by Hugo Sanctelliensis, by giving by showing how it fitted into the division of science, and giving portraits of Hermes and Apollonius. What we have here is a Pseudo-Apollonian *Hermetica*.

Hugo's prefaces to these works that he translated emphasise the importance and significance of the works. Man can gain the knowledge contained in these works because of a divine endowment. Human beings, although they have descended to the rank of mortals, nevertheless retain in the form of images what they knew before they were born. \*God has poured a kind of intellectual notion of things into the secret place of men's hearts. Moreover, God has bound together certain men who are endowed with special intellectual gifts. What

emerges from these prefaces is a picture of a special bond between men who have been privileged to receive God's gift of intuitive knowledge. This bond, which produces a state of peace in human society, is parallel to the bonds which govern and preserve the universe as a whole, as described in the book *On the Secrets of Nature*.

\*In one preface Hugo writes that, 'because of my love for the discipline, on which I have always worked day and night to the best of my ability, after I had approached the Arabs...an unsatiated desire for philosophizing threw away all fear of likewise approaching the Indians or Egypt...'

What may appear strange is that Hugo, apparently, did not translate any of the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Hermetica* I mentioned in the first half of the talk. But this may not be strange at all, because of the significance of the last person I am going to mention this afternoon, i.e. Hermann of Carinthia.

Hermann was active at the same time, and in the same area as Hugo, i.e. the valley of the Ebro. Hermann is the only author we know to have had access to Pseudo-Apollonius's *On the Secrets of Nature* whose legend of the discovery of the body of Hermes by Apollonius under the statue of Hermes he retells, as well as quoting an excerpt from the Emerald Tablet. Whether this is because Hermann knew of an Arabic manuscript of *On the Secrets of Nature*, or knew Hugo's translation, it suggests that Hermann worked closely with Hugo – something testified also by the fact that both translators are given as authors of the *The Book of the Three Judges*, which was a preliminary work to the *Book of the Nine Judges*. But Hermann, in addition, knew part of the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Hermetica*, since he quotes two versions of a story of the the spirit of Venus descending to a man living in the fourth clime, which can be identified in the Arabic *kitab al-Istamātīs*, and possibly from the same text as that from which the *Antimaquis* was translated.

The Pseudo-Hermetic and Pseudo-Apollonian *Hermetica* evidently had some influence as a way of engaging in science which was independent of the Aristotelian tradition, and as such enabled a person to realise his or her full potentiality, both in knowledge and in action. They were passed on from Arabic into Latin and continued to be transmitted, albeit as 'secret knowledge' throughout the Middle Ages and into early modern Europe.

