

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

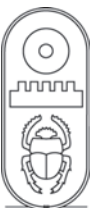
Several of the articles in this issue tell the story of how these Hermetic works made their way from the ancient world, through the Middle East, to the Roman Empire’s capital of Constantinople, as well as through the Islamic world, to the Italian Renaissance, and finally to the modern day. To distinguish 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.