

## THE ORDER OF THE ROSE AND CROSS.

### THRICE GREATEST HERMES

As Rosicrucians we are obliged to study the Hermetic sciences, I have prepared a paper outlining the merging of Greek and Egyptian philosophical and religious beliefs into the metamorphosis of a god called Hermes Trismegistus from which these Hermetic Sciences are derived.

According to the Hermetic treatise called Asclepias, the origins of these beliefs lie in Egypt which is the image of heaven ...the temple of the whole world . Even today Upper Egypt , which has preserved traditional ways more faithfully than other parts of the country, is a land dominated by the immense stone temples of the old gods

Of all the wonders past and present, natural and made, that Egypt had to show, it was her gods and temples that most caught the imagination of the foreign visitor. But the whole of Egypt's cultural and social life, like the configuration of the land itself was unique. So too was the Egyptian mind, with its immovable conviction that the cultural identity of Egypt and the stability of the physical universe itself was one and the same thing.

Egypt was subjected to foreign invasion but it was never assimilated. Alexander the Great's conquest of the Nile Valley had a marked political effect on the country's history in that the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt was never again to be worn by a native Pharaoh. Hellenism was triumphant in cultural terms; Egyptians, instead of being submerged by Hellenism, exercised so strong a gravitational and assimilative pull on it, that the product of their interaction was at least as much Egyptian as Greek. Nowhere was this truer than in matters of religion.

The Greek world at large, and after it the Roman, was firmly persuaded that the Egyptians had been the first people to organise formal religious cults. Men of these less ancient nations were prepared to admire quite uncritically the temples and rituals of the Egyptians, and even to accept the idea that the land of Egypt was intrinsically holy. Even the wisest representatives of other traditions - Moses among the Jews, Solon, Pythagoras and Plato among the Greeks - were acknowledged to have sat at the feet of Egyptian priests.

While in all probability there actually existed a great sage and educator by the name of Hermes, it is impossible to extricate the historical man from the mass of legendary accounts which attempt to identify him with the Cosmic Principle of Thought. Investigators believe that it was Hermes, who was known to the Jews as "Enoch" , the "Second Messenger of God that has had such a profound influence on Jewish mystical thinking ."Hermes was also accepted into the mythology of the Greeks, later becoming the Mercury of the Latins. As for Saint Augustine, " In the City Of God" he makes Trismegistus the great-grandson of a contemporary of Moses. Strabo says he gave the Egyptians their laws and taught philosophy and astronomy to the priests at Thebes

The appellation "Thrice Greatest" was given to Hermes, because he was considered the greatest of all philosophers , the greatest of all priests, and the greatest of all kings.

The Scandinavians worshipped Hermes under the name of Odin, the Teutons as Wotan, and certain oriental peoples as Buddha.. There are two theories concerning his demise. The first declares that Hermes was translated like Enoch, and carried without death into the presence of God; - the second states he was buried in the valley of Ebron, and a great treasure placed in his tomb not a treasure of gold but of books and sacred texts.

Religious belief, though, was an element of the Egyptian identity which proved especially resistant to fusion with imported Hellenism. Not of course that the phenomenon of syncretism between Egyptian and Greek deities was unknown. It manifested itself in various forms that are conspicuous in the Roman period.. The most elementary , of which Herodotus provides numerous examples, was the straightforward verbal identification of an Egyptian and alien divinity whose character, attributes, rituals or even names seemed similar. Thoth and Hermes, for example, because of their functional resemblance. More elaborately , it was possible to synthesize, however partially, two gods who were thought to enjoy some such kinship, and even produce from them a conglomerate - Hermes Trismegistus from the fusion of Thoth and Hermes, Hermanubis, Hermes and Anubis, or Helioserapis from the merging of Helios and Serapis

The evolution of Hermes Trismegistus himself out of the syncretism of Thoth and Hermes, well illustrates the tensions which arose from the encounter of the two strong minded cultural traditions. And to understand the genesis of the Egyptian Hermes is to take a first step into the historical milieu of the Hermetica.

Thoth was among the most diverse and popular of all Egyptian gods. Like many of his colleagues he was a composite, even an accumulation, rather than a figure cast whole and unambiguously defined; he was a powerful national god who yet had certain specialities and local associations. In particular, Thoth was regarded even in the most primitive period as the moon-god; and from this lunar association arose many his distinctive functions. Just as the moon was illuminated by the Sun, Thoth derived much of his authority from being secretary and councillor to the solar divinity Re, the moon ruler, “ruler of the stars, distinguishes seasons , months and years”. Thoth became the lord and multiplier of time and the regulator of individual destinies. Indeed so important were the moon’s phases in determining the rhythms of Egyptian national life, that Thoth came to be regarded as the origin both of cosmic order and the religious and civil institutions. He presided over almost every aspect of the temple cults, law and the civil year, and in particular over the sacred rituals, texts and formulae, and the magic arts that were closely related. To him, as divine scribe, inventor of writing and lord of wisdom, the priesthood attributed much of its sacred literature, including , for example parts of the Book of the Dead. Thoth was the acknowledged source of the occult powers latent in all these aspects of the cult of the gods. By extension he became lord of knowledge, language and all science - even as Understanding or Reason personified. Esoteric wisdom was his special preserve, and he was called “ the Mysterious”, “the Unknown. His magical powers made him a doctor too; and when the body finally succumbed to mortality, Thoth conducted the dead man to the kingdom of the gods and participated in the judgement of his soul. Thoth acquired a leading role in the drama of creation itself, as a demiurge who called things into being merely by the sound of his voice.

Besides the common near eastern idea that speech has creative power, we can surely detect here the influence of Thoth god of Magic.

The Greek settlers identified Thoth with their god Hermes. Like Thoth, the classical Greek

Hermes was associated with the moon, medicine and the realm of the dead.

Furthermore, both had a reputation for inventiveness and trickery and both functioned as messengers of the gods. In Hermes's case this prepared him as well for his characteristic function in the Hellenistic period, as the *logos* or "word", the interpreter of the divine will to mankind. This Hellenistic Hermes-*logos* was a thoroughly cosmopolitan divinity: The Lycaonians, who were sufficiently un-Hellenised to have retained their native language, had no difficulty in recognizing the apostle Paul as Hermes come down to earth, "because he was the chief speaker". The Stoics assigned Hermes a still more central role in their theology, magnifying his function from the merely expressive to the creative, regarding him as both *logos* and demiurge. It may even be that this development owed something to the Egyptian understanding of Thoth as creator.

Hermes Trismegistus, then, was the cosmopolitan, Hellenistic Hermes, Egyptianized through his assimilation to Thoth. And in fact known throughout the Roman world as the "Egyptian". To some extent this intermingling of Egyptian and Greek Theology and Hellenistic philosophy produced a sum that was greater than its parts, a divinity that could be deservedly placed among the *dei magni* of the pagan pantheon that presided over the Roman world.

Moving on to the Greeks it no doubt seemed enough to say that the Greek god Hermes was equivalent to the Egyptian god Thoth, and leave it at that. However the temptation to provide mythological explanation could not be resisted for ever. This was one of the reasons why Cicero was eventually able to enumerate no less than five different individuals who claimed the names Hermes, the third being the offspring of Zeus and Mia, while in other words, the story that was produced - and widely circulated- to explain the emergence of Hermes Trismegistus invoked a relatively human Hermes who was recognized to be a distant messenger of the Gods. So it is not surprising to find that people of Greek culture did not always envisage Trismegistus in the same terms as did those of a more Egyptian background. Most of those who looked at things from a Greek point of view had a rather different image of Hermes Trismegistus, which to some extent played down specifically Egyptian elements and assumed that, in origin at least, Hermes had been human. After all, Plato had queried whether even Thoth was a god or just a divine man

It is in the Greek magical papyri rather than in the Hermetica that we most clearly discern the lineaments of Hermes Trismegistus, and the Egyptian aspects of his identity are given fullest rein. In a country as renowned for its magic as was Egypt, that was only to be expected. The papyri present the new syncretistic Hermes as a cosmic power, creator of heaven and earth and almighty world ruler. Presiding over fate and justice, he is also lord of the night, and of death and its mysterious aftermath- hence his frequent association with the Moon. This is a quote from one of these magical papyri "he knows all that is hidden under the heavenly vault, and beneath the earth", and is accordingly revered as a sender of oracles. Many of the magical spells that are addressed to Hermes aim to elicit arcane information, frequently by inducing the god to appear in dreams. In this capacity, Hermes often becomes involved in the minutiae of his devotees; everyday existence. The Hermes of the magical papyri is then a cosmic deity, but one who may also dwell within the heart of man; and the magician often assumes a tone of intimacy shading off into self-identification, asserting that "I know you, Hermes, and you know me.

I am you and you are me"

This self-identification with a god, common in the magical papyri is an authentic Egyptian trait.

the familiar title “Trismegistus” acquired canonicity only in the Roman period

The twenty third Fragment of Stobaeus which is part of the Corpus Hermeticum describes the court of the Lord, the builder of the universe, as it existed before the presence of mortals. Hermes appears as the “soul” (psyche) possessing a bond of sympathy with the mysteries of “Heaven”. He is sent by God into our lower world in order to teach true knowledge . The Lord commands Hermes to participate in the creation of mankind as steward or administrator. The Egyptians likened humanity to a flock of sheep. The Supreme and Inconceivable Father was the Shepherd, and Hermes was the shepherd dog. The origins of the shepherd's crook in religious symbolism may be traced to Egyptian rituals. The three sceptres of Egypt include the shepherd's crook, symbolizing that by virtue of the power reposing in that symbolic staff the initiated Pharaohs guided the destinies of their people. He is a soul that descended here as the first divine emanation, preceding the second represented by Isis and Horus., who are also sent to this lower world for the instruction of humanity.

I shall move on to the progress of alchemy and its Hermetic connections: We have many interesting solutions to the riddle of Alchemy's origin being advanced. One is that alchemy was revealed to man by the mysterious Egyptian demigod Hermes Trismegistus. Hermes is credited by the Egyptians as being the author of all arts and sciences. In honour of him all scientific knowledge was gathered under the general title of, The Hermetic Arts.

Although alchemy was the creation of the Hellenistic and Roman mind, and most of the surviving alchemical literature is late, none the less neither the Hermetic nor any other treatises show much sign of the personal that is so characteristic of the period. It is only with Zosimus of Panopolis, at the turn of the fourth century, that alchemy comes fully of age in this sense; and Zosimus 's spirituality is so clearly the product of his contact with the philosophical Hermetica.

This was expounded in the later teachings of Alchemy; the art by which base metals were supposed to be transmuted into silver and gold. While the Alchemists's practical techniques were rooted in the skills of the jeweller, the glass maker and such like, his theoretical pretensions touched ultimately on the human soul in its relationship to God. Alchemists believed that it was only possible to transmute base metals into gold by manipulating the “body and soul” of metals. The same distinction between the body and soul of metals stimulated in some alchemists another, more analogical line of thought, which used alchemical imagery in order to describe the purification of the human soul and its ascent to the divine source. Then a physical process became a generative symbol of a spiritual experience. The alchemists themselves were “Philosophers”, and the aim of their “philosophy” or “divine art” was the dissolution of the body and the separation of the soul from the body in order to unite with the divine presence.

It is in consequence of the great respect entertained for Hermes by the old alchemists that Chemical writings were called “Hermetic” and the phrase “hermetically sealed” is still used to designate the closing of a glass vessel by fusion, after the manner of the chemical manipulators.

The art of healing was originally one of the secret sciences of the priestcraft. While modern physicians accredit Hippocrates with being the Father of medicine, the ancient “Therapeutae” ascribed to the immortal Hermes the distinction of being the founder of the art of healing. The belief that nearly all diseases have their origin in the invisible nature of man is a fundamental precept of Hermetic medicine, for while Hermetists in no way disregard the

physical body , they believed that mans material constitution was an emanation from, or an objectification of, his invisible spiritual principles.

The Hermetica is a collection of writings attributed to Thoth, The Greeks, who were in awe of the knowledge and spirituality of the Egyptians, identified Thoth with their own God Hermes, the messenger of the gods and guider of souls in the realm of the dead. To distinguish the Egyptian Hermes, from their own, they gave him the title “ Trismegistus, meaning Thrice Great, to honour his sublime wisdom. The books attribute to him became known collectively as the Hermetica.

The Hermetica is presented as a revelation of divine truth, not as a product of human reason; and in the philosophical as in the technical texts those who do the revealing are the typical deities of the Greco-Egyptian syncretism - the overall atmosphere is Egyptian . Alongside Hermes Trismegistus himself and Isis who had long been associated in the Egyptian as well as the Greek tradition, we find Asclepias, identified with the Egyptian Imhotep; Ammon, the God Amun, regarded by some as one of the country’s early kings; Horus, the son of Isis; there are also figures unique to the Hermetica: Poimandres, Tat and the priest Bitys . The origin and meaning of the word Poimandres is unclear, though it may well be Egyptian. As for Tat he began humbly enough as a Greek misspelling of Thoth, but ended up taking on the identity of his own as Thoth - Hermes’s son, both bodily and spiritually.

Thoth entrusted to his chosen successors the Sacred Book of Thoth. This work contained the secret process by which the regeneration of humanity was to be accomplished and also served as a key to his other writings. According to legend, the Book of Thoth was kept in a golden box in the inner sanctuary of the Temple. There was one key and this was in possession of the “Master of the Mysteries”, the highest initiate of the Hermetic Arcanum”. He alone knew what was written in the secret book. The book of Thoth was lost to the Ancient World with the decay of the Mysteries.

Though most of the philosophical Hermetica is attributed to Hermes’s personal authorship or at least feature him as teacher in conversation with a more or less stage struck pupil, there are certain tracts which are attributed to Asclepias, and in some dialogues Tat replaces Hermes as the teacher.

In this context the mysterious Poimandres is of special interest. In C.H.1, Poimandres, identified as divine intellect, instructs none other than Hermes Trismegistus himself.

One of the greatest tragedies of the philosophic world was the loss of nearly all of the forty two books of Hermes. These books disappeared during the burning of Alexandria, with the exception of the forgoing.

Among the fragmentary writings believed to have come from the stylus of Hermes are two famous works. The first is the Emerald Table, which is in reality a chemical formula of a high and secret order, It also contains 14 Maxims attributed to Hermes, the most well known being, “That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of one thing”. The second is the Divine Pymander, or as it is more commonly called The Shepherd of Men.

One outstanding point in connection with Hermes is that he was one of the few philosopher-priests of the pagan world, upon whom the early Christians did not vent their spleen.

The Divine Pymander of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus is one of the earliest of the Hermetic writings. While probably not in its original form, having been remodelled during the first centuries of the Christian era. The Divine Pymander consists of seventeen fragmentary writings, gathered together and put forth as one work. The second book, of The Divine Pymander, called the Poimandres, or the Vision, is believed to describe the method by which the divine wisdom was first revealed to Hermes. It was after Hermes had received this revelation that he began his ministry, teaching to all who would listen the secrets of the invisible universe.

The Vision is the most famous of all Hermetic fragments, and contains an exposition of Hermetic cosmogony and the secret sciences of the Egyptians regarding the culture and unfoldment of the human soul. In concluding his exposition of the Vision, Hermes quotes "The sleep of the body is the sober watchfulness of the Mind and the shutting of my eyes reveals the true Light. My silence is filled with budding life and hope, and is full of good. My words are the blossoms of fruit of the tree of my soul. For this is the faithful account of what I have received from my true Mind, that is Poimandres, the Great Dragon, the Lord of the Word, through whom I became inspired by God with Truth. Since that day my Mind has ever been with me and in my own soul it has given birth to the Word; the Word is reason, and Reason has redeemed me. For which cause, with all my soul and all my strength, I give praise and blessing unto God the Father, the Life of Light. And the Eternal Good.

The Vision of Hermes, like all Hermetic writings, is an allegorical exposition of great philosophical and mystic truths, and its hidden meaning may be comprehended only by those who have been "raised" into the presence of the true mind.

Although largely unknown today, the writings attributed to Hermes/Thoth have been immensely important in the history of Western thought. They profoundly influenced the Greeks and, through their rediscovery in the fifteenth-century Florence helped to inspire the "Renaissance" which gave birth to our modern age. The list of people who have acknowledged a debt to the Hermetica reads like a "Who's Who" of greatest philosophers, scientists and artists that the West has produced- Leonardo da Vinci, Durer, Botticelli, Roger Bacon, Paracelsus, Thomas More, William Blake, Kepler, Copernicus, Isaac Newton, Sir Walter Raleigh, Milton, Ben Johnson, Daniel Defoe, Shelley, Victor Hugo and Carl Jung. It heavily influenced Shakespeare, John Donne, John Dee and all the poet philosophers who surrounded the court of Queen Elizabeth I, as well as the founding scientists of the Royal Society in London, and even the leaders who inspired the Protestant reformation in Europe. The list is endless with the Hermetica's influence reaching well beyond the frontiers of Europe. Islamic mystics and philosophers also trace their inspiration back to the Thrice Greatest Hermes, and the esoteric tradition of the Jews equated him with their mysterious prophet Enoch

The Hermetica is a cornerstone of Western Culture. In substance and importance it is equal to well known eastern scriptures like Upanishads, the Dhammapada and the Tao Te Ching. yet unlike these texts which are readily available and widely read, the works of Hermes have been lost under the dead weight of academic translations, Christian prejudice and occult obscurities.

This paper I hope will encourage the Fratres to seek out and read the writings of Hermes

Trismegistus, as they have had such a profound influence on the development of Western thought.

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