

# HERMETICISM AND THE PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS

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**A**s we have seen, Thoth traveled from Egypt to the Hellenic world. The Hermetic sciences—magic, alchemy, and astrology—flourished in the gardens of Alexandria. This heritage was then enriched in the sixth century by the Arabs, who added their own observations. Then Hermes Trismegistus traveled toward the Christian West, with Spain, and later Italy, sheltering and developing Hermes' ancient knowledge. The climax of this journey was marked by the end of the ancient world in 1453, as the Roman Empire finally fell, and its heritage came west again.



The capture of Constantinople in 1453 allowed Greek culture—in particular the works of Plato, who was only known from various extracts—to penetrate Italy. Cosimo di Medici, the ruler of Florence, was aware of the importance of this event, and so he created the Platonic Academy of Florence and requested that Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) translate Plato. An indefatigable traveler, Ficino would provide the West with its first translation of Plato, as well as translations of Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblicus, and Dionysius the Areopagite. Soon afterwards, an important development took place. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, often mentioned in the Middle Ages, had disappeared and the *Asclepius* was the only text still extant. Then, in 1460, a monk in the service of the Medicis obtained a manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Cosimo I considered the document to be so important that he asked Marsilio Ficino to

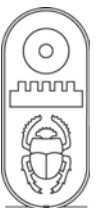
interrupt his translation of Plato so as to work on the newly discovered material. Shortly thereafter, in 1471, Ficino published the first translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This edition garnered such a widespread readership that it would be reprinted sixteen times until the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

## Philosophia Perennis

Marsilio Ficino was convinced that the original text of the *Corpus Hermeticum* had been written in Egyptian. Hermes Trismegistus was also described as an Egyptian priest who had originated and transmitted all of the secret wisdom. Marsilio Ficino, in his *Theologia Platonica*, published in 1482,



Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of a Musician* (1490). Leonardo is thought to have painted at least the face and hands. The identity of the subject is unknown, however many take this to be Marsilio Ficino. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.





Angelo Bronzino, *Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici* (1545). Collection of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Image from the Yorck Project / Wikimedia Commons.

devised a family tree of philosophers to whom this knowledge had descended from Hermes: Zoroaster, Orpheus, Aglaopheme, Pythagoras, Plato.<sup>2</sup> This vision gave birth to a new concept, that of the *Primordial Tradition*, a primal revelation that was perpetuated from age to age, from initiate to initiate. This concept, previously endorsed by St. Augustine, experienced a renewal due to Ficino. It was formalized in 1540 by Agostino Steuco (1496–1549), in his concept of *Philosophia Perennis*—the eternal philosophy.

It is quite understandable that this concept of eternal philosophy would find such a favorable reception in Florence. It was claimed that after the Flood, Noah had established twelve cities in Etruria (i.e., Tuscany), and a legend even claimed that his body was buried near Rome. From this arose the notion that the Tuscan dialect had its source in Etruscan, and was thus older and thus superior to Latin.<sup>3</sup> Little effort was needed to connect Florence with the very sources of civilization—and even to the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*—seeing that Hermes Trismegistus was claimed to be a contemporary of Noah. These ideas, debated fiercely within the Academy of Florence,

were particularly cherished by Cosimo de Medici, who felt they provided proof of the superiority of Florence and Tuscany over the rest of Italy.

### Natural Magic

Although the *Corpus Hermeticum* mentioned the secret knowledge of the Egyptians, it was rather imprecise concerning its implementation. In treatise thirteen of the *Corpus*, Hermes Trismegistus taught his son Tat the principles of mystical regeneration which could be obtained by suppressing the senses, in negating the ill-omened influences of the stars, and allowing the Divinity to be born in us.<sup>4</sup> Marsilio Ficino was not only a priest but a physician; and thus, he had a sense of the concrete. He sought the application of these theories in Neoplatonism—primarily in the *Picatrix*, the works of abu-Ma'shar, and in the writings of his compatriot Peter of Abano (ca. 1250–1316), who had studied Arab magic.

Ficino arrived at a “natural magic” which linked these theories with the Christian concept of the Creator’s Word. His natural magic achieved considerable refinement. He made use of the sympathies—such



Olga Deulofeu, SRC, *Orpheus*. Ficino intuited the connections between the Orphic and Hermetic paths.



Title page of the *Fama Fraternitatis*, the first Rosicrucian Manifesto (1614). From the Rosicrucian Archives.

as the planetary characters inscribed in all the elements, minerals, plants, as well as perfumes, wines, poetry, and music (Orphic hymns) to capture the *spiritus mundi*,<sup>5</sup> the subtle energies of Creation. Marsilio Ficino is a prominent figure in the history of Western esotericism, not only for his role as translator and commentator on the ancient texts, but also for such works as *De Triplici Vita*, which exerted great influence. As Antoine Faivre has remarked, thanks to Ficino “esotericism formed itself into a philosophy until being made an integral part of the thought of the Renaissance.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Egyptian Heritage in Question

Another aspect, which passed unnoticed at this time, would soon bring into question the matter of the “Egyptian heritage.” In 1614, Isaac Casaubon wrote *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI*, a work in which he demonstrated that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not of Egyptian origin and that it was written not by Hermes Trismegistus, but by

Christians from around the second century. This revelation put a halt to Hermeticism in the Renaissance. Nevertheless, even though it severely weakened the esoteric tradition elaborated upon in the Renaissance, it did not obliterate the fact that there was in effect a transmission of knowledge to the West coming from a remote past, of an “Orient of Light” in which Egypt may be considered the center of attraction.

In any case, it may be said that the foundation of what constituted the edifice of Western esotericism—alchemy, astrology, magic, Kabbalah, science of numbers, and divination—was established in the Renaissance. Thus it is astonishing to note that Casaubon’s discovery coincided with a reorganization, a refoundation of Western esotericism marked by the publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos in 1614. Christian Rosenkreuz was to replace Hermes Trismegistus and Egypt was to leave the scene, but it would eventually return, as we shall see later.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Regarding Marsilio Ficino, see Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficin* (1433–1499) (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> He sometimes gives a different hierarchy in which Moses either preceded or followed Hermes.

<sup>3</sup> Alfredo Perifano, *L’Alchimie à cour de Côme 1er de Médicis, savoirs, culture et politique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), 144–150.

<sup>4</sup> André-Jean Festugière, trans. *Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1983), 2: 200–207.

<sup>5</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 62–83; and Daniel-Pickering Walker, *La Magie spirituelle et angélique de Ficin à Campanella* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988). English edition: *Spiritual and Demonic Magic From Ficino to Campanella* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> *Accès de l’esotérisme occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 128. English edition: *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

