Book Reviews

special wisdom from the Ruler of the world”.

A German Foreword (i–xii) is followed by an Introduction (pp. 1–56, numerals in English). Weisser discusses briefly problems related to Sirr al-khaliqā, and gives a detailed description and an appraisal of sixteen Arabic manuscripts, from which she selected four in order to establish the Arabic text. This Introduction also provides footnotes and an extensive bibliography (pp. 57–66); all this section is in manuscript. Weisser quotes from Julius Ruska that this book, Sirr al-khaliqa, is the oldest Arabic text that has preserved the alchemical work entitled “Lawḥ al-zumurrud” (Tabula Smaragdina).

One would have liked to have seen all this book properly printed, especially as previous Arabic publications of Aleppo Institute for the History of Arabic Science have proved to be of a high standard.

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This is a highly welcome companion to Dr. Weisser’s own edition of the Arabic Sirr al-khaliqā (Liber de secretis naturae et occultis rerum causis). There are three sections of similar length: an account of the major problems surrounding the origins and transmission of the text; a summary, paragraph by paragraph, of its contents; and a commentary. There is also an extensive bibliography (pp. xv–xl). This is a work of great diligence and clarity. It will be of inestimable value to students of medieval esotericism (hermetism, alchemy, cosmology) in general and the history of Arabic science in particular.

The involved question of the origin of the Sirr has exercised scholars for some time. Weisser critically and soberly surveys the literature with admirable succinctness and lucidity. On one or two occasions she allows her own views to obtrude a little. Her preference is for the assumption that a late Greek original was translated into Arabic in the eighth century, and furnished with its initial account of God’s attributes by “the priest Sājīyūs of Nābulus”, more or less as asserted by the text (i.2.4). This is not exactly what the evidence would prima facie suggest. The basic facts about the Sirr, a rather feeble adaptation of earlier material, are still those established by Ruska, Plessner, and, above all, Kraus: (a) the Sirr shares with the Syriac Book of Treasures of Job of Edessa (early ninth century) a problemata physica source; (b) its longer version – designated B by Weisser and regarded as an adaptation, datable to the first half of the ninth century, of the shorter version A – includes the larger part of Nemesius’ De natura hominis; (c) it shares some material with the hermetic treatise Isamātīs; (d) it shares the tabula smaragdina with the Secretum secretorum (see Ullmann, Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam, p. 171).

Weisser ignores (d); and as the history of the Secretum (for which see M. Manzalaoui in Oriens 23–24, 1974) is no less obscure than that of the Sirr, this may be reasonable. Observation (a) too, for all its suggestiveness, yields no immediate conclusion. As regards (c), Weisser appears to be right in arguing that the Sirr depends on
the Istamāṭīs, but wrong in suggesting that the borrowing took place at a "pre-Arabic" stage (p. 69). The first of the parallels she points out (ibid.) is so close in the actual wording of the Arabic texts as to make it far more probable that it was the Arabic version of the Istamāṭīs which was used in compiling the Arabic version of the Sirr.

A similar query, but one of greater consequence, arises in connexion with (b). Weisser observes that there are parallels to Nemesius even in the shorter version A (p. 65). The most important of these parallels – let me call it NS – occurs at pp. 399.4–400.10 of her edition of version A. It is here that version B offers its longer extract from the De nat. hom., which I shall call NL. It is not entirely clear from her edition, which relegates NL to an appendix, whether B has NL in addition to NS or in its stead. The question is crucial, for NS is included in NL almost verbatim (a fact not sufficiently appreciated by Weisser). Hence if NS were duplicated in B, the secondariness of the longer version would, of course, be beyond doubt. But if, as one would expect, A simply has NS where B has NL, there is no earthly reason why A should not be an abbreviation of B. Indeed, this would then be the only natural assumption to make: for in no way can NS be regarded as anything but a minimally adapted extract from the beginning of NL (contra p. 65). In either case, the shorter version of the Sirr no less than the longer postdates the Arabic version of Nemesius on which they both draw.

Prima facie, therefore, the most reasonable assumption would appear to be that the Sirr was first composed in Arabic, from sources including the Istamāṭīs and a translation of the De nat. hom., by the translator of the latter. For the Sirr as a whole shares with NL some striking peculiarities of diction (for examples see Ullmann, loc. cit., pp. 172ff.). Minor differences (unduly emphasized by Weisser, p. 65) will be explained if we assume that much of the Sirr is a product of free composition. This would also go a long way to explain the deviations of NL from the text of Nemesius, which are clearly tendentious and cannot (pace W., p. 67) be passed off as fortuitous.

The date of the Sirr remains uncertain. It must have been put together at the same time, as, or a little later than, the Arabic version of the De nat. hom. underlying both NL and NS. A terminus post quem will be provided by the appearance of the Istamāṭīs – if it can be dated. On general grounds of style, one would be disinclined to consider a date later than the middle of the ninth century. To clarify this and other issues, much further study will be needed. In this the present book will prove immensely helpful.

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Professor Köcher of the Institut für die Geschichte der Medizin, Berlin, continues his magnum opus with the collection of Babylonian and Assyrian medical texts now in the British Museum but originally found in the ruins of the ancient capital city of