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«A GEMSTONE AMONG THE STONES»: THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN ISLAM AND ITS RELATION WITH LANGUAGE¹

LUCA PATRIZI

ABSTRACT · The recourse to the symbolism of precious stones is attested in different religious contexts. While several specialists of Judaism and Christianity analyzed this symbolism in the context of the Old and New Testaments, as in the Jewish and Christian exegetical literature, its presence and nature in the Islamic sources so far did not gain the attention of the scholarly world. Yet in Islamic literature, this symbolism already occurs in its two main sources, the Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet Muḥammad. Precious stones appear likewise in the title of a number of Islamic literary and religious texts, and some of these texts have been even structured according to the gemstones' names. Their symbolism is used in particular in the Islamic esoteric literature, exerting in this way a strong influence on Western Hermetic and Alchemical doctrines. Numerous examples are to be found in Sufi literature, including in the works of two of its most important authorities, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240). The symbolism of precious stones, as it is the case for the Jewish and Christian contexts, appears moreover in Islamic sources as closely related to the idea of language, as we intend to show in this article.

KEYWORDS: symbolism, precious stones, gemstones, Abrahamic religions, Hermeticism, Alchemy, Islam, Sufism.

Muḥammad bashar lā ka-l-bashar bal huwa yāqūt bayna al-ḥajar.
«Muḥammad is a man who is not like other men, but rather a gemstone among the stones».

IN his collection of biographies of scholars and Sufi masters entitled *The Greatest Ranks* (*al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*), the famous Egyptian Sufi, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 1565),² narrates the life of Abū-l-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī (d. 1477), an Egyptian Sufi who lived a century before him. According to al-Shaʿrānī, Abū-l-Mawāhib recited one day those precise verses during a Sufi gathering and then had a vision of the prophet Muḥammad who told him that God forgave his sins and those of his companions who recited these verses with him. From that moment, he recited these verses during every Sufi gathering he attended until his death.³ These verses were transmitted as a separate poem, a *qaṣīda*, but also as a refrain integrated in the recitation of the *Burda*, the celebrated poem on the mantle of the prophet Muḥammad composed by the Sufi poet Muḥammad al-Buṣṭī (d. 1295). Since then, those verses were spread throughout the

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¹ An early version of this article has been presented at the inaugural conference of the ENSIE (European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism) on «Common and Comparative Esotericism: Western, Islamic, and Jewish», organised by Mark Sedgwick, Francesco Piraino and Dilek Sarmis, and which took place in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini of Venice from 12 to 14 June 2018.

² All dates refer to current era (AD), except when indicated.

³ ʿABD AL-WAHHĀB AL-SHAʿRĀNĪ, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, al-Qāhira, Maktabat al-thaqāfat al-dīniyya, 2005, vol. 1, pp. 135-161.

Islamic world. The *Burda* offers a remarkable example of the widespread diffusion of the symbolism of precious stones in Islamic environment at a popular level. But before focusing on this symbolism in Islam, which did not get the attention of the scholarly world yet unlike in other religious contexts, I will look back in history to highlight the strong analogies that can be drawn in particular between the symbolism of precious stones in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic sources.

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

There were no past civilizations, especially those settled into complex social and religious systems, in which precious stones did not held a prominent place, leading the medievalist Gerhart Ladner to coin the efficacious expression of “sacred mineralogy” to define this phenomenon.¹

The Old Testament in particular is rich in passages related to the symbolism of precious stones,² starting from the thirty-first chapter of the book of Exodus, in which God announces to Moses that he granted to Bezalel, son of Uri, the knowledge and the ability to work gold, silver, bronze, and to cut gemstones.³ Some of the most significant passages are to be found in: 1 Chronicles, in which can be found reference to precious metals and stones that were placed by King David in the treasure of the Temple which was not yet constructed;⁴ in 2 Chronicles, which reports that King David’s son, Solomon, decorated the interior of the Temple with precious stones;⁵ in Isaiah, which offers a description of the Celestial Jerusalem, whose foundations are made of sapphires, while the rest of the construction is inlaid with precious stones;⁶ in the book of Ezekiel, which relates the prophet’s vision in which the wheels of a sort of chariot are made of topaz, and which also describes a sapphire appearing in the sky in the form of a divine throne on which sits a man;⁷ in another passage of the book of Ezekiel identifying the attributes of wisdom and beauty with precious stones, and describing the first man in the garden of Eden as covered with gold and various precious stones;⁸ and finally in the book of Ezra, which reports that Moses climbed the sacred mountain of Sinai accompanied by Aaron, Nadab, Abiu and the seventy elders of Israel, all of whom had visions of God and they saw sapphire plates beneath God, pure like the heaven.⁹

The twenty-eighth chapter of the Exodus in Old Testament can be referred as the most significant passage in terms of precious stones, in which God commands Moses to create a breastplate called *hoshen* for Aaron, his sons and his descendants, to be placed on the *ephod*, the sacred garment of the High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem.¹⁰

THE GEMSTONES IN THE BREASTPLATE OF THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE TEMPLE

Created by artisans directly inspired by God, the *hoshen* is described as made of gold and other precious materials. The shoulder straps of the breastplate are said to be ador-

¹ GERHART B. LADNER, *God, cosmos and humankind: the world of early Christian symbolism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 131-134.

² JAMES A. HARRELL, *Old Testament Gemstones: A Philological, Geological, and Archaeological Assessment of the Septuagint*, «Bulletin for Biblical Research», XXI, 2011, 2, pp. 141-172.

⁴ 1 Chronicles 29:2-9.

⁵ 2 Chronicles 3:6.

⁶ Isaiah 11-12.

³ Exodus 35:30-35.

⁷ Ezekiel 16:26.

⁸ Ezekiel 28:12-13.

⁹ Ezra 24:9-10.

¹⁰ Exodus 28:1-43, 39:6-14; cf. WILLIAM W. READER, *The Twelve Jewels of Revelation 21:19-20: Tradition History and Modern Interpretations*, «Journal of Biblical Literature», c, 1981, 3, pp. 433-457.

ned with two onyx stones, each engraved with six names of the ancestors of the twelve tribes, inserted in a golden bezel. The breastplate is adorned with four rows composed by three golden bezels in which twelve gemstones are inserted. There is no single interpretation of the nature of the twelve stones, and various translations of the original Hebrew text have been proposed, starting from the versions of the *Septuaginta* (3th century) and the *Vulgata* (4th century).¹ On each precious stone, the names of the ancestors of the twelve tribes are engraved. In this biblical text, a particular attention is given to the art of engraving in the stone in order to create seals.² The text of *Exodus* 28-30 also mentions the *urim* and the *thummim*, two mysterious elements that were attached to the breastplate and were considered to be connected to divination.³

SOME INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BREASTPLATE'S GEMSTONES
IN ANCIENT JEWISH LITERATURE

In Jewish exegetical literature, significant interpretations about the nature of the breastplate can be found, in particular in the work of Philo of Alexandria (d. 50), who identifies it with the long robe mentioned in a passage of the Book of Wisdom.⁴ Philo states that the entire universe is reflected on the priestly garment, and that the twelve stones correspond to the twelve zodiacal signs, therefore opening the door to astrological interpretations given the relationship between precious stones and zodiac signs.⁵ In the *Antiquities of the Jews*, Flavius Josephus describes the oracular function of these twelve stones, which would emit a luminescence the evening before every important battle as an indication of the divine support.⁶ The Palestinian Midrash commentary of the Pseudo-Philo introduces esoteric elements to classical interpretation.⁷ In addition to specifying that Moses himself would have inserted the jewels in the breastplate, the Pseudo-Philo also mentions two other series of gemstones that are not cited in the Old Testament. The first series would consist of seven gemstones from the land of Havilah, often associated with different zones of the Arabian Peninsula in Jewish sources,⁸ described as presenting extraordinary characteristics such as restoring vision to the blind people. Those supernatural and indestructible gemstones would have been profaned by the Amorites idols and then removed from this world to be placed on top of a mountain.⁹ Another series consist of twelve gemstones of divine origin, brought by angels to the top of the same mountain. According to Pseudo-Philo, Kenaz, the first judge of Israel after Joshua, discovered these gemstones on which the angels had engraved the names of the tribes, and which were similar to those engraved in the prie-

¹ Some attempts to reconstruct the nature of the twelve stones in ancient sources have been undertaken by READER, *The Twelve Jewels of Revelation 21:19-20: Tradition History and Modern Interpretations*, cit., pp. 435-444, and HARRELL, *Old Testament Gemstones*, cit., pp. 141-172.

² *Exodus* 28, 9-11, 21.

³ CORNELIUS VAN DAM, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1997; EDWARD ROBERTSON, *The 'Urim and Thummim; What Were They, «Vetus Testamentum»*, xiv, 1964, 1, pp. 67-74.

⁴ «For on his long robe the whole world was depicted, and the glories of the ancestors were engraved on the four rows of stones, and your majesty was on the diadem upon his head», *Wisdom* 18:24 (all the Bible translations are from the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], 1989).

⁵ READER, *The Twelve Jewels of Revelation*, cit., p. 438.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 439.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 444-447.

⁸ EMIL G. HIRSCH, A. H. SAYCE, HAVILAH (lit. «the sandy land»), *Jewish Encyclopedia*, jewishencyclopedia.com.

⁹ READER, *The Twelve Jewels of Revelation*, cit., p. 445.

stly breastplate. Kenaz would have placed these gemstones in the Ark of the Covenant together with the Tablets of the Law of Moses. Safeguarded in the Ark brought back to heaven until the Day of Judgment, the gemstones are therefore located in heaven, where the blessed ones will not be in need of solar or lunar light since they will be illuminated by the luminescence produced by the gemstones.¹

Furthermore, according to some Jewish rabbinical legends, Moses engraved the names of the twelve tribes on the priestly breastplate and Solomon built the Temple of Jerusalem, both of which using a mysterious object named *shamir*. Appearing three times in the Hebrew Bible,² the word *shamir* designates an extremely hard material according to the Jewish exegetes, and is usually translated as “diamond” or “adamantine stone”. However, it probably indicates a variety of corundum, whose use in the art of engraving, contrary to the diamond, is attested in the Ancient world.³ In rabbinical legends, the *shamir* is considered as the seventh of the ten prodigies that were created at the end of the sixth day of creation. Upon fulfilling its function of engraving the names on the priestly breastplate, it is said that the Shamir was destroyed along with the Temple.⁴

Curiously, according to Talmudic traditions, the *shamir* would not be a stone, but actually a small worm with extraordinary characteristics, capable of engraving precious stones with a calligraphic or ideographic magic seal.⁵

THE TABLETS OF THE LAW OF MOSES AS A PRECIOUS STONE

The rabbinic literature, in particular the Talmud and the Mishnah, reports some traditions according to which the Tablets of the Law of Moses were made of sapphire or lapis lazuli. These tablets, on which God would have engraved the Ten Commandments transmitted to Moses, are said to be carved out by God of the previously mentioned sapphire floor, described in Exodus.⁶ In this case also, we can observe the occurrence of inscriptions of divine origin engraved on a mineralogical support.⁷ Hence, a close relationship between precious stones and sacred language seem to be present in the Jewish tradition.

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament also contains several references to precious stones, in particular in the Book of Revelation. As reported in a famous passage, John the Evangelist was transferred to the top of a mountain by an angel, who showed him the Celestial Jerusalem descending from heaven, shining like a precious gem like a crystalline jasper stone. As the city was descending, John the Evangelist was able to perceive in detail a shining city made of gold and crystal: the walls of the city were made of jasper, standing on twelve foundations, inlaid by different types of precious stones on which the twelve names of the apostles of Jesus were inscribed. The twelve gates of the city were made

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 435-437.

² *Jeremiah* 17:1, *Ezekiel* 3:9, *Zechariah* 7:12.

³ WILHELM BACHER, LUDWIG BLAU, *Shamir*, in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, jewishencyclopedia.com; LOUIS GINZBERG, *Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2003 (first edition 1909-1938), vol. 1, p. 35, vol. 2 pp. 973-975.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁵ BACHER, BLAU, *Shamir*, cit.

⁶ *Exodus* 24:10.

⁷ BEN ZION BOKSER, *The Thread of Blue*, «Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research», 31, 1963, p. 12.

of pearl, and on each door the name of one of the twelve tribes of the Israelite was carved.¹ Christian exegetes did naturally highlight the symbolic relationship between the twelve stones of the High Priest's Breastplate and the twelve fundamental stones of the Celestial Jerusalem.²

The pearl plays a particularly significant role in Christian symbolism.³ Its centrality is underlined by two passages of the Gospel of Matthew. In the first one, Jesus draws an analogy between the dimension of the sacred and the pearl, instructing his disciples to not throw out the sacred «like pearls before swine».⁴ In the second passage, Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a pearl of great value: «Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it».⁵

We find another reference to precious stones in the first letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians.⁶ Through a parable, Paul states that the believer must build his own spiritual foundations on Christ, and this action is compared to the practice of building his spiritual foundations on incorruptible materials like gold, silver, and precious stones. On Judgment Day, when everyone's spiritual foundations will be visible, they will be tested by the divine fire, and only those whose spiritual foundations were built with precious materials will not be destroyed.⁷ This passage is a clear metaphorical reference to the foundations of the Celestial Jerusalem inlaid with precious materials, as described in the Book of Revelation.

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN CHRISTIAN ANCIENT LITERATURE

The Christian literature concerning precious stones is ambivalent. In reference to some passages of the Book of Revelation,⁸ the Fathers of the Church condemned on the one hand the use of precious stones as objects of luxury, for their representation of vanity and greed for material goods of men. On the other hand, in line with the exegetical patrimony of the Old Testament, they have attributed religious as well as symbolic implications to them.⁹

The earliest interpretations of the passages of the Old and New Testament related to precious stones, dates back to the 1st century, in a Greek context. The first treaties are those of Epiphanius of Salamis (d. c. 403), Eucherius of Lyon (d. c. 449), and of the bishops Andreas (d. 637) and Arethas (d. 860) of Caesarea.¹⁰ In the Latin context, the first commentary is the one attributed to Saint Gregory the Great (d. 604), which presented precious stones as allegories of the angels, apostles, patriarchs and saints. About

¹ Revelation, 21:9-21.

² UNA JART, *The Precious Stones in the Revelation of St. John xxi. 18-21*, «Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology», xxiv, 1970, 1, pp. 150-181; READER, *The Twelve Jewels of Revelation*, cit.; JONATHAN A. DRAPER, *The twelve apostles as foundation stones of the heavenly Jerusalem and the foundation of the Qumran community*, «Neotestamentica», xxii, 1988, 1, pp. 41-63.

³ NADIA IBRAHIM FREDRIKSON, *La perle, entre l'océan et le ciel. Origines et évolution d'un symbole chrétien*, «Revue de l'histoire des religions», ccxx, 2003, 3, pp. 283-317.

⁴ Matthew 13:45-46.

⁵ Matthew 7:6.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:10-13.

⁷ JAMES E. ROSSCUP, *A New Look at 1 Corinthians 3:12 «Gold, Silver, Precious Stones»*, «The Master's Seminary Journal», 1, 1990, pp. 33-51.

⁸ Revelation, 17:4; 18:6.

⁹ ELEUTHERIA AVGOLOUPI, *Simbologia delle gemme imperiali bizantine nella tradizione simbolica mediterranea delle pietre preziose: secoli I-XV d.C.*, Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2013, pp. 1-4.

¹⁰ ERIK SCHOONHOVEN, *Fra Dio e l'Imperatore. Il simbolismo delle pietre preziose nella Divina Commedia*, «Rivista internazionale di studi su Dante Alighieri», iii, 2006, p. 73; LADNER, *God, cosmos and humankind*, cit., pp. 131-134.

a century later, Bede the Venerable (d. 735), commenting on the Revelation, focused on the precious stones of the New Jerusalem, combining allegorical interpretations with classical magical-mineralogical descriptions. The work of Bede had a strong impact on the interpretations of Haimo of Auxerre (d. c. 865). The exegetical treatment of precious stones in the Old and New Testaments of Saint Gregory, Bede and Haimo, will represent a primary influence for a genre of Christian literature that will emerge in the 11th century, the Lapidary texts.¹

THE LAPIDARY TEXTS

The genre of the Lapidary texts, which has undergone a significant development both in the Middle Age and Renaissance Christian era, deals with the qualities and properties of semi-precious and precious stones, both in relation to the spiritual and material benefits that can be achieved through contact with them. Some Lapidary texts are independent, while others are incorporated in encyclopaedic compilations.²

Most Lapidary texts of the Ancient world are lost. The oldest known is the lapidary attributed to a disciple of Aristotle, Theophrastus (d. c. 285 BC), of which an original Greek version has been preserved.³ This is the only extant ancient lapidary among those cited in the chapter of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* dedicated to the precious stones, dating back to the 1st century.⁴ Actually, another ancient lapidary is the one attributed to Aristotle (d. 287 BC), which is probably a byzantine anonym treatise dating back to the 7th century, or according to other opinions, a Persian treatise dating back to the beginning of 9th century.⁵ The oldest extant version of this treatise is in Arabic language and circulated in Europe though a Latin translation, dating back to the end of the 12th century.⁶

The first significant Christian Lapidary texts are the one of the Byzantine Greek monk and philosopher Michael Psellos (d. 1078),⁷ the one written by Marbode of Rennes (d. 1123),⁸ the section on precious stones in the Hildegard von Bingen's *Physica* (d. 1179),⁹ and the famous *Lapidario*, allegedly translated from an Arabic or Syriac source written by a mysterious Abolays¹⁰ during the reign of Alfonso X of Castile the Wise (d. 1284).¹¹ Indeed, since the 11th century, the old tradition of Lapidary texts has been

¹ SCHOONHOVEN, *Fra Dio e l'Imperatore*, cit., p. 74.

² GEORGE KEISER, *Lapidaries*, in *Medieval Science, Technology and Medicine. An Encyclopedia*, edited by Th. Glick, S. J. Livesey, F. Wallis, New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 306-307; AVGLOUPOI, *Simbologia delle gemme imperiali byzantine*, cit., pp. 38-40.

³ EARLE RADCLIFFE CALEY, JOHN F. C. RICHARDS, *Theophrastus on stones*, Introduction, Greek text, English translation, and commentary, Columbus, Ohio State University, 1956.

⁴ SYDNEY H. BALL, *A Roman book on precious stones: including an English modernization of the 37th book of the History of the world by C. Plinius Secundus*, Los Angeles, Gemological Institute of America, 1950.

⁵ FELIX KLEIN-FRANKE, *The Knowledge of Aristotle's Lapidary during the Latin Middle Ages*, «Ambix», 17, 1970, 3, p. 138. ⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 138-139.

⁷ ANNIBALE MOTTANA, *Storia Della Mineralogia Antica. 1. La Mineralogia a Bisanzio nell'XI Secolo DC: I Poteri Insiti Nelle Pietre Secondo Michele Psello*, «Rendiconti Lincei», s. 9, 2005, v. 16, pp. 227-295.

⁸ MARBODE OF RENNES, *Marbode of Rennes' «De lapidibus», considered as a medical treatise with text, commentary, and C. W. King's translation, together with text and translation of Marbode's minor works on stones by John M. Riddle*, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1977.

⁹ HILDEGARD OF BINGEN, *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica. The Complete English Translation of Her Classic Work on Health and Healing*, Rochester, Healing Arts Press, 1998; PETER DRONKE, *The Symbolic Cities of Hildegard of Bingen*, «The Journal of Medieval Latin», 1, 1991, pp. 168-184.

¹⁰ GEORGE O. S. DARBY, *The Mysterious Abolays*, «Osiris», 1, 1936, pp. 251-259.

¹¹ *The lapidary of King Alfonso X the Learned*, edited by Ingrid Bahler, Katherine Gyékényesi Gatto, New Orleans, University Press of the South, 1997.

enriched by the emergence of Arabic and later Persian treatises. One of the major sources for Medieval and Renaissance lapidaries was the chapter dedicated to the precious stones in the famous *Secret of Secrets* (*Sirr al-asrār*). According to some scholars, this text, whose earliest extant version is in Arabic, could be a translation of an original lost Greek version of the alleged letters of Aristotle to Alexander the Great, and represented the model par excellence of the Medieval and Renaissance Mirrors for Princes.¹

Another notable lapidary was composed for a certain King Philip, probably Philip IV the Fair (d. 1314), and dealt with precious stones of the Priestly breastplate evoked in the Exodus and in the Book of Revelation.²

THE EMERALD TABLE AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE AND THEIR ARABIC SOURCES

The origins of two medieval doctrines which had constantly recourse to the symbolism of precious stones, Hermeticism and Alchemy, are lost between true or presumed Greek or Hellenistic and Arabic roots, and will flourish both in Western Christianity and in the Islamic world without hiding an incessant dialogue of mutual influences.³ A significant example is the Emerald Table (*Tabula Smaragdina*), attributed to the mythical character of Hermes. According to legends, a text was carved on it, that turned into the main reference of Hermeticism in Middle Ages and Renaissance. Although the initial examination indicates this text to be rooted in the Greek civilization, further studies of contemporary specialists find the root of this text in Arabic; due to the fact that the oldest attestations are found in some Arabic versions dating back to the 7th/8th century, translated into Latin for the first time in the 12th century.⁴

Some of the ancient versions of this text, written in Arabic and dating back almost to the 8th century, were discovered by scholars in the early 20th century and provide remarkable details.⁵ In these versions, Apollonios of Tyana (d. c. 100), who was a Neo Pythagorean philosopher known as Balinās the Wise in Arabic literature, found the statue of an old man identified with Hermes Trismegistus (*Hirmis al-muthallath bi-l-ḥikma*),⁶ sitting on a golden throne and holding a green precious stone table (*lawḥ ḡabarjad*)⁷ on which the words of Hermes were engraved in Syriac, the language of the ancients (*bi-*

¹ MAHMOUD MANZALAOUI, *The Pseudo-Aristotelian "Kitāb Sirr al-asrār". Facts and Problems*, «Oriens», 23/24, 1974, pp. 147-257; STEVEN J. WILLIAMS, *The secret of secrets: the scholarly career of a pseudo-Aristotelian text in the Latin Middle Ages*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2003.

² KEISER, *Lapidaries*, cit., p. 307.

³ On Hermeticism, cf. ANTOINE FAIVRE, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, Grand Rapids, MI, Phanes Press, 1995; FLORIAN EBELING, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus. Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 2007; KEVIN VAN BLADEL, *The Arabic Hermes from Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009. On Alchemy, cf. ERIC JOHN HOLMYARD, *Alchemy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1957; LAWRENCE M. PRINCIPE, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2013; PIERRE LORY, *Alchimie et mystique en terre d'Islam*, Verdier, Lagrasse, 1989; M. ULLMANN, *al-Kīmiyā*, Elz.

⁴ HOLMYARD, *Alchemy*, cit., pp. 95-98; FAIVRE, *The Eternal Hermes*, cit., pp. 89-95; EBELING, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus*, cit., pp. 48-51; JULIUS RUSKA, *Tabula Smaragdina. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der hermetischen Literatur*, Heidelberg, C. Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1926.

⁵ RUSKA, *Tabula Smaragdina*, cit., pp. 107-115, 137-139.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 113.

⁷ The *ḡabarjad* in Arabic is a peridot or olivine, a green precious stone often mistaken for an emerald in ancient sources, cf. GEORGE RAPP, *Archaeomineralogy*, Berlin-Heidelberg, Springer, 2009, pp. 100-101; in another version of the text, the table is actually a green emerald (*lawḥ min ḡumurrud akḥḍar*), RUSKA, *Tabula Smaragdina*, cit., p. 135.

suryānī bi-lisān al-uwal).¹ In another version, it is also specified that the text is written «under the veil of the ancient Syriac language» (*taḥta ḥijāb lisān al-suryānī al-qadīm*), the primordial Syriac language (*al-lughā al-suryāniyya al-ūlā*),² defined in a third version as “the first language” (*al-lisān al-awwal*).³ The Arabic term *suryāniyya* usually refers to the historical Syriac language, but in the present case, given the epithets of ancient (*qadīm*), primordial (*al-ūlā*) and first (*al-awwal*), it actually refers to the idea of a primordial language, “the Primordial Language of the Humanity” (*Ursprache der Menschheit*) according to Julius Ruska.⁴ Indeed, Arab historians and geographers often report the legend according to which in the Garden of Eden, Adam and his descendants spoke a primordial language called *suryāniyya*. Once the Edenic phase of humanity was ended, the *suryāniyya* was slowly replaced by various languages. However, the *suryāniyya* remained in use as the language of paradise, the language of angels.⁵ In the context of Islamic esoteric doctrines, the Friends of God (*awliyā*) in the esoteric hierarchy, are said to communicate with each other in the angelic *suryāniyya* for their proximity with the hereafter. More generally, this language can be assimilated to the spiritual charisma of the saint which is defined as *glossolalia* or «speaking in tongues», representing the ability to speak in different languages or to speak the language of angels or animals.⁶ It is possible to observe in these Arabic versions of the Emerald Table a relationship between precious stones and a primordial language engraved on it, which we already noticed in the sources related to the precious stones in the Old and New Testaments.

The equally famous legend of the Philosopher’s Stone (*lapis philosophorum*) also displays a complex origin. The earliest reports on this legend date back to the 8th century, and could be found in the works of the Persian Muslim alchemist Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 815), who had a natural acquaintance to Pythagorean, Neoplatonic and Gnostic sources through the complex culture of his epoch.⁷ The alchemical doctrines elaborated in Arabic and Islamic environment also spread through Spain in the Christian Middle Ages, where they enjoyed a great flowering.⁸ According to certain legends, prominent Christian theologians like Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) claimed to own the secret procedures of forging the Philosopher’s Stone, often described as a red or white gemstone providing to its holder the faculty to transform base metals into gold and silver.⁹ But beyond these alchemical procedures, an evident spiritual symbolism lies behind the Philosopher’s Stone, since in the Christian Renaissance, it was assimilated to Christ, descending into the world as a precious stone to take humanity from its low state towards a spiritual rebirth.¹⁰

¹ RUSKA, *Tabula Smaragdina*, cit., p. 112.

² *Ibidem*, p. 108.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 115. On the notion of primordial language, see MAURICE OLENDER, *Les langues du Paradis. Aryens et sémites: un couple providentiel*, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 1989; MILKA RUBIN, *The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language. A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity*, «Journal of Jewish Studies», 49, 1998, pp. 306-333.

⁵ LUCA PATRIZI, *Parlare la lingua di Adamo. Glossolalia e lingua dei santi nell’Islam*, «Historia Religionum», 6, 2014, pp. 87-89.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

⁷ SYED NOMANUL HAQ, *Names, Natures and Things: The Alchemist Jābir ibn Ḥayyān and his Kitāb al-Aḥjār (Book of Stones)*, Dordrecht-London-Boston, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994; LORY, *Alchimie et mystique en terre d’Islam*, cit.

⁸ HOLMYARD, *Alchemy*, cit., pp. 102-148; PRINCIPE, *The Secrets of Alchemy*, cit., pp. 51-82.

⁹ J. R. PARTINGTON, *Albertus Magnus on Alchemy*, «Ambix», 1, 1937, pp. 3-20; R. F. C. HULL, A. S. B. GLOVER, *Aurora consurgens. A Document Attributed to Thomas Aquinas on the Problem of Opposites in Alchemy*, London-New York, Pantheon Books, 1966.

¹⁰ JAMES R. KELLER, *The Science of Salvation: Spiritual Alchemy in Donne’s Final Sermon*, «The Sixteenth Century Journal», XXIII, 1992, 3, pp. 486-493; CLARENCE H. MILLER, *Christ as the philosopher’s stone in George Herbert’s ‘The Elixir’*, «Notes and Queries», XLV, 1998, 1, pp. 39-41.

THE «HYMN OF THE PEARL», SYMBOL OF THE REALIZATION OF THE SOUL

Another significant medieval text in regard to the symbolism of precious stones, that circulated equally in the East and the West, is the *Hymn of the Pearl*, a gnostic Syriac text which appears, possibly as an interpolation, in the manuscripts of the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*.¹ This hymn recounts the story of a boy, son of a king, who was dressed in an adorned garment with precious stones, and was sent by his father to find a pearl, guarded by a snake in the middle of a sea. After some vicissitudes, the boy finally discovers the pearl and returns to his kingdom to inherit the throne.² Since the discovery of the pearl is interpreted as the realization of the soul, “The Hymn of the soul” is an alternative title for this text.³

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN DANTE’S *COMEDY*

The symbolism of precious stones lying within the *Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) drew the attention of several scholars.⁴ The peculiarity of Dante’s approach is that theological and esoteric conceptions of precious stones prevail over the magical-medicinal interpretation of ancient sources and medieval Lapidary texts. Dante, in that respect, is similar to other Christian authors, including Saint Gregory the Great (d. 604), Bede (d. 735) or Haimo of Auxerre (d. c. 865), who attributed a purely theological significance to the precious stones.⁵ As the journey toward heaven proceeds, the presence of precious stones is more prominent in the *Comedy* of Dante. In *Hell* precious stones are mentioned only twice, in *Purgatory* five times, while in *Paradise* there are twelve occurrences in correspondence with the twelve stones of the Revelation.⁶ It is noteworthy to mention that Dante refers to precious stones in order to symbolize divine language, particularly in the nineteenth chapter of *Paradise*, in which the souls of the blessed, appearing as rubies, form the shape of an eagle that pronounces miraculously the first verse of the Book of Wisdom.⁷ In an even more emblematic passage, in the thirtieth *canto* of *Paradise*, Dante is described as being driven by Beatrice to receive the divine revelation and quench his thirst from a river of rubies set in gold, in a passage which highlights explicitly the relationship between precious stones, knowledge and divine language.⁸

In the first part of this article, I focused on certain modalities of the use of the symbolism of precious stones in Medieval and Renaissance Judaism and Christianity, and I tried to infer its main theological and esoteric implications, namely the constant reference to the dimension of the sacred and of the hereafter, and the close relationship with the notion of divine language. These preliminary evidences were necessary to shed light on the development of symbolism of precious stones in Islamic environment.

¹ JAMES R. RUSSELL, *The Epic of the Pearl*, «Revue des Études Arméniennes», 28, 2001-2002, pp. 29-100; CARL W. ERNST, *Fragmentary versions of the apocryphal «Hymn of the pearl» in Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Urdu*, «Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam», 32, 2006, pp. 144-188.

² RUSSELL, *The Epic of the Pearl*, cit., pp. 46-49.

³ PATRICK J. MARTIN, *The search for the true self in the Gospel of Thomas, the Book of Thomas and the Hymn of the Pearl*, «Harvard Theological Studies», LV, 1999, 4, pp. 1001-1021.

⁴ SCHOONHOVEN, *Fra Dio e l’Imperatore*, cit., pp. 69-93. This article, which to my knowledge is the latest contribution to this subject, reports a complete bibliography at p. 71. A study on the symbolism of precious stones in the work of Petrarch (d. 1374) has been conducted by MIA COCCO, *Precious Stones and the Infrangible Mirror in Petrarch’s «Rime Sparse»*, «Pacific Coast Philology», XXVIII, 1993, 1, pp. 20-31.

⁵ SCHOONHOVEN, *Fra Dio e l’Imperatore*, cit., pp. 73-74.

⁷ DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Comedy, Paradise*, 19:01-21.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 30:61-81.

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN ISLAMIC SOURCES

Aside from the studies that examined the occurrence of precious stones in Islamic sources from the mineralogical and historical points of view¹, only one investigation could be referred regarding the portrayal of the religious implications of the precious stones in the Islamic context, which was presented by Carmela Baffioni in two separate articles in 2008.² In these two essays the author displays the analogies between the mineralogical treatment in the anonymous *Letters of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (dating back to the 2nd half of the 10th century) and in the *Rāḥat al-'aql* of the *isma'īlī* scholar Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 1020). While the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', in their cosmological system, limited themselves to consider minerals as having "spiritual properties", Kirmānī explicitly attributes to them theological meanings. The *isma'īlī* scholar relates for example six particular minerals with the six divine laws brought by six prophets, from Moses to Muḥammad, comparing the sixth divine law, which will not be abrogated until the end of time, to gold, whose substance lasts forever.³

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN THE QURAN AND IN THE HADITH

Only a few verses of the Quran, describing the ornaments of the people of paradise, mention precious stones, together with precious metals like gold and silver.⁴ The Quran evokes in particular the ruby and the coral (*al-yāqūt wa al-marjān*)⁵, which appear as a symbol of the celestial women (*ḥūr*) in paradise, compared in the surah *al-Wāqī'a* with "hidden pearls" (*al-lu'lu' al-maknūn*),⁶ and gold and pearl (*dhahab wa lu'lu'*)⁷, which are the material from which the bracelets of the believers in paradise are made of. In the surah *al-Raḥmān*, it is also stated that pearls and corals (*al-lu'lu' wa al-marjān*) emerge from both seas that meet in the mysterious confluence (*al-barzakh*).⁸ This passage is the main source of inspiration for theological interpretations and esoteric speculations on the precious stones in the Islamic literature.

¹ JEAN-JACQUES CLÉMENT MULLET, *Essai sur la minéralogie arabe*, Paris, Imprimerie impériale, 1868; JULIUS RUSKA, *Die Mineralogie in der arabischen Literatur*, «Isis», 1, 1913, 3, pp. 341-350; WILLIAM JOHN SERSEN, *Gem minerals in early Arabic literature*, «The Mineralogical Record», xxvi, 1995, 4, pp. 43-48; MARTHA BERNUS-TAYLOR, *L'Orient islamique*, in *Cornaline et pierres précieuses. La Méditerranée, de l'Antiquité à l'islam*, edited by Annie Caubet, Paris, La documentation Française, 1999, pp. 93-111; SOPHIE MAKARIOU, *Le cristal de roche dans l'islam*, in *Cornaline et pierres précieuses. La Méditerranée, de l'Antiquité à l'islam*, cit., pp. 230-249; SHALEM AVINOAM, *Jewels and Journeys: The Case of the Medieval Gemstone Called al-Yatima*, «Muqarnas», xiv, 2005, pp. 42-56; SAYF SHĀHĪN AL MURAYKHĪ, *Tijārat al-jawāhīr wa-l-ahjār al-karīma 'inda al-'arab al-muslimīn khilāla al-qarnayn al-thālith wa-l-rābi' al-hijriyayn (The Arabs trade of precious stones during the third and fourth centuries of the hijra)*, «Qatar University Arts Journal», 28, 2006, pp. 41-87; ARASH KHAZENI, *Sky blue stone: the turquoise trade in world history*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2014; ZOHAR AMAR, EFRAIM LEV, *Most-Cherished Gemstones in the Medieval Arab World*, «Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society», s. 3, 2017, pp. 1-25.

² CARMELA BAFFIONI, *L'influence des Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' sur la minéralogie de Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī*, in *Une lumière venue d'ailleurs. Héritages et ouvertures dans les encyclopédies d'Orient et d'Occident au Moyen Âge*, éd. par Godefroy de Callataj, Baudouin Van den Abeele, Turnhout, Brepols, 2008; *The Religious Approach To Natural Sciences: The Case Of Mineralogy in the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' and in Ḥamīd Al-dīn Al-Kirmānī*, in *Islamic Thought in the Middle Age. Studies in Text, Transmission and Translation*, in *Honour of Hans Daiber*, edited by A. Akasoy, Leiden, Brill, 2008, pp. 181-194.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 187, 191-192.

⁴ *Ma'dīn*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, www.brillonline.com; GÉRARD TROUPEAU, *Metals and Minerals*, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Washington DC, Georgetown University, www.brillonline.com.

⁵ Quran, 55:58.

⁶ Quran, 56:23.

⁷ Quran, 22:23, 35:33.

⁸ Quran, 55:19-22.

References to precious stones, on the contrary, are recurrent in the main collections of the hadith of the prophet Muḥammad, in which this symbolism is closely connected, as well, to the life in hereafter. In one of these narrations, it has been reported that the Prophet narrated visions of paradise, where he saw a river called *kawthar*,¹ on the shore of which pavilions were made of hollow pearls (*al-durr al-mujawwaf*), and palaces were made of pearl and peridot (*qaṣr min lu'lu' wa ḡabarjad*).² In other narrations, he would see people rescued from hell entering paradise, and then coming out of the water of life (*mā' al-ḡayā'*) like pearls (*al-lu'lu'*), adorned with necklaces.³

A saying of the Prophet, transmitted with minor variation in different versions, describes in detail the composition of the celestial model of the Islamic sacred text: «God created the Preserved Table (*lawḥ maḡfūḡ*) from a white pearl (*durra bayḡā'*), whose pages are made of red ruby (*yāḡūta ḡamrā'*). His Pen is light, and his Scripture is light».⁴

In another saying, very similar to the one of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew cited previously, the Prophet affirms that imparting knowledge to those who do not deserve it, is like putting gems, pearls and gold around the neck of pigs.⁵

Another noteworthy element to be found in the hadith literature is the comparison between the drops of sweat from the body of prophet Muḥammad and pearls (*al-jumān*,⁶ *al-lu'lu'*).⁷ This same comparison appears in sayings related to the end of time and describing the descent of Christ, from whose hair will fall drops similar to pearls.⁸ Interestingly, these images are reminiscent of the Jewish interpretation of an episode of the Psalms in the Babylonian Talmud, in which two drops of oil felt from the beard of Aaron are compared to pearls as well.⁹

PRECIOUS STONES IN THE ASCENSION OF THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD

The narration of the Prophet's Ascension (*mi'rāj*), transmitted through the non-canonical version of his uncle 'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Abbās (d. c. 687), reports the Prophet's vision of paradise, and the hyperbolic imagery of this journey is also punctuated by a series of references to precious stones. Suffice it to cite a few significant passages:

«The roof of my house was split, and there descended Gabriel in his form. [...] Upon him was a cloak decorated with pearls and native gold».¹⁰ «I intended to exit the sacred enclosure when suddenly I found myself with Burāq, whom Gabriel had tied. [...] Its hair was braided just like a string of pearls and emeralds. [...] Its right [side] was of pearl strung upon pearl and coral. [Its left side] was covered with two stripes, one of gold and the other of silver, arranged with gems. Its soul was as the soul of a human. Its reins were a chain of red gold. Its backside was of emerald.»¹¹ «Then I glanced to my right, and I saw the gate to the paradise called Firdaws (Q 18:107; 23:11), whose base was of gold and whose crenellations were of pearl. Its dirt was of musk, its grass was of saffron,

¹ This river is also mentioned in *Quran*, 108.

² BUKHĀRĪ, *Ṣaḡīḡ al-Bukḡarī*, Dār al-Tā'ṣīl, al-Qāhira 2012, vol. 9, hadith n. 7513, p. 398; vol. 6, hadith n. 4952, 4963, p. 516; vol. 8, hadith 6590, p. 334.

³ *Ibidem*, vol. 9, hadith n. 7435, p. 352.

⁴ IBN KATHĪR, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, Dār Ṭayba li-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī', Riyāḡ 1999, v. 8, p. 373.

⁵ IBN MĀJA, *Sunan Ibn Māja*, Dār al-Jīl, Bayrūt 1998, vol. 1, hadith 224, pp. 214-215.

⁶ BUKHĀRĪ, *Ṣaḡīḡ al-Bukḡarī*, cit., vol. 5, hadith n. 4128, p. 305.

⁷ MUSLIM, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḡīḡ*, al-Maṭba'a al-'Āmira, al-Qāhira 1290 [1873], vol. 7, p. 81.

⁸ *Ibidem*, vol. 8, p. 198.

⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, *Horayot* 12a, cited in HAIM SCHWARZBAUM, *Jewish, Christian, Moslem and Falasha Legends of the Death of Aaron, the High Priest*, «Fabula», v. 2009, 1, pp. 185-227.

¹⁰ FREDERICK S. COLBY, *Narrating Muḡammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn 'Abbās Ascension Discourse*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2008, p. 196.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

its soil was of ambergris, and its land was of pearl and sapphire. The base of its trees was of pure gold, and their branches were of emeralds mixed with pearl and sapphire».¹

In this case again, the supernatural elements of the narration, such as the dress of the angel, the celestial mount and the appearance of paradise, are denoted by an abundant presence of precious stones.

PRECIOUS STONES IN ISLAMIC COSMOLOGY

Ancient Islamic historiography proposes a certain conception of the origin of the world, in which precious stones sometimes interfere. According to the *Lives of the Prophets* of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035/1036), when God intended to create heaven and earth, He decided to fashion an enormous green jewel. He sent an angel who crossed the seven earths as mentioned in Quran, and placed a green gem at the centre of the universe to keep it stabilized, which was taken from the highest levels of paradise;² then He decided to create a mountain of green chrysolith called mount Qāf and it is believed that it is this mountain that illuminates the paradise with green light.³

Islamic cosmology also refers to the celestial archetype of the Kaʿba in Mecca. According to the *Traditions on Mecca (Akhbār Makka)* by al-Azraqī (d. 864),⁴ God made the celestial archetype of the Kaʿba, the “House Visited [by the angels]” (*al-Bayt al-maʿmūr*), descending on earth with Adam in the shape of a red “heavenly ruby” (*yāqūta ḥamrāʾ min yawwāqīt al-janna*)⁵, a «hollow ruby» (*yāqūta mujawwafa*)⁶ or a «unique ruby» (*yāqūta wāḥida*), or even a «unique pearl» (*durra wāḥida*), before making it rise again in heaven.⁷ The Black Stone (*al-rukn al-aswad*), that is located in the wall of Kaʿba inside a golden bezel like a gemstone, is also believed to be descended on earth from paradise like a star, in the shape of a white corundum (*yāqūta bayḍāʾ*).⁸

Ancient Islamic sources also mention others mysterious tablets made of precious stone, that descended directly from heaven.

HEAVENLY TABLETS OF PRECIOUS STONE IN ISLAMIC SOURCES

Islamic traditions, in line with Rabbinical traditions, also refer to the tablets (*alwāḥ*) sent to Moses by God, which must be either made of green peridot (*ḡabarjad akhḡar*) as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) reports,⁹ or of green emerald (*ḡumurrud akhḡar*), with golden inscriptions on them, as al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) refers.¹⁰

A similar indication can be seen within the Shīʿī sources as well, which report that two tablets (*lawḥ*) descended on Fāṭima, the Prophet Muḡammad’s daughter and wife of ʿAlī. The first tablet is a page (*saḡīfa*) made of white pearl (*durra bayḍāʾ*) and the

¹ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

² AḡMAD AL-ṬHAʿLABĪ, ‘Arāʾis al-majālis fi ḡiḡaḡ al-anbiyāʾ’, or, *Lives of the prophets, as recounted by ʿAbū Ishāḡ Aḡmad ibn Muḡammad ibn Ibrāḡim al-Thaʿlabī*; translated and annotated by William M. Brinner, Leiden, Brill, 2002, p. 7.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁴ MUḡAMMAD AL-AZRAQĪ, *Akhbār Makka wa mā jāʾ fiḡā min al-āthār*, Makka, Maktabat al-Asadī, 2003.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 74, 79, 81-82, 681.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 79; a precious stone called *yāqūta bayḍāʾ* does not seem to exist in Arabic language. Indeed, the only white (*bayḍ*) or transparent gemstone is the diamond or corundum, which is called *mās* in Arabic, whereas in the text we find the word *yāqūt*.

⁹ ṬABARĪ, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, Dār al-Maʿārif, al-Qāhira 1968, v. 1, p. 426. On *ḡabarjad*, see note 1 p. 115.

¹⁰ ABŪ AL-ḡASAN IBN ʿALĪ AL-MASʿŪDĪ, *Murūḡ al-dḡahab wa mā ʿādin al-jawḡar*, Maktabat al-ʿAḡriyya, Bayrūt 2005, v. 1, p. 40.

names of the Twelve Imams, their descendants, and the names of their relatives are engraved on it. The second tablet, that is made of green emerald (*lawḥ min zumurrud*) and and it is believed to be brought to Fāṭima by the archangel Gabriel, includes the inscription of the names of the prophets and the Imams, engraved in luminous letters.¹

REFERENCES TO THE BREASTPLATE OF THE HIGH PRIEST AND HIS GEMSTONES IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Islamic historiographical sources allude to a powerful garment descended from paradise to the prophet Aaron. According to the *Tales of the Prophets* (*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā*) ascribed to al-Kisā'ī (d. about 12th century),² Pharaoh ordered to his vizier Haman to humiliate the prophet Aaron by removing his garments, keeping him only with his trousers. Then the angel Gabriel descended from paradise, bringing to Aaron a celestial tunic (*qamīṣ*) made of shining pearls, similar to the cloak of the angel Gabriel, which was mentioned in the narrative of the Ascension of Muḥammad. None of the Egyptian merchants were able to estimate the price of the garment of Aaron. In his treatise *Anīs al-jalīs* («The Familiar Companion»), al-Suyūfī (d. 1505) adds some details to this anecdote concerning the sacerdotal robe of Aaron: twelve pieces of coloured tissue were sewn on it, on each of which the name of a tribe was written. This celestial robe helped Aaron to defeat the Pharaoh, making the prophet immune to death.³

LAPIDARY TEXTS IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

As discussed above, the genre of Lapidary texts, which deals with precious stones from a mineralogical, magical and later even religious points of view, was already developed during the Classical Antiquity, but flourished during Late Antiquity in Christian context and paved the way for the Arabic and Persian Lapidary literatures to follow on and not start from scratch. The earliest extant specimen of this literature is the lapidary of Yūḥannā Ibn Māsawayh (d. 857), entitled *The book of precious stones and their characteristics* (*Kitāb al-jawāhir wa ṣifātihā*).⁴ Given their inclusiveness, two texts in specific spread within the framework of the Islamic context: the *Book of Precious Stones* of the Iranian scholar Abū al-Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1050)⁵ and the one of the Berber poet Aḥmad al-Tīfāshī (d. 1253).⁶ These lapidaries focus merely on mineralogy and healing virtues of the precious stones. However, in its detailed introduction, al-Bīrūnī refers to the metaphorical dimension of precious stones, stating that once compared to the true jewels, the jewels of the soul, they have neither value nor beauty. In this regard, he relates a

¹ MOHAMMAD ALI AMIR MOEZZI, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 74-75.

² W. M. BRINNER, *al-Kisā'ī, Muḥammad Ibn 'Abd Allāh (fifth/twelfth century?)*, in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, edited by Julie Scott Meisami, Paul Starkey, London-New York, Routledge, 1998, v. 2, p. 453.

³ SCHWARZBAUM, *Jewish, Christian, Moslem and Falasha Legends of the Death of Aaron, the High Priest*, cit., pp. 217-218.

⁴ YŪḤANNĀ IBN MĀSĀWAYH, *Kitāb al-jawāhir wa ṣifātihā: wa fī ayy baladīn hiya, wa ṣifat al-ghawwāṣīn wa al-tujjār*, al-Majma' al-Thaqāfī, Abū Zabī, 2001; Yūḥannā Ibn Māsawayh was an Assyrian Nestorian physician to four 'Abbasid caliphs. For a partial list of Arabic and Persian Lapidary texts, see KHAZENI, *Sky blue stone*, cit., pp. 22-24; YVES PORTER, *JAWĀHER-NĀMA*, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, www.iranicaonline.org.

⁵ ABŪ AL-RAYḤĀN AL-BĪRŪNĪ, *Kitāb al-jamāhir fī ma'rifa al-jawāhir*, Maktaba al-Mutanabbī, al-Qāhira, 1980.

⁶ AḤMAD AL-TĪFĀSHĪ, *Kitāb aḥḥār al-afkār fī jawāhir al-aḥjār*, al-Hay'a al-miṣriyya al-'amma li-l-kitāb, al-Qāhira, 1977. For an Italian partial translation of this text, see AḤMAD AL-TĪFĀSHĪ, *Il libro delle pietre preziose*, introd., trad. e note a cura di Ida Zilio Grandi, Venezia, Marsilio, 1999.

saying attributed to the man of letters Abū Bakr al-Khawārizmī (d. 993), who would have declared the following words praising a person: «He is a great pearl (*durra*) among pearls of nobility, not a (common) pearl of the shell/He is a ruby (*yāqūt*) among rubies of nobility, and not a (common) ruby among the stones».¹ These verses are reminiscent of those attributed to Abū-l-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī, cited in the *incipit* of the article.

PRECIOUS STONES AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE IN THE TITLES AND STRUCTURE
OF ARABIC LITERARY WORKS

One of the most interesting modalities of the application of the symbolism of the precious stones in the Islamic literature is reflected in the title and the structure of the religious, literary and linguistic texts, as I will now show through a few examples, drawn from a wider bibliography.

One of these titles, which belongs to the classical Arabic literature of *adab*, is the famous *Unique Necklace* (*ʿIqd al-farīd*) written by the Andalusian man of letters Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 940).² One of the significant characteristics of the book is that each of its twenty-five chapters bears the name of a precious stone, hence the meaning of book's title *The Unique Necklace*, which suggests an analogy between the book itself and a necklace composed by precious stones. The titles of the chapters, which are completely symmetrical, are divided into two series of twelve titles, with an intermediary title, just as a necklace divided into two symmetrical series of precious stones joined together by a central one. If the main concern of the author is literary and at best ethical, we can also observe in the introduction of the work the use made by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih of the precious stones symbolism in relation to language, in particular when the author declares: «I have compiled this work and selected its jewels from the choice gems of literature and the best picks of eloquence. It is therefore the quintessence of jewels and the kernel of all pith».³

In her analysis of the chapter “The Pearl on the Ruler” of *The Unique Necklace*, Isabel Toral-Niehoff suggests that «there is probably a yet unexplored correspondence in content between the books named after opposing jewels».⁴ I have reasons to believe that this correspondence can actually be investigated thanks to the analysis of the common use of the symbolism of precious stones in the books pertaining to this genre, as I am arguing here.

Another important book to be mentioned again is the famous historiographical work of al-Masʿūdī, *The Gold Meadows and the mines of gemstone* (*Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawhar*), because its author has explicitly addressed the use of metaphor in the title, and he states in the end of the work: «In composing [this book], I was like the one who found scattered jewels of various kinds, who strung them on a wire and

¹ BĪRŪNĪ, *Kitāb al-jamāhir fī maʿrifat al-jawāhir*, cit., pp. 13-14.

² IBN ʿABD RABBIH, *The Unique Necklace Volume 1* (Al-ʿIqd al-Farīd), Translated by Professor Issa J. Boullata, Reading, Garnet Publishing Limited, 2006; *The Unique Necklace Volume 2* (Al-ʿIqd al-Farīd), Translated by Professor Issa J. Boullata, Reading, Garnet Publishing Limited, 2009; ISABEL TORAL-NIEHOFF, *The «Book of the Pearl on the Ruler» in «The Unique Necklace» by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih. Preliminary Remarks*, in *Global medieval: Mirrors for princes reconsidered*, edited by Regula Forster, Nequin Yavari, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 134-151.

³ IBN ʿABD RABBIH, *The Unique Necklace Volume 1*, cit., p. 2.

⁴ TORAL-NIEHOFF, *The «Book of the Pearl on the Ruler»*, cit., p. 137; the author indicates a contrary opinion of Walter Werkmeister, who previously did an extensive research on the sources of *The Unique Necklace*, cf. WALTER WERKMEISTER, *Quellenuntersuchungen zum Kitāb al-ʿIqd alfarīd des Andalusiers Ibn Abdrabbih (246/860-328/940)*. *Eine Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1983.

made a precious and priceless necklace, remaining in the hands of the one who looked for it».¹

These elements not only identify the significance of the composition of the literary text itself, but also urge discussion about the crucial metaphor that is structured around the symbolism of the precious stones: the metaphor of the *naẓm*. Since the 'Abbāsīd era, the action of stringing pearls on a wire, named *naẓm* in Arabic, has been compared to the literary composition. Therefore, since then *naẓm* was used as a technical concept to indicate the composition of poetry, in particular in opposition to the term *nathr*, whose basic meaning is the action of "scattering" and which indicates the prose composition.² In this regard, the Persian man of letters 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) describes the *naẓm* metaphor as follows: «If you are aware that they used weaving, embroidery, engraving and goldsmithery as metaphors for the same things for which they used ordering [pearls] (*naẓm*) as a metaphor, and you have no doubt that these are all similes and analogies based on attributes and phenomena associated with ideas, rather than utterances, then you should realize that ordering (*naẓm*) works the same».³

However, *naẓm* was not confined to the literary world and has been employed in religious literature, especially in Sufi literature. Indeed, Sufi literature is very rich in references to the symbolic value of precious stones, as I will try to demonstrate through a few examples in the Arabic language, drawn from a huge literature which deserves undoubtedly a more exhaustive study than was possible in this article.

THE SYMBOLISM OF PRECIOUS STONES IN SUFI LITERATURE

In Sufi literature, the metaphor of precious stones does not seem to be employed as a simple literary rhetorical expedient, but rather as an allusive discourse to express spiritual realities.⁴ A major example is one of the most peculiar works of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, entitled *The Gemstones and pearls of the Quran (Jawāhir al-Qur'ān wa duraruhu)*, which reveals the complex epistemology of the exegetical approach of the Persian scholar to the Quran.

THE GEMSTONES AND PEARLS OF THE QURAN OF AL-GHAZĀLĪ (D. 1111)

In an attempt to investigate the hermeneutical approach of al-Ghazālī toward Quran, Georges Tamer in a recent article sought to analyse this text in detail.⁵ He states that al-Ghazālī uses the metaphor of the precious stones because it is helpful to his attempt to combine reason and revelation, theology and Sufi exegesis, rational sciences and spirituality.⁶ The degree of preciousness of a stone denotes its growing value, and is therefore suitable for symbolizing religious knowledge: the search for God, for example, can be assimilated to the search for extremely precious materials, like gold.⁷ Tamer summarises the hermeneutical approach of al-Ghazālī as follows: the science of ima-

¹ MAS 'ŪDĪ, *Murūj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-jawhar*, cit., v. 4, p. 306.

² G. J. H. VAN GELDER, *Naẓm*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, www.brillonline.com.

³ MARGARET LARKIN, *Al-Jurjani's Theory of Discourse*, «Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics», 2, 1982, pp. 76-86.

⁴ LUTZ BERGER, *Allusion (in Sūfism)*, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson, www.brillonline.com.

⁵ GEORGES TAMER, *Revelation, Sciences and Symbolism. Al-Ghazālī's «Jawāhir al-Qur'ān»*, in *Islam and rationality. The Impact of al-Ghazālī*, edited by Idem, Leiden, Brill, 2016, pp. 49-88.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

gination (*'ilm al-khayāl*) permits to move from the image of an element of this world, like a precious stone, to the essence of a spiritual element of the other world, as the interpreter of the Quran can move from the exterior meaning of a given verse to its spiritual inner meaning.¹

In my analysis of this fundamental work I will focus on its structure, which is entirely built around the alchemical symbolism of precious stones. According to al-Ghazālī, the Quran is like an ocean (*al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*) and the believers are required to dive to the bottom of it to find different types of precious stones (*jawāhir*).² The knowledge of God is compared to the red sulphur or red brimstone (*al-kibrīt al-aḥmar*).³ This expression, which brings to light the diffusion of the alchemical terminology in the Medieval Islamic world, appears in Arabic proverbs as well as in wisdom literature to denote something which possesses a great value. The expression also appears in the previously cited work on precious stones of al-Bīrūnī, where it is interpreted as one of the designations of the «golden elixir» (*iksīr al-dhahab*), an equivalent of the Philosopher's Stone, capable of transmuting the vile metal into gold. Just like other alchemical symbols such as the phoenix or gryphon (*'anqā' muḥrib*), the red sulphur is considered to exist as a concept and not as a reality by al-Bīrūnī.⁴

In the first chapter, al-Ghazālī divides the knowledge of God into different levels, in the same way that in a gemstone like corundum (*yāqūt*) there are different levels of preciousness, reflected by the variety of types and colours. Hence, the knowledge of the Essence of God is compared to the red ruby (*yāqūt al-aḥmar*), the knowledge of His Attributes to the blue-grey jacinth (*yāqūt al-akḥab*), and the knowledge of His Acts is identified to the yellow topaz (*yāqūt al-aṣṣfar*). The Persian scholar continues his metaphor by stating that just as the corundum is the most difficult gemstone to obtain, which only kings manage to acquire because of its rareness and high value, the attainment of divine knowledge is also reserved to an elite of few people.⁵

Al-Ghazālī divides the sciences of the Quran into external sciences, compared to the shell containing a pearl, and inner sciences, compared to the pearl hidden inside the shell. The prominence of a science is in proportion to its closeness to the centre, symbolised by the pearl itself; that is to say the more the science is esoteric, the closer it is to the pearl.⁶ According to al-Ghazālī, the Quran reveals to men similarities between physical realities of the visible world and spiritual realities of the invisible world by virtue of the symbolic correspondence between the visible world and the invisible world.⁷ In that way, the author interprets the meaning of different precious stones, focusing however in particular on the red brimstone (*al-kibrīt al-aḥmar*), which, in his words, symbolizes the alchemical procedure (*al-kimīyā'*) to follow in order to transform the substances (*qalb al-a'yān*) from their basic qualities (*ṣifāt khasīsa*) to their precious qualities (*ṣifāt nafīsa*), so that a simple stone (*ḥajar*) can be transformed into corundum (*yāqūt*), and copper (*niḥās*) into pure gold (*ibrīz*).⁸ Employing the literary metaphor of *naẓm*, al-Ghazālī divides a set of verses of the Quran into two groups: in his allusive system, a group of verses is related to gemstones (*naẓm al-jawāhir*), to be strung on one

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 86-87.

² ABŪ ḤĀMID AL-GHAZĀLĪ, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, Bayrūt, Dār Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm, 1986, pp. 21-22.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁴ M. ULLMANN, *al-Kibrīt*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs, www.brillonline.com; TAMER, *Revelation, Sciences and Symbolism Al-Ghazālī's «Jawāhir al-Qur'ān»*, cit., pp. 60-61, n. 44.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 35-36.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 48, 53, 55-56.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 25-26.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

wire (*fi silk wāhid*), while another group of verses is related to pearls (*naẓm al-durar*), to be strung on another wire (*fi silk ākhar*). The initial chapter of the Quran, the surah *al-Fātiḥa*, is divided into two parts: the first part, which pertains to knowledge, is related to gemstones, while the second part, which pertains to practice, is related to pearls.¹ In one chapter, al-Ghazālī analyses seven hundred and sixty-three verses of the Quran that are related to gemstones,² while in another chapter he investigates seven hundred and forty-one verses that are related to pearls.³ In the last chapter of his treatise, al-Ghazālī states finally that he has confined himself to emphasise on the verses directly related to gemstones and pearls, leaving aside the remaining verses of the Quran, because he wished to focus exclusively on the verses which were essential in the path toward God.⁴

THE GEMSTONES OF WISDOM AND «THE FABULOUS GRYPHON»
OF IBN AL-‘ARABĪ (D. 1240)

Among the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī, some essential treatises are related to the symbolism of the precious stones. Actually, this symbolism emerges in the very title of one of his most important and commented works, the *Gemstones of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*),⁵ since the word *faṣṣ* (pl. *fuṣūṣ*) designates the gemstone, either inlaid in a bezel, in a seal or even alone. Most translators of this text did translate the word *faṣṣ* by “bezel”,⁶ but this meaning does actually not appear in ancient lexicographical dictionaries.⁷

At the beginning of the first chapter, which is consecrated to the prophet Adam, Ibn al-‘Arabī clarifies the employed symbolism: the existence of the first man completed the universe as the inscription engraved in the gem (*faṣṣ*), used by the king to seal his treasure, completes the seal (*khātim*).⁸ The metaphor used by Ibn al-‘Arabī is that of the kingship of God: the King is compared to God, who protects his treasure containing the jewels of wisdom. Each chapter of the text refers to a jewel of wisdom (*faṣṣ al-ḥikma*) in the word (*kalima*) of the different prophets, from Adam to Muḥammad.⁹ The link between wisdom, precious stones and language of the prophets is therefore manifest.

Another important work of Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Fabulous Gryphon: On the Seal of the Saints and the Sun of the West* (‘*Anqā’ mughrīb fi khatm al-awliyā’ wa shams al-maghrīb*), is structured according to the imagery of precious stones.¹⁰ The title of this book refers to the mythological figure of the gryphon or phoenix, a major symbol in alchemy together with the Philosopher’s Stone and the Golden Elixir.¹¹ This text is structured around

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 84-85.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 86-146.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 147-210.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

⁵ IBN AL-‘ARABĪ, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-‘Alā’ ‘Affī, Bayrūt, Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2002.

⁶ Cf. the recent BINYAMIN ABRAHAMOV, *Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam. An Annotated Translation of ‘The Bezels of Wisdom’*, New York, Routledge, 2015.

⁷ EDWARD WILLIAM LANE, *f-ṣ-ṣ, Arabic-English Lexicon*, Beyrouth, Librarie du Liban, 1968. For a detailed discussion on this argument, see GERALD ELMORE, *Sufi Metaphysics and Qur’anic Prophets: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Thought and Method in the Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* by Ronald L. Nettler, «Journal of Qur’anic Studies», vii, 2005, 1, pp. 85-86, and AIYUB PALMER, *The Social and Theoretical Dimensions of Sainthood in Early Islam: Al-Tirmidhī’s Gnoiology and the Foundations of Ṣūfī Social Praxis*, PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2015, pp. 218-228. Palmer interestingly proposes an analogy between the notion of *faṣṣ* in Ibn al-‘Arabī and the antecedent notion of *khātam* (seal ring) in al-Ḥākim al-Tirmidhī (d. 869), interpreting in this way *faṣṣ* as a ring stone, and not as a simple gemstone.

⁸ IBN AL-‘ARABĪ, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, cit., p. 50.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 227-228.

¹⁰ IBN AL-‘ARABĪ, ‘*Anqā’ mughrīb wa khatm al-awliyā’ wa shams al-maghrīb*, Bayrūt, Dār al-Fikr, 1997; GERALD T. ELMORE, *Islamic Sainthood in the fullness of time. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon*, Leiden, Brill, 1998.

¹¹ About the ‘*anqā’*, and about the choice of the translation “gryphon”, *ibidem*, pp. 184-195. This figure is well-known also in the Persianate Islamic world under the name of Simorgh.

a complex cosmological metaphor, reflecting the quest in the deep sea for the hidden pearl in its shell.¹ This “unpierced” and “virgin” pearl, hidden in the darkness of the sea abyss,² is also described as a ruby in its shining pearl shell that a diver is called to extricate.³ In line with those verses of Quran in which the pearls and the corals are addressed,⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī structured his doctrinal edifice according to two partitions: in the first part, he described the ten macrocosmic pearls,⁵ while in the second part, he described the ten microcosmic corals.⁶

The importance of the symbolism of precious stones in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine has been fully understood by one of its main commentators, the already mentioned ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī. Indeed, many titles of the vast bibliography attributed to him explicitly refer to this symbolism.⁷

GEMSTONES, PEARLS AND LANGUAGE IN SOME WORKS
OF ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB AL-SHA‘RĀNĪ (D. 1565)

Among the works of al-Sha‘rānī which bear the imagery of precious stones in their titles, two of them in particular are consecrated to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings: *The Corundums and Jewels in the Clarification of the Beliefs of the Great Men* (*al-Yawāqit wa al-jawāhir fī bayān ‘aqā’id al-akābir*), conceived as a general introduction to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrines,⁸ and *The Red Brimstone: On the Clarification of the Sciences of the Greatest Master* (*al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar fī bayān ‘ulūm al-Shaykh al-Akbar*),⁹ a summary of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s magnum opus, *The Meccan Openings* (*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*). Al-Sha‘rānī in the introduction of *The Red Brimstone* claims that the degree of the sciences that he reveals in his own book, also referred as the degree of red brimstone, compared to the degree of the common sciences of Sufism, is equal to the degree of golden elixir (*iksīr al-dhahab*) compared to the common gold (*muṭlaq al-dhahab*).¹⁰

Two titles are consecrated to the teachings of his own direct spiritual master ‘Alī al-Khawwāš (d. 1532), an illiterate artisan who, according to al-Sha‘rānī, obtained the divine knowledge by inspiration.¹¹ The first title is *The Diver’s Pearls According to the Answers of ‘Alī al-Khawwāš* (*Durar al-ghawwāš ‘alā fatāwā sayyidi ‘Alī al-Khawwāš*).¹² The metaphor used here by al-Sha‘rānī is of course reminiscent of the one developed by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s in *Fabulous Gryphon*, except that in this case, the pearls of knowledge that the diver has to search for in the bottom of the ocean and bring to the surface are his master’s words. The second title, *The Precious Stones and Pearls in what ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī Benefited from his Master ‘Alī al-Khawwāš* (*al-Jawāhir wa al-durar mim mā*

¹ ELMORE, *Islamic Sainthood in the fullness of time*, cit., pp. 244-246.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 328, 335.

⁵ ELMORE, *Islamic Sainthood in the fullness of time*, cit., pp. 388-427.

⁷ MICHAEL WINTER, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt. Studies in the Writing of ‘Abd Al-Wahhāb Al-Sha‘rānī*, New Brunswick, Transactions Books, 1982; for a partial bibliography of al-Sha‘rānī, see pp. 241-245.

⁸ ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB AL-SHA‘RĀNĪ, *al-Yawāqit wa al-jawāhir fī bayān ‘aqā’id al-akābir*, Bayrut, Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1997.

⁹ IDEM, *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar fī bayān ‘ulūm al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, Beyrouth, Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹¹ ERIC GEÖFFROY, *Une grande figure de saint ummī : le cheikh ‘Alī al-Khawwāš (m. 939/1532)*, in *Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l’époque mamelouke*, éd. par R. McGregor, A. Sabra, Le Caire, IFAO, 2006, pp. 169-176; ADAM SABRA, *Illiterate Sufis and Learned Artisans: the Circle of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī*, in *Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l’époque mamelouke*, cit., pp. 153-168.

¹² ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB AL-SHA‘RĀNĪ, *Durar al-Ghawwāš ‘alā fatāwā sayyidi ‘Alī al-Khawwāš*, al-Qāhira, al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, 1998.

² *Ibidem*, p. 328.

⁴ Quran, 55:22.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 428-460.

istafāda sayyidī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī min shaykhihi sayyidī ‘Alī al-Khawwāṣ),¹ has the particularity, as the other works analysed so far, to provide a structure built on the symbolism of precious stones. In the introduction of his book, al-Sha‘rānī announces: «I entitled it *The Jewels and the Pearls*, and distinguished each of his utterances [of ‘Alī al-Khawwāṣ] by the name of a precious stone. [...] Thus I named them: diamond (*mās*), camphor (*kāfir*), red brimstone (*kibrīt aḥmar*), red corundum (*yāqūt*), rose corundum (*balaksh*), jewel (*jawhar*), pearl (*durr*), peridot (*ḡabarjad*), emerald (*ḡumurrud*), coral (*marjān*), and others».²

The Egyptian Sufi scholar indicates the name of the precious stone under which he collects a series of sayings of his master, passing then to another series of sayings under the name of another precious stone. In this way, the precious stones succeed one by one without an apparent precise order, either scientific or literary, as it was the case for *The Unique Necklace* of Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih. However, al-Sha‘rānī seems to suggest that he made a choice between the various degrees of preciousness of his master’s teachings, thanks to his esoteric knowledge.

PRECIOUS STONES IN THE BURDA OF AL-BUṢĪRĪ (D. 1295)

In the incipit of this article, I quoted a verse attributed by al-Sha‘rānī to Abū-l-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī, which is very often recited during the Sufi gatherings as a conclusion after the recitation of the *Burda*, the poem composed by the Sufi poet Muḥammad al-Buṣīrī: «Muḥammad is a man who is not like other men, but rather a gemstone among the stones».

The identification of the prophet Muḥammad with a precious stone is frequent in Sufi literature, in particular in sung poetry, and often this precious stone is a pearl. An example can be found in the *Burda*, in a passage that describes the prophet Muḥammad and compares his speech and his smile to a hidden pearl in its shell,³ an imagery borrowed from some famous verses of the poet al-Buḥturī (d. 897), initially addressed to a woman.⁴

In other passages of the *Burda*, al-Buṣīrī compares the verses of Quran to pearls: each verse, as each pearl, is endowed with a unique beauty, and its value does not diminish even if considered separately. However, when the verses of the Quran are strung together, their respective beauty increases, just as pearls strung together in a necklace enhance the beauty and the value of each pearl of the necklace.⁵ The poet underlies that the verses of Quran follow one after the other like the waves of the ocean, however their beauty and value exceed all the gemstones of the sea.⁶

CONCLUSION

In this analysis, I attempted to make the point that the symbolism of precious stones allows us to observe remarkable analogies between Judaism, Christianity and Islam,

¹ IDEM, *al-Jawāhir wa al-durar mim mā istafāda sayyidī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī min shaykhihi sayyidī ‘Alī al-Khawwāṣ*, Beyrouth, Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005.

² *Ibidem*, p. 7.

³ *Burda* 3:57, SUZANNE PINCKNEY STETKEYVCH, *The Mantle Odes. Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 99.

⁴ PINCKNEY STETKEYVCH, *The Mantle Odes*, cit., pp. 104-105.

⁵ *Burda*, 6:89, PINCKNEY STETKEYVCH, *The Mantle Odes*, cit., p. 121.

⁶ *Burda*, 6:97, PINCKNEY STETKEYVCH, *The Mantle Odes*, cit., p. 122.

in terms of their religious connotations as well as their esoteric dimensions. In the sources explored, the precious stones often appear as a kind of luminous fragments of paradise dispersed in the terrestrial world, reminding men of the splendour of the afterlife.

As we saw, in the Jewish and Christian contexts the theme of the High Priest's breastplate is a real pivot for the symbolism of precious stones, indicating the descent of the divine power and will to earth in Judaism, while offering a divine model for the Celestial Jerusalem in Christianity. In a broader context, the precious stones of the Old and New Testaments have represented a constant source of theological and esoteric exegesis in the Jewish and Christian thought over the centuries.

However, as the analysis of certain verses of Quran and sayings of the prophet Muḥammad have shown, in the Islamic framework, the symbolism of precious stones refers essentially to hereafter and to the life of the blessed ones in paradise, and is employed as well to describe some episodes of the world's cosmogony. Even though the quranic references are fewer in number, the sayings of the Prophet and the pre-Islamic narratives that have been integrated in the Islamic literature reflect a very lively picture of this symbolism.

I also verified the presence of noteworthy examples of the metaphoric use of precious stones in classical Arabic literature, as well as in religious literature. I focused in particular on Sufi literary heritage, which abounds in meaningful examples of this symbolism. These materials, which display a prominently esoteric connotation, have reinforced my conviction regarding the connection between precious stones and language. Indeed, another characteristic of the symbolism of precious stones in the Abrahamic traditions that I have tried to highlight here, is precisely its proximity with the idea of language, both to common language and to esoteric one.

At the end of this analysis, I have to underline that this research only represents a first inquiry on this subject which would require further investigations, considering the variety of sources to be analysed, and the theological and esoteric research horizons which this subject can disclose. A next stage would possibly include the analysis of the material applications related to this symbolism, namely the handling of these precious stones by the religious and political power, and the crafting of jewels for apotropaic, magical and esoteric purposes.

COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE SERRA DANTE DALLA
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