

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CORPUS HERMETICUM

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Environmentalist and Hermetic scholar and practitioner John Michael Greer presents the context of the Renaissance rediscovery of the [Corpus Hermeticum](#), as well as its contents and the significant role it played in the struggle for freedom of thought and mystical practice.



The fifteen tractates of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, along with the *Perfect Sermon* or *Asclepius*, are the textual foundation of the Hermetic Tradition. Written by unknown authors in Egypt sometime before the end of the third century CE, they were part of a once substantial literature attributed to the mythic figure of Hermes Trismegistus, a Hellenistic fusion of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. This literature came out of the same religious and philosophical ferment that produced Neoplatonism, Christianity, and the diverse collection of teachings usually lumped together under the label *Gnosticism*—a ferment which had its roots in the impact of Platonic thought on the older traditions of the Hellenized East. There are obvious connections and common themes linking each of these traditions, although each had its own answer to the major questions of the time.

The treatises we now call the *Corpus Hermeticum* were collected into a single volume in Byzantine times, and a copy of this volume survived to come into the hands of Lorenzo de' Medici's agents in the fifteenth century. Marsilio Ficino, the head of the Florentine Academy, was pulled off

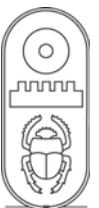


Johann Theodore de Bry, *Hermes Trismegistus* (ca. 1616) in Jean-Jacques Boissard, *De divination et magicis praestigis*. Louisa Scoggins, SRC.

the task of translating the dialogues of Plato in order to translate the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin first. His translation was printed in 1463, and was reprinted at least twenty-two times over the next century and a half.

The Contents of the Corpus Hermeticum

The treatises divide up into several groups. The first (chap. 1), the *Poimandres*, is the account of a revelation given to Hermes Trismegistus by the being Poimandres, an expression of the universal Mind. The next eight (chap. 2–9), the *General Sermons*, are short dialogues or lectures discussing various basic points of Hermetic philosophy. There follows the *Key* (chap. 10), a summary of the General Sermons, and after this a set of four tractates: *Mind unto Hermes*, *About the Common Mind*, *The Secret Sermon on the Mountain*, and the *Letter of Hermes to Asclepius* (chap. 11–14), touching on the



more mystical aspects of Hermeticism. The collection is rounded off by the *Definitions of Asclepius unto King Ammon* (chap. 15), which may be composed of three fragments of longer works.

The Significance of the Hermetic Writings

The *Corpus Hermeticum* landed like a well-aimed bomb amid the philosophical systems of late medieval Europe. Quotations from the Hermetic literature by the early Christian writers (who were never shy of leaning on pagan sources to prove a point) accepted a traditional chronology which dated “Hermes Trismegistus” as an historical figure to the time of Moses. As a result, the Hermetic tractates’ borrowings from Jewish scripture and Platonic philosophy were seen, in the Renaissance, as evidence that the *Corpus Hermeticum* had anticipated and influenced both. The Hermetic philosophy was seen as a primordial wisdom tradition, identified with the “Wisdom of the Egyptians” mentioned in *Exodus* and lauded in Platonic dialogues such as the *Timaeus*. It therefore served as a useful club in the hands of intellectual rebels who sought to break the stranglehold of Aristotelian scholasticism on the universities at this time.

It also provided one of the most important weapons to another major



Giovanni de Maestro Stephano, *Hermes Trismegistus* (1488). Inlaid floor panel in the Cathedral of Siena, Italy.



Zadith Senior, *Hermes with Alchemical Symbols, Points the Way to Pierce Illusion* (ca. 1560), in *De Chemia Senioris*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

rebellion of the age, the attempt to re-establish magic as a socially acceptable spiritual path in the Christian West. Another body of literature attributed to Hermes Trismegistus was made up of astrological, alchemical, and magical texts. If, as the scholars of the Renaissance believed, Hermes was an historical person who had written all these things, and if early Christian writers had quoted his philosophical works with approval, and if those same works could be shown to be wholly in keeping with some definitions of Christianity, then the whole structure of magical Hermeticism could be given a second-hand legitimacy in a Christian context.

Of course, this didn't work, and the radical redefinition of Western Christianity that took place in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, hardened doctrinal barriers to the point that people were being burned in the sixteenth century for practices that were considered evidence of devoutness as recently as the fourteenth century. The attempt, though, made the language and concepts of the Hermetic tractates central to much of post-medieval magic in the West.