

THE NOTION OF FIRE IN THE *CHALDEAN ORACLES*: CLASSICAL AND INNOVATIVE METHODS OF LEXICAL ANALYSIS FOR MAPPING INTERTEXTUALITY¹

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Abstract. The article proposes a lexical analysis of the *Chaldean Oracles*, focusing on fire-related vocabulary, to map its influence on early modern philosophy. The research combines both classical qualitative methods and computational approaches to examine distinctive expressions found in this ancient wisdom text. Particular attention is given to the multifaceted symbolism of fire in the *Oracles* and its reception in some early modern English texts. The study utilizes distant reading queries on digital corpora, primarily the Early Print website's Corpus Search function, to trace the reappearance of specific fire-related phrases in early modern texts. While some queries yielded stimulating connections, such as the use of 'intellectual fire' in Ralph Cudworth's works, others produced fewer results, highlighting both the potential and the limitations of this approach. The analysis reveals that while the *Chaldean Oracles* remained an important reference in 17th-century philosophical debates, the patterns of their influence were complex and not always reflected in *verbatim* quotations.

Keywords: *Chaldean Oracles*, Zoroaster, fire, distant reading, Thomas Stanley, Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, Neoplatonism

Introduction

Prisca sapientia had its often-distinctive lexical features constituted by key notions and expressions found in the sources believed to contain ancient wisdom. This distinctive vocabulary was enriched by the plurilingual diffusion of these sources, first in Latin, then in the vernacular, and by the early modern debates on ancient wisdom. This *prisca*-vocabulary can be studied using classic qualitative methods, focusing on specific notions, and using digital or computational methods, including word counts, stylometry, named entity recognition, etc. A partly computational preprocessing of ancient wisdom vocabulary allows us to carry out more efficient distant reading queries in large digital corpora of early modern printed books and to better map the influence

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of these sources. The reappearance of specific lexical elements found in the Close Reading Corpus of the project VERITRACE (CRC) in the Distant Reading Corpus (DRC), their frequency, the pattern they form, the first and last known date of their use are part of the quantitative analysis we intend to carry out.

In the present article, we propose to study this specific ancient wisdom vocabulary in the *Chaldean Oracles* and their reception focusing on the notion of fire. Two important methods used by our team to detect influences on a large-scale level are 1. punctual distant reading queries 2. text matching. The study of major ideas or images centred around specific call-words, such as *ignis* or *mens*, necessitates the former, that is targeted distant reading. In the queries carried out for this article, we mainly concentrated on the vernacular diffusion of the *Chaldean Oracles* in early modern England, namely by the translation of Patrizi's edition (1591) by Thomas Stanley (1662). We addressed the impact of this translation by queries using specific lexical elements, among which fire-related expressions. Interestingly, queries in an early modern English corpus also led us to French authors, translated into English during the 17th century. If pertinent, we included these results in the article as well.

The article is partly based on test queries. We could not yet use the research tool being developed for the project, hence our use of Early Print. A meaningful integration of these results in a new narrative on the influence of ancient wisdom in the early modern era takes time and necessitates further inquiries. We precise as for our methodology that all 17th-century works were consulted online. We double checked passages from Early Print digital copies if they contained non-transcribed Greek words or in case of other uncertain points.

The Specific Vocabulary of the *Chaldean Oracles*

In early modern times readers mostly knew the *Chaldean Oracles* in Francesco Patrizi's (1529–1597) edition. Thus, a study of fire-related thoughts bearing the traces of the *Oracles'* influence must regard this edition as a major reference. Let us consider first, however, the Psellus-Plethon-Patrizi editorial lineage of the text and its possible attribution in the early modern era.

The *Chaldean Oracles* consist of remaining fragments to be decoded, reunited by the three authors mentioned above, who added new fragments to the formerly known ones. While early modern readers did not generally discredit the very ancient nature of the *Oracles*, their attribution had been debated from the beginning. During the period we are interested in, they were known as the *Oracles* of Zoroaster or of the followers of Zoroaster and they were not attributed to the Juliani, who lived later.

Whether we should read the *Oracles* as specifically Chaldean is a long-standing question. According to Brigitte Tambrun-Krasker, the lack of a clearly identifiable origin renders this "*texte bâtarde*" especially important up to the present day, because it is ancient and atemporal at the same time.² As Graham John Wheeler points out, the connection between the *Oracles* and Zoroaster goes back to Plethon and was confirmed by Patrizi's longtime influential edition.³ Vojtěch Hladký also points out that Plethon was the source of the idea that the *Oracles* were the remains of extremely old revelations. Patrizi perpetuated this image, even if he reconsidered Plethon's chronological calculations in order to reconcile the fragments with biblical chronology and identified Zoroaster as a

contemporary of Abraham. Patrizi presumed that the utterances by Zoroaster and/or his followers had been translated into Greek by the Juliani.⁴

By the first half of the 18th century the connection between the *Oracles* and ancient Zoroastrian philosophy had been contested. Johann Jacob Brucker pointed out inconsistencies of this theory in the first volume of his *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742). Diderot borrowed and even radicalized these ideas in the entry PERSES of the *Encyclopédie* (1765). The change in the attribution at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries remains to be studied and further scholarship has to clarify blind spots in the narrative.⁵

Let us focus now on the terminology which can guide researchers in distant reading. Some of the expressions used in the *Oracles* seem esoteric, even unclear, while some of the keywords, such as *fire*, *light*, or *ether*, are too common to prove influence if reused in later published works. Some unique expressions are more reliable for our distant reading intuition. Thus, in queries aiming to map the early modern reception of the *Oracles* we must differentiate between unspecific and specific vocabulary and consider the reuse of specific terms or expressions as a plausible sign of intertextuality.

First, we study this specific ancient wisdom vocabulary as a contemporary reader of the *Oracles*. Then, we observe *fire* and the related expressions in the 17th-century translation of the *Oracles* by Stanley, which comprises the commentaries by Plethon and Psellus. Finally, we test the notion of *fire* in queries focusing on the possible influence of the 1662 English translation.

Unicity And Frequency of Vocabulary in the *Oracles*

Frequency is an essential aspect of computational lexical analysis. As has been said, ancient wisdom sources employ distinctive phrases and unique expressions, which are not necessarily repeated in the source text. They can appear as *hapax legomena* and stand out from the surrounding context as a unique combination of words denoting a special content. Some examples from the *Chaldean Oracles* are *fons fontium* (source of springs), *matrix contiens cuncta* (womb containing all), *multivaria materia* (multivaried matter or matter of various kinds), *paternum principium* (paternal principle), *mentis flos* (flower of the mind), and *paternus profundus* (paternal depth).

These expressions can be considered as typical of the *Oracles* but atypical in a different context. Thus, we can examine them as key textual elements, be they images or notions. Most of these unique expressions are so specific that it is highly unlikely that someone used the same wording by simple coincidence, without having read the *Chaldean Oracles*.

**Table 1: Vocabulary Frequency of the Chaldean Oracles
(Stop-words Not Included, Patrizi's Latin Edition)**

Word	Raw Count	Frequency (%)
mens	45	3.247
ignis	32	2.309
mundus	27	1.948
pater	24	1.732
anima	24	1.732
uerus	19	1.371
corpus	18	1.299
paternus	14	1.01
mental	13	0.938
terra	12	0.866
intelligibilis	12	0.866
...
intelligo	9	0.649
deus	9	0.649
natura	8	0.577
...
materia	7	0.505
luna	7	0.505
lumen	7	0.505
homo	7	0.505

Vocabulary frequency analysis can be insightful concerning the linguistic patterns of the *Chaldean Oracles*. The vocabulary used expresses two different ways of thinking. First, the text can be considered as part of the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition. Hence, its vocabulary is related to the notions of the Neoplatonic cosmology and theology. Secondly, it testifies to the Chaldean philosophical tradition to the extent that the text bears traces of Babylonian mystical and religious philosophy.⁶ Thus, many words in the *Oracles* have a complex and multifaceted usage, resulting in a unique fluidity of meaning.

Noetic, fire-related, and divinity-related vocabulary are very common in the *Oracles*.⁷ 'Mind' (*mens*) and 'fire' (*ignis*) have a high frequency in Patrizi's translation of the Greek text into Latin. These are the most frequent words used in the text (**Table**

1). Even if we include the stop words—that is, words of a text found insignificant in Natural Language Processing—in the analysis, the frequency of ‘mind’ and ‘fire’ remains high, as they occupy the third and fourth places, coming even before coordinating conjunctions (*et*) and relative pronouns (*qui*) (**Table 2**).

**Table 2: Vocabulary Frequency of the Chaldean Oracles
(Stop-words Included, Patrizi’s Latin Edition)**

Word	Raw Count	Frequency (%)
sum	59	3.018
in	48	2.455
mens	45	2.302
ignis	32	1.637
qui	28	1.432
et	28	1.432
enim	28	1.432
non	27	1.381
mundus	27	1.381
pater	24	1.228

Most of the frequent words of the *Oracles* can be grouped into four categories, reflecting the Neoplatonic content of the text. However, words can belong to more than one group. This is the case of words like ‘fire’ and ‘light’, which can both refer to the natural phenomena and the divine process of illumination (**Table 3**).

Table 3: Vocabulary Categories of the Chaldean Oracles

Mind and Intellect	Natural Elements	Divinity	Body
<i>mens</i> (mind)	<i>ignis</i> (fire)	<i>deus</i> (god)	<i>corpus</i> (body)
<i>anima</i> (soul, life force)	<i>mundus</i> (world)	<i>pater</i> (father)	<i>homo</i> (man)
<i>mental</i> (mental)	<i>terra</i> (earth)	<i>paternus</i> (paternal)	<i>materia</i> (matter)
<i>intelligibilis</i> (intelligible)	<i>natura</i> (nature)	<i>ignis</i> (fire)	<i>opus</i> (work)
<i>intelligo</i> (I understand)	<i>lumen</i> (light)	<i>lumen</i> (light)	

The notion of fire in the *Chaldean Oracles* is semantically rich; it serves as a symbol of divinity, transformation, and spiritual ascent. This ancient source, which testifies to the complexity of Hellenistic syncretism, employs the word *fire* in various contexts to illustrate its profound theological and cosmological connotations. Central to the Chaldean worldview, provided we accept that the remaining fragments mediate a Chaldean core, *fire* represents divine essence and the primary medium through which the soul undergoes purification and attains union with the transcendent realms.

Let us examine how these layers are presented in a modern edition of the text. One of the most important meanings of fire is its operation as an expression of divinity. The Chaldean First God is depicted as a Transcendent Fire (Fr. 5.1),⁸ reminiscent of Stoic imagery, which conveys a sense of purity, power, and omnipresence. In Neoplatonic theological thought, the Second Intellect, acting as the Demiurge, initially fashions the intelligible or Empyrean World of Ideas (Fr. 5.3–4). This is further elaborated in Proclus' commentary on *Timaeus*, where he cites Fragment 5 of the *Chaldean Oracles*.⁹ Fire is not interpreted as physical flame but as the divine medium through which creation and knowledge proceed. Fire, therefore, becomes one of the appellations of the Highest God. In Fr. 10.1, the Highest God is referred to as the One Fire.¹⁰ In contrast, the "other fire" means the "faux-intellec[t]" (Fr. 6.5).¹¹ This system also presupposes the existence of two distinct intellects: the Intellect of the Father and the Demiurgic Intellect. As Nicola Spanu underscores, the Father's Intellect contains the undivided intelligible Ideas. At the same time, the Demiurgic Intellect, called the "Craftsman of the fiery cosmos," mediates these Ideas into a form termed as "intellectual fire."¹² Fire thus becomes the medium by which divine intellection shapes the intelligible world into an archetype of the material one.

Chaldean cosmology describes three distinct worlds: the Empyrean (or intelligible), the Ethereal (or astral), and the Material (or sublunar).¹³ In his commentary, Psellus further describes these worlds, even more closely connecting the Chaldean and Neoplatonic thought (*Patrologia Graeca* 122, 1149c). The Empyrean World is more abstract and less material, it is, in fact, the divine sphere of the cosmos (Fr. 33.4). Within this world, Hecate is described as the "shape of light" (Fr. 145.2) and as the "girdling flower of fire" (Fr. 34.4), a phrase analogous to the "flower of mind".¹⁴ This fire is not merely symbolic but represents the descent of noetic forms, described in Fragment 34 as "lightnings" that obscure their flower as they plunge into the "hollows of the Cosmoi"—a metaphor for Hecate's cosmic womb. This symbolism is further developed in Fragments 65 and 66, where fire is described as life-bearing and descending through a "fifth channel" into the material realm. Proclus associates these channels with the World Soul and its function of ensouling the cosmos, as these notions likely represent psychic or noetic currents through which divine fire is transmitted to beings, highlighting once again fire's mediating and generative function in the Chaldean system.¹⁵ Hecate's womb, in this context, functions analogously to the Cosmic Soul of Middle Platonism: she receives the intelligible Ideas and brings them forth into structured, embodied matter. In this way, she regulates the transition from noetic to material reality, not unlike the World Soul's shaping of formless substance into a harmonised cosmos.¹⁶

The “flower of mind” represents the highest faculty of the soul, akin to the fiery essence of the First God, which allows for apprehension and union with the Highest God.¹⁷ In this context, the word “fire” is used alongside “light” to illustrate the processes of theurgy and deification.¹⁸ For example, Fr. 130.6 states that “the flower collects the fiery fruits”, indicating the Empyrean source of the flower of the mind.¹⁹ This flower is prepared for the contemplative perception of the Highest God (Fr. 1). Moreover, the process of divination is described as an “extension of the fiery intellect” (Fr. 128.1), and the “fiery intellect” is synonymous to the “flower/flame of mind” and the “spark of the soul”.²⁰ The illuminated intellect, often referred to as the “flower/flame of mind”, is compared to a flaming torch (Fr. 126.2), corresponding to the flourishing torches or intelligible rays of the Highest God (Fr. 130.4). The soul ascends mystically to the noetic realm through the “empyrean channels” of the sun (Fr. 2.4).

The kindling of the “flower of mind” is poetically described as *πυρίθάλπη ἔννοια* (*pyrithalpē ennoia*), meaning “fire-heated” or “fire-nourished thought” (Fr. 139). This imagery underscores the element of fire as essential to the process of deification. Additionally, the sacred activities of the theurgist are portrayed as “perfecting the works of imperishable fire” (Fr. 66.1). Following the Neoplatonic tradition, the *Chaldean Oracles* exhort the reader to strive towards light (Fr. 151.1).²¹

The *Oracles* present fire not only as a divine element but also as a medium for spiritual transformation and enlightenment. Fire symbolizes the divine presence and the soul’s potential for ascent and union with the divine. The idea of fire as a transcendental reality is reinforced by Proclus’ observation that the First Principle is described as “πῦρ ἐπέκεινα” (“fire beyond”), emphasising its absolute ontological separation from the sensible world. This distinction echoes both the Heraclitean and Stoic conceptions of divine fire; however, it surpasses them by positing a metaphysical fire that acts through, but is not identical with, the demiurgic agent.²² The fire of the *Chaldean Oracles* is thus simultaneously a symbol of divine unity, causality, and unknowability. It serves both as a purifying force and a source of illumination, playing a central role in theurgy and mystical practices. The *Oracles’* rich symbolism of fire reflects its profound significance in the spiritual and cosmological framework of Chaldean thought. The multifaceted symbolism of fire in the *Oracles* reveals its integral role in expressing divinity, facilitating the soul’s ascent, and embodying the transformative power essential for theurgical practices. This intricate and dynamic use of *fire* underscores its central place in the metaphysical and theological landscape of this tradition, but it also highlights the complexity of its meaning in the context of translating. This is one of the major reasons behind the differences between the Latin and the vernacular translations of the *Oracles*.

The Search After Intertextuality: The Word Fire in Queries

Their peculiar style and the unique expressions found in the *Chaldean Oracles*, discussed above, were an argument for their authenticity during the second half of the 17th century. Thomas Stanley (1625–1678) presents the English translation of the Patrizi-edition in this spirit to the public, referring to Pico della Mirandola and Ficino, who regarded the *Oracles* as genuine revelations. As Stanley notes, there is a layer of

more ancient vocabulary under the Hellenistic surface of the text: “Some argue that they are not Chaldaick, because many times accommodated to the Greek Style; But there are in them many so Harsh and Exotick Expressions, as discover them to be Originally forein.”²³ Besides their antiquity, Stanley emphasizes the “divine Excellence” of the *Oracles*,²⁴ regarding them as pagan revelation. His positive statement indeed had some impact. Protestant theologian Jean Le Clerc (1657–1736), reviewing in French the second edition of Stanley’s *History of Philosophy* (1687), with a special attention to ancient Chaldean thought, borrows this idea, even if he speaks of the oriental style of the fragments and not precisely of the “exotic” terms used in a text later rewritten in Greek.²⁵

Stanley’s remark concerning the peculiar expressions still feels valid for the 21st-century readers. These unique terms serve as call-words in queries and can lead to some unexpected results. However, while we originally assumed that Stanley’s English translation partly substituted to Patrizi’s Latin text after 1662, this hypothesis does not seem to hold true. Query tests do not show frequent or extant *verbatim* quotations from the English translation of the *Oracles*. One possible explanation for this is that the interest for them was already relatively scarce during the second half of the 17th century. Another possible explanation is that the smaller intellectual groups still interested in ancient wisdom continued to use Patrizi’s edition.

Several search terms that proved productive, sometimes no longer than two-word syntagms, contain the word *fire*. As has been said in the introduction, *fire* seems to be a word too common to be efficient in queries. However, the word surrounded by certain modifying elements—adjectives, possessive cases, verbal forms, complex images—constitutes useful combinations, since the fire-related imagery permeates the fragments. However, *fire* is not clearly defined in a signifier-signified pairing, and its meaning remains fluctuating. This particularity is at the same time an asset and a difficulty in queries.

As has been discussed above, *fire* does not appear as the natural phenomenon of burning in the source text but as a mystical concept which incorporates several meanings, such as divine nature, creative power, the soul, ascent, the power of the intellect, etc. *Fire* can refer to the beginning of creation, to the power of the creator, or to the soul as an immortal being. Several early modern commentators simply state that the ancient Chaldeans respected fire as God.²⁶ Fire and brightness refer to the immortality given to the soul, and it is stated that fire as intellect existed before the world came to life in its materiality. Adjectives further vary this image: “incorruptible fire” (“imperishable fire” in the modern edition) can be interpreted as divine immutability.

Commentaries sometimes give us a clue as for how to use the search terms. Plethon states that the word *fire* often refers to divine nature in the *Oracles*, while *earth* refers to mortal nature. He explains that God (the Father) did not limit his fire (his own divinity) to himself. Plethon also takes note of the conceptual proximity between fire and the soul: “the Soul procreated by this power of the Father, is a bright fire, that is, a Divine and Intellectual Essence”.²⁷ Plethon explains the “voice of fire” expression as “the most perfect presence”.²⁸ (We will come back to this question.) His commentary in its early modern English translation also provides unique phrases as search terms,

such as the “divine fire void of figure”.²⁹ Psellus’ explanation can also enrich our set of us search terms: “The Soul being an immaterial and incorporeal fire, exempt from all compounds, and from the material Body, is immortal.”³⁰ Supposing that early modern readers consulted as often the commentaries as the *Oracles* themselves, it enlarges the ways of looking for matches and paraphrases.

How to use these syntagms or expressions in actual queries? The word *fire* modified by a single adjective is often too commonplace to be fruitful: among “potent fire”, “life-bringing fire”, “life-giving fire”, “glowing fire”, “incorruptible fire”, and “intellectual fire”, found in the Stanley-translation, only some seem to be specific enough for queries. Uncommon syntagms, such as “the voice of fire”, “the flower of fire”, “cloathing fire with fire”, and the “fiery Bond of Love”, can lead to results. Some of the specific adjectives coupled with *fire* also occur with other nouns, for instance “incorruptible fire” and “incorruptible pattern”, making it possible to further test queries. These syntagms can be tested in exact matches, and—as a control test—as two words appearing close to each other in a passage, without forming a syntagm.

As has been said, we used Early Print Corpus Search to test our hypothesis. Early Print contains over 60.000 documents of early English print culture published before 1700, which provides a four-decade period to examine the impact of Stanley’s translation via the case study of *fire*. A major advantage of Early Print is high OCR-quality and research engine performance (variants, such as “fyre” are also recognized). One of its disadvantages is the limitation to Latin-alphabet keywords because Early Print does not transcribe non-Latin alphabet.³¹

We did not automatically consider results returned in a query as reliable, but we observed the passages in question by a close reading of the surrounding context. If the number of results returned was too high to make a close reading of the paragraphs in question, we combined keywords or limited the query to the works of one author in order to arrive at a manageable number of results. We tried to answer the following questions:

- In case of an identical or almost identical expression to the one from the *Chaldean Oracles*, does the work returned and the passage in question speak about Chaldean philosophy, Zoroaster, the *magi*, or ancient wisdom in general? Our aim was to rule out simple coincidences for expressions as “the flower of fire”, “intellectual fire”, etc. A high number of accidentally identical terms suggests that the syntagm is not specific enough for a query.
- Was the work in which an identical expression is found published before the first edition of Stanley’s translation or after it? If it was published before, could the common source have been Patrizi’s Latin edition of the *Oracles*?
- What is the general contribution of this finding to our knowledge on *prisca sapientia*? Some findings may be irrelevant or testify only to the popularity of ancient wisdom texts. Some citations might have served rhetorical functions, mostly if they occur in forewords and prefaces, and are rather part of a so-called Chaldean-imagery than that of a conceptual reuse.

Let us see some of the lessons of the actual queries. Early Print Corpus Search returns for the expression “the works of incorruptible fire” (*ignis incorruptibilis opera*), found in Stanley’s English translation of the *Oracles*, only Stanley’s own text, which

suggests that the expression, referring to the creator's work, was not borrowed by others, at least in this wording. The syntagm gives us an idea of keyword combination: while the noun "fire" occurs 391.447 times in the Early Print Corpus, and the adjective "incorruptible" 8.498 times, "incorruptible fire" appears only once, in Stanley's text. "Incorruptible" and "fire" within a five-word block appear 27 times in 26 documents but a closer look at these passages shows that the query method must be refined. A query on "immortal", "incorruptible", and "fire" within a ten-word block leads us to a passage by Jacob Böhme, which is not related to the *Chaldean Oracles*, but speaks of "the first Principle, which is immortal, and incorruptible; being the Magicall fire of the soule".³² In this case, we cannot speak of a borrowing from the *Chaldean Oracles*, despite a very similar wording or keyword set. While "first principle, immortal, incorruptible, magical fire of the soul" seem to echo the *Oracles*, similarity of concepts does not equate to filiation here but to vocabulary overlap: Böhme's concept of the magical fire of the soul is defined in a protestant context, without a direct connection to ancient wisdom texts.

A query made with the expression "incorruptible pattern", using the same adjective but not the same noun, returns besides Stanley's own translation Philippe de Mornay's *De la vérité de la religion chrétienne* (1585) in its English translation. Mornay writes in this passage that the Chaldeans had the idea of Trinity, which he illustrates with some passages taken from Proclus' commentary on the *Oracles*. Mornay's interest for *prisca sapientia* was analysed in D. P. Walker's 1954 article.³³ A query with the adjective "incorruptible" coupled with the nouns "fire" and "pattern" has not led us thus to any new findings but permitted us to test the method. Zooming on the passage found, both in French and in English, is thought-provoking.

In chapter VI of his book, entitled *Que l'ancienne Philosophie consent à cette doctrine de la Trinité* ("On that ancient philosophy comprises the doctrine of Trinity"), Mornay translates into French a passage from Proclus on the first intellect creating a second mind. God created before making a diversified world "*un exemplaire incorruptible*" ("an incorruptible copy").³⁴ In the English translation of Mornay's text, we read: "For afore the making of this sundry-shaped world, God had conceived an incorruptible pattern thereof, as a world subject only to mind and understanding."³⁵ By the shift between the two nouns, rendering "*exemplaire*" as "pattern", the 17th-century English translator of Mornay's text reproduced the same expression as Stanley translating Patrizi's Latin text (*mentalem typum incorruptibilem*). Somewhat paradoxically the exact match between these two occurrences of "incorruptible pattern" in two early modern texts is accidental, without direct connection between Mornay and Stanley.

An important result of trying "immaterial and incorporeal fire" as search terms for an exact match is the insight that Henry More refers to Psellus' commentary on the *Oracles* two times, both cases in the definition of the soul. One of these references is found in a work published posthumously.³⁶ Once again, the query brings to the surface an interesting reference, which must be studied more in depth in the future in the larger context of More's opposition to materialism.

A query using the syntagm "intellectual fire" (*ignis mentalis*) returns more results, even though not all the passages bear the influence of ancient wisdom readings. The number of results being 28 hits in 21 documents as an exact match for the syntagm, a

close reading of the related passages is possible. The main lesson of this specific query is the presence of the notion of intellectual fire in the writings of the Cambridge Platonists. Among the 21 documents containing the syntagm Stanley's own work comes first, with five occurrences in the whole text (either in the *History of Chaldaic philosophy* part or in the translation of the *Oracles* joint to the *History*). *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) by Ralph Cudworth contains three occurrences of this term. The term "intellectual fire" appears two times in Blaise de Vigenère's work *A Discovery of fire and salt discovering many secret mysteries* (a translation of Vigenère's *Traité du feu et du sel*, 1649), but only once related to ancient philosophy. Vigenère mentions Zoroaster relatively to the cult of fire and refers to Plutarch concerning "intellectual fire".³⁷ We also find two English translations of Plutarch on the list of the books containing "intellectual fire".³⁸ The syntagm occurs in early modern sermons and in poetry as well, having no direct connection to *prisca sapientia*.

Let us focus now on Ralph Cudworth's work.

But Heraclitus, who is one of those who are said to have affirmed ἐν εἶναι τὸ πᾶν, *that One was All, or that the Universe was but One Thing*; might possibly have taken both those senses together (which will also agree in the Stoical Hypothesis) that All things were both from *One God*, and from *One Fire*; they being both alike Corporeal Theists, who supposed an intellectual Fire, to be the First Principle of All Things.³⁹

Wherefore the Stoicks who professed to acknowledge no other Substance besides Body, and yet nevertheless, had a strong Persuasion of the Existence of a God, or an Eternal Unmade Mind [...] they [the Stoics as opposed to atheist corporealists] asserting an Intellectual Fire, Eternal and Unmade [...]⁴⁰

The Stoical God, not a meer Plastic and Methodical, but an Intellectual Fire.⁴¹

As we see, Cudworth uses the notion of "intellectual fire" relatively to Stoics, who opposed ancient materialists. He stresses that in the eyes of the Stoics, God was intellect and that there was one single origin, that is, "one fire", for everything, which is an idea present as well in the *Oracles*. Cudworth seemingly does not regard this notion as Chaldean but as characteristic of pre-Christian monotheism. Further inquiry into the relationship between *prisca sapientia* and stoicism in Cudworth's philosophy is necessary to enlighten his commentaries.

Cudworth refers to fire more specifically in relation to Chaldean philosophy in another passage, in which he inserts Psellus' commentary. Even if the term "intellectual fire" is not used here, Cudworth connects mind (*mens*) and fire (*ignis*) at a pre-Stoic time.

Nevertheless they carry along with them (as hath been already observed) a clear acknowledgement of a *Divine Monarchy*, or *One Supreme Deity*, the Original of all things; which is called in them *The Father*, and the *Paternal Principle*, and that *Intelligible*, ὃ χροῖ σε νοεῖν νόου ἄνθει, *that cannot be apprehended otherwise than by the Flower of the Mind*;

as also that *One Fire from whence all things spring*; Psellus thus glossing upon that Oracle, *All things were the Off-spring of one Fire*, πάντα τὰ ὄντα τὰ τε νοητὰ καὶ αἰσθητὰ, ἀπὸ θεοῦ τὴν ὑπόστασιν ἔλαβον, καὶ πρὸς μόνον θεὸν ἐπέστραπται, etc. ἄπταιστον οὖν τὸ λόγιον, καὶ πλήρες τοῦ ἡμετέρου δόγματος.⁴²

As we can see, distant reading is at the same time useful and unsatisfying here. It helps us find passages in Cudworth's *True Intellectual System* which connect the notion of fire and that of divine nature. Nonetheless, these passages, dispersed in a long work, if juxtaposed without a further study of his philosophy, can lead to erroneous statements on his interpretation of ancient wisdom. Queries allow to reunite relevant issues, such as the reuse of ancient wisdom terms in commentaries on the Stoics, but once again these points need further elucidation in a larger context.

Besides searching for exact matches of specific syntagms, we can also test queries with complex images. Originally, we assumed that such images would be fruitful for queries, because their reuse was textual evidence. One such image chosen as a representative example, in Stanley's rendering, is "For the Framers of the fiery world is the Mind of the Mind",⁴³ which by its peculiar wording can be an indicator of intertextuality.

However, this hypothesis has not been confirmed so far. While proximity search with several keywords returns some interesting results, queries with complex images containing the word *fire* are somewhat deceptive: seemingly, these images were not cited or borrowed during the four decades after the publication of Stanley's translation.

Let us look at another example. "For the fire once above, shutteth not his power Into Matter by Actions, but by the Mind", we read in the *Chaldean Oracles* in Stanley's rendering.⁴⁴ This image, also referring to the notion of "intellectual fire" or "immaterial fire", proves to be deceptive in distant reading queries: no early modern author seems to have borrowed it *verbatim*, at least in the corpus of Early Print. The image "For the soule being a bright fire, by the power of the Father Remaines Immortall, and is Mistris of Life"⁴⁵ gives a negative result as well: seemingly the sentence was not borrowed word for word or as a close paraphrase. The elements of the image, such as 'bright fire', 'power of the father', or 'mistress of life', if separated, are not specific enough to lead to pertinent findings.

The reason for this inefficiency is an intriguing question that we have to answer at a later point of our project. Why queries on complex images are deceptive? Can another digital corpus than Early Print or a different method, such as latent semantic analysis, lead to borrowings of such images? Had the imagery originating from the *Oracles* become old-fashioned or even outdated by the end of the 17th century? The answer is yet to be given.

The “Voice of Fire”: Thomas Vaughan and Henry More on a Passage of the *Oracles*

One of the most unexpected results of queries with the keyword *fire* is its role in the debate between Thomas Vaughan (1621–1666) and Henry More (1614–1687). As far as we are aware, the More-Vaughan debate is quite underexplored in scholarship, and it is treated as a subsidiary topic in a broader context. Their harsh disagreement can be understood in light of More’s scepticism for what he considered as possible fraud or irrational mysticism in some alchemists.

Vaughan inserts fragments from the *Chaldean Oracles* in his work *Magia adamica* (1650). He points out, as other commentators, that fire means the divine nature in this source:

We know the Sun dose not only dispense heat, but some other secret Influx; so did God also in the Creation, and from him the Sun and all the stars received what they have, for God himself is a supernatural Sun, or fire, according to that Oracle of Zoroaster,

*Factor, Qui per se operans fabrefecit Mundum,
Quaedam ignis Moles erat altera.*⁴⁶

This passage is found at the end of Vaughan’s foreword “To the Reader”, which contains an allegory of the departure of Truth, when Lie takes over her place, and a reflection on human capacity for knowledge. Vaughan evokes both Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster in this respect. He praises earth as an invisible but magical element and ends the foreword by three quotations from Patrizi’s Latin text of the *Oracles* for reinforcing that heat and spirit are the source of the world.

Vaughan’s enthusiasm for the *Oracles* became the target of irony after the publication of his work *Anthroposophia Theomagica Or A Discourse of the Nature of man and his State after death* (1650), published under the pseudonym Eugenius Philalethes. The title page of the book contains two quotations, one from the Bible, namely Daniel 12:4 (“Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased”), and one from the *Chaldean Oracles*, referred to as “Zoroaster in Oracul”, from which Vaughan cites the closing verse, “*Audi ignis vocem*” (“Hear the voice of fire”).⁴⁷

Henry More finds this quotation on the title page a displaced prophetic role, which may account for the tone of his criticism. We do not address the larger context of their debate in the present article but focus on the role of the phrase cited from the *Oracles*. In fact, the image “the voice of fire” becomes a retort here. More portrays Vaughan as conceited and accuses him of witchcraft or of an intellectual conspiracy:

And indeed the very clatter of the title of his Book, *AnthroposophiaTheomagica*, sounds not much unlike some conjuration, or charm, that would either call up, or scare away the Devil. And Zoroaster forsooth, at the bottome of the page, that old reputed Magician. Κλῦθι πυρὸςφωνήν *Audi ignis vocem*. That is in plain English, Hear the voice or noise of fire. Me thinks I smell a Gunpowder-plot.⁴⁸

Vaughan answers to this criticism in the same ironical, even sarcastic style:

But he hath left Eugenius [the author of the book], and falls upon Zoroaster, that old reputed Magician; he is angry with his Title too, and expounds his Oracle, like my Booke. Be pleased to reade what he did write. *Audi Ignis Vocem*. That is in plaine English, heare the Voice, or Noyse of fire. But what (saith he) can this voice of fire be? This is his Question, and I beseech you mark his Answer to it. It signifies (saith this Interpreter) Squibs and Crackers, such as the Cardinals are entertained with at Rome, for it does not meane Carabines and Canons.⁴⁹

Zoroaster's prophetic role seems to be a privilege both in More's and in Vaughan's eyes. The voice of fire, that is, divine voice or revelation, should not be seized by a flesh and blood author. On the one hand, the citation "Hear the voice of fire" seems to be a purely rhetoric element. On the other hand, the role it plays testifies to a real commitment to ancient wisdom, in the sense that adversaries should not claim to own this heritage.

It is evident from the passages which reuse a particular expression with *fire* from the *Oracles*—in diverse contexts or in different roles—that these expressions were common intertextual elements, either in Greek, Latin or English, often known by heart, similarly to the way of citing scriptural verses in theological debates or classical authors in historical ones. They were recognizable as quotations even in an allusive and abbreviated form. As we see from the example above, this rhetorical or discursive usage is a double-edged sword, because it shows at the same time an iconic but ingrained use of the source.

Conclusion

Several notions and expressions perceived by the early modern and modern readers of the *Chaldean Oracles* as peculiar can base distant reading queries on a digital and deeply searchable early modern corpus. However, a first series of queries are rather gleaning knowledge about the *Oracles'* reception than detailed insight to their influence. In the present study, we carried out queries related to the word *fire* with Early Print Corpus Search because of the high quality of the OCR of this corpus and the efficiency of its research engine. Other lexical elements, such as "paternal Mind", "paternal Depth", "fountain of virtue", "nature void of Passion", can base compelling queries in the future. *Fire* as a central search term led us to new findings because it is a key notion in the source, and it is found in syntagms which are often distinctive. It is semantically close to the divine, to God's creative power, to elevation, and reoccurs in this meaning in early modern philosophical debates. Relatively frequent intertextuality shows that this source was still used and referred to in the 17th century.

Distant reading queries on a large corpus, even though they might seem less scholarly than in-depth studies of a small number of texts, can reveal unnoticed details or show us the patterns of the diffusion of key ideas. Besides the idea that Trinity was

known by the ancient Chaldeans, the meaning of fire as divine nature is an often-quoted idea.

Until the mid-17th-century, Patrizi's Latin translation of the *Oracles* was widely used by English authors. Stanley's English translation seems to be, however, rarely quoted *verbatim*, at least in the corpus we used. It suggests either that it did not replace Patrizi's edition or that the publication of the *Oracles* in the vernacular happened at a moment when their influence had already diminished. Stanley's influence was probably via his few readers who mediated his books on the continent. Jean Le Clerc and a renewed French-language interest in Chaldean philosophy during the last decade of the 17th century seem to confirm this hypothesis.

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- ⁴ Hladký, V., “Francesco Patrizi and the Oracles of Zoroaster: The Use of *Chaldean Oracles* in *Nova De Universis Philosophia*”, in ed. Finamore, J. F. – Nejeschleba, T., *Platonism and its Legacy: Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*. (Lydney: Prometheus Trust, 2019), 259–261.
- ⁵ Kovács, E., “Diderot et l'ancienne sagesse: un débat clos ou réouvert dans l'*Encyclopédie*?” [forthcoming]. For the paraphrasis in question see Diderot, D., PERSES, *Philosophie des*, in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (vol. XII, 1765) 424a (Consulted on ENCCRE, at: <https://enccre.academie-sciences.fr/encyclopedie/article/v12-917-2/>, accessed 23 July 2025). The Latin text paraphrasing twelve key ideas from Patrizi's edition of the *Oracles* is an almost literal borrowing from Brucker by Diderot, completed by ironical statements in French about the “oriental verbiage” of the fragments.
- ⁶ Despite the traditional attribution of the text to Julian the Chaldean and his son Julian the Theurgist, the *Oracles* reflect a synthesis of various philosophical and religious traditions, including Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Eastern (particularly Mesopotamian or “Chaldean”) mystical elements. This syncretism is a hallmark of late antiquity, in which Hellenistic culture absorbed and reinterpreted diverse influences. The identity of the authors and the percentage of Near Eastern influence are still debated. See Majercik, R., “Introduction”, in *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary*, trans. R. Majercik (Leiden, New York, Kobenhavn, Köln: Brill, 1989), 11 and Sedley, D., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252. It is important to note that in Late Antiquity and its Byzantine and early modern reception, the term Chaldean did not designate historical Babylonians in a strict ethnographic sense as they are defined by contemporary research, but rather a

symbolic tradition of esoteric knowledge. By the time of Proclus and Psellos, “Chaldean” denoted a spiritual science whose origins were placed in a mythic Orient, distinct from both Greek and Christian traditions. As a result, in Renaissance and early modern thought, the *Chaldaei* were seen as keepers of an ancient *prisca theologia*, and their oracles were received as a daemonic, theurgical wisdom parallel and compatible with Platonic metaphysics. Viglas, K., “Chaldean and Neo-Platonic Theology”, *Philosophia E-Journal of Philosophy and Culture* (2016) 14:171–189. In this article, the term Chaldean—along with related forms—is not intended to denote a direct historical or ethnographic connection to the ancient Mesopotamian civilisation. Rather, it refers specifically to the tradition associated with the *Chaldean Oracles* and with the philosophical, cosmological, and theurgical ideas attributed to them.

⁷ Text cleaning, tokenizing, lemmatizing, etc., have been performed with the Classical Languages Toolkit (CLTK), a multitool for Natural Language Processing of classical and ancient languages of the Eurasia: Johnson, K., Burns, P., Stewart, J., Cook, T., Besnier, C., and Mattingly, W., “The Classical Language Toolkit: An NLP Framework for Pre-Modern Languages”, *Proceedings of the 59th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics and the 11th International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing: System Demonstrations* (2021): 20-29 [Online] Available via <https://aclanthology.org/2021.acl-demo.3/>, cited 28.06.2024. The statistical analysis has been performed using the Pandas module. The script was executed in Python 3.9. The text used was from the Patrizi’s Latin edition, Patrizi, F., *Magia philosophica hoc est Francisci patricii summi philosophi zoroaster. et eius 320. Oracula chaldaica. Asclepii dialogus* (Hamburg: heirs of Jakob Wolff, 1593).

⁸ Quotations in this section come from the modern critical edition of the text. We refer to the number of the fragment according to the Greek edition in Majercik, R., *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden, New York, Kobenhavn, Köln: Brill, 1989).

⁹ Diehl, E., *Procli Diadochi in Platonis Timaeum commentaria, vol. 2* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1904), 57. As Nicola Spanu points out, this passage reveals a metaphysical hierarchy in which the Father, identified as the “First Transcendent Fire”, does not act directly upon the material world but manifests through an intermediary, the Demiurgic Intellect. In this schema, fire becomes both the symbol of the Father’s transcendent power and the mediating force of creation via the intellect. See Spanu, N., *Proclus and the Chaldean Oracles: A Study on Proclean Exegesis, with a Translation and Commentary of Proclus’ Treatise on Chaldean Philosophy* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), 33.

¹⁰ Whether the Chaldeans unequivocally called their highest deity the ‘One’ is debatable. This complex theological question extends beyond the scope of this article. Further insights can be found in Majercik’s commentary. See Majercik, R., (1989), 146.

¹¹ This fragment can be read in parallel with the platonic allegory of the cave and the role of fire in it; Plato, *Res publica* 514a–520a; see Annas, J., *An introduction to Plato’s republic*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 242–271.

¹² Spanu, N., (2021), 37.

¹³ Majercik, R., (1989), 154.

¹⁴ Lewy, H., *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy* (Caire: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1956) 92, note 100; Seng, H., “Demons and Angels in the *Chaldean Oracles*”, in *Neoplatonic*

Demons and Angels, ed. Brisson, O'Neill, S., Andrei, T., (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018), 46–85.

¹⁵ Spanu, N., (2021), 101.

¹⁶ Johnston, S. I., *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*. (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1990), 50–52.

¹⁷ Majercik, R., (1989), 138.

¹⁸ Dodds, E. R., (1965), *Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety: some aspects of religious experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 56.

¹⁹ Proclus, *In Timaeus*, III, 82,12.

²⁰ Majercik, R., (1989), 189.

²¹ Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 11.6.

²² Spanu, N., (2021), 34–35.

²³ Stanley, T., *The Chaldaick Oracles of Zoroaster and his Followers: With the Expositions of Pletho and Psellus* (London: Printed for Thomas Dring, 1662), 3. The fragments being unnumbered in the Stanley-translation of the *Oracles*, we refer to the page in the 1662 edition. It is also noteworthy that there are some shorter interpolations in the English text which are not found in Patrizi's edition, and which seem to have a commenting or clarifying role.

²⁴ Stanley, T., (1662), 4.

²⁵ Le Clerc, J., “The History of Philosophy [...] par Thomas Stanley Equier” [review], in *Bibliothèque universelle et historique*, vol. 7 (Amsterdam: Wolfgang, Waesberge, Boom, van Someren, October 1687), 46. The review by Le Clerc comprises a French summary of longer passages from Stanley.

²⁶ This idea returns in early modern philosophy as late as Berkeley's *Siris*: “It appears too, from the *Chaldean Oracles*, that fire was regarded as Divine by the sages of that nation.” See Berkeley, G., *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar Water* (1744), in *The Works of George Berkeley* (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1837), 430. George Berkeley (1685–1753) born in a later generation than Newton, returns however to ideas regarded as occult by his time.

²⁷ Pletho, “His Exposition of the More Obscure Passages in These Oracles”, in *The Chaldaick Oracles of Zoroaster and his Followers* ed. T., Stanley (London: Printed for Thomas Dring, 1662), 40. Pletho's commentary does not figure in Ruth Majercik's edition of the *Oracles*, we thus cite this text in its 17th-century English translation.

²⁸ Pletho, (1662), 44.

²⁹ Pletho, (1662), 37.

³⁰ Pletho, (1662), 57.

³¹ Early Print – Curating and Exploring Early Printed English, at: <https://earlyprint.org/lab/> (accessed June 2024). As in case of all distant reading methods, results depend on the quality of the scan, the quality of the OCR, and on the query engine, besides the pertinence of the query terms. Early Print Corpus Search function is restricted to Latin alphabet; this method is thus not suitable to find Greek citations in a text in the vernacular.

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- ³⁷ Vigenère, B. de, *A Discovery of Fire and Salt Discovering Many Secret Mysteries* (London: Richard Cotes, 1649), 17.
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- ³⁹ Cudworth, R., *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Printed for Richard Royston, 1678), 386.
- ⁴⁰ Cudworth, R., (1678), 838.
- ⁴¹ Cudworth, R., (1678), table of contents, page unnumbered.
- ⁴² Cudworth, R., (1678), 293.
- ⁴³ Stanley, T., (1662), 29.
- ⁴⁴ Stanley, T., (1662), 29.
- ⁴⁵ Stanley, T., (1662), 31.
- ⁴⁶ Vaughan, T. (pseudonym on the cover: Eugenius Philalethes), *Magia Adamica or the Antiquitie of Magic* (London: Printed by T.W. for H. Blunden, 1650), page unnumbered. The Latin quotation comes from Patrizi's edition of the *Oracles*, but Vaughan omits the word “etenim”. Stanley renders it as “The Maker who Operating by himself framed the World. And there was another Bulk of fire”. Stanley, T., (1662), 32.
- ⁴⁷ Vaughan, T., *Anthroposophia Theomagica* (London: H. Blunden, 1650).
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- ⁴⁹ Vaughan, T., *The Man-Mouse Taken in a Trap, and Tortur'd to Death for Gnawing the Margins of Eugenius Philalethes* (London, 1650), 14.