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Athanasios Rhetor: a Greek in Paris, a Priest in Alchemy¹

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The Greek manuscripts of the National Library of France are divided into three collections: *Ancien Fonds Grec*, *Fonds Coislin* and *Supplément Grec*. A small part of the first collection and most of the manuscripts of the *Fonds Coislin* were collected between 1643 and 1653 by Father Athanasios the Rhetor, on behalf of the Prime Minister, Cardinal Mazarin, and Pierre Séguier, chancellor of France from 1635. The *Fonds Coislin*² comes directly from Séguier's own library and this collection gathers today 400 Greek manuscripts; more than 300 were collected by Athanasios himself.

The activities of Athanasios Rhetor in acquiring valuable Greek manuscripts for his French patrons have been noted by scholars since the end of the 19th century³. Athanasios has attracted attention too as a theological polemicist and an advocate of Church unification since the same period⁴. His interest in philosophy – in Neo-Platonist philosophy in particular – has been also studied in the 1970's⁵. But it is clear that nobody has paid attention to the chemical works of Athanasios. In the *Supplément Grec* collection are stored four volumes of Athanasios' manuscripts (letters, notes, papers, drafts, texts fragments); two of them concern precisely his chemical works never studied nor read⁶.

Athanasios was born in Costanza (near Salamis) in the today illegally occupied part of Cyprus in about 1571, the year of the first Turkish invasion of the Island. At an early age he and his two elder brothers lost their family and relatives. However, he managed to move to Constantinople where he was received and supported by the

¹ This paper is a work in progress which will be developed and published soon in the framework of the Dacalbo Project (Digital Archive Concerning Alchemy in Byzantium and in Greek-speaking communities of the Ottoman Empire).

² Omont, 1888, XIII; Astruc, Constyt, 1960.

³ Among other papers: Omont, 1902, 1-26; Darrouzès, 1950, 162-163; Constantinides, Browning, 1993; de Leeuw, 2000, 59.

⁴ Marini, 1898-1899 and 1899; Arabadjoglou, 1933, 73-76 and 1948, 184-189 and 1952, 12-15; Manousakas, 1949, 134-151; Korolevskij, 1932, 1394-1396.

⁵ O'Meara, 1977, 483-499; Dalsgaard Larsen, 1977, 1-37.

⁶ In their description of the French National Library Catalogue it is just written from time to time "alchemical notes" or "alchemical recipes".

Patriarchs Neophytos II then Timotheus II. He became himself Protosyggelos and Hieromonachos of the Church of Constantinople. He also attended, at the Patriarchs' expense, the Jesuit school which enjoyed the patronage of the kings of France and the full support of the French Ambassadors in the city. It is certainly under such influences that Athanasios became the staunch defender of Catholic orthodoxy; and he distinguished himself in 1614 in a theological controversy with Hilarion, Metropolitane of Heraclea. At about this time, moved by his "love of learning" as he said, Athanasios went to Rome with the hope of attending the Pontifical Greek College of St Athanasius. He was not admitted in the College (he was too old), but stayed none the less in Rome. He was probably in Paris in 1615 and was certainly established there in the 1620's.

What happened afterwards is well documented. At about the end of the year 1642, Séguier had the project to enrich his library with Greek manuscripts. For that purpose, he had sent Athanasios to the East. Arriving in Constantinople in August 1643, Athanasios started with no delay his task with the support of the Ambassador of France, Jean de La Haye: 46 manuscripts from Cyprus and 10 from Constantinople had been quickly sent to Séguier. Athanasios shipped then tens of other manuscripts from Thraki, Mount Athos, Thessalia and Makedonia to Séguier until 1653. But in December 1643, Mazarin wrote in his turn to the Ambassador of France in order that he may ask for searching and buying good and rare Greek, Turkish and Arabian books and manuscripts. On April 23, 1644, de La Haye acknowledged receipt of the demand and on the 5th November, he informed the cardinal about the first researches he had confided to a capuchin, Father Romain, and a Greek Catholic priest, Father Athanasios; the first prospecting in the area of Mount Lebanon, and the other in the area of Thessaloniki. On the 25th October 1646, Athanasios was sent by de La Haye to explore the libraries of Mount Athos. De La Haye described him to Mazarin as a man "very capable to carry out his commission perfectly, as he is very intelligent in the knowledge of good books". But the mission is a failure and the return to Constantinople journey took several months; Athanasios was obliged to stay 4 months on Limnos Island, for the lack of boat. In the beginning of May 1647, he sets off to Athos a second time, with, this time, the authorization of the local Turkish authorities. The next month, he had already arrived, but he complained about persecutions by certain religious who were ill disposed towards the Francs and the roman church. On November 30, he announced to the Ambassador his arrival to Limnos with a quantity of valuable manuscripts. But the last part of his journey was not so easy: Venetians were interrupting at this time any connection with Constantinople; and in addition, Athanasios suffered from health

problems due to his age (he was already 76 years old). In March 1648, de la Haye was finally able to announce to Mazarin that 150 Greek manuscripts and 16 printed books coming from Mount Athos arrived at last.

In June 1653, Athanasios left Constantinople (where he had been authorized by the Patriarch to preach and teach) for Rome, then Paris; de la Haye announced his departure to both Mazarin and Séguier, the latter had wished to meet him again for a long time. The missions of Athanasios in the East had taken 10 years.

Two years after, in 1655, Séguier – still wanting more manuscripts – arranged the removal of one-hundred and sixteen manuscripts from Athanasios' possession in Paris. Athanasios appealed – in vain – to Séguier, then to Baluze, at the time (1661) working for the bishop of Toulouse Pierre de Marca, and in 1662 to the king himself for compensation⁷.

On the 13 march 1663, Athanasios died at the age of 92 years old and was buried at St Etienne-du-Mont in Paris. Remnants of his library went to the library of the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève (i.e. according to the today catalogue: one manuscript and over fifty scientific, religious, philosophical and historical books). Fifteen days after his death, Séguier was assigned, by the right of escheat (“par droit d’aubaine”), the manuscripts Athanasios had been demanding for eight years which Séguier was keeping, as well as all the belongings of Athanasios which he gave to a musketeer and his servants.

Athanasios published several books; all of them in Paris⁸:

- In 1639 on the knowledge of unchanging realities of God: *P.[atris] A.[thanasii] O.[rat]oris Opuscula philosophica quatuor: quorum inscriptiones in singulorum videbis principiis*, (Latin and ancient Greek), Paris, dedicated to Séguier.
- In 1639 on the human virtues and vices: *Delitiae animae sive hortus ex iis quae Iamblichio magno elaborate sunt consitus*, (Latin and Greek), Paris, dedicated to Richelieu.
- In 1641 on certain “irreligious” men who had visited Paris “some days” previously, maintaining in debate that the rational soul is mortal and that this was Aristotle’s view: *P.[atris] Athanasii Rhetoris Byzantini. Aristoteles propriam de Animae*

⁷ Baluze described him at about this time as “learned, but ragged and poor. However, de Marca did not deem the man contemptible on that account, a man in whom were present, apart from good mind and extensive knowledge of sacred matters and of divine and human philosophy, a modesty worthy of a Christian and a blameless character”.

⁸ Legrand, t. 1 (1894: 404-405; 416-419), t. 2 (1894: 82-87; 96-98), t. 3 (1895: 417-426), t. 5 (1903: 51).

immortalitate mentem explicans. Opus vere singulare ... ex multi sac variis Philosophis collectum Aristotelis ipsius Auditoribus, qui sibi ex ordine successerunt, sententiae dogmatum ipsius initiati, praesertim vero admirabili & magno Iamblicoi, (Latin and Greek), Paris, volume 1 dedicated to Séguier, volume 2 dedicated to Achille de Harlay, bishop of St Malo and former ambassador in Constantinople.

- In 1655 (1657 for the second edition): an attack on the Paris, 1637, edition of Campanella's *De sensu rerum et magia*, including an *Approbatio* by the theological authorities of the Sorbonne dated February, 1638: *D.[octoris] Athanasii Rhetoris Presbyteri Byzantini Anticampanella in Compendium redactus adversus librum de sensu rerum & Magia*, (Latin only), Paris, dedicated to Cardinal Spada, Latin Patriarch of Constantinople (and to Séguier).

A dozen of unpublished works has also been noticed in Athanasios' manuscripts. Two manuscripts from the *Supplément Grec* collection actually gather together his chemical writings: Suppl. Grec 1027 and Suppl. Grec 1030. The first one which has a parchment binding of the 17th century appeared for the first time in the 16 august 1672 inventory of Séguier's library (made just after his death). The second one which has a simple cardboard binding of the 19th century appeared nowhere before, even if it belonged previously with no doubt to Séguier's library (its content is very mixed and appears to be a remnant that nobody had judged good to bind so as to make a separate entire volume). The chemistry which is presented there relates among other things to the preparation of gold or silver, the fixation of mercury, the extraction of mercury out of certain metals, the philosopher stone, the dyeing of the money, the purification of copper, lead or tin, the preparation of potable gold, quintessence and elixir, the preparation of clay of wisdom, preparation of alkali, oil of tartar, salt of sulphur, elebrot salt, ammoniac salt, or oil of dragon blood, the whitening of coins and some various remedies like those supposed to give strength, to preserve the memory, or against the arthritis, the eyes diseases, or the plague.

The manuscript 1027 is composed of 522 folios, with a number of variable lines, and also variable dimensions of folios. The parts concerning chemistry are generally well written and cover 107 pages. 164 recipes are counted. More than two thirds of the recipes are in Italian, less than one third in demotic and ancient Greek, only two in Latin and one in French, and here and there words in Turkish and more rarely in Arabian are noticed.

The manuscript 1030 is composed of 161 folios of various formats, with many variable lines. 102 folios relate to chemistry. The writing is generally not very neat. Approximately 150 recipes are counted. The texts contain many erasures and glosses. Most of them are obviously drafts and notes. The languages used are the same ones and at the same ratios, but this time three recipes are in French and one in Latin.

A short presentation of these manuscripts will be now done.

The chemical notes and recipes which compose the two thirds of the manuscript 1030 are all dispersed in the work. The first chemical folio shows a list of Alexandrian chemistry terms, in which a part of Ps.-Demokritos' *Φυσικά και Μυστικά* sentence is found. Further in this manuscript two recipes deal with partridges like some Alexandrian recipes do.

The manuscript contains a book of 64 pages all written by the same hand, but not Athanasios' hand, and they are all in Italian, except for the first one which is in bad French written by an Italian speaking writer. The most of the recipes of this book, apart from the latter, have been copied almost word for word by Athanasios; those which have not been copied are identified in the original text by the following expression: "*questo not ho scritto*" (Athanasios' writing). Certain sources are quoted: Ramon Lulle, Giovanni Battista Birelli, and Archelaus. It also appears that several recipes come from 1561 *Verae Alchemiae Artisq̄ue Metallicae* of Guglielmo Gratarolo which Athanasios personally owned; he however copied them.

A French recipe can be read here, not in Athanasios' hand writing, on a sheet used for notes which have nothing to do with the recipe. It is accompanied by its Italian translation by an unknown hand-writing, that Athanasios translated in his turn into Greek. This recipe about the oil of sulphur is in fact drawn from the book of Jean Liebaut (which had been republished a lot of times) *Quatre livres des secrets de médecines et de la philosophie chimique*, of 1573.

Another French recipe signed "Monsieur gras docteur en medecine demeurant chez m^r devertrieu en dauphine à seriere" is half translated into Italian and half into Latin. It speaks about vegetable philosopher stones related to a particular planet, the best known is the lunar one, that we can find since the 13th century in Paul de Tarente or Arnaud de Villeneuve, then in the hermetic herbaria. One of the lunar ones, the *borissa* comes from the Alexandrian period. So it is interesting to note that this term appears in Athanasios' text accompanied by its Arabian translation: "borisssa // ζεβητουνιέ //αραβιστί". Furthermore the manuscript contains unidentified drawings of

such plants accompanied by a text in demotic Greek. Athanasios carried out sketches of these drawings. In his manuscripts there are in fact several other recipes of this type.⁹

The manuscript contains some names of people, some of them important (like Avicenna or Sendivogius) but they are just a few, and some others unknown but certainly contemporary with Athanasios and supposed to be known to him. For example: “Papás Kyr. Daniel” (Priest Daniel), name associated with a recipe (in Greek with some Latin and Italian words) concerning the transformation of silver to gold, “Mehmet dedé from Kasimpasha” (a place of Constantinople), “Κυρίτζης Νικολάκης”, “Andreas Grimaldi, prêtre”, “Baltasar Andrigoji”, or “Georgakis Kasapoglis from Ex-Marmara” (in Constantinople). The last name appears twice, one time just on a small strip of paper and another time associated with a recipe in the manuscript 1027. Actually, this recipe exists initially in Suppl. Grec 1030 in the form of a draft without title and crossed out with two lines, before being carefully copied and developed in Suppl. Grec 1027.

The manuscript 1027 now. It begins with a short French recipe having however an Italian title. The author is not Athanasios but he could not be French either. In the 435r folio two very short quotations of Glauber’s *Consolatione navigatium* published in 1657, *Prosperitatis Germaniae* by the same of 1656 and his *Pharmacopaea Spagyrica* of 1654, appear¹⁰. Glauber and Sendivogius are the only references to contemporary famous chemists in all the two manuscripts.

Recipes of the Suppl. Grec 1027 are several times the final version of drafts of the Suppl. Grec 1030 (for one of these Athanasios had completely cut off its alchemical rhetoric). But recipes of Suppl. Grec 1027 can be also the ancient Greek version of well written Modern Greek recipes of Suppl. Grec 1030 (whose original version must have certainly been in Latin or Italian).

The chemical writings of the SG 1027 are actually gathered at the end of the manuscript, starting with a folio which represents a kind of a Greek-Turkish lexicon of chemicals (including 3 Latin occurrences). Turkish words are found elsewhere in the manuscript too; some recipes contain in fact words with their translation in Turkish. Basically, the recipes can be divided in two groups: those where masses are expressed in ounces and pounds and those where masses are expressed in *dramia*. For the latter,

⁹ One of them is rather similar at least in its first part to one of those of Paul de Tarente introduced by Colinet (2010). Half of the recipe is in Athanasios in Greek and the other half in Italian.

¹⁰ These quotations do not help us to date the manuscript. However they prove that SG 1027 and SG 1030 manuscripts had not been already taken by Séguier in 1655 (yet Séguier’s interest in alchemy is known).

Athanasios used the Turkish compounds *nisantiri* (for ammoniac salt), *seleïma* (for corrosive sublimate) and *kuvergule* (for niter salt) or even *raki*, the alcohol.

No trace of real theoretical elements can be really found to inscribe the content of these two manuscripts in the 17th century Paracelsian western chemistry. But it would be a mistake to just see these papers as the result of a work of a copyist reading old manuscripts. It is not very probable that Athanasios had the ambition to propose an edition of chemical works. He was a man, as he acknowledged it himself, who devoted his whole life to study. The manuscripts reveal that he practiced some of the recipes he wrote, he made some efforts to get recipes and to make the names and symbols of chemical compounds his own. Even more, he expressed on a draft his questions about what he didn't understand in a recipe he had read.

Athanasios was not only trying to join two religions but also two traditions, to make the East and the West join together, as well as the past and the present too: Alexandrian recipes are mixed with French ones, Turkish with Italian, ancient with demotic Greek. Thus Athanasios introduced some new terms in Greek chemistry like “to distillate” or “distillation”¹¹, even if he had some difficulties to stabilize their writings (sometimes he wrote them in Italian inside a Greek recipe, or he wrote them half in Italian half in Greek, or he dropped the beginning of the word, etc.)¹². The fact remains that Athanasios belonged to his time, interested in a more and more fashionable science, and not contenting himself with the old writings but frequenting concrete places and living with his contemporaries.

¹¹ “To distillate” or “distillation” seems to be absent in the 15th century Holkhamicus 109 and Parisianus GR. 2419 (cf. Colinet, 2010).

¹² “να δεστιλλάρη”, “να στιλλαρισθή”, “διστιλάνδο”, “δεστιλλαρισμένο”, “διστιλλατζίονε”, “δεστιλλατιονε”. Athanasios seems to translate more from Italian than from Latin to Greek.

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