

An Amphitheatrical Microcosm

Heinrich Khunrath's *Oratorium-Laboratorium*

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By far the best-known engraving from Heinrich Khunrath's *Universal, Ter-tri-une, Christian-Cabalist, Diviney-Magical, and Physico-Chymical Amphitheatre of the Only True Eternal Wisdom*, appearing in many books and articles on the history of alchemy, is this circular image of his Oratory-Laboratory.¹ It first appeared as the last of four ›Theosophical Figures‹ in the rare 1595 edition as a large circular hand-coloured engraving surrounded by text radiating outwards from the central image like spokes of a wheel (Fig. 1). In the 1609 edition the surrounding text has been removed and placed in the main text as an Isagoge or Introduction to each engraving (Fig. 2). Khunrath never discusses the sequence of his *Amphitheatre* images, but comparison of the five surviving 1595 copies makes it clear that the four engravings are in this order:

- 1) Christ Cruciform
- 2) Adam Androgyne
- 3) Alchemical Hermaphrodite
- 4) Oratory-Laboratory

While the first three figures are two-dimensional images, the fourth is 3-dimensional with deep perspective. The implication seems to be that only when the Christian-Cabala, Divine Magic and Physico-Chymistry of the previous three images are combined do we get the full ›reality‹ of Khunrath's *Amphitheatre*. This fourth figure is the visual summation of Khunrath's entire theosophy and his repeated injunction, *Ora et labora*, that is, to pray in the Oratory and work in the Laboratory. The vital importance of this combination of prayer (in the context of Cabala and Magic) with alchemical practice is emphasised in another early publication, *Vom hylealischen Chaos* (On Primaterial Chaos, 1597), in which Khunrath condemns those who *utterly un-Philosophically separate*

1 For more on the *Amphitheatre*, see Gilly, Hallacker, Neumann and Schmidt-Biggemann 2014.

*Oratory and Laboratory from each other.*² The *Amphitheatre's* fourth engraving is a potent expression of his conviction, voiced in *De igne magorum philosophorumque* (On the Fire of the Magers and Sages, 1608), of the necessary reciprocity and interconnectedness of all his practices in the declaration that *Kabala, Magic and Alchemy conjoined, should and must be used together with and alongside one another.*³

The Oratorium

On the left (Fig. 3), the Oratory is the realm of the Divine, connected with Christian Cabala and Divine Magic, described by Khunrath as *the monastic, or as it were hermetic Chapel or Sanctuary of the Oratory.*⁴ In a pavilion labelled *Oratorium*, we see a table on which rest two books. One is a bible, open at Psalm 145:19, declaring *YHVH does the Will of them that fear him*, while the other bears the *Amphitheatre's* first two circular figures of Christ and Adam (Fig. 4). A manuscript in the British Library, *Tabulae theosophicae cabbalisticae* (Cabbalistic Theosophical Tables), contains copies of these figures, with the same colour scheme as the 1595 originals, but with one significant difference: the centre of each image has been etched or painted onto the silver backing of a mirror (Fig. 5).⁵ This means that anyone gazing at these images will see Christ or androgynous Adam-Eve superimposed on their own face, which adds a completely different level of meaning to all the conjunctions in these amphitheatrical engravings.

Here, a bearded man, most likely Khunrath himself, is kneeling and gazing at the images, his arms outstretched in prayer, in imitation of Christ's own cruciform posture. Below the table are the traditional vanitas symbols of a skull and hour-glass, suggesting the transient nature of human life and activity, beneath the words *Disce bene mori* (Learn to Die Well). Above the table hangs an oil lamp casting light on a tablet bearing advice echoing words found in both Iamblichus's *Adhortatio ad philosophiam* (Exhortation to Philosophy) and in Marsilio Ficino's 'Symbols of the Philosopher Pythagoras', *Ne loquaris de deo absque lumine* (Do not speak

2 Khunrath 1597, p. 416: *Das ORATORIVM und LABORATORIVM trennen sie gantz unPhilosophisch von einander.*

3 Khunrath 1608, p. 87: *Kabala, Magia, Alchymia Coniungendae, Sollen und müssen mit und neben einander angewendet werden.*

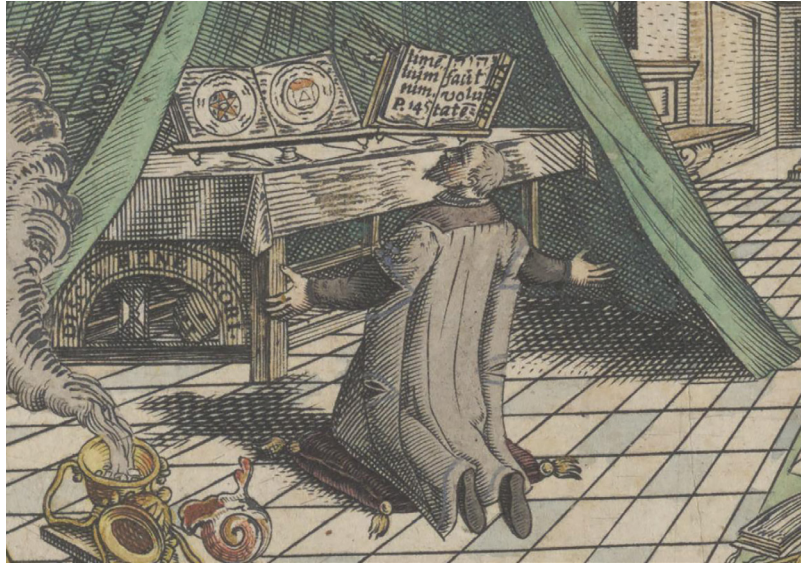
4 Khunrath 1609, II, p. 210: *in Sacello siue Adyto, Oratorii, monastico, aut quasi eremitico (...).* On Khunrath's Cabala, see Schmidt-Biggemann 2013, pp. 1-60.

5 London, British Library, Sign. Sloane Ms. 181 *Tabulae theosophicae cabbalisticae*, ff. 4-5.



Fig. 3 Detail of Fig. 1.

Fig. 4 Detail of Fig. 1.



of God without light).⁶ Michael Allen's reflections on the goals of Ficino's »lumenological« or »photological« magic in relation to the *Chaldaean Oracles* and *Corpus hermeticum* suggest that his goal was an »internal illumination or enlightenment in the literal sense of intensifying the light within.«⁷ This ties in well with the core message on the roof beam at the top of the Oratory-Laboratory engraving, from Cicero's *De natura deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods): *No one is ever a great man without divine inspiration.*

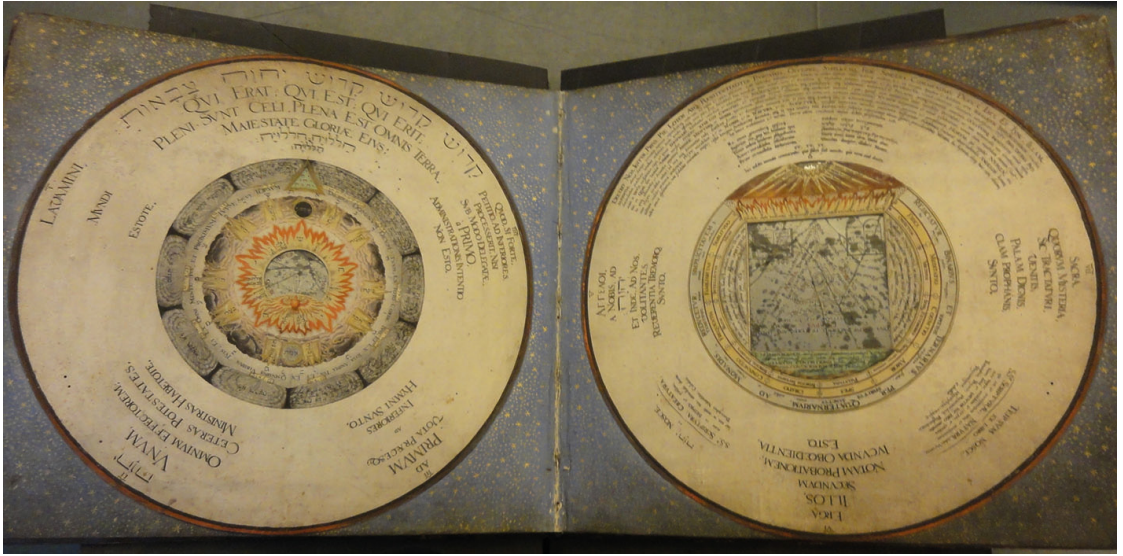
Running up the slanted wall of the pavilion is the phrase, »Hoc hoc agentibus nobis, aderit ipse Deus« (If this and this alone could be our purpose, God himself will be at our side).⁸ It is a slight modification of a line from the *Enchiridion militis christianae* (Handbook of the Christian Soldier, 1503) by one of Khunrath's favoured sources, Desiderius Erasmus, whose name appears in a shortlist of the most learned men of his era, together with Johannes Reuchlin, Martin Luther, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus, and Valentin Weigel.⁹ Not present in the 1595 engraving, but appearing as an extra quote in the 1609 edition, in the

6 Kiessling 1813, cap. XXI, p. 313, *De Pythagoreis sine lumine ne loquitur*; Ficino 1516, f. 86r, *Symbola Pythagorae phylosophi: De rebus diuinis absque lumine ne loquaris.*

7 Allen 2017, p. 56.

8 Erasmus 1518, p. 7 *Hoc, hoc agentibus nobis, aderit ipse Christus.* O'Malley 1988, p. 10: *If this and this alone could be our purpose, Christ himself will be at our side.*

9 Khunrath 1609, II, p. 30.



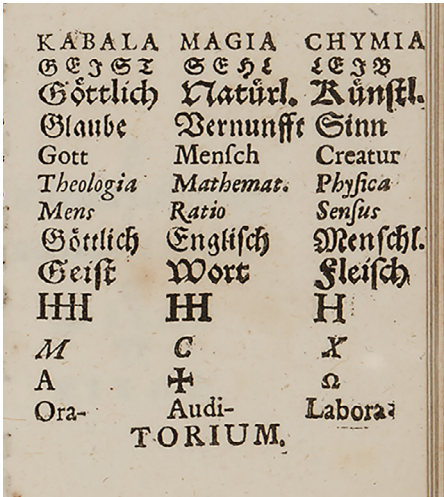
incense smoke rising from the thurible we read *Ascendat, ut fumus, oratio, sacrificium deo acceptabile* (Let Prayer rise like smoke, an acceptable sacrifice to God), words which call to mind Psalm 140:2 »Let my prayer be directed as incense in thy sight«, as well as Luther’s remark about burning the incense of prayers.¹⁰ Along the wall on the Oratory side of the engraving runs a long shelf of books, representing one of the traditional sources of knowledge, the sacred wisdom passed down from antiquity, namely, the Bible, the Church Fathers, as well as sixteenth-century religious authorities like Erasmus, Luther, and Weigel.

The *Laboratorium*

The opposite side of the engraving (Fig. 3) is the realm of Creation, the Macrocosm, and shows Khunrath’s Laboratory concerned with the Physico-Chymical investigation of the wonders of Nature, the transmutation of metals, the preparation of chemical medicines and the Philosophers’ Stone. The fireplace with two columns presents the other two sources of knowledge, in addition to divine revelation: *Ratio* et *Experientia* (Reason and Experience). Emphasising Khunrath’s conviction that the practices of the Oratory and Laboratory should not be

Fig. 5
Central Images of the *Amphitheatre*’s first two figures as mirrors, in: *Tabulae Theosophicae Cabbalisticae*. London, British Library, Sign. Sloane Ms. 181.

¹⁰ Bentley 1829, p. 199.



Kabala	Magic	Alchemy
Spirit	Soul	Body
Divine	Natural	Artificial
Belief	Reason	Sense
God	Human	Creature
Theology	Mathematics	Natural Philosophy
Mind	Reason	Sense
Divine	Angelic	Human
Spirit	Word	Flesh
1000	100	10
Alpha	+	Omega
Ora-	Audi-	Labora-
	torium	

Fig. 6

Diagram in: Abraham von Franckenberg, *Raphael oder Artzt-Engel*, Amsterdam 1676,

p. 27.

Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam, Sign. PH2659.

Translation by P.J. Forshaw.

seen as separate endeavours, on the laboratory mantelpiece we again find a quote from Erasmus's *Enchiridion: Sapienter retentatum, succedet aliquando* (After wisely trying over and over again, one may at length succeed).¹¹ This encouragement to perseverance seems highly appropriate for the difficult and frequently frustrating work that must have taken place in the apparatus beneath the large hood in the fireplace, where a plume of steam or smoke rises on the left and flames flicker on the right. As counterparts to the row of books on the shelf in the Oratory, here we find rows of reagent bottles and glasses on the laboratory's mantelshelf, bearing substances necessary for both *Chrysopoetic* (gold-making) and *Iatrochemical* (chemical-medicinal) alchemy. Below we find further useful items, including a coal bucket, shovel, tongs, and bellows. Some of these bear additional mottos, such as the coal bucket's *Non pudeat te carbonum* (Do not be ashamed of coals), or the athanor in the foreground, bearing advice from Erasmus's *Adages: festina lente* (Make haste slowly), and the sand-oven with the word *Maturandum* (Let it mature).¹² This sense of »adventurous prudence«¹³ is supported by Khunrath's motto on the chimney breast: *Nec temere, nec timide* (Neither rashly, nor timidly).

11 Erasmus 1518, p. 4: *crebro retentatum, succedet aliquando*. C.f. Mann Phillips 1982, Vol. 31, p. 154 Adage I ii 13: *It may turn out that a person scores a success after trying over and over again*.

12 See Mynors 1991, Vol. 33, *Adages* II i 1 to II vi 100, pp. 3-17 Adage II i 1: *Festina lente* (Make haste slowly). See also Erasmus 1564, p. 157: *in omni negotio maturandum esse*.

13 Wind 1967, p. 215.

The Central Table

The table dominating the centre of the engraving is covered with a wide variety of objects, those on the left relating more to the Oratory: ink pot, quill, pencils, notepaper; those on the right, balance-scales, a set of weights, tongs or dividers, chopping board and knife, all suggestive of the Laboratory, as are the glass distillation vessels under the table. Directly above the table hangs a star-shaped oil-lamp, with seven branches, relating to the seven archangels and the Oratory, the seven planets of the Ptolemaic cosmos, and the seven metals of alchemy in the Laboratory.

The *Auditorium*

While most readers of the *Amphitheatre* tend to focus on the relationship between the Oratory and the Laboratory, a few spend additional time musing over the significance of the contents of the central table that mediates between Khunrath's Cabala and alchemy. The Silesian nobleman Abraham von Franckenberg (1593-1652), follower and biographer of the German theosopher Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), was clearly inspired by the presence of the four stringed instruments in the central foreground of the image: harp and lira da braccio on the left; lute and cittern on the right, together with the message on the tablecloth immediately below: »Sacred Music [is] the dispeller (fuga) of sadness and evil spirits; because the Spirit of יהוה [Jehovah] gladly sings in a heart perfused with pious joy.«¹⁴

In his *Raphael: oder Artzt-Engel* (Raphael or Physician-Angel, composed 1639; published 1676), in a section on *Kabalistic or Spiritual Medicine*, Franckenberg includes a diagram in the margin of one page.¹⁵ It is a table of correspondences with three columns, each relating to one of Khunrath's practices: Kabala, Magia and Chymia. At the bottom of each column he identifies the place where they should be practised, *Oratorium*, *Laboratorium*, and *Auditorium*, which is a particularly imaginative way of conceptualising the significance of the central table with its instruments (Fig. 6).¹⁶

14 *Musica sancta tristitiae spirituumque malignorum fuga quia spiritus יהוה lubenter psallit in corde gaudio pio perfuso*. C.f. Töllner 1991, p. 216: »Singt der Alchemist Hymnen, so ist der Geist Gottes in ihm und die bösen Geister sind verschwunden – Ausdruck der melancholy«.

15 Franckenberg 1676, p. 27.

16 Forshaw 2010, p. 170.

For Franckenberg, then, the *Auditorium* mediates between the Oratory and the Laboratory, just as Mathematics stands between Theology and Natural Philosophy. Khunrath's central table can be understood as representing man (the magus) in relation to God in the Oratory and Nature in the Laboratory. Instead of a binary, we have a ternary, of body, spirit, and soul.

The *Dormitorium*

At the far end of the hall is a portico, leading out of the main hall into a room with bed and drapes on the left, and finally to the open door of a room with a table on the right and a diamond-shaped lattice window, at the image's vanishing point. On the portico's architrave we read *Dormiens Vigila* (While Sleeping, Keep Watch). Khunrath writes in the *Amphitheatre* about being »Divinely admonished, taught [and] instructed with visions« during sleep.¹⁷ Many of his readers would have been familiar with dream revelations in alchemy, from the ancient visions of Zosimos of Panopolis in the third century CE to Giovanni Battista Nazari's *Della tramutazione metallica sogni tre* (Three Dreams about Metallic Transmutation, 1599). The German physician and alchemist Johann Joachim Becher (1635-1682) was familiar with Khunrath's work and seems to have had the Oratory-Laboratory engraving in mind when he mentioned a *Dormitorium* together with an *Oratorium* and *Laboratorium* in his book *Psychosophia* (Soul-Wisdom, 1705).¹⁸ Thus, it could be argued that in his most famous engraving Khunrath presents us with four axial points of praxis: *Oratorium* and *Laboratorium*, *Auditorium* and *Dormitorium*, each relating in their own way to the overarching notion of divine, theological inspiration.

17 Khunrath 1609, II, p. 168: *Et dormiens ... Visionibus Diuinitus admoneberis, doceberis, instituëris*. See Forshaw 2011.

18 Becher 1705, p. 344: *Da hast du mein neues Hofleben/ und meine Residentz oder Pallast/ der in einem laboratorio, dormitorio, Oratorio, Apothek, Bibliothec/ und einer kleinen Druckerey bestehen wird.*