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

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Abstract

The community of Shi'ite 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 Shi'ite ġuluww as mirrored in the heresiographic sources of the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries, and in the Ġūlāt literary sources; and b) the last collection of the Ġābirean corpus as a polemical outcome specific to the Shi'ite milieu between the lesser and the greater Occultation of the twelfth Imam.

Keywords: Ġābir b. Hayyān, Early Shi'ite history, Islamic heresiography, Shi'ite heterodoxies, Politics and religion in Islamic middle ages

Introduction

The community of Shi'ite alchemists gathered under the pen name of Ġābir b. Ḥayyān1 produced an important corpus usually believed by scholarship to have been retracted between the third/ninth and fourth/tenth century.2 The corpus deals not only with alchemy but also – especially in the last two collections

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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).


* I wish to thank the anonymous readers for their relevant suggestions and remarks.
— 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. 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 Ḥa’far al-Ṣādiq (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. 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 Ḩwān al-Ṣafā’. 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. 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.

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 Ḥa’far al-Ṣādiq and placed under the authority of the sixth Shiite Imam. Hence, the Ġābirean corpus

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.
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-ʿilm).  

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 ġulāwī 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. 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. 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.

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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 ʿAyn, and the making of Ismāʿīlism”, 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,12 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 elite, 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.13 In this context the sectarian milieu of the ġulawwā is described by the heresiography of the end of the third/ninth and beginning of the fourth/tenth century

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(ps. al-Nāšī‘ al-Akbar, al-Nawbaḥšī, al-Qummī), 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 Ša fi al-Ṣādiq (such as Abū’l-Ḥaṭṭāb and Mufaḍḍal ibn ‘Umar al-’Īfī). This same line is more evident in texts such as Umm al-Kitāb (UK), Kitāb al-Haft wa’l-azilla (KHA) and Kitāb al-Ṣirāt (KṢ) (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 para-
phrase 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 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 thought, common to the surviving esoteric texts and the last production of the Ġābirean community, which early heresiography has long been concerned with. This 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 ġulūw 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.17
According to the heresiographers, those beliefs would have been divulged by close disciples of Ġa far al-Ṣādiq. They are Ġāsīr’s doctrines are the core 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


\[ \text{On ġhbīyya, see P. Crone, The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 92–5.} \]


subject to certain alchemical operations.\textsuperscript{21} 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 \textit{intagala} 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 \textit{tanāsuḥ} are highly recurrent in the \textit{KHA} and \textit{KS}, which heresiographers may have used as sources.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, in those texts the term \textit{tanāsuḥ} always occurs within a semantic field that places it not only in inferential but also synonymical relationship with the term \textit{tarkīb} (structure, compound). Moreover, in a passage from the Ġābirean \textit{Kitāb al-Ḥaḡar} the author speaks of “some of our books (\textit{kutubunā} on \textit{tanāsuḥ})”.\textsuperscript{23} None of these texts survive today. However, the Persian alchemist al-Ṭuḡrāʾī (d. 514/1121) recorded a long fragment from a \textit{Kitāb al-Īṣīmāl} repeatedly cited in the Ġābirean corpus.\textsuperscript{24} 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) (\textit{al-mīzāḡ} – a widespread concept in the \textit{KHA} and \textit{KS}) 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.\textsuperscript{25} The outcomes of this process of transmigration (\textit{mash} and \textit{rasḥ} – other very frequent terms in the \textit{KHA} and \textit{KS}) 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 (\textit{intiqāl}, \textit{takrīr}) capable of purifying the structure of the body.

In the \textit{incipit} to his version of the Ġābirean text, al-Ṭuḡrāʾī thus writes:\textsuperscript{26}

This text is interwoven with difficult metaphors (\textit{rumūz}), because in the literal sense it is written in the language of the supporters of the transmigration of souls (\textit{mubannā ālā kalām ahl al-tanāsuḥ fī-l-ẓāhir}). In a

\textsuperscript{21} Technical data on the early date of the \textit{Kitāb al-Raḥma} are found in Kraus, “\textit{Contribution I},” 5–9; Needham, \textit{Science and Civilisation in China}, vol. V, 4, 435.

\textsuperscript{22} If al-Qummi, \textit{Maqālāt}, p. 42, can reproduce a fragment of the heterodox speech on the progression of knowledge intended as refinement and purification, placing it in alchemically similitude with a purification process, it is very likely that this also depends on a process of intertextuality in progress.


\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Kitāb al-Īṣīmāl}, in \textit{MR}, 548–55. For its mentions throughout the Ġābirean corpus, see Kraus, “\textit{Contribution I},” 165.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. also \textit{Kitāb al-Ḥawāṣṣ} (\textit{MR}, 378) and \textit{Kitāb Usṭuqṣus al-usṣ al-ṭānī} (\textit{AW}, 100). Both treatises belong to the collection of the \textit{Hundred and Twelve Books}, which is earlier than that of the \textit{Book of the Balances} and includes (according to the Ġābireans) the \textit{Kitāb al-Īṣīmāl}.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Kitāb al-Īṣīmāl}, in \textit{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 tanāsuḥ a metaphor? The 
KHA and KṢ 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 KṢ repeatedly state that the sin of ignorance, punished with the gradations of the tanāsuḥ, 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, Ğābir 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:

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-Mawāżin. 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 Ğāfar al-Ṣādiq, 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 Ğābirean speech recognized that the risk of an interpretative drift was to be avoided. The gap between Ğābir’s utterance and al-Ṭuğrāʾī’s reading is at the very least disconcerting. When Ğābir 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

of knowledge. 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-Maģālāt, 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-Iṣtimāl as well as some passages of the KṢ or KHA:

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 yuḥsīn fī’t-ḥikma iḥtībāruḥu). 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-yafṣīhu), and when he really gets cleansed and perfected, he can consider himself free from the prohibitions that bind others.

In the KṢ we read:

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 (ja-stağnā ‘alā al-ta‘īm) 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 KṢ and that resulting from the Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn, in the top of which Ġābir places the Prophet, the Imam, and then the yatīm, the Orphan, followed by the rank of the Threshold (bāb).

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.
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 (yatīm) are magnified in the UK, the KHA, and the KṢ, 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-Māġid contained in the last collection of the corpus, the Five Hundred Books – is devoted to the precedence of the three ’Ayn-Mīm-Sīn principles (ʿAlī-Muḥammad-Salmān) and the subordination of the principle of Sīn to that of ’Ayn.

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

Let us return to some sources that describe the Shiîte heterodox landscape in Baghdad during the fourth/tenth century. One of them is Masʿūdī. In one passage of his Murūq al-qahab the doctrines of the tanāṣūḥ 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-existing in shadow form (azıllā). Two of these sects are of interest to us: muḥammadīyya and ʿilbāniyya (ʿilbāʾīyya):35

This error was supported by many of their authors, and also by the most subtle of their theologians, who belonged to the muḥammadīyya, ʿilbāniyya or even to other sects. Among these, we should remember Ishaq b. Muhammad al-Naḥaʾī, called al-Ahm, well-known for his book entitled Kitāb al-Ṣirāt. This book has been refuted by al-Fayyād b. ʿAlī b. Muhammad in his book entitled al-Quṣṭas, and by al-Nahkīnī. Those authors belong to the muḥammadīyya, and have refuted the tenets of [the sect of the] ʿilbāniyya, which are professed in the Kitāb al-Ṣirāt.36 We have already had [elsewhere] the opportunity to talk about muḥammadīyya, ʿilbāniyya, muğīriyya and all the other heterodox doctrines, such as those of the entrustment (tafwīd), or the mediation

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36 The text mentioned by al-Masʿūdī is not the same KṢ we are concerned with here: see M. Asatryan, Controversies, 97, 105.
(wasā‘īt); we have already refuted them all and also the ones who preach the transmigration of souls (tanāsūḥ al-arwāḥ) 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:

The ‘Albā’īyya are the followers of al-‘Albā’ b. Ḍira’ 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 Mīmīyya. 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-Masʿūdī 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 muḥammadīyya – or mīmīyya, as specified by al-Šahrastānī – which favours the absolute superiority of Muḥammad’s prophecy, and ‘ilbāniyya/albāniyya, 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.

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) teaching of the fifth and sixth Imams Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ğa’far al-Ṣādiq, 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

38 Cf. al-Qummī, Maqālāt, 59; ‘Alyā’īyya according to Halm, Kosmologie und Heilslehre, 157–61.
of spiritual adoption. In the long paragraph dedicated to the sect named muḥammīsa, he writes:

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 Muhammad 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 (nuqabā’), the Leaders (muqtabīyīn), the Elects (muṣṭafīyīn), the Competents (muḥtaṣṣīn), the Examiners (mumtaḥīn), and the Believers (mu’mīnīn). The sign of the Threshold is Salmān, and he is the messenger of Muhammad, 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-qurbīhi min al-bāb wa-ṭafarrudīhi bi-l-itiṣāl minhumā). The Orphans are two, the minor and the major: the greater is Miqdād, the lesser is Abū Darr.

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 Darr, 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. Shi’ite heterodoxy makes them symbolic steps of the initiatory hierarchy towards the Imam’s knowledge. Al-Nawbahṭī 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; KS, 325–7.
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: 44

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-Maḡid 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 букв, originating from al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Ḥasibī (d. 346/957) and his circle between the lesser and the greater Occultation. 45

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 (ṣarīʿa vs. nomos) and the problem of how to acquire knowledge – which the Ġābireans imagined could be reproduced. In operative terms, the


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

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.\(^46\) 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.\(^47\)

In the KṢ – an excellent allegory of knowledge – the Imam Ġaʿfar al-Ṣādiq describes a theory of perception according to which the senses form an apparatus that acts as a filter of the intellect (aqīl), which is the substance giving the senses the right order (al-ḡawhar al-mudabbir). The širāt, 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 mawġūdihi): alongside the theory of perception, a theory of happiness and health is thus outlined.\(^48\)

Ǧābir 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.\(^49\) This problem is systematically addressed in the Kitāb al-Taḡmīr and in the Kitāb al-Taṣrīf.\(^50\) However, artificial generation seems to

46 See below, n. 51.
47 KṢ, 337–41.
49 The two treatises belong to the third collection, the Kutub al-mawāzin, 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 (dīkhr).⁵¹ They are especially interested in learning how knowledge manifests through cognitive competence and language (*wuqūʿ al-ʾilm lahu wa-l-nuḥq*).⁵² 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 (ḥayāl), and with a legislative attitude (nāmūsī al-ṭibāʿ)”⁵³. They clearly state that they were able to generate law-bearing beings (*tawlīd aṣḥāb al-nawmīs*).⁵³

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-Nawmīs*.⁵⁴ Despite the apparent modernity of the project, the Ġābirean library contains texts belonging to a Hermetic – or better pseudo-Hermetic⁵⁵ – tradition closely linked to the *physika dynames* 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 *šarīʿa* contained in the Islamic revelation. In this period, Islamic political philosophy inspired by Plato⁵⁶ had in fact led


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.


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.\(^{57}\)

We know from Ibn al-Nadîm that the last collection, the *Five Hundred Books*, had been planned in view of a refutation against the philosophers (*naqdan ʿalā l-falāsīfa*).\(^{58}\) Of course, we do not know against which philosophers the controversy was targeted – the ancients or the moderns.\(^{59}\) However, the current use, also contemplated by Ğâbir, which distinguishes between the term *ḥukamāʾ* (referring to an ancient wisdom, with which alchemists were in contact), and the term *falāsīfa* (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 Ğâbireans share the philosophical–political framework of the debates on the relationship between politics and intellect: the laws (*navāmīs*); those texts refer to are explicitly related to political government (*siyāsā*).\(^{60}\)

Faced with the bewilderment experienced within the Shiite community after the disappearance of the Imam, the challenging response provided by the Ğâbirean 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 *ṣārīʿa* 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.

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\(^{58}\) Ibn al-Nadîm, *Fihrist*, 423.

\(^{59}\) In the *Kitāb al-Tağmī*, in *MR*, 369, Ğâbireans explicitly intend “philosophers” to mean those who are concerned with artificial generation (*aʿnī bī l-falāsīfa aṣḥāb al-takwīn al-ḥāṣṣa*). According to Kraus, “Contribution II”, 103–34, the Ğâbireans 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 Porphiry, 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.

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. 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-Ṣādiq 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-Kāẓim, the sixth Imam would have acted according to his cognitive faculties. Ġābir does not seem to deny the legitimacy of the Imams after al-Kāẓim, 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-Ṣādiq, and seems to accept the legitimacy of al-Kāẓim’s Imamate as a consequence of that charisma. A passage from the treatise reports the opinion of a group (ja’īfa) 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-Ṣādiq revealed his knowledge of a final order (saddada al-’ilm wa-nazarahu) in such a way as to render useless the advent of a vicar to fulfil the role of nāṭiq. 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. In the following passage, Ġābir suggests that the person (ṣaḥṣ) who acquires total knowledge and is able to unify both the eloquent and silent dimension (ḡāmi’ al-nuṭq wa-l-ṣamti) is represented by the same Ġābirean corpus. The internal consistency of the corpus leads us to read this statement within the framework of the Ġābiran 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”. The
Gābirean political view leads to an apocalyptic dimension in *Kitāb al-Bayān*:66

This person, o brother, will appear only in a moment that will make inevitable profound mutations (*intiqalāt*), 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*),67 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 Gābirean 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:68

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*),69 and is always bound to him. It is veiled, and only


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.


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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 Hasan, Husayn and Muhammad 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 (fadlān), even if their personifications (ašās) coincide. The subsequent Imams [after ‘Alī] learned from their Thresholds. This is why Ḥusayn was preferred by some to Hasan, 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 (muttaṣāṣil), 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 Ḥābir; “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 muḥammīsā tenets.70 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 Ḥābīrūn 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-Māḡīd, entirely dedicated, as we have seen, to formalizing the three principles ‘Ayn - Mīm - Ṣīn, 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: māḡīd 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 māḡīd as the archetype of those who aspire to become Ğābir71 – or to cover the political role reserved for the Imam.72 The demonstration of the priority of the ‘Ayn over the Ṣīn 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: ‘Allī, 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 Ṣīn: 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 (nāʾib), and later (ba’d: after his concealment?) he takes his place (qāma maqāmahu) as if he were his son.”73

As we have seen, an affirmation stands out with all its disturbing weight among the functions the Ğābireans 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 Ṣīn priority contained in the Kitāb al-Māḡīd, is it perhaps possible to identify the target of the Ğābiren discussion as someone who, at that time, in the Shiite esoteric hierarchy of the after-gayba, claimed the role of bāb by exalting the paradigm of the Ṣīn? The confutative aim of the last Ğābiren collection was likely directed against someone perfectly able to understand the alchemical perspective from which the Ğābireans 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 Ğābiren community, although identified in the rank of the Orphan, does not assign it any function or public engagement in the Shiite reformed establishment.
5. Contextualizing the last Ġābirīan 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 sufārā', a harsh confrontation divided the orientations of Shiism.74 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-juridical nature of the Imam’s knowledge, and was possibly more willing to provide answers to the doubts raised by the masses.75 In this period, marked by Ibn al-Furāt’s powerful pro-Shiite visirate, a tendency emerged, which Abū Ǧa’far al-Ṭūsī defined as bābawīyya. The challenge against the government of the sufārā’ came from the bureaucratic apparatus at the highest level of the Shiite community.76 Among the most important supporters of this elitist current was a prominent Shiite theologian, Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Šalmağānī (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


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.

of Baghdad,\textsuperscript{77} he was forced into exile in Maʿlatāyā (northern Iraq), and was then arrested and put to death with some of his followers.\textsuperscript{78}

Ibn al-Nadīm includes al-Šalmağānī among the names of the philosophers who dealt with the speculative aspects of alchemy (al-fālāsīfa al-ṣadīna takallamū fi l-šanʿa),\textsuperscript{79} 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 (ṣārḥ) on Ḥābir b. Hayyan’s Kitāb al-Raḥma.\textsuperscript{80} We know that a conceptual topos denoting the strong doctrinal dualism of al-Šalmağānī – who conceived of reality as a succession of pairs of opposites – is represented by the idea of didd, the demonic and adversative principle which informs his emanationist metaphysics. The term also occurs in the lexicon of the KS, which currently uses it in a perspective that likely recalls the doctrine of the opposites as the sources attribute it to al-Šalmağānī.\textsuperscript{81} In the Seventy Books collection, Ḥābir uses it to indicate negative physical qualities inherent in the elementary structure of substances.\textsuperscript{82}

Dedicating a comment to the earliest text of the Ḥābīrean 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 Ḥābir b. Ḥayyān, pupil of Ḥāfar al-Ṣadīq, 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 Shiīte 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 treatises – the Kitāb al-Ḥamsīn and the Kitāb al-Māġid in particular – the Ḥābīrean community developed a system of relations among the Shiīte 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 Ḥābīrean elite identifies.\textsuperscript{83} The hierarchy as imagined by al-Šalmağānī may have had to adhere to an immobile structure

\textsuperscript{79} Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, 419, mentioning him as al-ʿĀzaqīrī. Cf. the same source, at 423, where the Five Hundred Books collection is depicted as a refutation of the philosophers (naqdʿ alā l-falāsīfa).
\textsuperscript{80} Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, 425, under the entry Ibn Abī l-ʿĀzaqīr.
\textsuperscript{81} Fragmentary elements for a tentative reconstruction of al-Šalmağānī’s doctrines, as reported by sources such as Yāqūt’s Irshād al-arīb or al-Ṭūsī’s Kitāb al-Gayba, have been gathered by Charles Pellat, “Muhammad 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.
\textsuperscript{82} E.g. in Kitāb al-Hudā, in L’élaboration de l’elixir suprême. Quatorze traités de Jābir ibn Ḥayyān sur le Grand Œuvre alchimique, ed. Pierre Lory, 5.
\textsuperscript{83} See above, n. 66.
whose apex was the Bāb. The refutation of the Sīn priority formulated in the enigmatic Kitāb al-Māgid – 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 ġulāt 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 ġuluww 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 šarīʿa (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 šarīʿa vs. nomos, specific to the fourth/tenth century, inaugurated by al-Fārābī.