

## Conference “Mistakes and the study of manuscripts” 2016

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### Types of discrepancy, types of text

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*Mercury, silver, or just the Moon? On some misinterpretations and errors in Byzantine alchemical manuscripts*

**Abstract** – Greek-Byzantine alchemical manuscripts preserve various typologies of texts including among others treatises and recipes. Typical of this literary-scientific production is a large use of symbols standing for elements such as substances, metals and other ingredients used in the different procedures described. The correct de-codification of such system of signs was crucial for every user of Byzantine alchemical manuscripts: lists explaining their meaning were also compiled as aid for the readers. Nevertheless, given the high level of ‘encryption’ of this hidden knowledge, errors are quite common: symbols were both falsely understood and changed with different ones. The analysis of mistakes occurring in different manuscripts can therefore help in understanding the cultural milieu of their producers and users. Starting point of the present investigation will be an alchemical lexicon transmitted in some Byzantine manuscript dating from the 10th to the 15th century. The text has no parallel within the Greek alchemical tradition and it posed many problems to the copyists and users of it, also because of the use of symbolic notation that caused further errors and misunderstandings. Modern editors are also not immune.