

05. The Hermetic Corpus and Magic

1. Hermes Trismegistus

(i) Appearance of Hermetic writings (1st-2nd cent. A.D.)

- Greek texts thought to be translations of ancient Egyptian texts written by Hermes Trismegistus.
 - *Egyptian priest, philosopher, and law-giver.*
 - *An amalgam of Thoth (Egyptian scribe, god of wisdom) and Hermes (Greek counterpart).*



(ii) Prophecy of Christianity

- Texts contain references to:
 - *The Son of God.*
 - *The Creative Word.*
 - *A creation story similar to the Book of Genesis.*
- Early Christians appropriate Hermetic texts as a method of legitimization.
- An appeal to *prisca theologia* (ancient theology).

(iii) Prophecy of Platonism/Neoplatonism

- Texts contain references to:
 - *A tripartate hierarchy.*
 - *A creation story similar to the Timaeus.*
 - *References to the dual nature of humans.*
- Texts are thus linked to *prisca sapientia* (ancient wisdom).
- Early Christians can view texts as legitimizing Christianity in both the traditions of *prisca theologia* and *prisca sapientia*.

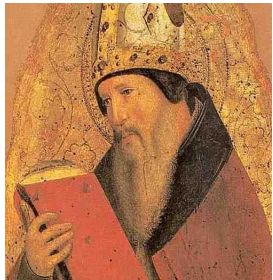
(iv) Further legitimization

- Early figures in Catholic Church on Hermes T:



Lactantius
(~240-~320 A.D.)

"And although he was a man, yet he was of great antiquity, and most fully imbued with every kind of learning, so that the knowledge of many subjects and arts acquired for him the name of Trismegistus. He wrote books, and those in great numbers, relating to the knowledge of divine things, in which he asserts the majesty of the supreme and only God, and makes mention of Him by the same names which we use - God and Father." (*The Divine Institutes*, Book I, Chap. VI.)

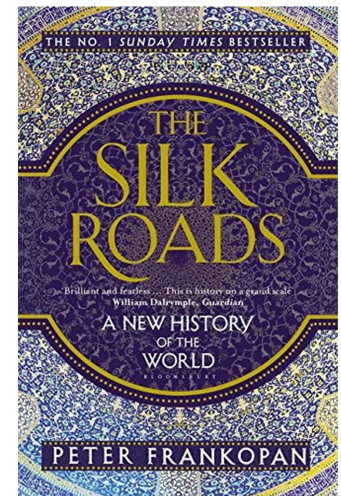


Augustine of Hippo
(354-430 A.D.)

"The Egyptian Hermes, whom they call Trismegistus, had a different opinion concerning those demons... This Egyptian, however, says that there are some gods made by the supreme God, and some made by men... [H]e asserts that visible and tangible images are, as it were, only the bodies of the gods, and that there dwell in them certain spirits, which have been invited to come into them, and which have power to inflict harm, or to fulfil the desires of those by whom divine honors and services are rendered to them." (*The City of God*, Book VII, Chap. 23.)

(v) Middle Ages (5th-14th cent): Loss of texts

- 5th cent: Demise of western Roman Empire
- Economic/political/cultural centers:
 - *Islamic Central Asia, Egypt, the Levant*
 - *South Asia (India)*
 - *China*
 - *Byzantine Empire: Constantinople*
- 1453: Ottoman conquest of Constantinople
 - *Migration of Byzantine scholars to Italian city states...*



(vi) Renaissance (15th cent.): Recovery of texts

- 1460: Marsilio Ficino translates *Asclepius* and *Hermetic Corpus* into Latin.
 - *Wide dissemination; authenticity unquestioned.*
 - *Large influence on Renaissance culture.*



Mosaic of Hermes T., Siena Cathedral (1480s)



Siena Cathedral (built 1215-1263)

Yates' Thesis:
Large influence on Renaissance magic and development of early modern science.

Francis Yates (1899-1981)

(vii) Casaubon Dating (1614)

- Isaac Casaubon dates Hermetic Corpus to 100-300 A.D.
- Textual analysis suggests texts were written after early Greek and early Christian works.
- Gradual (but not complete) decline of influence thereafter.



Isaac Casaubon
(1599-1614)

Why were the texts written and by whom?

Possible explanation: deliberate Christian forgeries.

- *Reflect spiritualized Platonism of 1st-3rd cent. Hellenistic Egypt: A return to ancient wisdom (Egypt) coupled with Neoplatonism and Christianity.*
- *Christianity in heavy competition with other sects.*
- *Problem of legitimizing a minority subculture in the melting pot of Hellenistic Egypt.*

2. Hermetic Writings

- Attributed to Hermes T:

- (i) "Philosophical Hermetica":

- Hermetic Corpus: 14 essays (first of which is *Pimander*)
 - *Asclepius*

- (ii) "Technical Hermetica": Essays on practical magic, alchemy, astrology (*Ex*: "The Emerald Tablet of Hermes")



- Influenced by Hermes T:

- *Picatrix*: 11th cent. text on talismanic magic by unknown Arabic author.



(a) *Pimander (Poimandres)*

- Egyptian Genesis story: description of creation of cosmos.

Metaphysics

Nous-God

Nous-Demiurge
(craftsman-mind)

Seven Governors
(planets)

Natural World
4 elements
animals

- In the beginning: "light" and "darkness".
- "Darkness" becomes a "watery nature".
- "From the light a holy word mounted upon the watery nature."
- Nous-God (mind) = "life and life".
- "By speaking gave birth to a second mind."
Luminous Word = Son of God.
- Craftsman-mind = god of fire and spirit (*breath*).
- Produces 7 governors (planets).
- Governors produce elements; elements produce natural world.

Characteristics of Humans ("Egyptian Adam")

- "In the image of God": life and light (God) = soul and intellect (human)
 - Thus: Possesses creative powers.
- Intentional Fall: "Falls in love" with nature and takes on material form.
 - Thus: Possesses double nature: divine part and material part.
- Debased by material part:
 - Comes under domination of planets/fate.
 - Divided into sexes; dies; reproduces.
 - Forgets divine nature.
- Purpose of life: learn to understand *nous* within (knowledge of the divine).

Example of pessimistic Gnosticism

- The world is essentially evil.
- *Gnosis* (knowledge) is obtained by escape and reunion with the divine.
- Emphasis on hierarchical structure of the world, as opposed to its unity.
- Suggests: Pessimistic magus must learn passwords and signs to rid himself of evil influences in upward journey (no drawing *down* of magic *into* world).

(b) Asclepius

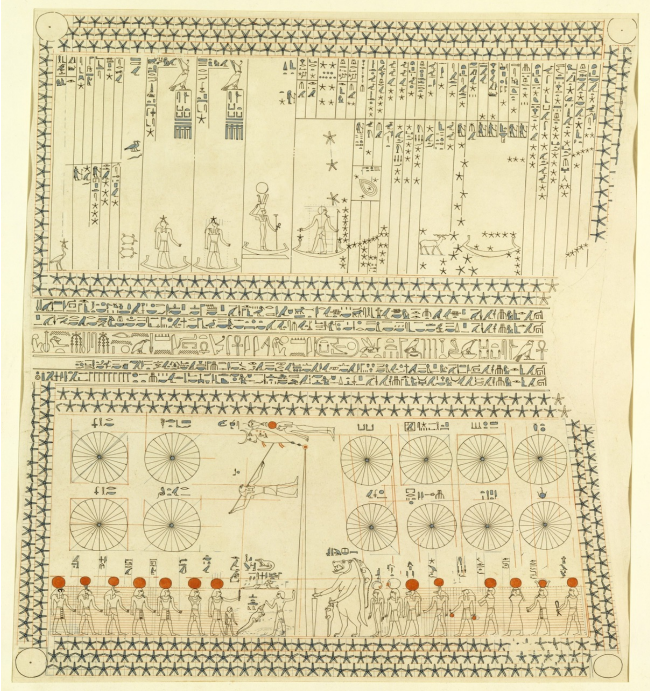
Metaphysics

The One/The All

Heaven
(7 planets, 36 decans)

Material World

- Decans = Egyptian gods of time (one for every 10° segment of Zodiac): hold power over every moment of day/night.



- Material world flows from the One *via* Heaven.
- Continual "effluvia" (air) passes from Heaven into material world: air is the "organ" or "instrument" of the decans.
- Humans as dual natured: divine and material.

God-Making: Animation of Statues

"Just as the master and father is maker of the heavenly gods, so it is mankind who fashions the temple gods who are content to be near to humans. Not only is mankind glorified; he glorifies as well. He not only advances toward god; he also makes the gods strong...

Are you talking about statues, Trismegistus?

Statues, Asclepius, yes. See how little trust you have! I mean statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means; statues that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves." (Copenhaver, pp. 80-81.)

"What we have said about mankind is wondrous, but less wondrous than this: it exceeds the wonderment of all wonders that humans have been able to discover the divine nature and how to make it. Our ancestors once erred gravely on the theory of divinity; they were unbelieving and inattentive to worship and reverence for god. But then they discovered the art of making gods. To their discovery they added a conformable power arising from the nature of matter. Because they could not make souls, they mixed this power in and called up the souls of demons or angels and implanted them in likenesses through holy and divine mysteries, whence the idols could have the power to do good and evil." (Copenhaver, pp. 89-90.)

How gods are made

"And the quality of these gods who are considered earthly - what sort of thing is it, Trismegistus? It comes from a mixture of plants, stones and spices, Asclepius, that have in them a natural power of divinity. And this is why those gods are entertained with constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven's harmony: so that the heavenly ingredient enticed into the idol by constant communication with heaven may gladly endure its long stay among humankind. Thus does man fashion his gods." (Copenhaver, pg. 90.)

- Yates: Egyptian priests draw down heavenly spirits into statues *via* use of herbs, stones, aromatics, hymns.

Example of sympathetic magic

- Occult (hidden) properties exist in material objects.
- Can be used to produce sympathies between spiritual and material realms.

Example of optimistic Gnosticism

- The world is essentially good.
- *Gnosis* is obtained by re-establishing sympathies.
- Emphasis on drawing heavens into natural world, rather than escape.

3. Reactions to Hermetic Writings

(a) Lactantius (3rd cent.)

- Acknowledges *Pimander* as prophesy of Christianity.
 - *First darkness over the waters, then light, then creation.*
 - *The "Luminous Word" ⇔ "And God said, Let there be light..."*
 - *Egyptian Adam ⇔ Christian Adam*
 - *Son of God ⇔ Christ*
- Acknowledges Hermes T. as first prophet.

yay!



(b) Augustine (4th cent.)

- Condemns:
 - *God-making passages in Asclepius (views them as demonic)*
 - *Idolatry of planetary spirits (decans)*
 - *Implicit Arianism (Christ-as-God)*
- Acknowledges Hermes T. as ancient author.

boo!

