

Fellows

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PROJEKTTITEL

Toward a Cultural History of Niter, Johann Rudolf Glauber (1604-70)

PROJEKTBESCHREIBUNG

The German alchemist Johann Rudolph Glauber (1604-70) gave a key role in his physics and metaphysics to niter (saltpeter). Identifying the substance with Christ, the Savior of humankind, Glauber thought that it would bring about a millennial age of German prosperity. Uneaving niter's secrets, Glauber believed, would allow him to synthesize new medicaments to heal the body and fertilizers to enrich the soil. Niter would even help enable the transmutation of base metals into gold, allowing Germany to enrich its coffers more efficiently than mining ever could. Finally, Glauber believed, an armamentarium of his own design, using chemical weapons derived from niter, would allow German Christians to defeat and enslave the Turks on Germany's flank. He imagined the citizens of a Christian city defending their walls from heathen besiegers by raining down upon them hissing showers of acid. The weapons, Glauber argued, were "humane" because rather than killing the invaders they would allow for their incorporation into the community as blinded slaves.

Glauber was no idle speculator. He actually built prototypes of the weapons he proposed. In his laboratory, he also pursued empirical research in an effort to discover the hidden properties of natural

substances. Yet his efforts to understand nature do not have the character of science in the modern sense, and they do not fit neatly into historians' current understanding of seventeenth-century science. A challenge for historical understanding is to come to terms with a frame of thinking within which concrete chemical processes were understood to carry a spectrum of kinds of meaning that today's scientific discourse tends to mask. Thus, for Glauber, the properties of niter were not simply matters of fact but were laden with emotional and spiritual content as well. More than simply reporting how chemical substances behaved, Glauber sought to communicate a sense of wonder and of the numinous. And the progressive revelation of chemical secrets, Glauber believed, must culminate in a new world of chemical apocalypse.

The utopian future was to be won through total warfare-warfare made possible by technologies that Glauber himself had already developed. It would be a warfare aimed not only at defeating the enemy but eliminating him. Such a vision reflected not only Glauber's reaction to the Thirty Years' War but also his experience in the laboratory, where the spectacular powers of fire and strong nitric acid to transmute natural substances encouraged a cosmology in which annihilatory problem-solving was divinely ordained.

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