

THE HARRAN OF THE SABIANS IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM A.D.; CHANNEL OF TRANSMISSION OF A HERMETIC TRADITION?

HOW HERMETIC KNOWLEDGE REACHED MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE EUROPE

18th World Congress of the International Association of the History of Religion, Durban/Zuid-Afrika (5-12 augustus 2000).

Lecture, abstract and article by Dr. Annine van der Meer

HOW HERMETIC KNOWLEDGE REACHED MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE EUROPE

It is well known that the Arabs absorbed antique knowledge on philosophy, medicine and the exact sciences in the 9th and the 10th century A.D.¹ They assembled a huge library of *hermetic* texts and some of them reached medieval and renaissance Europe. The Arabic *hermetica practica* contain more than two thousand texts ascribed to Hermes.² This means that the Arabs were highly interested in *hermetic* texts on alchemy, magic and astrology. Most of these texts are not translated yet. The history of Arabic *hermetica* must be written yet. By transmission of the Arabs we dispose over the famous *Tabula Smaragdina* and parts of the magical treatise called *Ghayat al-Hakim* or *Picatrix*. In this work a lengthy extract of the *Nabataean Agriculture* was transmitted. This source records the cult of the seven planets and is possibly connected with the Harranians. They were called Nabataeans before they were called *Sabians*. In this context also the Corpus Gabirianum of the famous Jabir, Gabir or Geber (725-812 A.D.) must be mentioned³.

In medieval and renaissance Europe Arabic hermetic texts were translated, studied thoroughly and became very popular. For the study of *western esotericism* it is important to know how these texts reached the Arabs. Very little is left of the alchemic literature in Greek. How did these texts from hellenistic Egypt and surrounding areas reach the Arabs? Who were the translators and which were the channels of transmission? It is certain that hellenistic cities in Syria of which Harran was one, played a significant role in this process. Since the field of Arabic *hermetica* (*practica*) is still a terra incognita and needs research, it will be difficult to follow the channels of transmission from Egypt and Greece via hellenistic cities in Syria into the Arabic world. The following study

¹ F. Rosenthal, *Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam*, Zurich 1965, p. 25; E.J. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, Northampton, 1957.

² M. Bachmann, Th. Hofmeier, "Hermes-Vater der Alchemie", M. Bachmann, Th. Hofmeier, *Geheimnisse der Alchemie*. Basel 1999; p. 22-28, p. 24 (Die Herkunft Hermes), p. 25 (Hermes in der arabischen Alchemie). For a survey on the *Hermetica Arabica* see R.P. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégistos* 1, *Astrologie et les Sciences Occultes, avec un appendice sur l'Hermétisme Arabe* par M.L. Massignon Paris 1950, Appendix III: Inventaire de la Littérature Hermétique Arabe, p. 384-400; F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, Vol. IV, Leiden 1972, p. 38-41 is giving a list of alchemic and astronomic, astrologic and magical hermetic texts; M. Plessner, "Hirmis", *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. III, Leiden 1971, p. 463-465 criticizes Massignon because he exaggerates the role of Hermes as the promoter of the hellenistic tradition in Islam: "he also claims for some books a Hermetic character, which are simply neoplatonic or gnostic... So long as Hermes is not explicitly quoted, we have no right to style the books as Hermetic... It is the make-up of these books as revelations that constitutes their belonging to the Hermetica"; M. Ullmann, *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam*, Leiden Köln 1972, gives an inventory of hermetic arabic texts on alchemy, astrology and magic. He also criticizes Massignon on p. 370, because he uses "hermetic" too easily for neoplatonic, gnostic or magical texts.

³ F.E. Peters, "Hermes and Harran", *Intellectual Studies on Islam: essays written in honor of Martin B. Dickson*, M. Mazzaoui, V.B. Moreen ed., University of Utah 1990, p. 185-215, p. 195 sees Jabir as a hermeticist. He also sees the *Ghayat al-Hakim* on p. 202 as "the most considerable piece of Arabic Hermetica".

must be seen as a humble attempt to explore the possible links, in particular the significance of the intermediary function of the city of Harran.

This city is situated in northern Mesopotamia⁴. During the 9th century and afterwards our Arab sources abound with information about the pagan religion of the inhabitants of Harran, in which they show a remarkable interest. What information do the Arabic sources give about the indigenous religion of the *Sabians* in the city of Harran itself? How reliable are these sources? Do we really find specific *hermetic* knowledge in Harran? Does this knowledge concern the *hermetica philosophica* or the *hermetica practica* or both of these fields; or does it concern a more general *esoteric* knowledge? Harranian scholars left Harran for Baghdad where they translated numerous texts from Greek and Syriac into Arabic and were honored by their Arabic fellowmen. The work of the Harranian Sabians in Baghdad became legendary throughout the Arabic world. Did these learned *Sabians* transmit hermetic thought to the Muslim world? In any case: it was ultimately transmitted from Islamic resorts to our western world and is now important for the study of *western esotericism*.

First we will give a valuation of sources. We will find Arabic sources describing the indigenous religion of the Harranians and Arabic sources describing the knowledge of Harranian Sabians in Baghdad. Separation of spirits will result in a division in sources. Then we will explore the field of methodology and terminology. Can we define *Sabian* sources as *hermetic* or *hermeticistic*? Is Harran really a channel of transmission of a *hermetic tradition*?

Before we go into the sources we have to know why the Arabs called the Harranians *Sabians*. Muslim authorities conquered Mesopotamia in 639 A.D. *Ibn an-Nadim* (died in 995) wrote his *Kitab al-Fihrist* (book of the catalogue) in Baghdad in 987. He is called 'the bookworm' because he wrote an encyclopedia for the Arabs of what he considered to be all antique knowledge. It contains in the Dodge translation 864 pages.⁵ *Ibn an-Nadim* wrote in 987 about the attitude of Harranians towards the Muslim authorities. In order to compose the section about the *Sabians* in chapter 9, he uses information of three authors and one anonymous Syriac text. Scientists consider the four sources which *an-Nadim* uses, the oldest and most reliable sources of the religion of the Sabians⁶. An official contact between inhabitants of the city of Harran and their Muslim officials took place in the 9th century A.D. *Ibn an-Nadim* recorded this event in 987. He gives information about the exact moment the

⁴ Holmyard, *Alchemy*,; p. 61: When political conditions became quieter the Muslims soon manifested a great interest in learning, and having overrun not only Alexandria and Harran but all the other principal centers of Greek culture they were able to indulge it to the full.; p. 65: The transmission was made chiefly through direct contact in Alexandria and other Egyptian cities, but partly by intercourse with the intellectual centers of Harran, Nisibis and Edessa; p.66: Syrian pagans from Harran were also widely employed in translation; Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 188: "...by the eighth century..."Greek science and philosophy, Persian ethical and political ideals, Indian medicine and mathematics all quickly became part of the Arab intellectual experience...Absorbed by the Muslims with the rest of this prodigious inheritance was the later Greek fascination with the occult, as well as the object of that fascination, an unknown quantity of Hermetic literature. The Arabs learned to be Hermeticists even before they learned to be philosophers. They were helped in their education by ... the so-called Sabians of ...Harran".

⁵ *The Fihrist of Al-Nadim*, a tenth century survey of Muslim culture, B. Dodge ed. and trans. Vol. 1 and 2, New York London 1970.

⁶ J. Tubach, *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes*. Der Sonnenkult in Edessa, Harran und Hatra am Vorabend der christlichen Mission, Wiesbaden 1986, p. 145; S. Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*. The Origins and Early History of the Mandaeans and Their Relation to the Sabians of the Qur'an and to the Harranians. *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 3*, Oxford, 1994, gives Arabic sources before *al-Ma'mun* p. 22-29 and after him p. 29-52.

inhabitants of Harran adopted the name *Sabians* in order to gain favored status under Islamic rule⁷. In this context *an-Nadim* quotes the Christian author *Isha' al-Qatiyi*. At the end of his life caliph *Al-Mamun* (813-833) is travelling through the regions and meets Harranians. He threatens to slay them to the last man when they don't embrace the religion of Islam or one of the religions Allah mentioned in his book. According to our source one of the people of Harran advised them: "*When al-Ma'mun returns from his journey, say to him: "we are Sabians, for this is the name of a religion which Allah, may His name be exalted, mentioned in the Koran. Profess it and you will be saved..."*"⁸ This passage proves that the Harranians used *Sabians* as a kind of pseudonym, because this group is mentioned three times in the Koran as a protected group⁹. As Sabians they were protected as Jews and Christian were. *an-Nadim* continues his story and relates that *al-Ma'mun* dies before he is able to return and to control the brand-new *Sabians*. These citations show tense relations.

Other adaptations had to be made to survive under muslim rule. The ones who became *Sabians* enjoyed protection. Muslim officials describe the People of Harran before they became the so-called *Sabians* as *Nabataeans* (Syriac-speaking pagans) and immigrants from Greece¹⁰. Later caliph *Abd al-Karim* (974-991) will confirm the right of these so-called *Sabians*, "who live in Harran, Raqqa and Diyar Mudar" to perform *Sabian* cult in their sanctuaries¹¹. He doesn't mention the *Sabians* of Baghdad; probably they didn't have a cult. As we will see adaptation to Islam caused a separation of spirits. It provoked tension and our sources reflect this.

One of *an-Nadim's* sources, called *at-Tayyib*, is giving information about external adaptations to the Muslim faith. He mentions: fasting-days, ritual slaughter and purification before praying and praying with inclinations and prostration's (chapt. 9 section 1)¹². He doesn't mention, as some other sources do¹³, how human victims are sacrificed in *Sabian* temples. This could raise the suspicion of the authorities. Another adaptation was made. *at-Tayyib* refers to Aristotle and many of his works in relation with the Sabians: *...their assertion about matter, the elements, form, non-entity, time, place and motion is in accord with what Aristotle presented in...*(chapt. 9, section 1)¹⁴. *at-Tayyib* describes the religion of the learned *Sabians*¹⁵. These *Sabians* tried to convince their Muslim authorities how Islam evolved naturally out of *sabianism*. In their writings they called in mind Abraham, who was a starworshipper and also lived in Harran and became a strict monotheist (see also the dialogue between the Muslims and *Sabians* from *al-Sahrastani*¹⁶). The learned *Sabians* used Abraham to justify their case. Jewish

⁷ Dodge, trans., p. 751.

⁸ Ibid. p. 752.

⁹ Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*, p. 17 mentions verses 2:62; 5:69 and 22:17.

¹⁰ Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*, p.131-32, p. 51, p. 37 (they were also called Chaldaeans).

¹¹ Chwolsohn I, p. 501.

¹² Dodge, trans., p. 747 n. 11.

¹³ see following pages about the pagan religion.

¹⁴ Dodge, trans., p. 750 n. 27: "This passage about the influence of Aristotle, probably refers to the spiritual sect which was influenced by hellenism; the other sect clung to idolatry". (see as-Sahrastani on the following pages about the Sabians of Baghdad).

¹⁵ Hjärpe, *Analyse critique des traditions arabes sur les Sabéens harraniens*: Diss. Uppsala 1972, p. 41: he doesn't mention that human victims are sacrificed ; p. 38 : Caliph Abd al Karim.

¹⁶ Hjärpe, diss. p. 38; Dodge ed., p. 750, n. 27.

and Christian prophets were also their prophets. They associated Hermes with Henoah-Idris¹⁷. They even provided themselves according to the Christian author *Isha'al-Qatiyi* with a holy book, called *al-Hatifi*, which dealt with all kinds of magical acts. The savant *at-Tayyib* became the tutor, friend and adviser of the caliph *al-Mu'tadid*. Even this high position proved to be dangerous for a *Sabian*. He was disgraced and died in prison in Baghdad in 899. Others continued his work of adaptation and integration. Because of their work hermetic texts reached medieval and renaissance Europe. We will come back to them later.

SOME REMARKS ON THE SOURCES

Many Arab sources give more or less reliable information. In considering our sources we have to keep in mind several things. Although the *Sabians* must have had numerous books of themselves, there are according to Gündüz probably only three left¹⁸. So we have to depend on secondary sources.

Most of them are written by opponents who were either Jew, Christian, Muslim or anonymous. The only exception are the *Rasa'il* (end of the tenth century), the testimonia of the sympathetic *Brethren of Purity*¹⁹ at Basra. Peters states: *Their occultism, on the other hand, comes, on their own admission, from the Sabians of Harran*²⁰.

The information of adversaries of the *Sabians* of Harran about the mystery-cult was often not understood by the writers themselves. Sometimes they deliberately wanted to be malicious, sometimes they didn't understand that the alchemic elements of the mystery-cult had a symbolic and not a literal meaning. How older the source, the more reliable it is. The most reliable are the ones, which were composed by those who knew the *Sabians* personally. For example: *at-Tayyib as-Sarahsi* (died 899 A.D.) was a pupil of the famous *Sabian* scholar *al-Kindi* (died 870). *at-Tayyib* knew *Tabit ibn Qurra* (835-901) and corresponded with him.

Some Arab writers took pains to travel to Harran and to inform themselves personally. The learned and traveled *al-Masudi* (died in 956 A.D.) wrote the first systematic study on the *Sabians*. He visited Harran in 943, enjoyed a guided tour through the city and wanted to be informed on several matters. He got his information personally from one of the *Sabian* headmen: *...I talked with Malik ibn Uqbun and others of them...*²¹. *al-Masudi* wanted to verify all kinds of information about human and animal victims and other possible backbiting. Chwolsohn

¹⁷ Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 190.

¹⁸ Gündüz, *The knowledge of Life*, p.135 mentions the Book of Baba the Harranian, the Book of the five mysteries and The Nabatean Agriculture; Chwolsohn II, Introduction p. I-VI states that nothing is left of the books which the learned Sabians wrote about the religion of the Sabians (in Harran).

¹⁹ Yves Marquet, "Sabéens et Ikhwan al-Safa", *Studia Islamica* 24 (1966) p. 35-80 and *Studia Islamica* 25 (1966) p. 77-109; Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 206 about their sympathy, p. 198 about *Rasa'il* IV "the most overt expression of Hermeticism".

²⁰ Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 197: The Sabians of Harran were, according to the Brethren (in occultism) the teachers of the Greeks and a link in the chain of wisdom that began in Egypt and Babylon and ended in the Greek philosophical schools. For this occultism they did not use not the same metaphysics as the scholastic Greek sources, which were only translated in the ninth and tenth century. Sabian philosophical literature was almost certain in Syriac and was older (eight-century) and would antedate most of the formal translation activity from Greek into Arabic.

²¹ *al-Masudi, Kitab Murug al Dhahab wa-Ma'adin al Jawhar, Les Prairies d'Or*, Ch. Pellat ed. and transl., Vol. 1, Paris 1962, Vol. 2, Paris 1965; Vol. 2, par. 1395, p. 536; Chwolsohn II, p. 374-5. For commentary see Chwolsohn I, p. 501.

supposes that they lied to him and didn't tell him everything about their mystery-cults.²² Of what he saw during that tour *al-Masudi* states: ...*I saw In Harran on the doorknocker of the porch of a place where the Sabians gather an inscription in Syriac derived from Plato which was explained to me by Malik ibn Uqbun and other persons of their sect: The one who knows his own nature, becomes God*²³ Known is that Greek temples had inscriptions above their entrances.

Masudi's information about a hellenistic sabian temple is important. We need to go into Harran's hellenism more deeply in order to value the findings of our eyewitness. Harran was the city of the pagan *Hellenoi*. Even at 639 A.D., when muslims conquered Mesopotamia, and later in the tenth century during Masudi's visit, the city was still one of the hellenistic outposts in Mesopotamia. Since 312 B.C. it had been hellenized; then the city became a military colony under the Seleucids, the heirs of Alexander the Great's conquest. During nearly a millennium Harranians were hellenized. The Romans honored Harran with the title of *colonia aureliana philoromania* because of the help of Harran under *Marcus Aurelius* (161-180 A.D.)²⁴. In 217 A.D. the Roman emperor *Caracalla* was murdered in Harran during his return from the *Sin-* or Moon-temple to his palace. The hospitable city opened the gates for the Roman emperor *Julianus* (360-363). Was it because he was converted to a mystical form of neoplatonism in 351 A.D., that he took pains to visit Harran on his raid on the Persians? It definitively was because of the fame of the city as last fortress of '*hellenismos*' in Osrhoëne. Followers of the old religion were in *Julianus*' eyes '*hellenoi*'. He wanted cities to stay with their old religion. He gave the example by overtly venerating the old gods in the temples of Harran when he left the city. *Julianus* was not very Christian minded²⁵. Later emperors changed their minds. Long afterwards the Harranians would remember the destruction of the *Sin-* or Moon-temple in 386 A.D.; most probably it was done by *Cyngius*, head of the praetorian guard, who acted in command of the Christian emperor *Theodosius I* (379-395 A.D.)²⁶. This emperor ordered the destruction of pagan temples in Egypt and Syria. Paganism had to be erased and as a citizen of the Roman Empire one had to become a Christian. In Egypt people had to bury their library, because reading suspect books could bring the death penalty. Alexandria became dangerous territory for pagans. The pagan philosopher *Ammonius* had to flee from Alexandria to Constantinople²⁷. The Academia in Athens was finally closed in 529 A.D. Tardieu suggests that the philosophers *Simplicius*, student of *Ammonius* in Alexandria, and *Damascius* escaped from Athens to Persia and afterwards stayed at the platonic academy of Harran around 490 A.D.²⁸. Philosophers went

²² Chwolsohn I, p. 501.

²³ *al-Masudi Murug, Les Prairies d'or*, ed. Ch. Pellat, Vol. 2, par. 1395, p.536; Chwolsohn II, Masudi, text II, Chapt. 6, p. 372.

²⁴ Chwolsohn, I, p. 393.

²⁵ Chwolsohn, I, p.428; Tubach, *Im Schatten des Sonnengottes*, p. 135-40, n. 44,50,51; Gündüz, *The Knowledge Of Life*. p. 130-31.

²⁶ Chwolsohn, I, p. 406-07.

²⁷ G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A historical approach to the late pagan mind*, Cambridge 1986, p. 391.

²⁸ M. Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques et Sabiens de Harran", *Journal Asiatique* 274 (1986), p. 1-44, p. 20-1: from Athens the philosophers went to Alexandria, from 529 A.D. they went to Antioch and to Harran, especially under the caliphate of Mutawakkil (822-861) (information bases on reliable sources as Masudi a.o.). Afterwards they went to Baghdad. Tabit ibn Qurra is only departing from Harran to Baghdad in 875 A.D; p. 22, 23, 25: in the 8th century two intellectual centers in Syria were Antioch (Christian city which transmitted Greek knowledge into Syria) and Harran (pagan city, that was the capital in 744 and passed Greek

from Athens and Alexandria eastwards to Christian Antiochia and pagan Harran. These two cities became centers of learning and proliferated Greek knowledge into Syria and Arabia. When a Spanish traveler, called *Ibn Gobeir*, visited Harran in June 1184 A.D., he saw the most important mosque built on what was considered to be the basement of a Roman building, which had been a temple²⁹. Next to it was an impressive tower also from Roman times. Remarkable is that during the fourth century Harran got its first Christian bishop, who also became, because emperor *Constantius* ordered so, bishop of Edessa. His name was *Barses* (361-378 A.D.). Chwolsohn, who assembled and edited massive information about the *Sabians* of Harran in the middle of the 19th century, remarks that this appointment doesn't mean that there actually were Christians in Harran³⁰. The Spanish woman pilgrim *Egeria*, who was on her way to Edessa around 384 A.D., could not find a single Christian in the city of Harran. The tense relation between the two cities of Harran and Edessa some 30 miles to the north, wasn't only caused by the scarcity of water. It was also caused by the stubbornness with which the Harranians clinged to the old religion. Fathers of the Church called Harran *Hellenopolis*, "the heathen city", because of the old religion of its inhabitants. The Harranians lamented the destruction of their public buildings at the end of the fourth century. They were angry with their occupiers; the millennia old and famous *Sin*-temple was said to have been more beautiful than the *Serapis*-temple in Alexandria.

Later the Harranians begged the Muslim authorities, who conquered Mesopotamia in 639 A.D., for permission to rebuild their pagan sanctuaries and to continue their city-cult. Gündüz records that Harran was a political and military force under the Umayyad dynasty³¹. The Umayyad caliph *Umar II* (682-720 A.D.) transferred a school of medicine and philosophy from Alexandria to Harran. In the last period of the Umayyad dynasty the caliph *Marwan II* (744-750 A.D.) made Harran his residence and moved the capital from Damascus to Harran. During the reign of the caliph *al-Mutawakkil* (822-861 A.D.) the school of philosophy and medicine gained in importance. Tardieu is sure that *al-Masudi* visited the neoplatonic academy of Harran, where science and philosophy were taught from the 7th till the 11th century³². This excursus shows how Harran proliferated hellenistic knowledge into the Arabic world. Back to our sources now. They will show us that Harranians had to pay a price for it.

Although Chwolsohn, in the Asiatic museum in St. Petersburg, collected the bulk of main sources and published them in two large volumes in 1856, it was Hjärpe who managed to give the decisive criterion for their valuation. He argues that Chwolsohn devotes a chapter of 80 pages to the learned and famous *Sabians*³³. He manages to

knowledge in Syria and Arabia; p. 44: the Academy in Harran is the haven of exiles for Athens after the agreement between Xosrow Anusirwan and Justinianus in 532 A.D. Simplicios wrote here his commentary on the Enchiridion (p. 24 n. 105); M. Tardieu, *Les Paysages Reliques. Routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius*, Louvain Paris, 1990, p. 16 and 20 n. 3; I. Hadot, "La vie et l'oeuvre de Simplicius d'après des sources grecques et arabes", *Simplicius, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*, Berlin New York, 1987, p. 3-39.

²⁹ Chwolsohn, I, p. 406 en 434.

³⁰ Chwolsohn, I, p. 423.

³¹ Gündüz, *The Knowledge of life*, p. 132-33.

³² M. Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques et Sabiens de Harran", p. 18, n. 6 and 7.

³³ Chwolsohn I, Chapt. 12, p.542-622; Hjärpe, diss., p. 36.

mention more than 30 learned *Sabians*, who excelled in all the known sciences such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy. But there were only a few of them who actually lived in Harran during their lifetime; the teacher of *Tabit ibn Qurra* and the informant of Masudi. The other ones lived, as *Tabit* later did, in Baghdad at the courts of the Caliphs, or in Basra or Baalbek. Baghdad became their center and they became *the Sabians of Baghdad*³⁴.

A DIVISION IN SOURCES CAUSED BY A SCHISM

Hjärpe sees a division in sources. When dated after the schism around 875 A.D., they were composed by two different groups of *Sabians*. He bases his argument on information of *Ibn Hallikan*.³⁵ This informant tells us that *Tabit ibn Qurra* was brought before the headman, had to recall his teachings and was forbidden to enter the temple. In the end he was forbidden to visit their meetings. The headman of the community of Harran exiled him because of his heterodoxy. *Ibn Hallikan* also tells that *Tabit* went to Baghdad in 875 A.D. where he founded a 'schismatic Harranian sect'. We know that this 'sect' in Baghdad still existed in the 11th century and that the first *Sabians* who converted to Islam lived in this group at this time. In Baghdad *Tabit's* son *Sinan* (d. 942) provoked difficulties with his *sabianism*, despite his prestigious position. He had to flee from Baghdad and ended his days as a Muslim.

An-Nadim also gives information about the departure of *Tabit*³⁶. He tells that it was *Muhammed ibn Musa* of the famous family of savants and patrons of learning, who took *Tabit*, who was in Harran employed as a money changer, into his translation circle, which at that time included the celebrated *Hunayn ibn Ishaq*. *Tabit* trained with *Mohammed* and was eventually introduced to the caliph *al-Mu'tadid* (892-902) in Baghdad.

According to Tardieu there were no problems in Harran around 875 A.D. The neoplatonic Academy was very active in the 9th century and continued to prosper after the depart of *Tabit*³⁷. When *al-Masudi* visited Harran in 943 A.D. he visited the Academy and the temple called *Maghlitiya*. Those were, he heard, the only two sacred buildings that were existing and functioning³⁸. *An-Nadim* has preserved a list of headmen at Harran from the time of *Abd al-Malik* (685-705 A.D.) till 944 A.D.³⁹. Afterwards they didn't have official leaders anymore. According to Peters the *Sabians* in Baghdad used their influence for their colleagues and fellow-translators at home. He wonders whether they started to cultivate the perhaps safer domain of belles lettres and history for reasons of safety. Famous *Sabians* as *Ibrahim ibn Hilal* and *Tabit ibn Qurra's* grandson *Tabit ibn Sinan* (d. 975) were literary men rather than scientists⁴⁰.

³⁴ Hjärpe, diss. p. 35-40.

³⁵ *Ibn Hallikan, Wafayat*, n. 127, tr. de Slane, i, 288; Hjärpe, diss. p. 35-40; Chwolsohn I, p. 482-3 gives a lot of information on *Ibn Hallikan*; the latter doesn't give his informant; Tubach on Hjärpe see p. 157.

³⁶ Dodge, trans., p. 647.

³⁷ Tardieu, *Sabiens Coraniques*, p.19.

³⁸ *al-Masudi, Murug*, Pellat ed., Vol. II, par. 1392, p. 535.

³⁹ Dodge, trans., 768-69; Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 205-206.

⁴⁰ Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 206.

Nothing is said about the cause of the schism. We may suppose that the more cooperative attitude toward Islam of the more learned and hellenized *Sabians* of Harran caused tension in the native group. We know that even in hellenized cities there was a small group of educated people. The mass of the simple citizens and especially the folk of the countryside stuck to their, in this area, native Aramaic religion. But the native group of *Sabians* of Harran was not primitive. Peters states: ...*Sabianism was far more than mere star worship; the Harranians possessed a physics and a theology as well...a body of cosmology, physics and psychology probably constituted the esoteric teachings of the Sabians of Harran...the pagans at Harran fashioned for themselves a theology, that is, they attempted to explain their beliefs in terms of Hellenistic rational discourse. The experiment cannot be judged a complete success. The old and the new theology sat uneasily together...*⁴¹.

Hjärpe, who refers to scientists of name like Festugière, Massignon, de Goeje and Margoliouth, is convinced of the fact that the neoplatonic philosophy and speculative *Sabian* theology weren't part of the folk-religion. He states that the *Sabians of Baghdad* simply were neoplatonic philosophers themselves⁴². These learned *Sabians* brought to Baghdad a "hermetic theology", which was absorbed by Muslim scholars⁴³. When examining the sources we find that the sources written by *Sabians of Baghdad* or by writers related to these circles are more philosophical and speculative. They are younger, but therefore not less valuable. These philosophers didn't like the pagan cult of the local Sabians, another possible cause of tension. If *hermetic*, these writings will cover the field of the *hermetica philosophica*.

The next subject we are going to investigate is the religion of the native Harranians. One of the sources of *al-Nadim* is a cultic calendar of annual festivities in the city of Harran written by a Christian author named *Abu Said Wahb*. One other highly interesting source for the native religion is an extract from a little Syriac book of the Harranians about their mysteries. Dating these sources is difficult. Although they must have been written before 898 A.D. because *al-Nadim* used them, the described habits and cults can be age old⁴⁴. It is tantalizing to find out what this mystery-cult was all about. We will continue our search in the field of the *hermetica practica* and examine these sources on their possible *hermetic* content. Having finished this job we will examine the learned *sabianism* of the Sabians of Baghdad. Finally we need to work on our definition of what we regard as *hermetic and hermeticistic*. We then hope to come to a conclusion about possible *hermetism* in *Sabian Harran*.

⁴¹ Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 199-200.

⁴² Hjärpe, diss. p. 164.

⁴³ Hjärpe, diss. p. 38; Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques", p. 27, is doubting this 'hermetism'. He considers it as pure Neoplatonism; Tardieu, *Les Paysages Reliques*, p. 159-60, "le corpus hermétique, tel que nous le connaissons, circulait donc à Harran"; Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*, p. 208-210, p. 210: "there was a big influence of Hermeticism on the pagans of Harran...Hermetic literature was also translated into Arabic via Syriac by the medieval Harranians. Hermetic beliefs, ideas and actions were widespread among them".

⁴⁴ Tubach, op. cit., p. 146, compares the calendars of festivities.

THE OLD PAGAN RELIGION

First of all *al-Biruni* (972-1048) gives information about the astronomical grounds for the calculation of months and years in his *Chronology of the Sabians* (1000 A.D.)⁴⁵. *Sabians* of Harran used a lunar calendar for cultic activities. *al-Biruni* gives, in a paragraph, the feasts, festivals and cults of the Harranians. The source he uses is *al-Hashimi*, which he does not consider very reliable. There are differences between *al-Biruni* and the Christian author *Wahb*, one of the informers of *an-Nadim*⁴⁶. *al-Biruni* wanted to visit Harran to check his information, but didn't succeed in getting there⁴⁷.

All information we have attest that the Harranians venerated the stars and planets. *Wahb* informs in a Handwriting about Offerings: ...the first day of the week offerings to the Sun; *al-Shams* or *Helios*, the second day to *Qamar* or *Sin*, on the third day to *al-Mirrikh* or *Ares* or *Mars*, on the fourth day to *Utarid* or *Mercury* or *Nebo*, on the fifth day to *al-Mushtari* or *Jupiter* or *Bel* or *Bal*, on the sixth day to *al-Zuharah* or *Venus* or *Baltha* or *Belit*, on the seventh day to *Zuhul*, *Saturnus* or *Cronus*⁴⁸. They venerate these celestial bodies in seven or sometimes twelve temples or shrines with different geometrical forms: We find: 1. the shrine of the Primal Cause (hemisphere); 2. Intelligence (circle); 3. Soul (circle); 4. Form or Space (shape unknown); 5. Time or the Governing (circular); 6. Saturn (hexagonal); 7. Jupiter (triangular); 8. Mars (square); 9. Sun (square); 10. Venus (elongated triangle); 11. Mercury (square outside but hexagonal inside); 12. Moon (five-sided)⁴⁹. In the more philosophical works the temples of the seven planetary deities become abstract, intellectual substances and are expanded from seven to twelve⁵⁰.

In the sacred enclosure of the *Sabians* of Harran there were 12 shrines. The Harranian pagans were visiting the shrines at special times. The Christian author *Wabd* who wrote a calendar remarks: *The beginning of their year was Nissan (April)... they pray humbly to their goddess Baltha, who is al-Zuharah (Venus). When entering the shrine of the goddess on these days, group by group in a scattered way, they slaughter sacrificial victims and burn animals alive... on the 26th day of this month (it is September) they go forth to the mountain and observe the opposite position of the Sun and Saturn and Venus... On the 27th and 28th day they have mysteries, offerings, slaughters and burnt sacrifices to the North, who is the greatest god, as well as to the devils and jinn, whom he controlled and scattered, giving them luck*⁵¹. We must remember that our informant is a Christian; he writes about cults he disapproves of and doesn't understand.

Going up the ziggurat or sacred hill or mountain and watching the stars, people did already in ancient Sumeria and Babylonia. In Babylon in ancient Chaldaea there were the *seven shrines*, which were according to Dodge

⁴⁵ Tubach, op. cit., p.160, n. 67.

⁴⁶ Chwolsohn II, p. 22-39; Dodge ed., p. 755-765.

⁴⁷ Hjärpe, "the Holy Year of the Harranians", *Orientalia Suecana XXIII-XXIV* (1974-1975) p. 68-83, p. 69; M. Tardieu: "Les Calendriers en usage a Harran d'après les sources arabes et le commentaire de Simplicius à la physique d' Aristote", *Simplicius sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*, Berlin, New York 1987, p. 40-57; Tubach 146-47 n. 12.

⁴⁸ Chwolsohn II, Text 1, cap. IV, p. 22; Dodge, trans., p. 755.

⁴⁹ Hjärpe, diss., compares sources Chapt. IV, p. 62-96, p.90-92; Dodge, trans., p. 755, n. 50.

⁵⁰ Tubach, op. cit., p.142-158.

...almost certainly seven small temples inside a sacred enclosure, consecrated to the moon, sun and five known planets. They very likely formed a semicircle facing the ziggurat⁵².

In *Sumatar Harabesi* (built between 165 –200 A.D. under King Akbar the Great) less than 31 miles from Harran, a sanctuary was excavated, with a citadel, a central shrine and several smaller shrines around it. What was demolished in Edessa and Harran, survived in this backward territory close to both cities. It was a place where the Moon-god and planetary deities were venerated⁵³. At the time *Sumatar Harabesi* was erected by king Akbar the Great, there lived at his court at Edessa a famous astrologer, called Bar Daisan (154-222 A.D.). In his books we find an early mixture of pagan astrology with hellenistic philosophy. He was highly gifted in all fields and worked as a philosopher and a man of science. Bar Daisan seems to have been familiar with the hermetica. In *the Book of the law of the Countries* Bar Daisan asks Avida: "Hast thou read the books of the astrologers who are in Babylon, in which is described what effects the stars have in their various combinations at the Natives of men; and the books of the Egyptians, in which are described all the various characters which men happen to have?" "I have read books of astrology" said Avida, but I don't know which are those of the Babylonians and which those of the Egyptians. "The teaching of both countries, said Bardesanes, is the same"⁵⁴. Although it is probable, it cannot be proven Bar Daisan knew the Greek hermetica philosophica⁵⁵. We must consider him, as Drijvers does, as belonging to the same mental climate⁵⁶. In Syria we must search for preliminary phases of what later became Arabic hermeticism.

Christian sources such as the *Doctrina Addai* and the *Homily on the fall of idols* of the Christian bishop Jacob of Sarug (451-521), Sarug is situated close to Harran, give us information about high planetary sanctuaries of which *Sumatar Harabesi* once was one. Jacob tells us that on the hills temples were erected and painted idols were venerated. ...*There was no hill that was not moist of the blood of sacrifices... youth in multitudes were given as sacrifices...to the Sun, Moon and to the star Venus and to the luminaries...*⁵⁷ *Sumatar Harabesi* is such a pagan sanctuary, which has survived the ages. It is an important source of ancient Syrian paganism. Ultimately the Mongols came in 1260 A.D. They destroyed Harran thoroughly. In the ruined mosque we recently, at one of the entrances, found a stele on which the Muslims placed their feet in order to enter the mosque⁵⁸. The last Babylonian king of the new Babylonian empire Nabonidus (556-539 A.D.) is pictured on the stele. He

⁵¹ Dodge, trans., p. 755-765.

⁵² Dodge, trans., p. 573, n 7; Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 191 n. 14.

⁵³ J.B. Segal, "Pagan Syriac Monuments in the Vilayet of Urfa", *Anatolian Studies* III (1953), p. 97-120; J.B. Segal, "Some Syriac Inscriptions of 2nd-3rd Century A.D.", *BSOAS* XVI (1954), p. 13-36.

⁵⁴ Bar Daisan, *Book of the Law of the Countries*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson ed., Edinburgh repr. 1995, VIII, p. 729-30.

⁵⁵ G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 203.

⁵⁶ H.J.W. Drijvers, "Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica", *Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux* XXI (1970), p. 190-210; H.J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* VI, Assen 1966.

⁵⁷ P.S. Landesdörfer, "Die Götterliste des mar Jacob of Sarug in seiner Homilie über den Fall der Götterbilder" *Programm des kgl. Gymnasium im Benediktinerkloster Ettal für das Schuljahr 1913-14* (1914).

⁵⁸ D.S. Rice, "From Sin to Saladin. Excavations in Harran's Great Mosque", *ILN* 231 NR 6172 (21 Sept. 1957), p. 446-469; J.B. Segal, "The Sabian Mysteries", *Vanished Civilizations of the Ancient World*, E. Bacon ed., New York 1963, p. 201-220.

restored Harran's famous *Sin*-or moon-god temple in the 6th century B.C.⁵⁹. He is venerating the symbols of Moon, Sun, and Venus; his image has survived and remains a symbol of the survival of ancient Mesopotamian paganism.

MYSTERY-CULT

The anonymous Syriac book including five of their Mysteries, used by *an-Nadim* gives: *...as the lambs in the flock... so are the young men sent to the Bayt al Bughadhariyin* (house, hall, tent, or shrine of initiation)⁶⁰. The beginning of the Second Mystery starts like this: *It is the mystery of devils and idols, taken from their words...* This author did not approve of their cults, too. In this mystery animals are mentioned *...to the dogs, ravens and ants*. We know that dogs are sacred animals of Nergal (twinbrother of Sin) and the ravens of Nebo of Mercury⁶¹. In these shrines the young men are initiated in seven days, along seven heavenly bodies, in probably seven initiations. Twenty-two allegories are narrated to them, sung and chanted. They eat and drink and enjoy sacred meals⁶². *Wabd* is telling how they visit in procession their several shrines on the top of the hills; make vows in May; perform magic acts in June; make noise in July; embellish the shrine of Venus with fragrant flowers and fruits in December. During all these months they offer, and slaughter animals (chickens, lambs, and a bull to Hermes in April). They even slaughter human victims. On a day in August... *they sacrifice an infant boy when he is born to the gods who possess the idols. They slaughter the boy and then boil him until he disintegrates*.⁶³ The flesh is prepared in a special way and eaten. More sources give such horrifying information⁶⁴. Human sacrifices were performed in ancient Mesopotamia⁶⁵.

More plausible is another possibility. The authors who had to describe a secret and hidden mystery-cult interpreted alchemical acts literally, whereas it had a symbolic meaning. This seems the case concerning the information about "the Head". When *al-Ma'mun* meets the Harranians he asks if they are *Magians*. When they deny he replies: *Then you are unbelievers, the slaves of idols, Adherents of the Head*⁶⁶. *an-Nadim* continues to describe how a human man with an appearance like that of Mercury was seized upon with trickery and deception... He was placed in oil and borax and was prepared in a special way. The head was pulled off and then the tongue spoke like a kind of medium. *an-Nadim: It has been confirmed at length in their book entitled al-Hatifi*⁶⁷.

⁵⁹ T. Green, *The City of the Moon God*, religious traditions of Harran, Leiden, New York, 1992. Chapt. 1.

⁶⁰ Dodge, trans., p. 769, n. 121.

⁶¹ Dodge, trans., p. 770, n. 122.

⁶² Dodge, trans., p. 769-770 n. 120.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Human sacrifices are slaughtered in the months December and January. Dodge, trans., p. 763; ad-Dimasqi is telling a horrifying story about mother and child, Chwolsohn II, text III, par 3, p. 387.

⁶⁵ Chwolsohn II, p.142-155.

⁶⁶ Dodge, trans. p. 751.

⁶⁷ Dodge, trans., Chapt. 9, section 1, p. 754.

The story of the Head, which gives oracles or prophecies can be placed in a different context. In antiquity people knew the story of *Orpheus*, who was torn to pieces; afterwards his head managed to speak and to give oracles on the island of Lesbos⁶⁸. In Harran and Edessa *Orpheus* was seen as a prophet. Chwolsohn gives an Arabic source which states, that it was *Seth* or *Agathodaimon* or *Orpheus* who was the first prophet and the first one who founded a religion. ...*The Sabians called him Agathodaimon and in Greek his name is Orafi (Orpheus)*⁶⁹.

There is another possibility. When an-Nadim writes his 10th chapter on alchemy he says: The names of the Philosophers who spoke about the art: Hermes, Agathodaimon and many others... They are remembered for making the head and the perfected elixir⁷⁰. Al-ra's (the head) is the basic agent in alchemy, an elixir. This would mean that Sabians performed an alchemic act with an elixir called "the head"⁷¹.

Al-Ra's means (the) (H)(h)ead; this word has more than one significance; in alchemy it means the most important ingredient; it also means 'the head' of the body, but also 'the principal' of a group. In another context, in *The History of the Headman of the Harranian Sabians*, head is used in this significance: "The Head" or headman or principal of the Harranians⁷².

A symbolic interpretation is confirmed by the *Gayat al-Hakim*. This is a text written by the andalusian alchemist and astrologer *al-Magriti* (1000 A.D.) In the Middle Ages this book became very popular in Latin, Hebrew and Italian translation. In this text we find prayers to the seven planets of Harran and information about Harranian paganism. The author of the *Gaya* states that it is by allegory that they talk about the chopped head that talks. It sustains our supposition that we don't have to take all information of adversaries literally.⁷³

According the Christian author Isha'al-Qatiyi the Sabians also seem to have possessed a holy book on magic. In a Book of the Sabians called *al-Hatifi* ...are ascribed to them wonders of incantation, enchantment, knots, pictures and pendants... and images of animals cut on stones... . This book which is lost, deals with magic. *an-Nadim* mentions in chapt. 8 section 2 *Books on Hermes about incantations, special objects and amulets*; one was called *al-Haritus* and another *Marqunas*⁷⁴. The religion of the Harranians had practical and theoretical aspects; the magical aspect was important for the pagans in Harran. Now the time has come to look at the philosophy of the Sabians of Baghdad.

⁶⁸ Tubach, op. cit., p. 151, n.28.

⁶⁹ Chwolsohn II, Nachträge, cap. 25, information of Momammed al-Basthami p. 635; see also Chwolsohn I, p.801; T. Fahd in the *Encyclopedia of Islam part VIII*, Leiden, 1995, p. 676 under 'sabi' mentions a remarkable story told by Aghani, vi, 135-6, about the caliph al-Walid who kept in a basket covered with a silk veil an image of a man. In his eyes mercury and sal-ammoniac had been placed; these eyes seemed to move and wink.

⁷⁰ Dodge, trans., p. 849-850.

⁷¹ Dodge, trans., p. 850, n. 58.

⁷² Dodge, trans., p. 768-769.

⁷³ H. Ritter, M. Plessner, transl., "*Picatrix*". *Das Ziel des Weisen von Pseudo-Magriti*, London 1962, gives the story at two places: p. 146-7 and p. 240-1; Hjärpe, diss., p. 125; T. Green, *The City of the Moon God*, religious traditions of Harran, Leiden, New York, 1992, p. 179-80; Tubach, op. cit., p. 148-9, p. 150-1, n. 28.

⁷⁴ Dodge, trans., p. 733.

It is obvious that hellenistic knowledge and also hellenistic astrological knowledge reached Harran and its Academy. *an-Nadim* tells about *al-Kindi* (801-866) that he ... *was the distinguished man of his time and unique during his period because of his knowledge of the ancient sciences as a whole. He was called "the Philosopher of the Arabs". His books were about a variety of sciences, such as logic, philosophy, geometry, calculation, arithmetic, music, astronomy and other things* (chapt.7, section 1)⁷⁵. To *al-Masudi* the Harranian philosophers, whom he met a century later, were pseudo-sages. Our eyewitness puts it like this: *The Sabians of Harran are no more than vulgar disciples of the Greeks, a vague double of the ancient philosophers...*⁷⁶ *They are Greeks, but not all Greeks are philosophers...*⁷⁷.

Sabians outside Harran are more estimated at, we will see. The most famous *Sabian* is *Tabit ibn Qurra* (835-901 A.D.). He had to leave his hometown after the schism and became very successful abroad. Because he was the friend of the caliph *al-Mu'tadid* (857-902), he was permitted to take up his residence in Baghdad and to found a *Sabian* community. He had many students and friends among the Muslims. *Tabit's* school produced the most eminent savants over two hundred years. His students became distinguished and famous scholars; physicians, astronomers/astrologers, mathematicians and translators. *Chwolsohn* gives an impressive list of thirteen pages of all the works *Tabit* translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic. Furthermore *Tabit* corrected existing translations and wrote commentaries, treatises and abstracts⁷⁸. He chiefly translated works on mathematics, astronomy and medicine. In silence he worked on astrology and magic⁷⁹. He wrote eleven books about the religion of the *Sabians* including a book on *Hermes*, of which we know only know all the titles⁸⁰. *Tabit* shared both traditions, the older one and what *Peters* calls , the new, "scholastic" one by his contact with *Musa*⁸¹. In *al-Kindi's* work we find a more philosophical oriented version of *sabianism*, which became popular among the Muslims.

Do sources give us an impression of the philosophy? What sources do we have concerning this subject? We dispose among others over manuscripts from *al-Masudi* (died 956); *al-Biruni* (972-1048); *ad-Dimasqi* (died 1347), who gives, in his *Cosmography*, information about the temples, images, offerings and prayers and *as-Sahrastani* (1076-1154) in his *Book on religious and philosophical sects*. These Arab authors tried to be

⁷⁵ *an-Nadim* gives a long list of names of books by *al-Kindi*. He gives: Names of His Philosophical Books; His Books about Logic; His Arithmetical Books; His Books on Spheres; His Musical Books; His Astronomical Books; His Geometrical Books; His Cosmological Books; His Medical Books; His Astrological Books; His Books of Disputations; His Books about the Souls; His Books about Politics; His Books on Ontological Occurrences; His Books about Distances; His Books about Premonitions (to know things before they happen); His Miscellaneous Books (on jewels, stones, colors, animals, a warning on the deceits of alchemists; the alchemy of perfume; principals of mechanics and many others. *Dodge* trans., p. 615-626. *Tardieu* considers him an important philosopher at the Academy of Harran.

⁷⁶ *al-Masudi*, *Murug*, Pellat ed., Vol. I, cap. 210, p. 81.

⁷⁷ *al-Masudi*, *Murug*, Pellat ed., Vol. 2, cap. 1394, p. 536.

⁷⁸ *Chwolsohn* I, p. 553-564.

⁷⁹ *Tubach*, op. cit., p. 154.

⁸⁰ *Chwolsohn* II, p. II-III.

⁸¹ *Peters*, *Hermes and Harran*, p. 204.

unprejudiced, and wanted to give objective information⁸². Chwolsohn is certain that the learned *as-Sahrastani*, who lived in Baghdad for a long time, was informed by neoplatonic philosophers from the circle of the *Sabians of Baghdad*⁸³. He must have read numerous books written by the *Sabians* on their religion that circulated among the Muslims⁸⁴. We will give a short summary of his information⁸⁵.

According to *as-Sahrastani* there are different groups of *Sabians*; the idolaters and the philosophers, who adhere to fatalism⁸⁶. They mix philosophy with *sabianism* (caput 37). The supreme God is not knowable and works through intermediaries, spiritual beings (caput 8). The first teachers of these teachings were *Agathodaimon* and *Hermes* (caput 8), elsewhere called the prophets of the *Sabians* (caput 34). The spiritual beings sometimes called angels live in stars as if these were their houses (caput 9). The spiritual beings intermediate through the seven planets. The *Sabians* examine their houses, their rise and fall, their conjunctions and oppositions, the division of days, nights and hours, symbols and climates. All physical things live through the spirit, which is transmitted by the planets and stars. They make rings where they affix their seals on. They produce magical things, they make amulets, and they perform magic, tell fortunes, study astrology, say incantations and work with the seals on their rings (caput 28).

Certain is that these *Sabian philosophers* combined the old astral religion with late or neoplatonic philosophy. Without the "happy marriage" between philosophy and astrology with philosophy as the backbone, the intelligentsia would have converted much quicker to Christianity or Islam, as happened elsewhere.⁸⁷ *Sabians* translated and transmitted the antique heritage into the Muslim world. They integrated a neoplatonic monotheistic philosophy with pagan astrology. This was the reason why the Arabs estimated and venerated the *Sabians of Baghdad* so much.

THE SABIANS OF BAGHDAD AND HERMETISM

Sabians knew *Hermes* as the founder of their cult, their prophet, their fount of wisdom and as one of their gods. They transmitted three mythical traditions about *Hermes*, which had a Babylonian and Iranian origin⁸⁸. They associated the Greek *Hermes* with the Roman *Mercury* and the Egyptian *Toth*⁸⁹.

Did these people possess hermetic writings? Although we cannot prove it, learned *Sabians* must have known hermetic texts⁹⁰. It is probable that the Academia in Harran had the disposal of Greek texts that were part of the *Corpus Hermeticum (Philosophum)*, but it cannot be proven. *an-Nadim* states that the *Sabians* possessed books

⁸² Tubach, op. cit., p. 147-48, see p. 151 for remark about objectivity.

⁸³ Chwolsohn I, p.682; Tubach, op. cit., p.148.

⁸⁴ Chwolsohn I, p. 683.

⁸⁵ For *as-Sahrastani* see Chwolsohn II, p. 415-450.

⁸⁶ Chwolsohn II, text IV, par.2, p. 416; Masudi gives some other information: "under the people called Harranians and Sabians, live philosophers, who belong to the 'eclectics', Chwolsohn II, text II, par 5, p. 371.

⁸⁷ Tubach, op. cit., p. 153-157 especially p. 153, n. 40: culture in Northern-Arabia went backward without the backbone of philosophy around 600 A.D.; Tardieu, *Les Paysages Reliques*, p. 159-60.

⁸⁸ Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 191 for the Arabic sources.

⁸⁹ Gündüz, *The Knowledge of Life*, p. 210.

ascribed to Hermes. In the introduction of the tenth chapter about alchemy Hermes is prominently mentioned: ... *the first man who spoke about the science of this art was Hermes, the wise man and Babylonian who moved to Egypt...and about the Art he wrote a number of books...* He observed the specific and spiritual properties of phenomena and his knowledge of the art of alchemy was substantiated by his investigation and observation. He also knew about the making of talismans and wrote many books about them...Hermes wrote about the stars, incantations, and things incorporeal (*pneumata*)⁹¹. *an-Nadim* cites the names of thirteen books of Hermes about the art of alchemy. According to *at-Tayyib, al-Kindi* "the philosopher of the Arabians" (801-866 A.D.) who lived in Harran before the schism in 875 A.D. said... *that he saw a book that these people (the Sabians) used. It were the Discourses of Hermes on Unity, which he (Hermes) wrote for his son, and which was of the greatest excellence on this subject of unity. No philosopher exerting himself can dispense with them and agreement with them (can disagree with the Discourses of Hermes)*⁹². This passage is taken by Scott in his *Hermetica* as testimonial for the existence of Arabic hermetism⁹³.

Tabit ibn Qurra wrote *Liber de legibus Hermetis* and his son *Senan* (died 942) translated into Arabic *Leges Hermetis*⁹⁴. There are traces that the *learned Sabians* possessed and translated books ascribed to Hermes⁹⁵. It is obvious that (pseudo)hermetic texts circulated among them. They must have known philosophical writings that were ascribed to Hermes, but didn't belong to the *Corpus Hermeticum (Philosophum)* as composed of the seventeen or a few more texts known to us at this moment. Citations of numerous classical authors make it crystal-clear that the *Corpus Hermeticum* must have been larger in classical times than it is at this very moment. *al-Kindi* read *Discourses of Hermes on Unity*; and the Jewish author *Bar Hebraeus* (1226-1286) read a book in Syriac writing in which *Hermes* answered questions asked by his son *Tat*.⁹⁶ In *Corpus Hermeticum* IV, V, X, XII and XIII *Hermes* is also answering questions of his son *Tat*. It is not provable the texts are the same. But it is obvious that hermetic texts circulated in Syria. Another parallel is found in the ascent of the soul through the seven or more planetary spheres. This is a common theme in the *Corpus Hermeticum (Novum)*. Our Arabic authors attest that this was also part of Sabian philosophy. Can we consider this *philosophical pseudo(?) -hermetica* as a part of a *'hermetic tradition'*? Or do we have to accept *pseudo-hermetic* works because they were ascribed to *Hermes* as an integrated part of *hermeticism* and belonging to a broader *pseudo-hermetic* or *hermeticistic* (adjective of hermeticism) *tradition*? We are going to deal with those questions later.

⁹⁰ Tubach, op. cit., p. 156, n. 50.

⁹¹ Dodge transl.; Vol. 2, Chapt. X, p. 843-848; *al-Nadim* mentioned in Vol. 2, Chapt. 7 section 2 p. 638: books written by Hermes about the stars end at the end of the list of books we find the title: "what is hidden in the secret of the stars, also called the Rod of Gold".

⁹² *an-Nadim*, Chapt. 9 section 1, Dodge, trans., p. 750; Tardieu, "Sabiens Coraniques", p. 27-8 underlines the importance of *al-Kindi*; Peters, *Hermes and Harran*, attests on p. 202: "that the *Discourses on Unity* have been identified, without evidence, as the tract called *Poimandres* in our *Corpus Hermeticum*".

⁹³ W. Scott, *Hermetica*, the ancient Greek and Latin writings which contain religious or philosophic teachings ascribed to *Hermes Trismegistos*, Vol. I (Oxford 1924), Vol. IV *Testimonia*, Oxford 1936, A.S. Ferguson ed., p.248-489, see for *al-Kindi* p. 248-250.

⁹⁴ Chwolsohn II, p. III, IV and V.

⁹⁵ Hjärpe, diss., p. 166-67.

There are two sources that mention the existence of 'hermetists' as a group or sect. In 1186 the mystic *Suhrawardi* wrote in *The Philosophy of Illumination* about *Hermes of Egypt... who was the founder of the Haramisa* (i.e. Hermetists)⁹⁷. Also *al-Katibi* (died 1276 A.D.) says: *The Hernanites say ...*(i.e. the philosophizing *Sabians*)⁹⁸. Is the existence of these groups proof of the existence of a *living hermetic tradition*? Philosophy was taught in Harran in the Academy. The Sabian philosophers were neoplatonists. *Hermetism* is a part of neoplatonic philosophy. But it doesn't proof that these philosophers were *hermetists* standing in a *hermetic* tradition.

THE HAPPY MARRIAGE

When we combine the ancient paganism of the *Sabians of Harran* with the neoplatonism of the savant *Sabians of Baghdad* we can summarize⁹⁹: 1 *The prima causa* in its transcendence is not accessible; 2. mediators are necessary; 3. these are spiritual, non-corporal beings; 4. they are angels or gods inferior to the Supreme; 5. the atmospheres of the stars are the houses or temples of these spiritual beings; 6. the beings who live in the seven planets govern our world; 7. the images of the gods or idols are the physical representation of these superior beings; 8. there is a sacred relation between man and planetary divinity. This relation is strengthened by watching the right constellation, by incantation, purification and prayers. Plants, minerals, colors, food, animals and human beings can live in harmony with these energies.

A worship of stars and planets comes to us through the oldest sources. Also the younger sources attest this. Astromagic; astrobotanica, astromedicine, astrophysiology, astropsychology, alchemy and magic develop from this astroreligion and represent theoretical and practical aspects. For the neoplatonist all knowledge was one. Ancient paganism was made harmless because philosophy transformed it into monotheism. For this integrated knowledge Islam proved to be receptive.

SOME REMARKS ON METHODOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY

Now the moment has come to find out what we consider to be 'hermetic'. Scholars in the field of 'hermetism' study the 'hermetic' writings; writings ascribed to *Hermes Trismegistos* or other mythical sages of his circle. These 'hermetic' writings consist of two main categories: the *hermetica philosophica* and the *hermetica practica*. They are restricted in time (first three centuries A.D.) and place (Greece, Egypt, and Armenia). The philosophical texts form the *Corpus Hermeticum* consisting of seventeen philosophical and religious texts in Greek and Latin from the first three centuries A.D.; and the *Corpus Hermeticum Novum*¹⁰⁰, which consists of Coptic and Armenian texts found in Nag Hammadi and elsewhere. *Clemens Alexandrinus* knew forty-two

⁹⁶ Chwolsohn I, p.795 and p. 715; Maimonides also cites pseudo-hermetic writings, *ibid*.

⁹⁷ Scott, *Hermetica* IV, p. 264.

⁹⁸ Scott, *Hermetica* IV, p. 271.

⁹⁹ Hjärpe, *diss.*, p. 158-9.

¹⁰⁰ See J.O. Mahé, "De weg naar onsterfelijkheid", in: G.Quispel ed., *De Hermetische gnosis in de loop der eeuwen*, Baarn 1992, p. 27-52, esp. p. 51-52.

hermetic writings; thirty-six had a philosophic content and six handled about medicine. There must have existed a larger *Corpus*. Only a *Corpus of seventeen or a few more texts* is left¹⁰¹. The *hermetica practica* or *technical hermetica* consist of astrological, alchemic and magical texts. They were called 'popular', 'vulgar' or 'occult'. Although these texts were older than the philosophical ones, they were devalued. Peter Kingsley states that the new versions of Hermetic texts from Nag Hammadi, called the *Corpus Hermeticum Novum*, are in certain respects closer to the original form of the texts than the versions passed down through the Renaissance¹⁰². We need to look towards Christian scribes and editors, who during the period of late antiquity 'cleaned up' the Hermetic writings by stripping them of their magical dimension¹⁰³.

Besides 'hermetism' the broader field of 'hermeticism' is studied. Scholars study the 'hermetic' texts in the field of 'hermetism'; the interpretation of these texts by Jewish, Christian and Islamic scholars is studied in the field of 'hermeticism'. 'Hermetism' and 'hermeticism' are elements of *western esotericism*.

It is necessary to study this field, which a little while ago still had the odium of a *pseudo-science*, in a structured and well-defined way. *Esotericism* is a mixture of theories, which emerged in the Christian culture during the Renaissance, from a convergence of older traditions going back at least to late antiquity¹⁰⁴. The traditional magical and esoteric worldpicture was blown up by the arrival of empirical science and materialism in the 19th century. Many subjects within this field prove to be a kind of *proto-science*. They don't deserve the predicate *pseudo-science*, only while magic was involved. By working in this field, we are emancipating it and undoing it from old prejudices. But we have to do it in a scholarly and scientific way. Summarizing: We studied *Sabian* religion and thought in the field of *esotericism and hermeticism*. But is *Sabianism* 'hermetic', or does it belong to a living 'hermetic' tradition? When does *esoteric* thought belong to 'a hermetic tradition'? Does there really exist 'a living hermetic tradition'?

Standing in a *tradition* in the strict sense of the word means having a place in a chain of interdependent and interwoven situations or events, registered in documents, which are in *historical* way connected and which were transmitted. We would like to support a less rigid and strict definition. In a strict scientific sense a text is 'hermetic' when it is part of the *Corpus Hermeticum (Novum)*¹⁰⁵. In this sense *Sabian* esoteric thought is not 'hermetic'. In this sense there is no 'hermetic tradition', which is passed through. We saw that *Sabian* savants must have known *pseudo-hermetic* texts, which were ascribed to *Hermes*. In these texts the name of *Hermes* is prominently mentioned. In any case is *sabianism* a form of *hermeticism*. Can *pseudo-hermetica* belong to a

¹⁰¹ M. Ullmann., *Die Natur- und Geheimwissenschaften im Islam*, Vol. IV, Leiden Köln 1972, p. 369.

¹⁰² P. Kingsley, "An Introduction to the Hermetica: Approaching Ancient Esoteric Tradition", *From Poimandres to Jacob Boehme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*. R. van den Broek and C. van Heertum ed., Amsterdam 2000, p. 17-40, p. 23.

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁰⁴ W.J.H. Hanegraaff, "On the construction of esoteric traditions" in *Western Esotericism and the science of religion*. Selected papers presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion, Mexico 1995, A. Faivre and W.J.H. Hanegraaff ed., 1998, p. 11-61, p. 43-47.

¹⁰⁵ For the discussion among scientists about the definition of a "hermetic" text see note 1.

'hermetic tradition'? They do belong to a *hermeticistic* tradition. We don't want to play with words. We need to make some critical remarks about the criteria in defining a text 'hermetic'

Our mythical prophet, cosmic being, god, astrologer, and philosopher *Hermes*, who probably never existed, is standing in an ancient genealogy of divinely inspired sages. One sees him as a legendary sage in whom more than one historic person is united. For *Hermes* himself and his *legendary and mythical* tradition we cannot use *historical* criteria¹⁰⁶. The knowledge of which the ancients said it was coming from the Egyptian *Toth* and later the hellenistic *Hermes*, was very old and finally written down in the Egyptian *Houses of Life*, the scriptoria of temples¹⁰⁷. The knowledge was secret. In this context the word 'hermetic' means *closed, hidden, mysterious, magical and esoteric*. Of *Hermes* was said that he could close a pipe of glass with a secret seal so that no air could enter. This seal was 'hermetically' closed, and as such his knowledge was secret and closed to the masses.

ANCIENT HERMETICA ASTROLOGICA

The most ancient written knowledge is astrological and magical. Fowden: ...above all, *Hermes* was known as astrologer... our earliest hints at the Hermetic milieu (of Alexandria) are astrological¹⁰⁸. Its original intention ...is more to describe techniques rather than to reflect on their theoretical implications¹⁰⁹. They were written and used by people who did not pretend to be anything other than working magicians... straightforward technicians... They were practical men¹¹⁰. The common people to overcome the hardships of everyday life used them¹¹¹. The cosmic *Hermes* is older than the philosophizing *Hermes* is. This temple-literature, is more a genre or style or mode.

In The Corpus Hermeticum Novum magical procedures are written down; the Corpus is showing how technical and philosophical hermetica are closely interwoven¹¹². Fowden: ...there is no intellectual discontinuity between those who saw *Hermes* primarily as a technician and those who thought of him as a philosopher¹¹³. Recently his view is supported by prominent scholars as Peter Kingsley and Roelof van den Broek. They are criticizing the distinction made between the Higher, philosophical Greek hermetica and the Lower, magical and alchemical and essentially Egyptian hermetica¹¹⁴, or the distinction between the learned hermetism and the popular hermetism¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁶ Peters, "Hermes and Harran", p. 191 gives sources of the Babylonian and Iranian origin of *Hermes*.

¹⁰⁷ G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, p.57.

¹⁰⁸ Fowden, op. cit., p. 161.

¹⁰⁹ Fowden, op. cit., p. 89.

¹¹⁰ Fowden, op. cit., p. 116.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 116-7.

¹¹² Fowden, op. cit., p. 172.

¹¹³ Fowden, op. cit., p. 172.

¹¹⁴ P. Kingsley, "Poimandres: "The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica", *From Poimandres to Jacob Boehme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, p. 41-76, p. 67-68: Scholars as Zielinsky accused Reitzenstein of obliterating the distinction between Higher and Lower Hermetica. Reitzenstein eventually recanted. His critics missed an important point in their approach of the Hermetica from a purely Greek philosophical angle. The results of this destructive analysis of the Hermetic corpus have been embodied in the now-standard edition and commentary by Nock and Festugiere.

¹¹⁵ R. van den Broek, "Religious Practices in the Hermetic 'Lodge': New Light from Nag Hammadi". *From Poimandres to Jacob Boehme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, p. 77-96, p.79-80: "the great French scholar A.J.Festugiere distinguished between popular Hermetism and learned Hermetism. He was of the opinion that the philosophical Hermetica were written for an audience that differed almost completely from that of the magical, the astrological and the alchemical texts. This seems to be

In theurgy the practical soul tried to liberate itself of its *fatum* through magic; in philosophy through theory. According to Fowden the theory was developed that ...*the soul progressed through the material and spiritual worlds ...transgressed the planetary spheres and lose himself forever in contemplation of the divine realm*¹¹⁶. In Fowden's view it is obvious that there is a vital link between *hermetism* in this *technical* and *theoretical* aspect and late *platonism*¹¹⁷.

Astrological writings also deserve a place in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and form the *Corpus Hermeticum Astrologicum*¹¹⁸. The word *corpus* must not be seen as a restricted area, but as a living organism with different members where also astrological texts ascribed to *Hermes* find a place.

YOUNGER *HERMETICA PHILOSOPHICA*

In the philosophical texts there emerges a picture of an inspired spiritual teacher, mostly called Hermes, surrounded by a small group of followers. He instructs a pupil about the nature of man, the world and God. Some of them desire personal illumination. They express their inner religious experience in a mythical and symbolic language. Mention is made in the texts of prayers, hymns, meals and initiation in hermetic mysteries. Roelof van den Broek asks himself: "Does all this points to the existence of Hermetic groups in which the 'way of Hermes' was taught and celebrated in a more or less structured way? Or are we only concerned here with a literary device, without any base in real life?"¹¹⁹ In his opinion the Hermetic texts clearly suggest: "the existence of small Hermetic communities, groups, conventicles or Lodges, where Hermetic instruction was given and individual experiences were collectively celebrated with rituals, prayers and hymns"¹²⁰. After prayer the embrace and the mutual kiss takes place. After the initiation into the hermetic mystery, which is a mystical cosmic experience¹²¹, members could enjoy a sacred vegetarian meal¹²². Van den Broek is convinced that hermetic Nag Hammadi texts show us how in confraternities of initiates the living tradition of the way of Hermes was celebrated. Some Hermetic Nag Hammadi texts "can be read as literary reflections of what happened in the Hermetic 'lodge'"¹²³. "The view that they merely existed in the minds of writers who wanted to promote a special brand of religious philosophy has to be abandoned"¹²⁴. Fowden: *Any attempt to describe the milieu of hermetism must take into account the extensive common ground between the philosophical and technical aspect of the doctrine...*

reasoning from a too modern point of view, namely that of the difference between respectable philosophy and theology and not so respectable occult sciences. Moreover we know from Nag Hammadi that also in circles where the philosophical Hermetica were flourishing magical and astrological terminology and practices were quite common".

¹¹⁶ Fowden, op. cit., p. 119.

¹¹⁷ Fowden, op. cit., p. 153.

¹¹⁸ W.Gundel, *Neue astrologische Texte des Hermes Trismegistos*. Funde und Forschungen auf den Gebiet der antiken Astronomie und Astrologie. Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Abteilung, Neue Folge Heft 12, München 1936, p. 147, 'astrologischen Corpus Hermeticum'.

¹¹⁹ Van den Broek, *Religious Practices in the Hermetic 'Lodge': New Light from Nag Hammadi*, p. 80.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 81.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p. 90.

¹²² *Ibid.* p. 84, 87.

¹²³ Van den Broek, *Religious Practices*, conclusion p. 95.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 95.

However small the Hermetic circles, they will always have included people at different stages of instruction and spiritual understanding. There is no reason why we should not imagine adepts of techniques of astrology and alchemy sitting together with those who yearned for a more spiritual wisdom at the feet of the successor of Hermes¹²⁵.

These texts have no fixed body of doctrine and all depend of the personal authority of one teacher. If there exists 'a hermetic tradition' it must be a very informal and loose one! *Historical* criteria seem hardly usable, now we learn that the *technical* and *theoretical hermetica* both are *genres* consisting of "isolated groups of conceptually similar treatises"¹²⁶. Peter Kingsley is giving an example of what could happen when these texts were translated. When considering the transfer of traditions from Egypt into Greek, the word 'translation' must be understood in "very broad terms"¹²⁷. The word *hermeneia* means not only 'translation' in our modern sense but also 'interpretation'. It is not only "a question of literal rendering, word for word", but it also involves the interaction between the translator or writer and "the inventiveness of the God whose nature he felt committed to reveal"¹²⁸. Translating a text meant the interpretation and re-interpretation and in fact the re-writing of a text. The translator felt free to do so, because in his view he stood under the guidance of the gods he wrote about. He felt himself inspired in the most literal sense of the word.

We learned another important thing: The *corpora* are interdependent. A division was not only artificially made but it also put the philosophical texts on a pedestal of learning and intellectuality. So it happened that Walter Scott in the introduction of his standard work *Hermetica* (ed. 1924) wrote on the very first page: "We are therefore justified in treating "religious" or "philosophic" *Hermetica* as a class apart, and, for our present purpose, ignoring the *masses of rubbish* which fall under the other head". Also Gurth Fowden disapproves this, in our view, arrogant and unhistorical attitude when underlining the interdependency: *...the clumsiness of such categories as technical, philosophical and spiritual, which reflect a schematic way of thinking quite alien to that of a Hermetist*¹²⁹. We were very surprised to find in Scott's *Hermetica* (part IV volume 1 and 2) numerous Arabic writers who managed to meet Scott's requirements. Evidently their writings contained enough religious and philosophical content to satisfy the compiler's critical mind.

May we conclude that there exists a *Corpus Hermeticum Philosophicum Arabicum*¹³⁰? Careful Ferguson, who edited Scott's work posthumously, argues: *...but it is perhaps possible to reduce the names of the Sabian prophets to some order and to connect them with the hermetism of our documents*¹³¹.

¹²⁵ Fowden, op. cit., p. 160.

¹²⁶ Fowden, op. cit., p. 95.

¹²⁷ Kingsley, *Poimandres*, p. 70

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 71. As an example Kingsley uses the translation of an Egyptian religious text into Greek concerning the nature and worship of the god Imhotep; p. 72: its relevance to our Hermetic corpus is undeniable.

¹²⁹ Fowden, op. cit., p. 89.

¹³⁰ Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, p. 32-38, asks himself whether the hermetic Arabic texts are merely translations of Greek texts or falsifications. He pleads for the first option. Scientists made efforts to search in Greek hermetic sources and to prove translation in Arabic (p.33).

¹³¹ W. Scott, *Hermetica*, Vol. IV, part 1 with introduction of A.S. Ferguson, p. xliv.

HARRAN, A CHANNEL OF TRANSMISSION OF A HERMETIC TRADITION?

We wonder if in this context the category of *pseudo-hermetica* is still usable. Why can only the seventeen or a few more fortunate *hermetic* texts ascribed to *Hermes*, but written by adherents, be '*hermetic*'? Admirers of *Hermes* also wrote other texts; they are just as personal and positive as the seventeen lucky and chosen ones. We cannot help thinking that there must exist '*a living hermetic tradition*' in an unorganized, spontaneous and informal way¹³². We cannot prove that Harran was a channel of transmission of a hermetic tradition in the strict sense of the word, because we don't know whether they read the specific hermetic texts, which belonged to the *Corpus Hermeticum Philosophicum*. We suggest to give the words 'hermetic', 'corpus' and 'tradition' a more fluid, natural and less rigid definition. We suppose our investigations show that the definition of the word 'hermetic' needs a fresh approach. Isn't it time for a new historical attitude, which includes the Egyptian and even Greek magical and alchemical prehistory of the texts?

Sources did reveal and prove that Harran was a channel of transmission of hermeticism. Sabians of Harran and Baghdad have transmitted a *hermeticistic* tradition indeed, because, in any case, *sabianism* is a *manifestation of hermeticism*. Sabians of Harran and Baghdad gave their interpretation of what *they* considered to be *the sacred tradition of Hermes*, their God and prophet. It seems that by this attitude they are standing in an old and living tradition of personal inspiration and interpretation of hermetic texts. These Syrian pagans formed an important link from Egypt and Greece to the Muslim world. They certainly deserve their place in the line of the mystical *tradition of Hermes* and his followers.

Dr Annine van der Meer

¹³² Kingsley, *Poimandres*, p. 68: "On the contrary, they were clearly the products of specific circles of people belonging to a living tradition; and they arose out of and served as pointers towards a way of life based on mystical practice and realisation".