ISSN 0035–9149 | Volume 75 | Issue 3 | 20 September 2021

NOTES AND RECORDS

THE ROYAL SOCIETY JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

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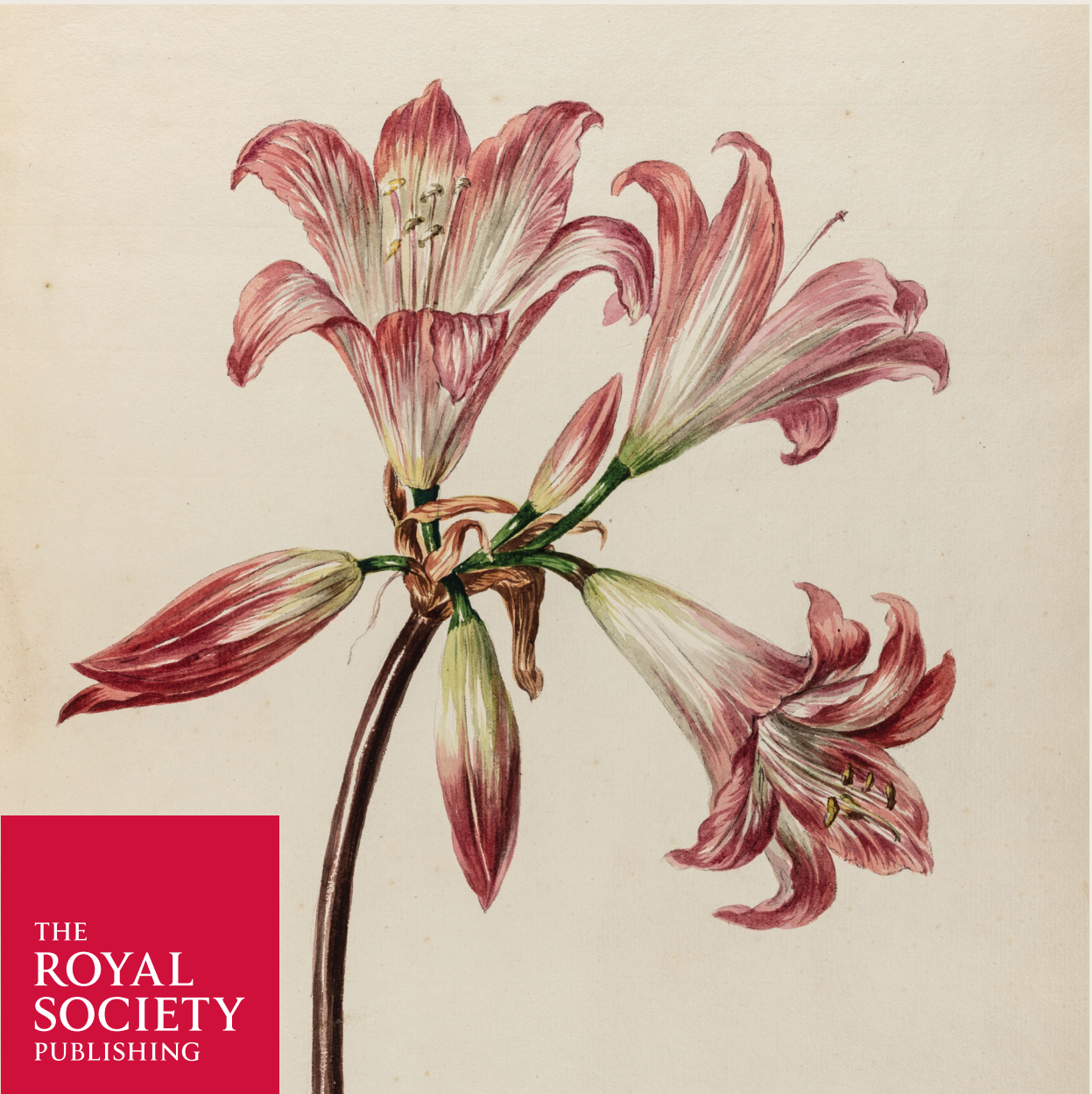

THE ROYAL SOCIETY PUBLISHING

NOTES AND RECORDS

Notes Rec. (2021) **75**, 397–413
doi:10.1098/rsnr.2020.0017
Published online 22 July 2020

EARLY ROBERT GROSSETESTE ON MATTER

by

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This article investigates the origin of Robert Grosseteste's theory of matter. Covering Grosseste's early production, from his *De artibus liberalibus* to *De luce* and the *Commentarius* on Aristotle's *Physics*, his gradual developing of a philosophical theory of matter and prime matter is examined by means of his progressive study of the works of the Aristotelian tradition. Surprisingly, Grosseteste's first notion of matter is bound to alchemy and astrology. It is a physical notion of matter as subject to astral influence and human manipulation. Only with his study of Aristotle's *Physics* does Grosseteste elaborate a more Aristotelian theory of matter, directly engaging himself with the manifold problems of assimilating Aristotle's theories into a Christian-based speculation. As a consequence, a much-refined version of his theory of matter is presented in the commentary on the *Physics* and *De luce*, where prime matter is envisioned as an extensionless point containing in itself the possibility of the existence of the entire universe. Notwithstanding the gradually more philosophical attitude marking Grosseteste's reflection, some tension between the alchemical and metaphysical epistemes of matter he engaged with can be appreciated throughout much of his early production.

Keywords: matter; Grosseteste; metaphysics; alchemy; natural philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Living in the first half of the thirteenth century, Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) is representative of the transition from early medieval Platonism to Scholastic Aristotelianism. Often considered a polymath, his scientific interests covered a wide set of disciplines and problems (from astronomy to the theories of vision and sound), which are often treated with a remarkably mathematical approach. Grosseteste's scientific reflections, however, were gradually accompanied by his interest in philosophy and, later, theology. The mingling of science and philosophy that marks relevant aspects of his early production was famously welcomed by Roger Bacon, who, later in the thirteenth century, would leave

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Paris and its Scholastic method to follow 'the other way', of which he considered Grosseteste to be the initiator.[1]

Grosseteste's scientific and philosophical thought is marked by conspicuous tendencies toward the Aristotelian shift that was initiated one century earlier and which would be completed later in the thirteenth century. In particular, his early reflections are grounded on a pioneering blending of traditional Latin Platonism with new theories that were made available by translations from Greek and Arabic into Latin in the twelfth century.[2] Thus, an examination of Grosseteste's early speculations is directly connected to the questions about the production, circulation and use of the translations made in southern Italy (from Greek) and, especially, in Iberia and Toledo (from Arabic). On the one hand, the gradual shift toward Aristotelianism implied an overall reassessment of philosophical theories of matter at the beginning of the thirteenth century and the de-materialization of the 'primordial matter' of the universe from a material chaos into an extensionless potency.[3] On the other hand, the Greek- and especially Arabic-into-Latin translation movements made available new interpretations of Aristotle's theory of matter (notably those of Avicenna, Ibn Gabirol and, later, Averroes) and, crucially, implanted in Latin Europe new scientific disciplines that were focused on practices of material manipulation, such as alchemy.

This article surveys the development of Grosseteste's theories of matter. Whereas a recent study by Cecilia Panti focused on Grosseteste's theory of matter as presented in his later works, this article analyses the development of his early thought on the related notions of matter and prime matter.[4] The philosophical coordinates of Grosseteste's first engagement with the problem of matter are rather different from his later thought, in consideration of both his aims and the sources used. Specifically, through my examination of the origin of his theory of matter, I want to address a central question: how did Robert Grosseteste interact with the diverse considerations of matter as an epistemic object provided by different disciplines and traditions in his attempt to construct a unitary theory of matter?

This question is very important in consideration of the gradual absorption of medieval sciences within the Aristotelian philosophical framework, which would become their shared paradigm later in the Middle Ages. In the case of matter, the epistemes adopted and

1 On Roger Bacon's consideration of Oxford and Paris, see Jeremiah Hackett, 'From *Sapientes antiqui* at Lincoln to the new *Sapientes moderni* at Paris, ca. 1260–1280: Roger Bacon's two circles of scholars', in *Robert Grosseteste and the pursuit of religious and scientific learning in the Middle Ages* (ed. J. Cunningham and M. Hocknull), pp. 119–142 (Springer, Berlin, 2016). Bacon's narrative tends to characterize Grosseteste in opposition to the university masters, especially those working in Paris. For instance, see Roger Bacon, *Compendium of the study of philosophy* (ed. T. S. Maloney), pp. 74 and 81 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

2 On how those new texts reshaped the Latin framework of both philosophy and science, see Charles Burnett, 'Arabic into Latin: the reception of Arabic philosophy into western Europe', in *The Cambridge companion to Arabic philosophy* (ed. P. Adamson and R. C. Taylor), pp. 370–404 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005); and Charles Burnett, 'Translations and transmission of Greek and Islamic science to Latin Christendom', in *Cambridge history of science* (ed. D. C. Lindberg and M. H. Shanks), vol. 2, pp. 341–364 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013).

3 In the twelfth century, the problem of how to interpret Plato's theory of primordial chaos expounded in the *Timaeus* gave rise to some controversy, for instance between Hugh of St Victor and William of Conches and, later, Gundissalinus. On the former, see Dominique Poirel, 'Physique et théologie: une querelle entre Guillaume de Conches et Hugues de Saint-Victor à propos du chaos originel', in *Guillaume de Conches: philosophie et science au XII siècle* (ed. B. Obrist and I. Caiazzo), pp. 289–327 (International Society for the Study of Medieval Latin Culture (SISMEL), Florence, 2011). It is worth pointing out how these controversies on the nature of primordial chaos and matter witness the gradual shift toward a more Aristotelian consideration of primordial matter as prime matter.

4 See Cecilia Panti, 'Matter and infinity in Robert Grosseteste's *De luce* and *Notes on the Physics*', in *Materia: nouvelles perspectives de recherche dans la pensée et la culture médiévales (XIIe–XVIe siècles)* (ed. T. Suarez-Nani and A. Paravicini Bagliani), pp. 27–55 (SISMEL, Florence, 2017).