

ROSI CRUCIAN
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HERMETISM

Each issue of the *Rosicrucian Digest* provides members and all interested readers with a compendium of materials regarding the ongoing flow of the Rosicrucian Timeline. The articles, historical excerpts, art, and literature included in this *Digest* span the ages, and are not only interesting in themselves, but also seek to provide a lasting reference shelf to stimulate continuing study of all of those factors which make up Rosicrucian history and thought. Therefore, we present classical background, historical development, and modern reflections on each of our subjects, using the many forms of primary sources, reflective commentaries, the arts, creative fiction, and poetry.



This magazine is dedicated to all the women and men throughout the ages who have contributed to and perpetuated the wisdom of the Rosicrucian, Western esoteric, Tradition.



May we ever be worthy of the light with which we have been entrusted.



In this issue, we explore the tradition associated with Hermes Trismegistus—from the wisdom of Thoth in ancient Egypt, through Renaissance Hermeticism, to alchemy, and modern mysticism. One of the most influential and pervasive mystical traditions, the Hermetic path is founded on the essential unity of all things, “As above, so below.” Its practitioners strive for the practical means to achieve reunion with the source of all Being.

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HERMETISM AND HERMETICISM: AN INTRODUCTION

Staff of the Rosicrucian Digest

In this issue of the Rosicrucian Digest, we explore one of the most popular and enduring mystical philosophies on Earth—the tradition attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.



Around the ancient Mediterranean, the antiquity of Egyptian society was well known, and Egypt was widely considered the font of learning and wisdom. As the *Corpus Hermeticum* puts it,

Do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is the image of the Heaven; or, what is truer still, the transference, or the descent, of all that were governed or moved in Heaven? And if more truly still it must be said—this land of ours is Shrine of all the World.¹

Out of the most ancient past of Egypt comes the figure of Thoth—Djehuty—who is variously described as the heart and tongue of Re, the god of magic, inventor of writing, the Divine arbiter, sustainer of the world, and later associated with the Logos and the Mind of the Divinity in Platonism.²

When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE, the ensuing fusion of Hellenistic and Egyptian thought produced a rich and creative culture, through which the wisdom of ancient Egypt would eventually be transmitted throughout the world. In the typical mode of ancient religion, conquerors did not seek to obliterate the native spirituality and local people sought to find parallels between their deities and those of the new people. In this way, Thoth became assimilated to the Greek Hermes. By the second century BCE, Thoth's epithets were already being applied to Hermes, and in the second century CE, we begin to see the now familiar title Trismegistus—that is, “thrice great”—paired with Hermes' name, clearly coming from Egyptian references to Thoth.³

By the second century CE, literature attributed to Hermes Trismegistus circulated around the ancient Mediterranean, in two basic genres. There were sublime philosophical and mystical treatises, and also collections of technical writings on everything from magic to the interpretations of various natural phenomena. Astrological



David Roberts, *Temple of Hermes at Dakkeh in Ethiopia* (1838), in *Egypt and Nubia*. Dakka was the stronghold of Ethiopian magic. Hermes Trismegistus was worshipped here, and many Greek ex-votos are inscribed to him on the propylon and other parts of the temple. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



Athanasius Kircher, Title Page of *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (1646). Hermes Trismegistus is the source of the Light. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

and alchemical treatises began to emerge as well. As Garth Fowden has demonstrated in his seminal work *The Egyptian Hermes*, these two genres formed part of a consistent Hermetic progression from below to above.⁴

Each Egyptian Temple has its accompanying *Per Ankh*—House of Life—where the Mysteries were handed from initiates to candidates. These had been united in the Eighteenth Dynasty during the reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III under the Vizier Hapuseneb, an event recognized by Rosicrucians as pivotal to the transmission of the Primordial Tradition which manifests today in AMORC.⁵

Ancient sources believed that the Hermetic materials were a Hellenized manifestation of the traditions taught in the Houses of Life. Clement of Alexandria (ca.150–215 CE) reports seeing a procession of the “forty-two books of Hermes” in the first decade of the third century CE.⁶

Indeed, the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself alludes to the Egyptian origins of its materials, even in a text that has come down to us in Greek:

This discourse, expressed in our ancestral language keeps clear the meaning of its words. The very quality of the speech and the sound of Egyptian words have in themselves the energy of the objects they speak of.⁷

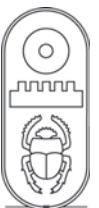
Several of the articles in this issue tell the story of how these Hermetic works made their way from the ancient world, through the Middle East, to the Roman Empire’s capital of Constantinople, as well as through the Islamic world, to the Italian Renaissance, and finally to the modern day. To distinguish these movements, the term “Hermeticism” usually refers to the practices of the Hermetic path in the ancient world before the Renaissance, while “Hermeticism” refers to Renaissance and modern Hermetic work.

For most of this time, Hermes Trismegistus was accepted by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars as an ancient prophet, and the writings attributed to him were afforded considerable respect. Then the Swiss Classicist Isaac Casaubon(1559–1614) demonstrated that the language of the *Corpus Hermeticum* had to have come from the second–third centuries CE. For many, this appeared to sever the connection with ancient Egypt.

Nevertheless, as we will see, the Hermetic Tradition continued to inspire mystics, and indeed, modern scholarship has returned to



Stele of Iry and Meru (First Intermediate Period, ca. 2192–2066 BCE). For Ancient Egyptians, writing or pronouncing the name of something in Egyptian brought that reality into manifestation such as in this family stele. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.



the affirmation that the Hermetic Tradition is indeed a reflection of the Primordial Tradition in Egypt, filtered through the Hellenistic and Coptic cultures.⁸

Let us then proceed on the path of Hermes, following the advice of the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

“But tell me again,” I asked, “how shall I advance to life, O my mind?”

For the Deity says, ‘Let those who are mindful recognize themselves.’ All people have mind, do they not?”

“I myself, the mind, am present to the blessed and good and pure and merciful—to the reverent—and my presence becomes a help; they quickly recognize everything.”⁹



The light of ancient Egypt continued to be transmitted through the Hermetic writings. From the Rosicrucian archives.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Asclepius* 24:1. Adapted from G. R. S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906), 2:351. www.sacred-texts.com/gno/th2/th245.htm

² E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* (London: Methuen and Co., 1904), 400–415.

³ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 26–27, 162, 216–217.

⁴ See the discussion throughout Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*.

⁵ Steven Armstrong, “Hidden Harmonies: Rediscovering the Egyptian Foundations of the Rosicrucian Path,” *Rosicrucian Digest* 85 No. 1:47–50

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata (Miscellanies)*, 6:4:35–37. www.sacred-texts.com/chr/lecf/002/0020394.htm.

⁷ “Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon” (*Corpus Hermeticum* 16), 1. Adapted from Brian P. Copenhaver, ed. and trans., *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 58.

⁸ Jeremy Naydler in *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005), 363n9 provides several examples of modern scholarship supporting the genuine Egyptian origins of the

materials in the Hermetica: Brian P. Copenhaver, ed. *Hermetica*, xlv–lix; E. Daumas, “Le fonds égyptien de l’hermétisme,” in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique*, ed. J. Ries (Louvain-la-Neuve, France: 1982), 1–23; P. Derchain, “L’authenticité de l’inspiration égyptienne dans le Corpus Hermeticum,” in *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 61 (1962): 175–98; E. Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press), 1984; Peter Kingsley, “Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica,” in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 56 (1993): 3–25; J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en haute-Egypte* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1978–82); B. H. Stricker, *De Brief van Aristeas* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitg. Mij., 1956). See also R. Jasnow and Karl-Th. Zausich, “A Book of Thoth?” (paper given at the 7th International Congress of Egyptologists, Cambridge, 3–9 September 1995); Sir William Flinders Petrie, “Historical References in the Hermetic writings,” in *Transactions of the Third International Congress of the History of Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 1:196–225, and *Personal Religion in Egypt before Christianity* (New York: Harpers, 1909), 85–91.

⁹ “Poimandres” (*Corpus Hermeticum* 1), 21–22. Adapted from Brian P. Copenhaver, ed. and trans., *Hermetica*, 5.

THE HERMETIC TRADITION

Joscelyn Godwin, Ph.D.

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Theosophical Publishing House www.questbooks.net.

Leading esoteric scholar Joscelyn Godwin traces the outlines of the Hermetic Tradition from Thoth to Hermes Trismegistus, and its essential teachings. He demonstrates how the unique character of the tradition has enabled it to influence much of the Western world and its many paths.



The idea of a primordial wisdom leading directly from the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus to the Greek Orpheus had more than a grain of truth in it. Even though the Egypt of classical times was far past its zenith, its temple traditions attracted aspirants of the caliber of Pythagoras and Plato, who made the journey to gain its initiations and incorporate them into their own philosophies. At the level of popular religion, the Egyptian cults entered the classical world in the fourth century B.C. with Alexander the Great's conquests. Alexander himself was pictured with the ram-horns of the Theban god Amon. To Rome went the goddess Isis, whose cult became one of the most splendid of the imperial era. In Alexandria and other Greek-speaking centers, a new god, Serapis, arose as a friendly rival to Zeus. Ibis-headed Thoth reappeared under the turban of Mercurius Trismegistus, Thrice-Greatest Hermes.

In polytheism, each god or goddess has a particular function. Each is an aspect of the unknowable One, and doubtless they all point to the same goal, but each appeals to a different psychospiritual type. Thoth, in Egyptian mythology, was the first giver of

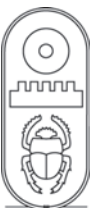
useful knowledge to mankind. A god who relates to mankind by giving knowledge is far different from a suffering savior god like Osiris or Jesus, or a loving mother goddess like Isis or the Virgin Mary, and will attract a different type of devotee. The way that leads through knowledge is, on the whole, an esoteric path, as opposed to the exoteric one of devotional religion. This knowledge, which is the goal of true philosophy, has a dual purpose. First, it teaches techniques and practices for overcoming human limitations, such as the trauma of death. Second, it studies the cosmic order and seeks to work within it. Wherever these two purposes meet, we have a form of Hermetism.

Characteristics of Thoth

In Egyptian myth, Thoth is described variously as the spirit and intelligence of



Olga Deulofeu, SRC, *Thoth*.





Seated Baboon representing Thoth. (Saite Period, ca. 664–525 BCE.) The Baboon is seated in the position of a scribe, and therefore is associated with Thoth (Djehuti). The base of the figure may have been used to dispense incense, making this a practical temple tool. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

the Creator; god of learning and of healing; judge of celestial disputes and secretary of the gods; weigher of the souls of the dead. It was he who uttered the words that reunited the severed members of Osiris after the latter's murder by Set. Thoth invented numbers; he measured time and created the calendar. At his most abstract, he was a god of transitions: from chaos to cosmos, strife to friendship, death to rebirth, causes to effects. More concretely, he was seen by the people as a god of magic spells and astrology, folk medicine, and the lore of plants and minerals.

All of these qualities followed Thoth as the Alexandrian Greeks adopted him,¹ finding the nearest equivalent in their own pantheon as Hermes. The Greek god Hermes had also been a god of transitions: a marker of boundaries, guide of souls to Hades, messenger between Olympus and earth, patron of merchants and thieves. When his name was given to Thoth, with the epithet Trismegistus, he moved up the

social scale, becoming a philosopher-king. Thus he recreated for the Hellenistic age the memory of those divine men, or incarnate gods, who are said to have been the first teachers and lawgivers of the human race. There are echoes of them in every land: in India as Rama, Krishna, and Manu; in Persia as Zoroaster; in China as Fo-Hi; in the Americas as Quetzalcoatl and Viracocha; in Greece as Dionysus and Orpheus, in Ireland as the Tuatha Dé Danann; and in Northern Europe as Odin.

Gradually Hermes Trismegistus acquired a body of scripture of his own, now known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*.² Generally dated to between the first and third centuries A.D., it is a collection of doctrinal and inspirational writings by several authors, playing variations around a few great themes: the absolute goodness of God, who is both One and All; the self-revelation of the Divine Mind in the cosmos; the universe as an emanation of living beings in hierarchical order; the unique constitution of the human being as microcosm; the way to regeneration and the direct knowledge of God. The Hermetic scriptures restated these themes for the



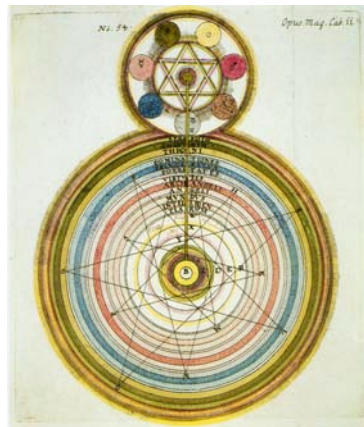
Hermes and Herse (ca. 470 BCE). Attic red-figure amphora. From the collection of the National Archaeological Museum of Spain. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.

benefit of cosmopolitan Greek-speakers living under the Roman Empire.

Master and Revealer of Esoteric Sciences

Just as Thoth had a popular side, so Hermes became a master of the occult sciences, a revealer of astrological medicine and of the sympathetic magic by which one draws down influences from the heavens and fixes them in talismans. An example occurs in the Latin Hermetic text *Asclepius*, in the description of how the Egyptians infused gods into statues: an idea that both fascinated and scared Christian writers.³ Last but not least, Hermes's natural philosophy and secret knowledge joined to make him the father of alchemy, the Egyptian art of transmutation. It is no chance that alchemy accords such a vital role to Mercury, both as the most mysterious of the known metals and as a symbol of the elusive faculty of the soul that mediates between matter and spirit. The transmutation in question could be understood chemically, as turning base metals into gold, but also in terms of inner transformations within the human being (see chapter 13 [of *The Golden Thread* —Ed]).

Another mythic image for the latter process occurs in the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, "Poimandres."⁴ It is the description of the ascent of the soul after death, and the surrendering of its energies to the successive spheres of the seven planets. (The cosmos is assumed to be geocentric, with the earth at the center surrounded, like the layers of an onion, by the spheres of the moon, planets, sun, and stars.) When the soul has given up all its downward tendencies, it can soar up through the eighth sphere (the fixed stars) and join the company of the Blessed. This is a cosmic version of the ordeal described in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (or *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*), where the soul must traverse the several halls of the Otherworld and be weighed against a feather, before it can enter the paradise of Osiris.⁵



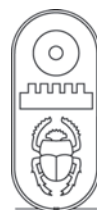
Georg von Welling, *The Circles of the Cosmos* (1735) in *Opus Mago-cabbalisticum Et Theosophicum*. From the Rosicrucian archives.

The Doctrine of Correspondences

The philosophic side of Hermetism is based on the doctrine of correspondences. In the Hermetic ascent, each planet corresponds to a certain power of the soul: Mercury to the intelligence, Venus to desire, Mars to anger, etc. The human being is thus a microcosm, containing in little the same energies as the macrocosm. If we picture earth at the center of the universe, the soul has acquired these energies on its downward (or inward) journey from the celestial regions through the planetary spheres. It emerges into earth life via the womb, full of potentials and tendencies that are delineated by its natal horoscope. Through life it works with these potentials, hopefully refining them so that they emerge as virtues. If this is accomplished, the soul when it leaves the body at death is light and unencumbered, and well able to rise upward (or outward) to the place of its origin. If instead the energies have coagulated in vices, then the upward journey will be difficult and the soul may even remain trapped in the earth's atmosphere, a torment to itself and a bane to its fellows.

Hermetism in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity

After the Roman Empire, Hermetism, or the religious philosophy that gave rise to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, expanded to include



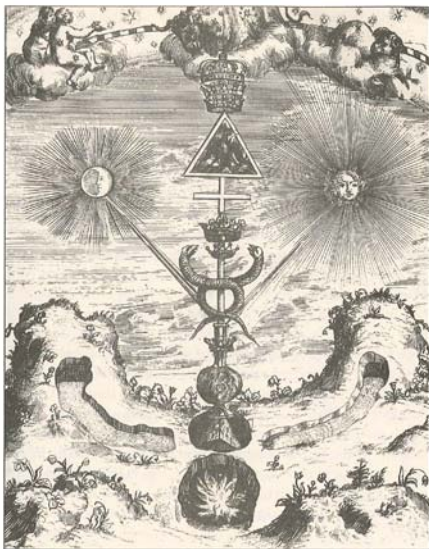
alchemy and the occult sciences (divination, astrology, magic, etc.). All three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) found a place for it, though sometimes a grudging one. It entered Islam thanks to the Sabaeans of Harran, the center of an ancient copper industry now in Turkey near the Syrian border. The Sabaeans, who receive favorable mention in the Qur'an, blended star worship with Neopythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, and practical alchemy.⁶ Their patron divinities were Hermes and Agathodaimon, who were made respectable as the Muslim prophets Idris (the Enoch of the Bible) and Adam's son Seth. For a century or more Harran was also the home of a school of translators who specialized in Greek mathematics and astronomy, thus transmitting much of the Pythagorean tradition to the Muslim world. Their work was taken over in the tenth century by the Brethren of Purity of Basra (Iraq), who compiled an encyclopedia of all the arts and sciences, including theurgy and magic. This was studied by the Druses, by the sect of the Assassins, and by most Sufi schools, in which it is still read today. In this way, Hermetism has passed into the very heart of Islamic esotericism.

In Judaism, the Hermetic influences emerged in the Kabbalah. The short and fundamental Kabbalistic text *Sepher Yezirah*⁷ (the "Book of Creation," ca. third century A.D.) expounds a cosmology based on the doctrine of correspondences, notably the sevenfold one of the planets, days of the week, openings in the head and body, etc., and the twelve-fold one of the zodiac, directions of space, months, organs of the body, etc. It describes a cosmos not torn between good and evil, but held in polarity by positive and negative energies. The method of salvation is through becoming aware of oneself as a microcosm, seating the "King on his Throne" (the divine presence) in the center of life. Again we have a doctrine that is affirmative of nature and the body, and dedicated to the realization of the macrocosm in the microcosm. The esoteric idea of Israel is also a Hermetic one: it is that the Jews are called upon to bear witness to the divine order on earth. Just as in Hermetism the earth, including the human body, is replete with celestial influences, so the Jewish way of life is designed to ensure that every action carries a spiritual significance.

In the West, the only Hermetic treatise known through the Middle Ages was the *Asclepius*, which was viewed with some mistrust as a magical text. Only in 1460 did the greater part of the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrive in Florence; one of Cosimo de' Medici's scouts had discovered a manuscript in Macedonia. Three years later, Marsilio Ficino presented his translation to the aged Cosimo, and for the next century and a half the Hermetic writings had a marked effect on the intellectual world. The idea that God had spoken not only to the Jews but to the pagans led, in select circles, to the renewal of a universal religious sense, such as had last existed under the Roman Empire. In the Renaissance era, the Hermetic philosophy served as neutral ground for Protestants and Catholics alike. Alchemy and the other occult



Stefan Michel Spacher, *The Cave of the Ancients* (1616), in *Cabala: Spiegel der Kunst und Natur in Alchymia*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



Limojon de Saint-Didier, *Hermetic Cadeuceus and the Seven Steps* (1689) in *Le Triomphe Hermetique*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

sciences to which it provided the intellectual under-pinning flourished as never before.

Because it is essentially a cosmological and practical teaching, rather than a theology, Hermetism can coexist with any religion. It offers an analysis of the human condition within the cosmos, and a variety of methods for making the best use of this condition. Its historical record is innocent of intolerance and bloodshed, its way of life one of science, contemplation, and self-refinement. For these reasons, the Hermetic territory is an ideal meeting place for Christians, Jews, Muslims, and those of other religions or none. John Michell writes of how the Hermetic science of sacred geometry, which he demonstrates as underlying the city of Jerusalem, might potentially unite “Jews to the east, Muslims to the south, Christians to the west and, in the direction of the north pole, followers of that ancient religious system that preceded the others.”⁸

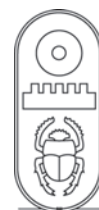
Essence as Immortal and Impersonal

However, if we try to penetrate this deeper wisdom with the help of modern Hermetic schools, we meet a more esoteric and perhaps disturbing doctrine. According

to these schools, while the essence of each human is immortal, it is also impersonal. The personality does not survive, at least not long after bodily death, and consequently there is nothing left of most people’s souls once they have been filtered through the planetary spheres.⁹ The vast majority will be extinguished as personalities soon after death, while their essence may be recycled as entirely different entities. To put it plainly, there is no guarantee of personal immortality, whatever comforting doctrines may say to the contrary. The ambition of the Hermetic adept is to survive this general dissolution, and if he should incarnate again, to do so only through deliberate choice, not through bondage to a natural process like everyone else. In order to pass beyond the boundaries of the cosmos (symbolized by the starry sphere) and enter consciously into another mode of existence, the adept must have forged, during life, a “radiant body” as vehicle for his individuality.¹⁰ This is obviously similar to the process described in the *Chaldean Oracles* and discussed in the previous chapter [of *The Golden Thread*—Ed].



Hildegard of Bingen, *Humanity in the Universal Creation* (thirteenth century), in *Liber diviorum operum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



But it would be a great mistake to assume that only the adept's life is worthwhile, because only he or she achieves personal immortality. In a sense, the adept's goal of preserving individuality is against nature, and because, like all science, it is amoral, it may preserve evil personalities as well as good ones. As one of the few experts in this field writes:

The *permanent* preservation of a personal identity beyond death is a very rare achievement, accomplished only by those who wrest her secrets from Nature, and control their own super-material development. . . . [It is] accomplished only by adepts and sorcerers—the one class having acquired the supreme secret knowledge by holy methods, and with benevolent motives, the

other having acquired it by unholy methods, and for base motives.¹¹

Hermetism is not limited to the aim of personal immortality in this sense. Unlike the world-rejecting philosophies, it accepts and joyfully embraces the entire process of incarnation and excarnation. The physical world, because it is infused with celestial influences, is a place of beauty and wonder. Nature is a book from which the wisdom of the divine Mind can be read. Thoth, we recall, was concerned with *useful* knowledge: arts and sciences that improve the quality of life, such as music and mathematics and writing. Alchemy itself obviously began with the technology of metals. Wherever mere animal existence is enhanced by the arts or sciences, and people become aware of the divine Mind through the works of Nature, the gifts of Thoth are bearing fruit.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes, from Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, trans. J. Godwin (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1995); and Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

² The standard English translation is Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Previous versions are by John Everard, *The Divine Pyramider of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus* (London, 1650 and reprints); G. R. S. Mead, *Thrice-Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis*, 3 vols. (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906 and reprints); Walter Scott, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926 and reprints).

³ See D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London: Warburg Institute, 1958), 40–44; Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1964), 66–68.

⁴ “Poimandres” is sometimes translated as “shepherd of men,” but recent scholarship suggests that it is derived not from the Greek *poimen*, “shepherd,” but from the Egyptian *pe-men-re*, meaning “enlightened mind.” See Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 95.

⁵ See Normandi Ellis, *Awakening Osiris: The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988), 87–94.

⁶ See Nick Kollerstrom, “The Star Temples of Harran,” in *History and Astrology: Clio and Urania Confer*, ed. A. Kitson (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 47–60.

⁷ See *The Book of Creation*, trans. I. Friedman (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1977).

⁸ John Michell, *The Temple at Jerusalem: A Revelation* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 2000), 60.

⁹ See *Introduzione alla magia quale scienza dell'Io*, 3 vols. (Genoa: Fratelli Melitta, 1987). A translation of the first volume into English has been published as Julius Evola and the Ur Group, *Introduction to Magic: Rituals and Practical Techniques for the Magus*, trans. G. Stucco, ed. M. Moynihan (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2000); J. Godwin, “The Survival of the Personality According to Modern Esoteric Teachings,” in *Esotérisme, Gnosés Imaginaire Symbolique, Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, ed. R. Caron, J. Godwin, W. J. Hanegraaff, J. L. Viellard-Baron (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 403–14.

¹⁰ See Ea [Julius Evola], “The Doctrine of the ‘Immortal Body,’” in *Introduction to Magic*, 196–202.

¹¹ H. P. Blavatsky, “Death and Immortality,” *Collected Writings* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1969), 4:250–56.

FROM LEAD TO GOLD: HERMES AND ALCHEMY

Richard Smoley

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Hermeticism and alchemy lead us to inner and outer transformations. These practices have their roots in ancient Egypt and Greece. Well-known author and lecturer Richard Smoley considers how these ancient traditions affect us today.



Where and when he lived, whether he was a man or god, or whether he ever existed on this planet at all, we do not know. He is variously identified with the Greek Hermes, the Egyptian Thoth, the Muslim Idris, and the biblical Enoch. Who was, or is, Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes Thrice-Greatest? Why “Thrice-Greatest”? What is Hermeticism?

Hermes Trismegistus makes his first appearance in known records in an unprepossessing fashion: on the minutes of an ancient meeting held to deal with certain abuses in the cult of an Egyptian god. In the second century A.D. devotees of Thoth were accustomed to offering sacrifices of



Thoth Votive Mummies (Late Period-Ptolemaic, ca. 525–30 BCE). To either side are ibis mummies wrapped in the most expensive manner, and in the center, a gilded cartonnage coffin for an ibis, sacred to Thoth (Djehuti). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

his emblematic bird, the ibis, which then abounded on the banks of the Nile. (The popularity of the sacrifices may explain why the ibis can no longer be found there.)

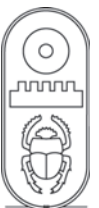
Evidently there were irregularities either in the feeding of the sacred birds or in their sacrifice; at any rate transactions of some meetings on this matter, written on *ostraka*, or broken potsherds, the memo pads of antiquity, have survived. One of them reads in part: “No man shall be able to lapse from a matter which concerns Thoth . . . Thoth, the three times great.”¹

This title was affixed to the name of Hermes, Thoth’s Greek counterpart, who stands at the head of the Hermetic tradition. The Renaissance magus Marsilio Ficino says: “They called him Trismegistus or thrice-greatest because he was the greatest philosopher and the greatest priest and the greatest king.”² Some Christian Hermeticists, on the other hand, have claimed that Hermes got his title because he taught the doctrine of the Trinity.

Hermes Trismegistus, though, is not exactly a god, but more of a superhuman benefactor of our race. Like the bearded demigods of Mesoamerica or the legendary emperors who begin the Chinese chronicles, he is at once teacher, ruler, and sage, who brought science and art to humankind in its infancy.

Renaissance Views of Hermes

During the Renaissance Hermes Trismegistus was regarded as the “contemporary of





Bernardino di Betto (Pinturicchio), *Isis with Hermes Trismegistus and Moses* (1492–94). Room of the Saints, Borgia Apartments, Vatican City.

Moses.” Though few today believe this literally, there is some justice in seeing a parallel between them, since Hermes Trismegistus is revered as the primordial sage of the Egyptian esoteric tradition, as Moses is of the Hebrew one. Like Moses, Hermes left distinguished pupils: his line is said to include Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, Apollonius of Tyana, and Plotinus.³

Over the centuries, the god Hermes metamorphosed into the master Hermes Trismegistus, and as the French scholar Antoine Faivre notes:

Hermes Trismegistus obviously possesses several of the essential attributes of the god Hermes: mobility, mutability (eclecticism), discourse and inspiration (hermeneutics), the function of crossroads (tolerance, irenicism). . . . Like Hermes-Mercury, he runs between various currents, linking the separate, skimming over oppositions while stealing their substance.⁴

Hence the tradition of the Thrice-Greatest one, which we call Hermeticism,⁵ has as its main concern the esoteric arts of transmutation and change. One facet of this tradition is alchemy, with its well-known objective of turning lead into gold. But Hermeticism involves much more than that. It is concerned not only with changing

one substance into another but also with transforming grosser substances into subtler ones. As the *Emerald Tablet*, the primordial document ascribed to Hermes, says, “you will separate the fine from the coarse, sweetly, with great ingenuity.”

Taking a slightly different perspective, Peter French, in his excellent book on John Dee, defines the most basic concept of Hermeticism thus: “Man must know himself and recover his divine essence by reuniting with the divine *mens* or mind.”⁶

These two objectives—changing lead into gold and reuniting human consciousness with the divine mind—don’t, on the face of it, seem to have much to do with each other. If one embodies the highest of human aspirations, the other looks like a cheesy get-rich-quick scheme. Yet they may not be so far apart.

Transmutation: Lead into Gold

To begin with the transmutation of lead into gold, we know that gold is good for tooth fillings and wedding rings, for



Jean-Jacques Boissard, *Apollonius of Tyana* (sixteenth century), in *De Divinatione et Magicis*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



Heinrich Khunrath, *The Emerald Tablet* (1606), in *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

To begin with, the Hermetic arts speak of two fundamental principles, *sol* and *luna*. The epithets applied to them are numerous and confusing: *sol* is Sun, gold, heaven, light; *luna* is Moon, silver, water, stone, ocean, night, and many more. It is far from clear at first what these terms mean. Baron Julius Evola, the quirky Italian esotericist whose book *The*

stabilizing currencies, and for diversifying one's portfolio. But is it really worth all the attention it's gotten? Is it so important that the occult secrets of its manufacture were encrypted in the sculpture of the great French cathedrals, as the mysterious alchemist Fulcanelli asserts?⁷ Even our own age, so roundly decried for its materialism, hasn't resorted to the ploy of putting scientific formulae on the walls of churches.

Hermetic Tradition offers perhaps the clearest discussion of the alchemical process, says such strings of words “are symbols in the hermetic cipher language that refer, often in the same passage, to one continuous object and thereby create an enormous difficulty for the inexperienced reader.”⁸

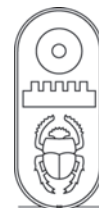
If you are sophisticated about such things, you may reply that of course alchemy isn't *really* talking about literal gold and literal lead—it's all a symbol for something in the psyche. And alchemists, in their cryptic way, seem to agree. “Our gold is not the gold of the vulgar,” they say. How can we reconcile the apparent opposition between the symbolic and the substantial, or, as the *Emerald Tablet* puts it, between the “above” and the “below”?

Evola goes on to quote Cornelius Agrippa: “No one can excel in the alchemical art without knowing these principles *in himself* and the greater the knowledge of self, the greater will be the magnetic power attained thereby and the greater the wonders to be realized.”⁹

I must state here that I'm not an alchemist; my practical knowledge of the art does not exceed the capacity to mix a few simple cocktails. All the same, in struggling with various Hermetic materials over time, I've come to some conclusions that strike me as useful.

So what are these principles in ourselves? “We can say that in general the Sun is ‘form’ and the power of individuation,” Evola writes, “while the Moon—which preserves the archaic Mother and Woman symbols—expresses the ‘material’ and universal: to

Michael Maier, *Hermes Trismegistus with Alchemical Sun and Moon* (1617), in *Symbola Aureae Mensae Duodecim Nationum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



the undifferentiated vitality, to the cosmic spirit or the ether-light, corresponds the feminine.”¹⁰

Still a bit abstract. To simplify further, we could say that *sol*, the Sun, gold, represents the principle of consciousness, that which *experiences*—the “I.” The Theosophist Annie Besant calls this the Self, the Knower, “that conscious, feeling, ever-existing One that in each of us knows himself as existing.”¹¹

Luna, on the other hand, is a name for that which *is experienced*. The Greeks called it *hyle*. This word is usually translated as “matter,” but it seems more to resemble Eliphas Levi’s “astral light”—a watery astral substance that has no shape of its own but can take on the shapes of specific things.

This is to say that experience has no qualities in a pure state; we never just experience, but rather we experience *something*, and we experience it *as* something—a table, book, chair, or what-have-you. This is matter in its fixed state, or “lead.”

If so, then Hermeticism, in one of its many dimensions, could have to do with transmuting the “lead” of ordinary



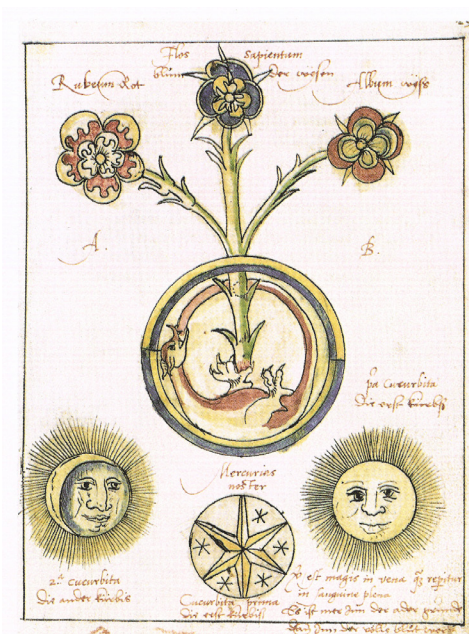
Michael Maier, *The Philosophers' Vulture (their Mercury)* (1618). The vulture proclaims “I am the black, the white, the yellow, and the red” referring to the alchemical stages, in *Atalanta Fugiens*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

experience into the “gold” of consciousness. Alchemists say you have to have gold in order to make gold. This would mean that you have to start with the raw material of your own experience (“lead”), using what consciousness you already have (“gold”) to create more consciousness.

The Descent of Consciousness into Matter

The alchemical process, then, can be seen as an elaborate allegory of the descent of consciousness into the matter and the means by which it returns to its pristine state. Other metals such as copper and iron, as well as the stages such as *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo*, would refer to intermediate steps in this process.

The idea of “mercury,” for example, serves as a symbol for the means by which mind “mediates” between the knower and the known. Mercury, or quicksilver, as you know, is what we have in our thermometers; changing shape, it tells us the temperature. In the same way our own perceptions “change their shape” to reflect how the world is. (The accuracy of their reporting has always been a subject of lively debate among philosophers. And of course you’ll remember that Hermes is the trickster among the gods.)



H. Reussner, *Alchemical Ouroboros, Sun, and Moon* (1592), in *Pandora*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

Similarly the stage of *nigredo* or blackness is associated with Venus or desire. (This points to one interpretation of the symbol of the Black Madonna, sometimes identified with Isis.) At this stage the “I” or sol becomes conscious of its own desire and its attachment to that desire. One of Venus’s names, as Fulcanelli reminds us, is Cypris, in Greek *Kupris* or “the impure one.”¹² Like Venus, desire has this dual aspect: it is beneficent, life-giving, but it cements us to our own experience, bringing death and destruction.

To realize this truth at a deep level brings about the next stage: whitening or *albedo*—the triumph of purity, the freedom from attachment to desire. Evola suggests that this purification can be accomplished in two opposite ways. There is the familiar means of asceticism (associated with Mars or iron, suggesting struggle and discipline), which is the conquest of desire, but there is also the possibility of embracing desire, especially sexual passion, and transforming it. But, Evola bluntly warns, “This is an extremely dangerous path!”¹³

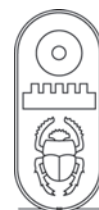
Assuming that the *albedo* is accomplished without mishap, consciousness becomes purified. In this stage the “I” is known as White Gold, White Sulfur, “matter that turns copper white”—possibly meaning that it makes desire pure. (Copper, you’ll remember, is the metal of Venus.)¹⁴

And finally, the last stage, *rubedo*, or reddening. If white is associated with purity, redness is associated with warmth. We all know people who have been stuck at the stage of *albedo*: they may well seem pure, ethereal, clean, but they also exude a certain remoteness or disembodiment. *Rubedo* adds, or reveals, another characteristic of consciousness. Evola characterizes it as the “return to earth” of purified consciousness. As the *Emerald Tablet* says, “its power is intact, if it shall have been turned toward earth.”

That is to say, consciousness, the “I,” *sol*, having become purified and detached from the dross of experience, must now return to give it warmth and light. This stage brings to mind the myth of the Buddha’s enlightenment: having achieved supreme illumination, he yields to the entreaties of the gods and returns to earth to teach the Dharma.



Matthaeus Merian, *The Great Work* (1618), in J. D. Mylius, *Opus Medico-Chymicum*. It was later included in the appendix of the *Musaeum Hermeticum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



This is, as you can see, an extremely brief and schematic view of the Hermetic transformation; there are many stages and substages that I've left out. (Earlier alchemists, for example, described another phase, *xanthosis* or yellowing, after the *rubedo*. This stage lays additional stress on illumination or gnosis, symbolized by the color yellow, as a characteristic of the perfected *sol*.) Clearly it's not possible to go into all these variations here, but I think the general outline holds true.

Alchemical texts are well known for their obscurities and omissions, so it comes as no surprise that we are left wondering just what technique enables this transmutation to take place.

The answers are as varied as spiritual experience itself. C. G. Jung, for whom alchemy furnished an elaborate blueprint for his view of individuation, favored work with dream figures, images, and symbols through "active imagination."

While admitting that these images are endowed with unimaginable profundity, I feel tempted to sound a note of caution here. The psychic world of dreams and images is notorious as a realm of delusion and fascination; we can wander in and forget how to find our way out. Hence dream and imagery work can prove dangerous and disorienting unless one makes a serious effort to ground oneself in ordinary work and life. (This does not seem to be a mistake that Jung himself fell into, but it does seem to be one that some Jungians fall into.)

Awareness of One's Own Body

There is, however, another means of approach, which involves a practice that probably goes back to the ancient Egyptian mysteries. It has acquired a new name in the modern world: *proprioception*, or the ability to sense one's own body. In choosing the matter on which to perform the Great Work, one alchemist advises: "Take some *real earth, well impregnated with the rays of*

the sun, the moon, and the stars."¹⁵ This could refer to bodily sensation and experience, "real earth" impregnated with celestial and cosmic influences as manifested in our own psyches.

Sol, then, would here be conscious attention, the ability to sense and experience the body from the vantage point of "I." This is simultaneously a separation from and an immersion in the experience of the body here and now. If carried out properly, the "lead" of ordinary sensation, dull, inert, nearly dead, becomes "gold," bright, lustrous, and untarnishable. The life force itself, which begins as a thing of the earth, doomed to die like a plant or beast, becomes adamant and immortal. Evola writes:

The goal of Hindu alchemy was to introduce consciousness into this vital force, causing it to become part of it; then to reawaken and retrace all the phases of the organization, reaching thereby an actual and creative rapport with the completed form of one's own body, which could then literally be called regenerated. "The living man," as opposed to the



Robert Fludd, *The Microcosm* (1617). Frontispiece to the first volume of *Utriusque Cosmi*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

tradition of the “sleeping” and the “dead,” esoterically would be precisely the one who has realized such direct contact with the innermost source of his corporeal life.¹⁶

Isha Schwaller de Lubicz teaches that much the same is true of Egyptian esotericism:

The way is the conscious reanimation of the entire body, the confirmation of the interplay between its functions and all its vital reactions. . . . No earthly man can perceive Spirit except in his own flesh. And this is no mere literary simile, but a most positive reality. You can only find your God by generating Him in yourself, in the darkness of your own body. For when He takes cognizance of a substance, then He becomes its God.¹⁷

This process of transformation through conscious attention to the body could even offer a key to the central myth of ancient Egypt, the legend of Isis and Osiris. Osiris, or the force of consciousness, is slain by Set, the

force of oblivion. Osiris’s limbs are scattered all over Egypt. Esoterically this could mean that consciousness in the ordinary state forgets its own embodiment; our own limbs and body parts are “scattered” in the sense that we are normally oblivious to them. Only attention and integration, represented by the gods Horus and Isis, manage to defeat Set and restore Osiris to life.

Specific techniques of proprioception, or conscious sensing of the body, are still taught today in various esoteric schools, some of which trace their practices back to Egypt itself.¹⁸

Deep Symbolic Importance of Alchemy

We can perhaps accept that alchemy, so far from being an archaic collection of nonsense, has deep symbolic import. C. G. Jung certainly thought so. In works like *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, he traces an elaborate correlation between alchemical images and the images that arise in the psyche. Jung, however, had little interest in practical alchemy, and he insisted more than once that “the alchemists did not know what they were writing about.”¹⁹

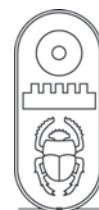
I think one would need to be very cautious in making such a statement. Every so often one encounters a practicing alchemist like François Trojani, who contends that the transmutation of lead into gold is meant very literally indeed. And a great deal of alchemical writing, it seems to me, makes no sense unless it is so understood.

If so, then practical alchemy is an analogous process to what I’ve sketched here: the alchemist goes through parallel procedures in the laboratory and in himself. The matter in his beaker is transformed alongside the matter of his body.

Exactly how this is done in concrete terms I can’t say, and you are very much at liberty to disagree. But for the moment grant me my point. Let’s suppose an alchemist can change ordinary, physical lead into gold. The literature



Statues of Osiris (Late Period, 525–332 BCE). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.





The rosa alba (white rose) of alchemy (fifteenth–seventeenth centuries), in *Domum Dei*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

is full of warnings about doing it for reasons of greed. And the operation is secret, so there can be no question of proving a point to somebody. So why go through this procedure?

As I've stated it here, alchemical transformation involves taking something with only a minimal amount of life and intelligence in its ordinary state and refining and perfecting it until it reaches a state of higher being. Hermes Trismegistus says: "As above, so below." What does this enable us to conclude about laboratory alchemy?

Everything is Endowed with Consciousness

Here you might recollect an idea that appears often in esoteric thought: the notion that everything in the universe is endowed with consciousness. Even a sodium atom, which we normally regard as having no intelligence at all, "knows" how to recognize, and bind with, a chlorine atom. An atom's consciousness is very narrow and rigidly determined, but it does have consciousness nonetheless.

Hence it would stand to reason that some substances have more "consciousness"

or "knowledge" than others. Gold is in this sense more "intelligent" than lead: it "knows" how to shine, and unlike baser metals, such as copper, iron, or silver, it also "knows" how to stay free from tarnish or rust. To transmute lead, a comparatively dull and dense substance, into an intelligent one is thus a means of raising the consciousness of matter.

Again, though, what's the point? Even if an alchemist were able to transmute several pounds of lead into gold, this is still an infinitesimal quantity of all the matter known to exist. Can the consciousness of the universe really be raised by this procedure?

Here it's important to avoid a common trap. As good Americans, we automatically assume that more is better. But it may not always be so. The point of alchemical transmutation may not lie in the size of the final product but in the transmutation itself. There may be something in the procedure that acts like a homeopathic remedy, stimulating the growth of consciousness in the universe in ways we can't imagine. After all, consciousness, like life, wants and needs to perpetuate itself.

At this point we stand on the borders of other schools and other disciplines. To liberate the infinitesimal shards of intelligence that groan under the oppression of dullness, to produce "gold," not only in the literal sense but by increasing the consciousness of an inert substance, calls to mind, for example, the idea in Lurianic Kabbalah that "sparks" of the primordial Light are imprisoned in all things and that it is the duty of the righteous to liberate them. I don't imagine the Hermetic Great Work (or for that matter Lurianic Kabbalah) is the *only* way of enacting such a liberation. But it may be one way.

This all may sound rather superstitious. It's not so superstitious, though, to think that the world, inanimate as well as

animate, possesses an interiority that can be either neglected and despised or awakened and cultivated. It's even possible that this great secret offers a clue to our purpose on earth, which we've forgotten as we've become identified with the shifting shapes of our own mercurial perceptions. Does the *Emerald Tablet* allude to this purpose when it says, "This is the father of all consecration of the whole world"?

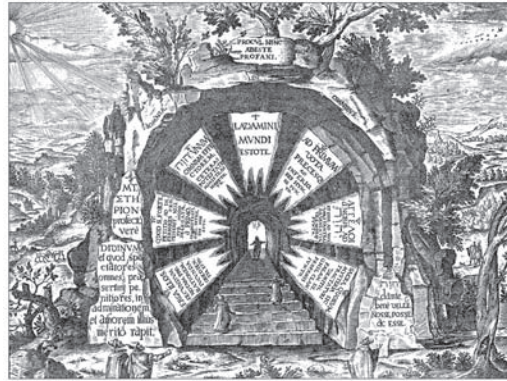
Hermes Trismegistus

Enough, perhaps, about Hermeticism for now. What of Hermes himself? I hesitate to use words like "god" or "archetype," but possibly we can think of him as a superhuman intelligence who not only reminds us of our function in linking the "above" and the "below," but who regulates the great spiritual streams of humankind.

Hermes Trismegistus has stood at center stage in world history three times so far. Of his first manifestation, in predynastic Egypt or earlier, we can say nothing; it is all but completely obscured by its remoteness. The second time he comes to the fore, this time in a historical epoch, is in late antiquity, when the gods of the Pagan pantheons had



Hermes and the Charities (ca. 480 BCE). Collection of the Louvre. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.



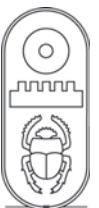
Heinrich Khunrath, *The Gate of Eternal Wisdom* (1606), in *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

grown weak and old. Here the Hermetic works served as a bridge between the ancient faiths and the new Christian milieu that would supplant them.

Then Hermes reappears in the Renaissance, when the Christian stream itself had grown tired and corrupt. At this point the *Corpus Hermeticum*, rediscovered among the ruins of Byzantium in 1460, helped inspire the Renaissance and served as a midwife for the birth of modernity, which over the past century has grown into the first truly global civilization.

Today modernity seems to have reached its own state of exhaustion. Is Hermes reappearing in our own age to reformulate his tradition once again? Certain impulses suggest it. There is on the one hand the looking backward of certain streams of contemporary Neopaganism, which are trying to revive the worship of the gods of Greece and Egypt. There is also the looking forward of various new religions, with their admixtures of old forms with contemporary science and psychology.

Though both of these directions are valuable and necessary, I'm not sure that any of the current attempts at reformulation have arrived at their goal. It seems unlikely that bird-headed figures will inspire worship in the humanity of the third millennium. On the other hand, any



new religion will have to join the pack of squabbling faiths that are already crying for the allegiance of humankind.

Perhaps the Hermetic impulse today, rather than reformulating the traditions of the past, will have as its chief objective the tolerance and irenicism of which Antoine

Faivre speaks. That is to say, rather than inventing a new faith, it may instead try to teach the ones that already exist to live in peace. At the same time it may also remind them of the goal that lies at the heart of each: the transformation of the “lead” of ordinary being into the “gold” of true consciousness.



ENDNOTES

¹ Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xiii–xiv.

² Quoted in *ibid.*, xlvi.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1995), 104–5.

⁵ Faivre says that the term “Hermetism” should be used to refer to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the literature directly inspired by it, while “Hermeticism” should be used in a wider sense to refer to “many aspects of Western esotericism, such as astrology, alchemical speculations, and the like” (See his introduction to *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, coedited with Jacob Needleman [New York: Crossroad, 1992], 3). But this distinction strikes me as more likely to confuse than enlighten the general reader, so I have chosen simply to use the term “Hermeticism” in all instances.

⁶ Peter French, *John Dee* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1987), 146.

⁷ Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales*, trans. Mary Sworder (Albuquerque, NM: Brotherhood of Life, 1984). Reviewed in *Gnosis* 10 (Winter 1989).

⁸ Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition: Symbols and Teachings of the Royal Art*, trans. E. E. Rehmus (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1995),

23. For an overview of Evola’s writings available in English, see *Gnosis* 40 (Summer 1996): 64.

⁹ Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, 25. Emphasis, here and in other quotations, in the original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36–7.

¹¹ Annie Besant, *Thought Power* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966), 13. Besant does not, however, explicitly equate the Knower with alchemical *sol*.

¹² Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales*, 46.

¹³ Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁵ Quoted in Fulcanelli, *Le mystère des cathédrales*, 53.

¹⁶ Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, 164.

¹⁷ Isha Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Opening of the Way: A Practical Guide to the Wisdom Teachings of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1981), 39–40.

¹⁸ See Robert Masters, *The Goddess Sekhmet: The Way of the Five Bodies* (Amity, NY: Amity House, 1988), and *Neurospeak* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1994); also Jean Houston, *The Passion of Isis and Osiris* (New York: Ballantine, 1995).

¹⁹ See, for example, C. G. Jung, “The Psychology of the Transference,” quoted in *Jung on Alchemy*, ed. Nathan Schwartz-Salant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 69.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CORPUS HERMETICUM

John Michael Greer

From *The Rosicrucian Beacon*, 15:3 (June 2006).

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

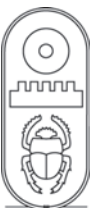


Johann Theodore de Bry, *Hermes Trismegistus* (ca. 1616) in Jean-Jacques Boissard, *De divination et magicis praestigis*. Louisa Scoggins, SRC.

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.

SECRET SERMON ON THE MOUNTAIN (THE INITIATION OF TAT)

From *The Corpus Hermeticum* translated by G. R. S. Mead, adapted for modern readers.

The Secret Sermon on the Mountain is the thirteenth tractate of the Corpus Hermeticum in the collection that has come to us through fifteenth century Constantinople. It is a dialogue between Hermes and his child Tat regarding mystical rebirth. The tractate concludes with a great invocation to the Divine.



Tat: In the General Sermons, father Hermes, you spoke in very unclear riddles about Divinity, and when you said that no one could be saved before Rebirth, you concealed your meaning.

Further, when I became your Suppliant, on descending the mountain, after you conversed with me, and when I longed to hear the Sermon on Rebirth (for this beyond all other things is just the thing I do not know), you said that you would give it to me, “when you have become a stranger to the world.” For this reason, I prepared myself and made my thought a stranger to the world-illusion. Now, complete what I lack with what you said you would give me, the tradition of Rebirth, setting it forth in speech or in the secret way.

O Thrice-greatest one, I do not know from what matter and what womb we come to birth, or from what seed.

Hermes: Wisdom that understands in silence is the matter and the womb from which human beings are born, and the True Good is the seed.

Tat: Who is the sower, father? I am altogether at a loss.

Hermes: It is the Divine Will, my child.

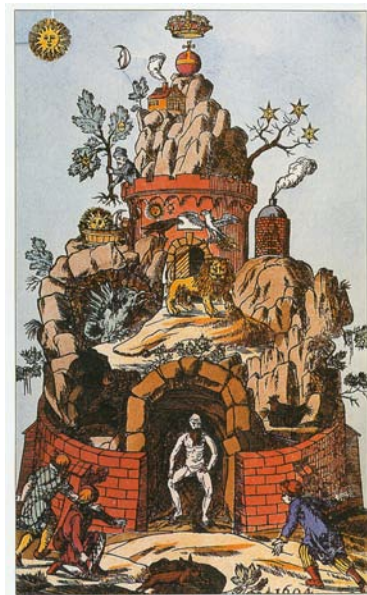
Tat: And of what kind are those that are begotten, father? For I have no share of that essence in me, which transcends the senses. The one that is begotten will be another one from the Deity, a Divine Child?

Hermes: All in all, composed of all powers.

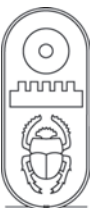
Tat: You are telling me a riddle, father, and you are not speaking as a father to a child.

Hermes: This heritage, my child, is never taught; however, when the Divine wills, human memory is restored by the Divinity.

Tat: You are saying impossible things, O father, things that are forced. I would have direct answers to these things. Am I a child foreign to my father’s heritage? Do not keep it from me, father. I am a true-born child: explain the manner of Rebirth to me.



The Mountain of the Philosophers (1785)
in *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*.
From the Rosicrucian Archives.





Achilles Bocchius, *Hermes-Mercury* (1555) in *Sybolicarum Quaestionum*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

Hermes: What can I say, my child? I can only tell you this. Whenever I see the simple vision born of the Divine Mercy within myself, I have gone out of myself into a Body that can never die. Now I am not as I was before; but I am born in Mind.

The way to do this is not taught, and it cannot be seen through the elementary combinations by means of which you see here below. Indeed, I have had my former composed form dismembered for me. I am no longer touched, but I have touch. I have dimension too, and yet I am a stranger to these things now. You see me with eyes, my child; however, you do not understand what I am, even with the greatest effort of physical sight.

Tat: You have plunged me into a fierce frenzy and mind-fury, father, for now I can no longer see myself.

Hermes: Would that you, my child, had passed through yourself while awake, as they who dream in sleep.

Tat: Tell me this too! Who is the author of Rebirth?

Hermes: The Child of the Divine, the One Person, by the Divine Will.

Tat: Now you have completely confused me, father. The perception which I had before has stopped, for now I see your greatness identical with your distinctive form.

Hermes: Even in this, you are wrong. The mortal form changes every day. It is turned by time into growth and waning, since it is not a true thing.

Tat: What then is true, Thrice-greatest One?

Hermes: That which is never troubled, child, which cannot be defined; that which has no color, nor any figure, which is not turned, which has no garment, which gives light; that which is comprehensible unto itself alone, which does not suffer change; that which no body can contain.

Tat: Truly I lose my reason, father. Just when I thought that you would make me wise, I find the senses of my mind blocked.

Hermes: That is how it is, child. That which is borne upwards like fire, yet is borne down like earth, that which is moist like water, yet blows like air: how will you perceive this with your senses—that which is not solid nor moist, which nothing can bind or loose, of which humans can only have any perception through its power and energy—and even then it must be a person who can perceive the Way of Birth in the Divine?

Tat: Then am I incapable of this, O father?



Victoria Franck Wetsch, SRC, *Three Sprouts—Eternal Knot*.

Hermes: No, Heaven forbid, my child! Withdraw into yourself, and it will come; will it, and it comes to pass; let go of the body's senses, and your Divinity will be born; purge the brutish torments from you—things of matter.

Tat: I have tormentors in me, O father?

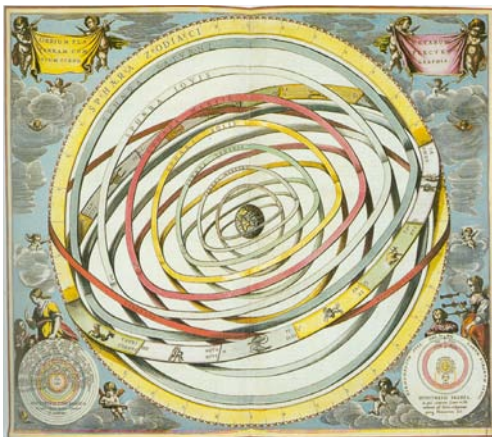
Hermes: Yes, and not a few, my child; indeed they are fearful and manifold.

Tat: I do not know them, father.

Hermes: The first Torment is Ignorance, child. The second one is Grief; the third, Intemperance; the fourth, Concupiscence; the fifth, Unrighteousness. The sixth is Avarice; the seventh, Error. The eighth is Envy; the ninth, Guile. The tenth is Anger; the eleventh, Rashness. The twelfth is Malice.

These are twelve, however, under them are many more, my child, and creeping through the prison of the body they force the person who dwells there to suffer through the senses. However, they depart (although not all at once) from those whom the Divine has shown pity, and this constitutes the manner of Rebirth and its path.

Now, my child, be still and keep a solemn silence! In this way, the mercy that flows to us from the Divine will not cease. From this point forward, rejoice, O child, for you are being purified for the articulation of the Word by the Divine Powers.



Andreas Cellarius, *The Superlunary World with the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac* (1646) in *Harmonia Macrocosmica*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



Hildegard of Bingen, *Representation of the Trinity as the True Unity* (twelfth century), in *Scivias*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

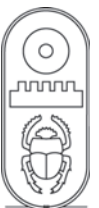
Divine Gnosis has come to us, and when this comes, my child, Ignorance is cast out. Gnosis of Joy has come to us, and with its arrival, child, Sorrow will flee away to them who allow it entry. I invoke the Power that follows Joy, your Self-control. O Power most sweet! Let us very gladly welcome it, child! As it arrives, it chases Intemperance away!

Now fourth, I call on Continnence, the Power against Concupiscence. This step, my child, is the firm seat of Righteousness. For without effort she has chased Unrighteousness away. We are made righteous, child, by the departure of Unrighteousness.

I call the sixth Power to us—that which acts against Avarice, that is, universal Sharing. Now that Avarice is gone, I call on Truth. Error flees, and Truth is with us.

See how the Good is complete, my child, with Truth's coming, for Envy is gone from us and the Good is united with Truth, and with Life and Light. No torment of the Darkness comes near. They have all been vanquished and have fled with whirring wings.

Now you know the way of Rebirth, my child. When the Ten have come which drive



out the Twelve, your Birth in understanding is complete, and by this birth, we are made into divinities.

Those who achieve this Divine Birth through the Mercy of the Deity, abandoning the physical senses, know themselves to be of Light and Life, and they consist of these, and are filled with bliss.

Tat: Made steadfast by the Deity, father, I no longer look at things with my physical sight, rather with the energy the Mind gives me through the Powers.

I am in Heaven, in earth, in water, in air. I am in animals and in plants. I am in the womb, before the womb, after the womb. I am everywhere!

Further, tell me this: How are the twelve torments of the Darkness driven out by the ten Powers? How does this happen, Thrice-greatest one?

Hermes: This dwelling-place of the human body through which we have just passed, my child, is constituted from the circle of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, this being composed of elements, twelve in



Heinrich Khunrath, *Divine Tetrakys and the Cosmic Rose* (1595) in *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*. From Wikimedia Commons.

number, but of one nature, having one appearance. To confuse us, they appear separate; however, when they act they are one. Not only can we never separate Rashness from Wrath, they cannot even be distinguished from one another.

According to right reason, the Twelve naturally withdraw for the last time, because they are chased out by no less than ten powers, that is, the Ten.

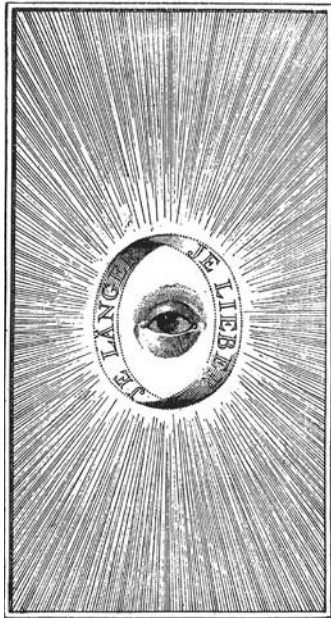
For, child, the Ten is that which gives birth to souls. Life and Light are unified there, where the One has being from the Spirit. According to reason, the One contains the Ten, the Ten the One.

Tat: Father, I see everything. I see myself in Mind.

Hermes: This is Rebirth, my child: No longer to understand things from the body's viewpoint, extended in three dimensions. This is accomplished through this discourse on Rebirth, which is just for you and not made public, so that we may not communicate it to those not yet ready, only to those to whom the Divine wills.

Tat: Tell me, O father: This body which is made up of the Powers, is it ever dissolved?

Hermes: Be quiet, child! Do not speak of impossible things, lest you sin and your



The Two Eyes (eighteenth century) in *Little Flower Garden of the Seraphim* from the *Works of Jacob Boehme*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.

HERMETICISM AND THE PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS

Christian Rebisse, FRC

From *Rosicrucian History and Mysteries* (San Jose: Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC, 2005).

As 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

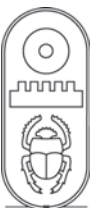
interrupt his translation of Plato so as to work on the newly discovered material. Shortly thereafter, in 1471, Ficino published the first translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This edition garnered such a widespread readership that it would be reprinted sixteen times until the sixteenth century.¹

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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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*,⁵ 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.”⁶

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

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

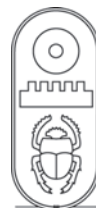
² He sometimes gives a different hierarchy in which Moses either preceded or followed Hermes.

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

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

⁵ 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).

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



SECRET SYMBOLS OF THE ROSICRUCIANS: AN INTRODUCTION

Staff of the Rosicrucian Digest

On the following pages are two of the many illustrated plates from a venerable Rosicrucian classic, *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. These plates were hand-colored by former Emperor H. Spencer Lewis.



The first part of the work was published in German in 1785 in Altona, followed by the second part in 1788. It is considered by many to be second only in importance to the Rosicrucian Manifestos themselves.

The symbols and text gathered in this collection are from earlier works—some as far back as 1621—soon after the Manifestos. It was common in the seventeenth century to privately circulate manuscripts with mystical text and illustrations, and this may have been how these materials came into the hands of the compiler of *Secret Symbols*.

Many of these plates came to North America with the second round of Rosicrucian work, at the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania, around 1700, attesting to the widespread and genuine Rosicrucian nature of these emblems. They were published by AMORC beginning in 1935, and are now available at www.rosecroixjournal.org.

Reproduced here are two plates from book 1.

The first, on page 36, is the venerable *Emerald Tablet of Hermes*, complete with text and allegorical emblem. Although we do not have an ancient original of this most famous Hermetic statement on alchemy, the

manuscript tradition includes versions in *The Second Book of the Elements of Foundation* (*Kitab Ustuqus al-Uss al-Thani*) attributed to Jabir ibn Hayyan (Geber) (721–815)¹, *The Book of the Secret of Creation and the Art of Nature* (*Kitab Sirr al-Khaliqa wa San'at al-Tabi'a*) (ca. 650–830)², and *The Book of the Secret of Secrets* (*Kitab sirr al-asrar*) (tenth century CE)³.

The Latin headlines on the plate read “The Emerald Tablet of Hermes. The Words of the Secrets of Hermes,” while inscribed around the emblem itself is the well known alchemical phrase V.I.T.R.I.O.L. (Visit the interior of Earth, and by rectifying you will find the hidden stone.)

The second plate, on page 37, is *The Hermetic Philosophy*, with both text and symbolic illustration. This is followed by an explanatory essay by Frater Peter Bindon.

Also included on the following pages is the Preface to this important Rosicrucian resource, written by H. Spencer Lewis, founder of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC. As Emperor Lewis recommends, these texts and emblems can be used for mystical work at many levels.

ENDNOTES

¹<http://nwolibrary.com/component/k2/item/680-tablet-hermes>. See also E. J. Holmyard, *Alchemy*, (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1957), 95–8; J. Needham, “Spagyric discovery and invention: Apparatus, Theories and Gifts” in *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 5:4.

²Ibid

³Steven J. Williams, *The Secret of Secrets: The Scholarly Career of a Pseudo-Aristotelian Text in the Latin Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians

AN EXACT REPRODUCTION
OF THE ORIGINAL
BUT
WITH THE GERMAN TEXT AND TERMS
LITERALLY TRANSLATED

THE AMORC EDITION
WITH PREFACE BY
H. SPENCER LEWIS, F.R.C., Ph.D.

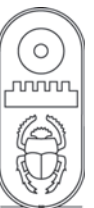
*H. Spencer Lewis
Feb. 11-1938*

GEORGE ENGELKE
THE ARIES PRESS
CHICAGO, 1935

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Title page of the copy of *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians* hand-colored by H. Spencer Lewis. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



contain so many secrets in little elements of word or line. . . .

I have been happy to check its text and observe the preservation of the coded principles and terms. The sincere student would do well to analyze with care, each idea or ideograph presented in word, phrase, line, or color. In the years 1785 to 1788 when the symbols and principles contained herein were in use to such an extent that the first edition of this book was warranted, humanity's thoughts were being directed in channels quite new. The uniqueness of the text was, therefore, startling; but today the world needs these surprising truths to an equal degree.

I have seen two of the original copies, in German text, so thumb-worn as to proclaim

the useful service they have rendered for many years. Their old, yellowed and faded condition spoke eloquently of the passing of time, but from each page came the voice of eternal truth. . . .

On behalf of many thousands of neophytes and adepts whom I represent, I wish to thank the publisher for his vision and altruism in undertaking such a tedious and costly task, and in making such a timely contribution to the bibliography and literature of true Rosicrucianism.

In the Bonds of the Order

H. SPENCER LEWIS

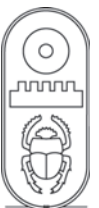
Imperator for North and South America

San Jose, Calif.,

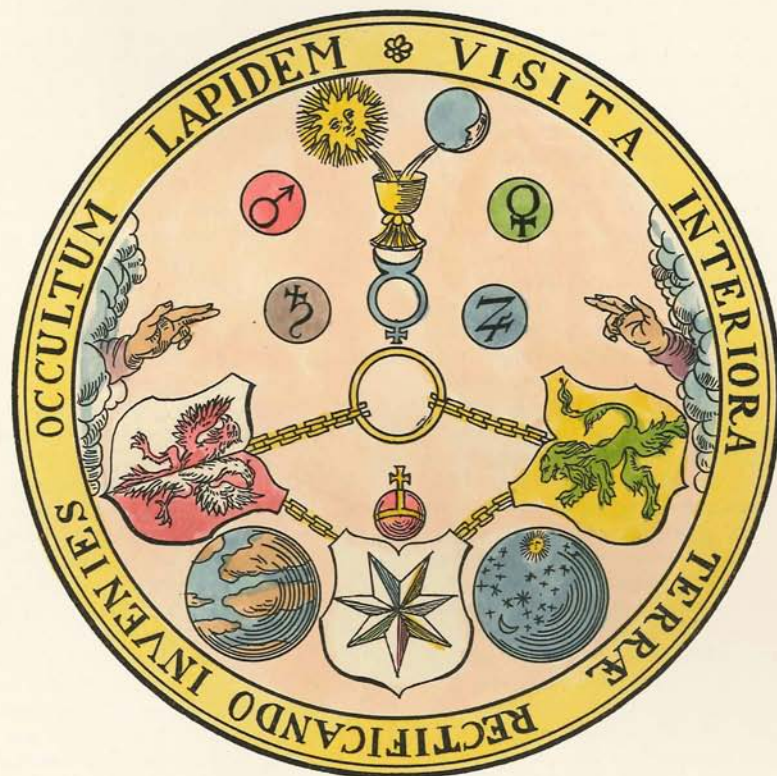
November 15, 1935



From the desk of Imperator H. Spencer Lewis. Photo © 2011 Supreme Grand Lodge, AMORC. From the Rosicrucian Archives.



TABULA SMARAGDINA HERMETIS.



VERBA SECRETORUM HERMETIS.

It is true, certain, and without falsehood, that whatever is below is like that which is above; and that which is above is like that which is below: to accomplish the one wonderful work. As all things are derived from the One Only Thing, by the will and by the word of the One Only One who created it in His Mind, so all things owe their existence to this Unity by the order of Nature, and can be improved by Adaptation to that Mind.

Its Father is the Sun; its Mother is the Moon; the Wind carries it in its womb; and its nurse is the Earth. This Thing is the Father of all perfect things in the world. Its power is most perfect when it has again been changed into Earth. Separate the Earth from the Fire, the subtle from the gross, but carefully and with great judgment and skill.

It ascends from earth to heaven, and descends again, new born, to the earth, taking unto itself thereby the power of the Above and the Below. Thus the splendor of the whole world will be thine, and all darkness shall flee from thee.

This is the strongest of all powers, the Force of all forces, for it overcometh all subtle things and can penetrate all that is solid. For thus was the world created, and rare combinations, and wonders of many kinds are wrought.

Hence I am called HERMES TRISMEGISTUS, having mastered the three parts of the wisdom of the whole world. What I have to say about the masterpiece of the alchemical art, the Solar Work, is now ended.

The Hermetic Philosophy.

I attract all those seeking God and the truth; those alone will find the art. I am the Magnet-Stone of divine love; attracting the iron-hard men on the road to the truth.



PRIMA MATERIA.

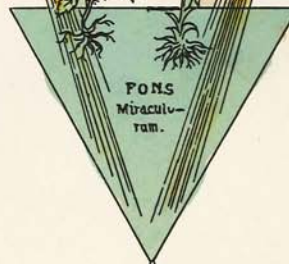


I am the moisture which preserves everything in nature and makes it live, I pass from the upper to the lower planes; I am the heavenly dew and the fat of the land; I am the fiery water and the watery fire; nothing may live without me in time; I am close to all things yea; in and through all things, nevertheless unknown.

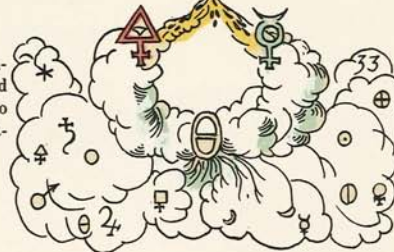
Nevertheless I only am in the grasp of the Philosophers.

I unfold and fold up again, Bringing contentment to the artists, Without me thou canst do nothing Furthering any of your affairs.

Therefore fear God, pray and work in patience, if you find me your want would cease and you have a merciful God who befriendeth thee and giveth thee whatever thy heart may desire.



This moisture must be caught, lest it should change into vapor or fume.



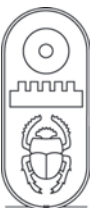
The two vapors or fumes are the roots of the art.

The Prima Materia derives its existence from the Fiat, the Word of creation. And this Word comes from the Father who is the creator of all things, and the Spirit radiates from both: This is God's life giving air. Then, too, air brings to life everything within the elements. The fire warms all things, the water refreshes, delights and saturates all things: And the nitrous earth, Mother-like, nourishes and sustains all things; the air was born out of fire, and in turn makes the fire burn, that it may live, but air in the form of water is food for the fire, and the fire burns into this element: Water and dew of the ground, the greasy fat dew of the ground, the earth as keeper of nitrous salt nourishes it. For the womb of the earth is the sulphuric nitrous-salt of nature, the one good thing God has created in this visible world.

The same Salt-Mother of the elements is the nitrous, aluminous and spiritual gumosic water, ☉ earth or crystal, which has Nature in its womb, a Son of the Sun, and a Daughter of the Moon. It is a Hermaphrodite, born out of the wind, a phoenix living in fire, a pelican, reviving his dear young ones with its blood; the young Icarus, drowned in the water, whose nurse is the earth, whose Mother is the wind; whose Father is the fire, the water her caretaker and drink, one stone and no stone, one water and no water, nevertheless a stone of living power and a water of living might; a sulphur, a mercury, a salt, hidden deep in nature, and which no fool has ever known nor seen.

Deus vendit sua dona pro labore.

The Hermetic Philosophy from *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians* (1935), hand-colored by H. Spencer Lewis.



HEINRICH KHUNRATH'S COSMIC DEW

Peter Bindon, M.A., FRC

From *The Secret Rosicrucian Tradition*
(San Jose: Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC, 2004).

Frater Peter Bindon, who served as Grand Master for the English Grand Lodge for Australia, New Zealand, and Asia for many years, presents an example of German symbolic artwork from the late sixteenth century that was of such importance in the Rosicrucian Tradition that it is included in [Secret Symbols](#): the concept of “Cosmic Dew” as proposed by the German alchemist Heinrich Khunrath (see page 37). Khunrath is best known for his alchemical classic, *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (Hamburg, 1595). Khunrath’s ideas, as expressed in *Amphitheatrum* and other works, represent tensions typical of the late sixteenth century—tensions between the importance of experience and direct observation, versus more traditional spiritual beliefs (“Wisdom coming down from the Divine”). The controversial ideas revolving around the conflict between spirituality and experiment, and the rich symbolism expressed in Khunrath’s text and engravings in *Amphitheatrum*, caused this work to be condemned by the Sorbonne in 1625. However, today the book attracts the attention of scholars as it has throughout the centuries.

the diagram is “to show (that) the mind of the Rosy Cross at the end of the eighteenth century was that of Khunrath two hundred years previously.” Waite does not say much more about this interesting German alchemist and natural philosopher at this point, although he does elaborate elsewhere in the book on Khunrath’s contribution to the Rosicrucian Tradition.



Heinrich Khunrath, *Alchemist's Laboratory* from *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (Hamburg, 1595).



In Arthur Edward Waite’s book, *The Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, published in the early part of the last century, he reproduces a figure taken from the book, *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Waite’s description of the illustration is primarily alchemical and is allegorical to say the least. He claims that his purpose in reproducing

Heinrich Khunrath, sometimes spelled Kunrath, was born in Leipzig, Germany, around 1560, and died at just forty-five years of age in Dresden (or Leipzig), on September 9, 1605. Khunrath was a medical doctor and an alchemist. During his short professional life, he wrote several books and treatises that attempted to unite Kabbalah, alchemy, and natural phenomena. He taught the value of personal observation and experience in life matters and encouraged

those who read his books to form their own conclusions regarding the meaning of his essays and symbols.

The Divine Hand

In our diagram, the Divine Hand suspends a magnet over the work, symbolic of bestowing cosmic energy on the procedures that take place beneath its influence, while simultaneously showering the alchemical dew on the symbols on the upper portion of a triangle. *Ros* in Latin means “dew” or “sweat.” This word was given special meaning by mystics and in symbolic alchemy that persuaded Rosicrucians to establish linguistic connections linking the mystical understanding of this heavenly dew and the rose in the center of the Rose Cross. Khunrath believed the cosmic dew was strongest in the spring, when it should be collected and retained for use as a “universal solvent,” which is said to be “water that is not water” or the “blood of the green lion.”

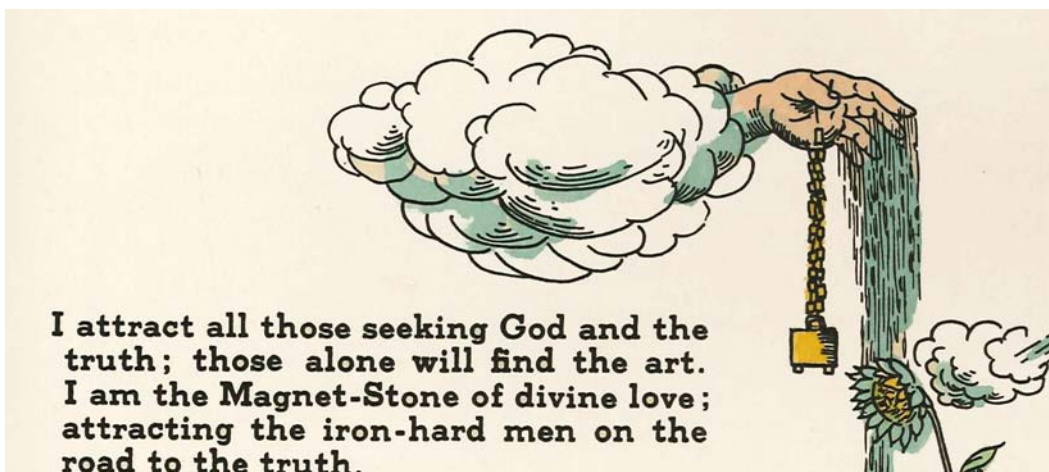
In the illustration, the dew falls on a sunflower that has its head turned from the Sun by a heavenly wind. This deflection from its normal attitude into the path of the universal solvent is a kind of baptism that, along with the magnetic effects, bestows an unusual power on the elements represented in this upper portion of the triangle. A Rosicrucian interpretation of what we have

examined could be that with cosmic guidance and the assistance of the “heavenly dew” (which we can reveal is actually a chemical compound secreted by glands within the brain as a consequence of meditation), we can bring about changes in ourselves that we never thought possible. This is symbolized by the sunflower turning away from the Sun, in opposition to its more usual action, which is to face the Sun.

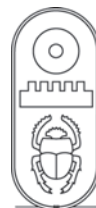
The dragons, usually depicted as being killed by the action of the Sun and the Moon, have risen above the plane where this could have been accomplished and thus reinforce the idea that the so-called “usual events and activities in our lives” can be transcended. For the alchemists, the dragon being killed by the Sun and the Moon was symbolic of the liquid metal mercury (dragon) being combined with gold and silver (the Sun and Moon), and while losing any capacity for further transformation, in the process it becomes something else.

The Rose and the Lily

Below this scene, the Sun and Moon project rays of light and energy towards each other and downwards onto the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of Jehoshaphat. In this section of the illustration, we are presented with an idea of opposites and further symbolic alchemical interactions. The word

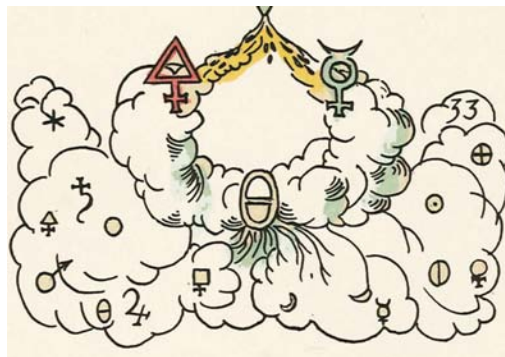


Detail from “The Hermetic Philosophy” in *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*. The Divine Hand suspends a magnet over the work.



“rose” itself was an alchemical code name for “tartar,” a product formed from tartaric acid. The previous chemical reactions resulted in the production of an amalgam of gold and silver, a silvery white compound (the lily). Now it is to be subjected to the cleansing and purifying chemical action of tartaric acid (the rose). In alchemical symbolism, a wedding between the male and female opposites symbolized this process, but our artist has chosen to use a different pair of symbols to illustrate this stage of the transformative process. Both the rose and the lily have ambiguous symbolism.

Rosicrucian interpretations parallel biblical usage and Khunrath certainly understood this imagery. The rose symbolizes both the soul and the mystery of resurrection and rebirth, which in the New Testament came to be symbolic of the Master Jesus. Although the lily has been seen as symbolic of purity, chastity, and intense love, from the perspective of the Rosicrucian, it symbolizes the mystical surrender of oneself into the Divine Hands and the Cosmic. Both lily and

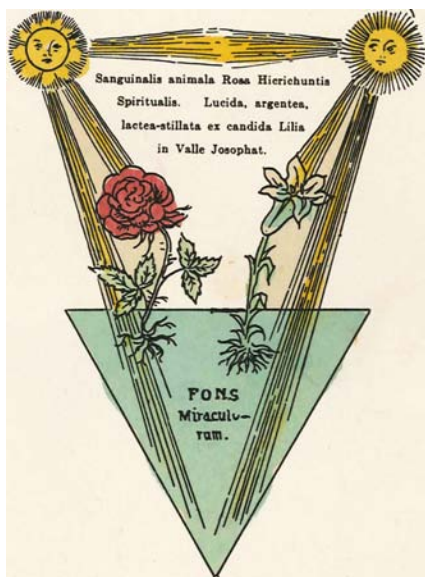


Detail from “The Hermetic Philosophy” in *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*. From the lower point of the triangle a vapor emanates that condenses to form Earth.

rose arise out of the Spring of Miracles (*Fons Miraculum*), that is the Fountain of Youth, which is also fed by the drops of heavenly dew that percolate down through the diagram. The Rosicrucian symbolism here is that by aligning ourselves with cosmic energies, and performing the correct acts of transmutation, we can achieve a blissful state like that sought by the philosophers of ancient times. As Khunrath might have believed, this could be either now or in a future existence (when it would be called “heaven”).

The Elements of the World

From the lower point of the triangle a vapor emanates that condenses to form Earth, the central symbol in the double cloud, surrounded by numerous other sigils (signs) representing the elements that go to make up the world. The symbol of the double cloud is to remind us that there is a world, or as we might say today, a “state,” that lies above our mundane world, but which is accessible to those who know the techniques. This state of peace and harmony is available to all those seekers who are prepared to listen to the voice of the inner guide, or in a Rosicrucian sense, the Cosmic. Despite the time difference between Khunrath and ourselves, it is almost certain that he too was aware of the inner world that forms a precious part of human experience.



Detail from “The Hermetic Philosophy” in *Secret Symbols of the Rosicrucians*. The Sun and Moon project rays of light and energy towards each other and downwards onto the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of Jehoshaphat.

A ROSICRUCIAN CHRISTMAS CARD

Paul Goodall, FRC

Frater Paul Goodall has expanded and revised his study of Rosicrucian Hermeticism especially for this issue of the [Rosicrucian Digest](#). The original version of this text appeared in the Rosicrucian Beacon in December 2002. The recognition of the importance of Rosicrucian Hermeticism continues to grow in academic and popular circles even today.



Since the seminal work of Dame Frances Yates¹ and the subsequent work of scholars such as the more recent Carlos Gilly, academics have to accept the existence and importance of the Rosicrucian stream of Hermeticism that influenced philosophical, religious, and political ideas at the beginning of European early modern history. Rosicrucianism and other esoteric philosophies existed not just on the fringe of the cultural, social, and political arena, but often played a central role in motivating important personalities. It is clear now, for example, that events leading up to the Thirty Years War (1618–1648)² in Europe cannot

be understood without recognizing the influence of Rosicrucianism upon individuals placed high in contemporary society.

The Manuscript

Bearing this in mind, we can consider with interest a document that came to light in early 1979. This was a manuscript on parchment discovered by the researcher Adam McLean (based in Glasgow) that had been designed and authored by none other than Michael Maier and named by the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh (now renamed the National Archives of Scotland) as “King James’s Christmas Card.”

The manuscript was originally presented to King James I (VI of Scotland) during the Christmas period of 1611. For copyright reasons it is not possible to include a digital scan of this artifact so we rely on a redrawn image, from the original manuscript, of the central figure of the rose by Adam McLean. Much of the crucial text in red that adorns the rose is almost invisible and can only be seen through the use of ultra-violet light. For this reason, we also rely on McLean’s investigations of the text.

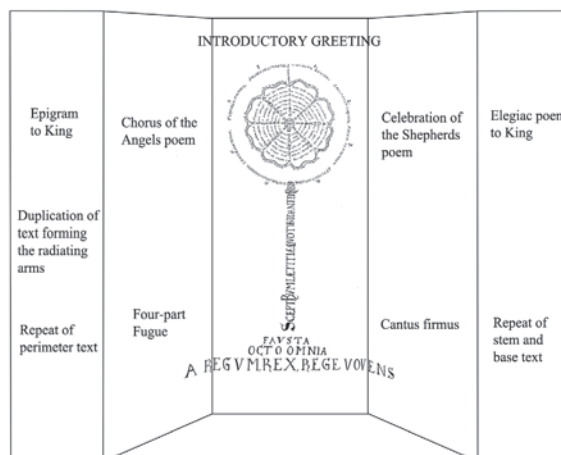
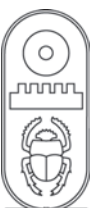


Diagram of the full manuscript.



Interestingly the manuscript predates the printing of the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614), the first of the Rosicrucian Manifestos by two years and also Maier's own published works. The document itself is quite large and measures 83.82 centimeters by 60.96 centimeters (33 inches by 24 inches) and although it may have been originally rolled up like a scroll, it is quite clear from examining the document that at some point it was folded longitudinally four times to enclose its contents. These four fold lines, whether deliberate or not, conveniently delineate each of the five column components that comprise the manuscript. The two outside columns are not as broad as the three inner ones.

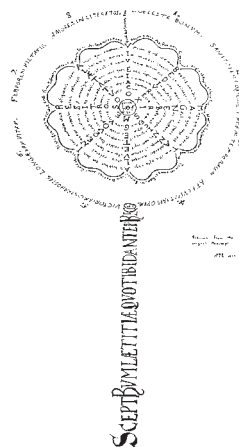
Once the two columns that flank either side of the center have been unfolded there is inscribed along the top of the manuscript and above the rose head a formal greeting to the king: ³

A greeting on the birthday of the Sacred King, to the most worshipful and energetic lord and most eminent James, King of Great Britain and Ireland, and Defender of the true faith, with a gesture of joyful celebration of the Birthday of the Lord, in most joy and fortune, we enter into the new auspicious year 1612. Dedicated and consecrated with humble service and submission, from Michael Maier, German, Count Palatine, Doctor of Medicine and Philosophy, Knight and Poet Laureate.

Looking at the central illustration one can see that the body of the rose is supported by a stem attached to a base, both of which are modeled from Latin texts. The stem followed by the base read together:

SCEPTRUM LAETITIAE QUO
TIBI DAN TE PRECO FAUSTA
OCTO OMNIA A REGVM, REX
REGE VOVENS.

The Scepter of joy, which I pray is given to you. Luck in all eight is



FAUSTA
OCTO OMNIA
A REGVM, REX, REGE VOVENS

Central figure on the Rosicrucian Christmas Card.

wished to the Kingdom, the King and the Court.

Arranged around the rose are eight inscriptions to which the above text refers:

1. COELESTE BONUM:
The blessing of heaven.
2. SANITATEM CORPORIS:
The health of the body.
3. PACEM TEMPORALEM:
A time of peace.
4. AFFLUENTIAM OPUM:
The rewards of work.
5. VICTORIAM CONTRAHOSTES:
Victory against enemies.
6. LONGAEVUM VITAM:
A long life.
7. FEARVOREM PIETATIS:
Fervent piety.
8. AMOREM IN LITERATOS:
Love of learning.

One cannot fail to admire the ingenuity of Maier when the relationship of the text within the petals and the radiating eight arms forming the divisions between the petals are examined. It can be seen that the letters making up each arm (in gold on the original) begins each line of text (in red) on the petal to the immediate right forming an acrostic. An example will suffice to demonstrate this; the bold type below indicates the arm

between the first and second petals. On the second petal then (under SANITATEM CORPORIS) the text reads:

Beatis omnibus
Est et Conorum
Divina merces
In sanitate
Vivere et
Robustum
Esse

With all happiness and enterprise,
the Divine Reward is to live in health
and be strong.

If one traces the path of the letters of the arms beginning at twelve o'clock and reading toward the center in each arm (then going clockwise), one gets:

VIVE IACOBE DIU REX
MAGNE BRITANNICE SALVE
TEGMINE QUO VERE SIT
ROSA LAETA TUO:

Long live James, King of Great
Britain, hail, may the Rose be joyful
under thy protection.

In the center of the rose we find VIVAT REX ET REGNUM (Long live the king and his reign) which, from its positioning, suggests that Maier was making a deliberate link between James and the symbol of the Rose. Placed directly around the perimeter of the rose and along the line traced by the petals in red ink is a poem addressed to King James, which adds emphasis to this: ⁴



The message of Christmas greetings set out in the shape of a rose and sent by Michael Maier to King James I in 1612.



Matthäus Merian, *Engraving of Michael Maier at age forty-eight*. From *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617).

Through the Divine, the King of Kings, may the King obtain all good fortune.

May England be guarded well by the angelic hand.

May twice-four blessings speed to his joyous scepter.

May the ROSE not be gnawed by the canker of the North Wind.

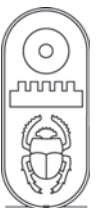
May the bounty of Almathea flourish with the fruit of the cornucopia.

May the gloomy Eris be banished from the Kingdom, and let Eros appear.

So that the Golden Age of the double-faced Janus may return.

May JESUS, who is both Divine and human, grant all this. Amen.

Flanking the Rose Cross emblem are two lengthy allegorical poems full of classical mythological overtones⁵ even though they refer to the biblical Nativity. The one to the left, forming the second column, is entitled “The Chorus of the Angels Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Michael,” and the one to the right making up the fourth column, “Menaleas and Thirsis, the celebration of the Shepherds.” Beneath the Angels’ chorus is a four-part musical *fugue* singing praise to God while under the Shepherds’ chorus, and accompanying the *fugue*, is a repeating *cantus firmus*.⁶ The red





Frederick V and Elizabeth Stuart as King and Queen of Bavaria, with Four Lions (1619). Engraving created in Prague in honor of their coronation. Collection of the National Portrait Gallery.

ink of the libretto is barely visible like that of the red text in the Rose figure.

The two outside columns, one and five, contain addresses to the king in the form of an epigram (*Epigramma ad Reg*) and an elegiac poem (*Elegia ad Reg*) respectively; humor on the one hand and lament on the other. Both are signed *Maier: Supplicans* which seems to reflect the nature of these personal appeals and strengthens the idea of the document as a propitiatory or conciliatory device. No doubt, this is in line with Maier's political motives. Beneath the epigram in the first column the text of the radiating arms of the rose figure and the text surrounding the rose head are both duplicated. Similarly, the text from the stem and base of the rose emblem is repeated under the elegiac poem in the fifth column.

Background

It is interesting to note that a similar manuscript was later discovered in the early nineteen eighties at the British Library showing the same handwriting and style and addressed to James's son, Prince Henry. This manuscript was sent at the same time as the document we are considering, confirming the authenticity of "King James's Christmas

Card" and certainly demonstrating Maier's intent to promote the Order of the Rose Cross. Although it is not certain that Maier presented these manuscripts personally,⁷ he was certainly in England by November of 1612 for on the sixth of that month he was attending the funeral of Prince Henry as a representative of Frederick V, the Elector Palatine (now Southern Germany).

Frederick had already visited England the previous month to court King James's daughter, Elizabeth. A political and religious alliance was being forged between the strongly Protestant Britain and the equally Protestant Palatinate. For Rosicrucians, their utopian aspirations could only be realized by living and working freely in a country where Protestantism flourished and so it was in their interest to promote this union.

Another event occurring in 1612 that seemed to thwart the plans of the Order was the death of Emperor Rudolf II, the ruler of the Habsburg Empire in Europe. This monarch was quite extraordinary, and from his Bohemian capital of Prague⁸ had actively encouraged and promoted esoteric studies, particularly alchemy. The loss of this patron made the task of ensuring the success of

the marriage of Frederick V to the Princess Elizabeth crucial to the advancement of Rosicrucianism in seventeenth century European society.

Conclusion

The manuscripts speak for themselves, of course, but Maier (who, incidentally, was employed by Rudolf II as physician and advisor before his death) certainly had an agenda in coming to England. He was preparing the ground for the political alliance and marriage mentioned above. He was also moving in the circles of high society and meeting many important figures including Robert Fludd. It is not to be forgotten that Francis Bacon was also a contemporary personality.

It is interesting to speculate how the king may have received his presentation of a Rosicrucian Christmas Card. Would the symbolism have been lost on him or did he have some knowledge of the import of the Rose and Cross combination that Maier knew would have an accord with him? At any rate, the royal event went ahead and the Elector Palatine, Frederick V, was married to Princess Elizabeth on February 14, 1613 in the royal chapel of Whitehall.

Unfortunately the joy was short lived. After having reigned in Heidelberg, Frederick

was offered the throne of Bohemia and reigned in Prague during the winter of 1619–1620. The two were known as the “Winter King and Queen of Bohemia.” However, the Catholic armies were moving against him, culminating in the Battle of the White Mountain outside Prague on November 8, 1620 in which Frederick’s forces were totally defeated. It was the end of any immediate plans of establishing the Rosicrucian dream of a utopian state.

Postscript

Readers may be interested to know how they can see the subject of this article for themselves. The catalog number for the document is GD241/212 and is described as “MS Poems and music dedicated to King James VI by Michael Maier [the German alchemist and Rosicrucian], Count Palatine [sic] and doctor of medicine and philosophy, 1612.” It is not possible to view a digital image online and you have to arrange a visit to the search rooms in Edinburgh to view the subject. All the information you require can be gained at www.nas.gov.uk/searchRooms/default.asp. If the reader wishes to enquire about the second manuscript to Prince Henry, the reference number is British Library Royal MS 14B XVI.

ENDNOTES

¹ Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

² In European history, a series of wars fought by various nations for various reasons, including religious, dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries. Its destructive campaigns and battles occurred over most of Europe, and, when it ended with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the map of Europe had been irrevocably changed. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Thirty Years War”).

³ All Latin translations from Adam McLean.

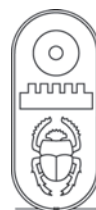
⁴ Adam McLean, “The Impact of the Rosicrucian Manifestos in Britain” in *Das Erbe des Christian Rosenkreutz*, ed. F. A. Janssen (Stuttgart: E. Hauswedell, 1988), 176.

⁵ Adam McLean, “A Rosicrucian Manuscript of Michael Maier,” *The Hermetic Journal* 5 (Autumn 1979): 6.

⁶ Joscelyn Godwin, “Michael Maier’s Christmas Greeting to King James I and VI (1611),” *Atalanta Fugiens* (Glasgow: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1987), 177.

⁷ Ron Heisler, “Michael Maier and England,” *The Hermetic Journal* 43 (1989): 119.

⁸ Rudolf moved the imperial court of the Habsburgs from Vienna to Prague, which became a center for those interested in esoteric studies. He had a large library in his palace and entertained the most famous alchemists and astrologers of the time, among who were John Dee, Giordano Bruno, and Johannes Kepler.



ANCIENT MAGIC: A SURVEY OF THE TECHNICAL HERMETICA

Kristin Pfanku, M.A., SRC

Less well known than the *Philosophical Hermetica* of the [Corpus Hermeticum](#), a large number of ancient technical or practical volumes on magic, alchemy, astrology, and a host of other subjects are also part of the Hermetic legacy. In this survey, Professor Kristin Pfanku introduces readers to the technical Hermetica and its wide array of themes. At first, these texts seem very different from the sublime mysticism of the *Philosophical Hermetica*, however, modern scholarship indicates that both are part of a consistent whole, the Hermetic transmission of the wisdom of ancient Egypt. The technical Hermetica begin here below and ascend, while the *Philosophical Hermetica* complete the journey above. As the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes* teaches, “As above, so below, and as below, so above, to accomplish the marvels of the One Work.”



Erect and dignified, the ancient Egyptian stands, swathed in a simple cloak, with shining armband and bracelet, scepter in his right hand. In front of him, smoke from an incense burner wafts upward from a small table. A shooting star, the astrological sign for Mercury, and the letter “A” gleam in the background. This ancient Egyptian is The Magus, represented on the first of twenty-two cards of the Tarot’s Major Arcana, part of an early Rosicrucian publication, which blends traditional Tarot themes with Egyptian symbolism.¹

The Magus. The Magician. The one who uses secret knowledge of forces in the natural and divine worlds to perform miracles. Although Egyptian magic gradually changed

as the Greeks and Romans influenced it more than two thousand years ago, magic was still very much alive in Greco-Roman Egypt, where the technical Hermetica were created.

This ancient sense of magic can be seen in these technical Hermetica, the textual counterparts of the philosophical Hermetica. Focusing primarily on esoteric magic, astrology, and the alchemy of the last century BCE to the third century CE, these works build on Aristotle’s objective investigation and classification of phenomena, but mingled with this is a belief in universal forces that can be advantageous once one knows the esoteric, magical knowledge. The technical Hermetica show the human will and ability to penetrate and make use of the secret, hidden powers of the natural and divine worlds.



The Magus of the Egyptian Tarot. From the Rosicrucian Archives.



Egyptian Scribe Set (New Kingdom, 1549–1069 BCE). Since Thoth/Hermes was the patron of scribes, it is natural that the scribe's tools of ink and papyrus would have magical applications. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

The *Greek Magical Papyri*

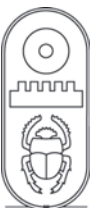
The *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM), a collection of hundreds of spells, formulae, rituals, and hymns, show the diverse uses for magic in late antiquity. The papyri, which contain material from Greco-Roman Egypt of the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, represent an eclectic blend of traditions and were created to control what the ancients saw as the “unfathomable scramble of energies coming out of the universe.”² The magicians using these spells functioned as “crisis managers”³ who, with their handbooks of magic and code words, could persuade people that the magicians could make things work in a world where nothing seemed to work the way it used to.⁴

This catalog of spells spans nearly every situation imaginable. The spells relate to everyday life (catching a thief, keeping bugs out of the house, healing a scorpion sting), social relationships (gaining favor with another, going before a superior, getting friends), romance (attracting a lover, binding a lover, separating a man from a woman), and other miscellaneous desires (invoking a daemon or deity, bringing a vision or dream,

foretelling the future, attaining invisibility). Those using the spells had a multiplicity of spirits and deities to invoke. Moreover, the beauty of magic was its offering an extraordinary number of options to its practitioners.

The spells call for specific ingredients and actions to be followed very precisely. In PGM 1.232–47, for example (a memory spell), the one performing the ritual must take “hieratic papyrus” and write the “prescribed names” with Hermaic ink.⁵ The names must then be washed off into spring water from seven springs. This water had to be drunk on an empty stomach for seven days while the Moon was in the east. Then five lines of specified text had to be written on a strip of papyrus, washed off, and drunk. The ink had to be composed of six specific ingredients, which were burned together.⁶ The magical power of the names was produced after they were washed off and consumed.⁷

The *Greek Magical Papyri* promised their readers and users magical methods of controlling the natural and divine worlds for concrete, short-term purposes. Still, some of the *Greek Magical Papyri* move beyond



the mundane realm. PGM 4.475–829, for example, starts by requiring herb and spice juices and addresses the forces of earth, air, water, and fire with mystical noises. But the invocation asks for “immortal birth. . . to my underlying nature, so that. . . I may gaze upon the immortal.”⁸ The initiate seeks divine rebirth through magical techniques.

Although many classical scholars have denigrated the magical Hermetic texts as merely superstitious, others see them as a collection of great religious literature.⁹ The *Greek Magical Papyri* represent a broad range of religions and cultures, including Greek and Jewish, with an especially strong influence from Egyptian religion. They also reveal significant insights as to how Jews, Christians, and pagans perceived their world.¹⁰ Magic strongly influenced the educated population in Hellenistic and Roman society as well as the less educated.¹¹

Cyranides: The Forces of Nature

Cyranides, another of the technical Hermetic texts, illustrates the secret forces

of nature and how they can be learned and magically used to ensure success, protection, and healing. A compilation from several earlier treatises, *Cyranides* dates to the first or second century CE (though a large portion goes back to the Hellenistic period from the fourth century BCE forward).

Book 1 (of six surviving books) of *Cyranides* uses the magical characteristics of animals, plants, birds, stones, and fish, which represent the four elements of nature: earth, air, water, and fire. With all four elements used in concert, the magical power of the remedy was strengthened. Further, the names of the bird, plant, stone, and fish all begin with the same letter and in some cases are homonyms, which, for the ancients, increased the curative power even further, since the word held the essence of the object it described. At the close of each chapter, directions for creating an amulet are given (a stone engraved with the animal, plant, stone, and fish for that chapter) as well as instructions as to when to wear it and what benefits the wearer can expect.

For example, in book 1, chapter 3 (entitled “Gamma”), the plant, bird, fish, and stone all begin with the Greek letter “gamma.” The accompanying description of the amulet reads:

If you engrave in a gnathios stone an owl and under its feet the fish glaucus, you enclose the latter’s eyes and you wear it. . . , you will seem noble to the people when darkness has come. For those who see you will think that you are inspired by the god. When daylight comes they will trust everything you say. If you wear it in bed. . . , it will show you unerring dreams.¹²

Although the owl (*glauco*) was thought to be the bearer of the evil eye,¹³ the embodiment of envy (*phthonos / invidia*) and therefore an evil omen, the owl’s ability



Hathor Amulets (Second Intermediate Period–New Kingdom, 1650–1069 BCE). The creation and use of amulets was almost universal in the ancient Mediterranean. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.



Morning Flowers. Hermetists have always been interested in the mystical and medical properties of plants. From the Rosicrucian archives.

to foretell the future (the amulet promises “unerring dreams”)¹⁴ is frequently mentioned in *Cyranides* and is sacred to Athena (the owl, too, has her wisdom). That the amulet with its owl confers a benefit on its wearer at night and in daytime comes from the idea that the owl is both a nocturnal bird and a Sun emblem in antiquity.¹⁵ Lastly, the fish (*glaucus*) corresponds to a sea deity named Glaucus, famous for the gift of prophecy.¹⁶ So both the owl and fish denote divination and prophecy, promising it to the hopeful amulet wearer.

The twenty-four amulets in book 1 promise success of all kinds, cures for medical problems, respect from others, freedom from fear—in general, a plethora of remedies for nearly all situations.

The theme dominating the amulet description is verbal magic, verbal homeopathy. Each of the four elements in the composition has its magical function, but the combination and magical link among the elements make the amulet more powerful.

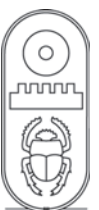
The magical link is usually a verbal one, using the alphabet, homonyms, or homophones.¹⁷

Cyranides is the largest surviving example of Greek literature that treats a broad spectrum of natural phenomena, highlighting their magical and medical uses.¹⁸ This work would later have significant influence on medico-magical thought in Western Europe.

Hermetic Botany and Medicine

There are other botanical works in the collection of technical Hermetica. The *Liber Sacer* (astrological botany), *From Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius: On Plants and the Seven Planets*, *On the Plants of the Twelve Signs by Hermes Trismegistus*, and the *Holy Book of Hermes to Asclepius* could be termed botanical. This last work uses plants and the decans as a basis for its botanical prescriptions. (A decan is a subdivision of the area covered by a sign of the zodiac.)

Other Hermetic treatises deal with astrological medicine, including *Kanonion*



or *Organon of Hermes Trismegistus*, *Iatromathematika of Hermes Trismegistus to Ammon the Egyptian*, and the *Book of Asclepius Called Myriogenesis*. *Myriogenesis* looks at the medical effects of the theory of correspondence between the human microcosm and the universal macrocosm.

In addition, one pharmacological Hermetic text still survives: *Fifteen Stars, Stones, Plants, and Images*, which singles out particular stars as determinants of pharmaceutical power.

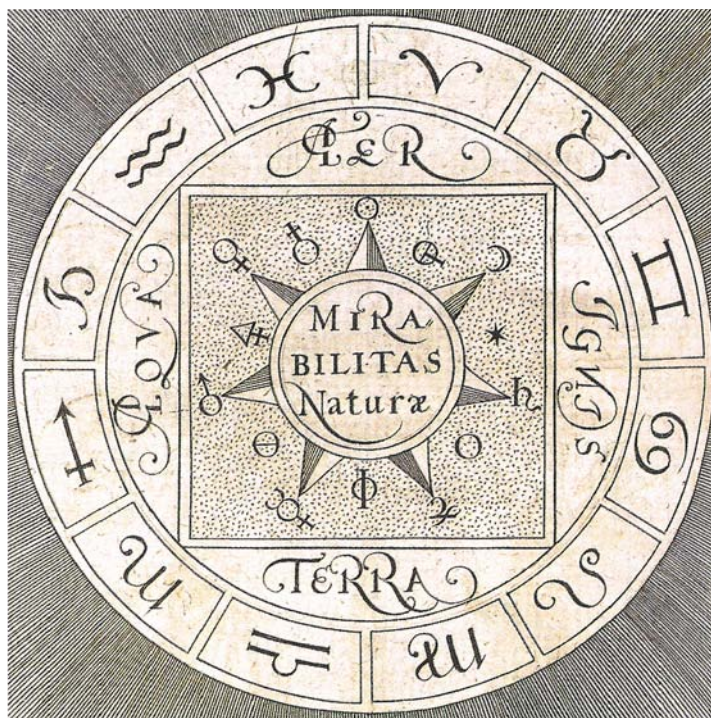
Hermetic Astrology

In addition to the Hermetic works that discuss the magic of the forces in the natural world, several Hermetic treatises deal with astrology, which was a mix of Babylonian and Greek streams of thinking and practice.¹⁹ The most important work, the *Liber Hermetis*, originally from the third century BCE, gives the fullest discussion on astrology. The work is a composite, with pieces spanning the period of the third

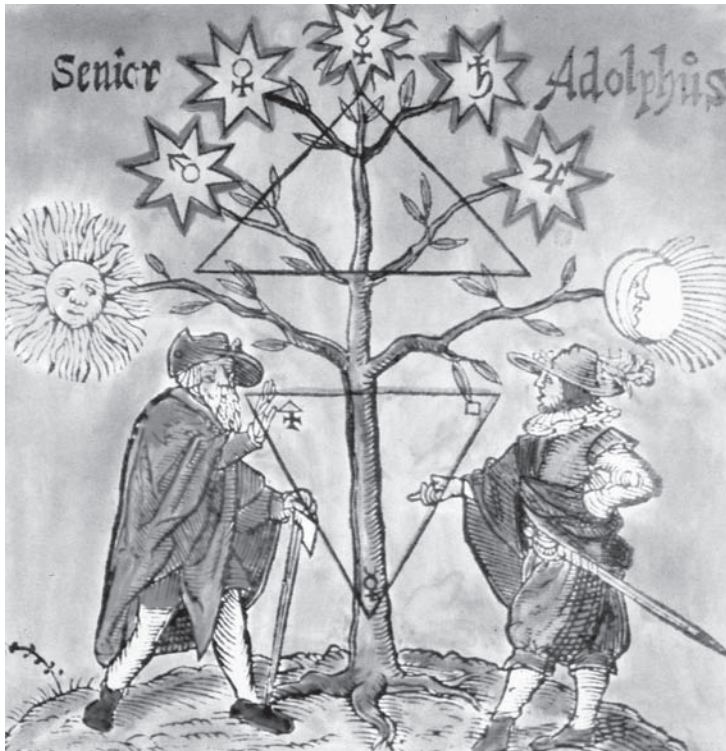
century BCE (astrological material used by Egyptian priests in the temples) to the third or fourth centuries CE.²⁰

The first section of the book deals with the thirty-six decans, the forces that influence over one-third of a sign of the zodiac, each influencing ten degrees of the zodiacal circle. The thirty-six decans are listed; each is linked to what was considered the proper sign of the zodiac and related to a planet. Each decan is named, connected with a sign, and linked to a geographic area and an area of the human body influenced by the decan. The astrologer needed this information to make specific forecasts²¹ and, in a sense, functioned as a kind of magician in possessing and using arcane astrological knowledge. The decans' influence on the terrestrial human world shows the "as above, so below" principle on which all astrology (and Hermetism) is founded.

The *Liber Hermetis* compares with the sixth excerpt of a Hermetic text found in the *Stobaei Hermetica*, an anthology of philosophical Hermetic excerpts collected



Michael Maier, *Alchemical Wheel with the Zodiac* (1618), in *Viatorium*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.



Durch Johann Bringern, Senior and Adolphus with the alchemical tree of the metals between them (1613), in *Occulta Philosophia*. From the Rosicrucian Archives.

there are the astrological treatises the *Panaretos*, the *Secret Method of Hermes Trismegistus*, and *On the Denomination and Power of the Twelve Places*. Other works such as *Brontologion* discussed the meaning of thunder as it occurred in different months while *Peri seismom* linked earthquakes to astrological signs.

Astrology held a prominent place in the Hellenistic and Roman world-view and produced

by fifth century Greek compiler Joannes Stobaeus. In this excerpt, in a dialogue with his disciple Tat, Hermes explains the role that the decans play in determining what takes place in the world. At the conclusion of the dialogue, this knowledge of the decans is made a requirement for the vision of the Deity, which fosters an understanding of all reality.²² For the writer of this Hermetic text, the decans had a very significant role in the cosmic system, and understanding the cosmos and how it functioned required an awareness of the role of these decans. However, later philosophical or spiritual Hermetists insisted on the soul's need to transcend the realm of fate before it could be joined with the Divine.²³

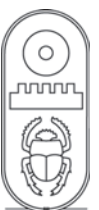
Other astrological works from the technical Hermetica include excerpts from the work attributed to Nechepso and Petosiris, an Egyptian pharaoh and high priest, respectively (the manuscript dates from about 300 BCE). It is an astrological textbook used as the principal source material for all later Greek astrology.²⁴ Further,

much Hermetic literature.²⁵ Its ideas greatly influenced both the technical and philosophical Hermetica.²⁶

Hermetic Alchemy

Hermetic writers were also attracted to the magic of alchemy, the transformation of base metals into precious ones (silver and gold). Before the common era, many alchemical tracts surfaced which were attributed to Hermes and others. The last of these treatises (of about thirty), which date from the second or third century CE, exist as fragments. One of the longer fragments, *Anepigraphos*, is an extended metaphor on creating silver by cooking and melting several different substances. Another alchemical work, *Isis the Prophetess to Her Son Horus*, is a dialogue in which the angel Amnael unveils the mystery of alchemy.

Some of the alchemists had a higher goal, which related to the human soul and its connection to the Divine. The alchemists' initial preoccupation with imitating the color and appearance of precious metals



gradually evolved into the thought that metals were made of a lifeless physical base or “body” and an animating principle or “soul” which gave uniqueness to the physical base.²⁷ They believed they could transmute base metals into gold by manipulating the “soul.”²⁸ This body/soul distinction inspired the more philosophically inclined alchemists to use alchemical imagery to describe the human soul’s purification.²⁹ In this way, the alchemical process became symbolic of a spiritual experience, one of transformation and renewal.

Still, most of the extant Hermetic alchemical literature is late, and none of the treatises shows much individual spiritual sentiment.³⁰ However, with the alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis, who lived in Alexandria around 300 CE, we see a spiritual quality in his alchemical work that has come from his reading of the philosophical Hermetica.³¹

Creating Order and Enhancing Life

In this eclectic mix that make up the technical Hermetica, different types of and uses for magic can be seen. From the

Greek Magical Papyri and *Cyranides* to the astrological and alchemical texts, we see the human will to use magical knowledge to enhance life and health, create order and stability, and advance inchoate sciences such as alchemy. Many ancients undoubtedly viewed magic as mysterious and were awestruck by its efficacy in various situations. The Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, too, teaches its members marvelous things which might seem magical to others; however, the Order bases its teachings on natural laws that govern the universe. Still, the manifestations are not necessarily less awe-inspiring for that.

Scholar Antoine Faivre sums up the main point of Hermetic philosophy this way:

The characteristic of all Hermesian gnosis is to. . . [emphasize] human power and will in the climb or reascension [toward spiritual enlightenment]. . . . Each human being is considered to be a potential magus who can accomplish marvelous actions.³²

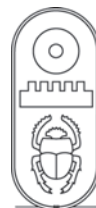
As we readers of the technical Hermetica reflect upon the techniques and philosophy of the ancient Hermetists, even though very different from our own, we may better appreciate the forms their magic took. This may help us rekindle our own contemporary sense of awe, inspire us to spiritualize our experience, and, if we choose, gradually to become magi ourselves.



Athanasius Kircher, *The Sunflower* (1641) in *Magnes sive de Arte Magnetica*. From the Rosicrucian Archives.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This series was published in 1933 by then Emperor of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, H. Spencer Lewis. The images of the cards are available online at http://www.rosicrucian.org/publications/digest/digest1_2007/table_of_contents.html.
- ² Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), xlvii.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid., 9.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., 48.
- ⁹ Ibid., xlv–xlv.
- ¹⁰ John Scarborough, “Hermetic and Related Texts in Classical Antiquity,” *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 32.
- ¹¹ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 86.
- ¹² Maryse Waegeman, *Amulet and Alphabet* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1987), 27.
- ¹³ Ibid., 28.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 29.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 224.
- ¹⁸ Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xxxv.
- ¹⁹ Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 68. See note 11.
- ²⁰ William C. Grese, “Magic in Hellenistic Hermeticism,” *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 46.
- ²¹ Ibid., 47.
- ²² Grese, “Magic in Hellenistic Hermeticism,” 46. See note 20.
- ²³ Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 78. See note 11.
- ²⁴ <http://projecthindsight.com/reference/catalog.html>
- ²⁵ Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 91. See note 11.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 89.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 89–90.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 90.
- ³¹ Ibid., 91.
- ³² Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1995), 59.



THE HERMETIC MUSEUM, 1625

Peter Bindon, M.A., FRC

From *The Secret Rosicrucian Tradition*
(San Jose: Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC, 2004).

The Hermetic principle of “as above, so below” is illustrated in this emblem first published in 1625 in the collection, [The Hermetic Museum](#) in Frankfurt. Frater Peter Bindon, considers the mystical meanings of this image.



“Cosmic Harmony,” thought Pythagoras, “is more than simple relationships between musical notes.” Well, he might have made such a statement when he discovered that musical harmonic relationships reflect simple numerical proportions. Then again, his discovery may have occurred the other

way about, he may have discovered that numerical proportions could be applied to musical notes. If this sounds something like a “chicken and egg” story, you are right.

We have considered in another place the adage “as above so below, as below so above,” reputed to be first recorded on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus. The illustration is an alchemical example of this adage. It first appeared as one of only two illustrations in the first edition of *The Hermetic Museum*, published in Frankfurt in 1625. Although not presented in our illustration, the original illustration was accompanied by a text in Latin which can be translated as follows:



Engraving from *Musaeum Hermeticum*, Frankfurt, 1625. Color version © 2011 by Adam McLean.

The things that are in the realms above are also in the realms beneath; what heaven shows is oft found on Earth. Fire and flowing water are contrary to one another; happy thou, if thou canst unite them: let it suffice thee to know this.

Above and Below

To emphasize the statement that the upper world is reflected in the lower and vice versa, the illustrator has chosen to duplicate the pale crescent containing the Sun, Moon, and five stars as a dark crescent beneath bearing the same images. But what about Pythagoras you ask? His contribution to this engraving comes through the Kabbalists, who added many of his numerical concepts to those inherited from their mystical Jewish ancestors. From the Kabbalists, who maintained their studies in Spain, France, and Portugal until the late fourteen hundreds when they were expelled from these areas, Rosicrucians inherited the Tree of Life which shows diagrammatically the human relationship to the Divine.

One of Pythagoras's contributions was to attribute gender to numbers, the male odd numbers being active and generative, the even female numbers being passive and receptive. He also provided descriptions of the typical attributes of these numbers, based primarily on his observations concerning the relative place of each number in the harmonic system of the universe. Rosicrucian teachings discuss these concepts at certain stages on the student's path, but for our present discussion it is sufficient to see how the engraver used some of these ideas in our illustration.

Pythagorean Numbers

The central figure holds the Seal of Solomon which stands for the one, the Philosopher's Stone and ultimate goal that mystics seek to attain. The Seal is produced by the union of the two, male and female, indicated by the alchemical triangles for

water and fire, when joined emblematic of alchemical perfection and plenty. The engraving also shows one Apollo who plays his lyre in the symbolic underworld. He plays to the six Muses themselves symbolic of the six alchemical metals and their celestial counterparts. Together they look towards the well from which the rope and bucket are strangely absent.

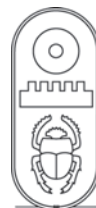
The biblical Jesus asked the women of Samaria to give him water from the well, the draught of knowledge and indeed of life. This well reminds us that we too can access the hidden or arcane knowledge of the earth that is symbolically hidden in the well. Water has always been a precious commodity as we can testify. We can conclude from the absence of the means to draw the water, that we must devise the method of accessing the sacred principles from within the depths of this well using our own initiative.

The three figures seated beneath the trees emphasize that we are dealing with the Law of the Triangle in this instance, three being the geometrical number that gives us the first solid figure—one being a point and two defining a line, but three providing a triangle. The presence of three in our illustration is underlined by the three sides of the triangles and the multiple triangles that can be found in the Seal of Solomon and the three cherubs providing the symbol for air in the top right-hand corner.

The Elements of Creation

The other three corners of the illustration are filled with more quaint drawings representing the other three elements of Creation: the salamander representing fire, ship and whale indicating water, and the castle solidly grounded on Earth. The four elements are united in the perfected work of the philosopher and the mystic, represented in the one we have previously noted.

Five stars separate the Sun and the Moon, active male and passive female. Lest





Greek Orthodox shrine of the Well at Samaria, 1934–1939.
G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of
Congress / Wikimedia Commons.

readers think that passiveness is in some way a lesser role for the feminine principle, let me emphasize that the nurturing role of absolute creativity has always been held as supremely important in the development of the mystical life. Such development cannot come to fruition in an atmosphere of hectic action. Creativity and all the other qualities cherished in the mystical life demand a certain amount of passive reflection and quiet before they manifest. The participation of the feminine is absolutely indispensable in mysticism as it is in all of human activity. The five is emblematic of humanity as a whole. There are five projections from the trunk of the human body (head and four limbs)

that emphasize this numerical similarity, our hands and feet are constant reminders of our relationship to the number five and especially five is the number of the human senses.

A. E. Waite, that prolific author of the nineteenth century esoteric revival, comments in his preface to a translation of *The Hermetic Museum* that it had appeared after many had been disillusioned by the difficulties of alchemy and were just being “awakened to the conviction that if alchemy was true at all, it was not to be learned from books, or, at least, from any books that had hitherto been written on the subject.” The mystical and allegorical character of alchemical symbolism had been brought to the fore.



POEM WITHOUT WORDS

Olga Deulofeu, SRC

Soror Deulofeu is an artist, writer, and poet who has exhibited her work at the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose as well as in many other venues. In both symbol and verse, she shares with us her reflections on Hermetic Truths.

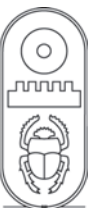
So, understand the Light . . . , and make friends with it.—*Corpus Hermeticum*

The souls inhabit the air
And their deity is the moon.
Those are souls who come and go,
Ignoring the void.
They will cross the elements
In different bodies,
Falling and rising, rising and falling.
One day they will fly already purified
Passing through the seven divine spheres.
Nothing on this Earth is real
Just a false mirror of Divinity's—
goodness.
Poimandres, the shepherd of men
and women
Is the immovable cosmos
That created the movable one
And the rational cosmic person.
O divine, invisible craftsperson
Wrapped in the mysteries
Becomes visible in the Sun's fire,

In the land, in the air,
And in the blue water.
The Deity didn't use hands
To create the universe
Because the Divine word became light,
Hate and love, war and peace,
Black and white,
Are only dualities leading to oneness.
The essential person will seek beauty,
Leaving behind the twelve vices of ignorance.
One will never be alone in the dark path.
Nor in one's deepest dreams without a guide,
Because the only ones who will be lost
Are those unable to hear the pious
music of the Divine.
They will reject beauty.
And unable to be quiet,
They won't understand.
For in the silence there are wise words
That only those who are quiet can hear.



Olga Deulofeu, SRC, *Poem Without Words*.





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