SECTION 2

SCIENTIFIC MANUSCRIPTS
ART IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE:
THE KITĀB AL-DIRYĀQ IN TEXT
AND IMAGE

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This paper will consider the illustrated copies of the Kitāb al-diryāq (The Book of the Theriac, often called The Book of Antidotes) from a new vantage point (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, arabe 2964, and Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, A.F. 10). Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this study aims to clarify the Kitāb al-diryāq’s literary context, evaluate the impetus for its illustration in light of a new understanding of the text, and explore the possibility of a shared pictorial program.

The manuscripts likely share a northern Mesopotamian (Jazīran) provenance, as well as characteristics congruent with luxury book status, such as figural frontispieces, a high ‘rate of illustration,’ extensive use of gold, careful calligraphy and illumination, and sizeable physical format, both in folio size and the area reserved for images. The Paris and Vienna manuscripts are very close in size; although both have had their margins trimmed, their folios share an approximate size of eleven by seventeen inches.

The Kitāb al-diryāq ostensibly concerns the famed ‘universal antidote’ of Antiquity and is attributed in its title to Galen, with the commentary of Yahyā al-Nahwt (John the Grammarian/Johannes Grammatikos or Johannes Philoponus) of Alexandria. Scholars of Greek literature have never considered the Kitāb al-diryāq an authentic work of Galen; rather, it may be a pseudepigraphic Arabic original work. Commonly referred to as a scientific or ‘pseudoscientific’ work in the secondary literature, the Kitāb al-diryāq has also been described as an esoteric treatise containing elements of numerology. A careful reading of the text, however, points to an identification of the Kitāb al-diryāq as a literary ‘hybrid.’ While

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1 This paper presents some of the findings of my doctoral dissertation: Kerner 2004. I wish to thank the editor, Anna Contadini, for organizing the Arab Painting symposium at SOAS in September, 2004 and the present volume.

2 The issues of regional style and provenance in early Islamic manuscript painting remain problematic. Kurt Holter attributed the Vienna Diryāq to a northern Mesopotamian ‘school’ of manuscript painting; Holter 1937a. Richard Ettinghausen later extended Holter’s attribution of the Vienna Diryāq to the Paris manuscript, although Bishr Farès had previously attributed the manuscript to the ‘School of Baghdad.’ Ettinghausen 1962, 83–86; Farès 1953b, p. 940. I am grateful to Oleg Grabar for providing the latter.

3 Golombek 1972, p. 23.

4 While the term luxury book usually applies to works of courtly patronage, ‘luxury’ status may be ascribed to the illustrated Kitāb al-diryāq manuscripts (especially the Paris Diryāq) with little reservation.

5 Paris: 36.5 × 27.5 cm; Vienna: 36.5 × 28 cm.


8 Meyerhof 1932.