

# Hermetism

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The modern term “Hermetism” is sometimes used in a manner near-synonymous to such terms as “esotericism,” “occultism,” and “Gnosticism,” but is more properly used to refer to the teachings contained in the treatises attributed to the Egyptian divine sage Hermes Trismegistus or his associates. These treatises, referred to as *Hermetica*, consisting most often of dialogues between Hermes and his disciples, were all authored in Greek, though some are now only available in Latin, Coptic, or Armenian translations. Their dating remains uncertain; most scholars will place them between the 2nd and 3rd century CE, though some teachings were likely current around the turn of the Common Era, and certain astrological treatises already in the Ptolemaic era. The teachings can be broadly labelled an eclectic [Middle Platonism](#), and the *Hermetica* were quoted sympathetically by some Fathers of the church, because of their view on the oneness of God and his son as the creative Logos. After the texts were rediscovered by Italian Renaissance humanists, Hermetic teachings enjoyed an illustrious though controversial afterlife, which is sometimes referred to as *Hermeticism* (Hanegraaff, 2006, ix).

## Hermes Trismegistus

The epithet Trismegistus, “the Thrice Greatest” ([Hermes Trismegistus](#)), derives from an Egyptian epithet of the god Thoth, appearing in Demotic texts of the Ptolemaic era (Bull, 2018, 33–36). Thoth was already an ancient god by this time, appearing in the earliest religious writings of Egypt, the *Pyramid Texts*. He was a god of wisdom, magic, and writing; a tutelary god of priests, and the scribe in charge of recording the weighing of human hearts in the underworld in the famous chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead*. The Greeks identified him with their Hermes from at least the 5th century BCE. In the *Hermetica*, we hear of one Hermes who is a primordial god, and another homonymous descendant of his who became divine through his wisdom. The latter is the Trismegistus appearing in the dialogues. Famous philosophers such as Pythagoras and Plato were credited with study-trips to Egypt, and by the 1st century BCE Egyptian priests could show Greek and Roman visitors the cells where the philosophers had lived in the Egyptian temples and tell the names of their putative Egyptian teachers. Consequently, some philosophers such as Albinus and [Iamblichus of Chalcis](#) claimed that Hermes was one of the original sources of the philosophies of Pythagoras and Plato, as did certain church fathers.

## Hermetic Writings

There are two categories of Hermetic writings, commonly referred to as technical and theoretical *Hermetica* (Fowden, 1986, 1–11). The technical texts were earliest, and mostly deal with the interpretation and manipulation of natural phenomena, what A.-J. Festugière called “the occult sciences” (Festugière, 1944–1954, vol. I). Pride of place here goes to astrological treatises, handbooks detailing the occult influences of the stars, and how to interpret the future by means of them or harness their energy for astrological medicine (*Gk iatromathematica*) by using amulets or drugs. Astrological *Hermetica* seem to be in circulation by the 2nd century BCE, though the texts preserved are of much later date. A similar situation obtains for the alchemical *Hermetica*, which deal with metallurgy and

precious stones. The recipes transmitted under the name Hermes are exceedingly hard to date. The first alchemist known by name is Zosimus of Panopolis in Egypt, in the late 3rd century CE, who refers to Hermes and his books among the foremost authorities, so a significant Hermetic corpus must have predated him. Hermes and Thoth are also authorities invoked in Greek and Demotic magical papyri, preserved in profusion from the 1st to the 4th century CE. Since Demotic was a language used by Egyptian priests at this late date, many of these papyri arguably derive from such priestly spheres, and some of the spells for obtaining divine visions have parallels in the theoretical *Hermetica* (Bull, 2018).

The theoretical or philosophical *Hermetica* are the most well-known and studied treatises. The most influential are the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*, 17 treatises of differing length, united together in a single codex some time before the time of Michael Psellus (11th cent.), who left a scholion ([Scholia](#)) preserved in some of the manuscripts (Nock & Festugière, 1945–1954, vol. I–II). Another main repository of philosophical *Hermetica* is the extensive anthology of Stobaeus (early 5th cent. CE), which preserves 40 excerpts of very varying lengths (Nock & Festugière, 1945–1954, vol. III). The compendious *Perfect Discourse* ([Perfect Discourse, Excerpt from the](#)) is only preserved in a Latin translation known as the *Asclepius*, which was the only Hermeticum known to the Latin West before the Greek treatises arrived after the fall of Constantinople (Nock & Festugière, 1945–1954, vol. II). With the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Codices ([Nag Hammadi Writings](#)) in 1945, three more *Hermetica* in Coptic translation came to light, two of which were already known as [parts of the Asclepius](#), whereas the important third text, the so-called *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* ([Thanksgiving, Prayer of](#)), led to a reorientation in Hermetic studies (Mahé, 1978–1982; 2019). A collection of sentences is preserved in Armenian but only partially in the original Greek (Mahé, 1978–1982; 2019). Some papyrus fragments in Greek also exist (Mahé, 2019).

The texts were written in Egypt. Although many scholars point to Alexandria as the likely place of origin, it is equally possible that *Hermetica* were authored elsewhere in Egypt, also thoroughly Hellenized by this period. There were readers of *Hermetica* in Fayyum, Hermopolis, Panopolis, and Thebes, and possibly their authors too lived in such cities. Hermopolis was the ancient cult-center of Thoth, and Hermetic snippets can be traced there (Bull, 2018).

Even though these texts are in dialogue with each other, and have common themes, a singular Hermetic doctrine cannot be clearly defined. Commonalities include the pseudonymous attribution to Hermes and his associates, and for the most part a dialogue-structure between spiritual master and disciple. Early scholars argued that the variety of doctrines was such that no Hermetic community could have existed, and identified one monistic, world-affirming, “philosophical” group of texts, and another dualistic, world-denying, “gnostic” group (with some adding a third, “mixed” group; Festugière, 1944–1954; [Gnosis/Gnosticism](#)). In recent decades, scholarly consensus has shifted to view such doctrinal differences more as an indication that the texts were located on different stages of spiritual progression, called the Way of Hermes by scholars, or rather the Way of Immortality as one text calls it (Mahé, 1978–1982; Fowden, 1986; Van den Kerchove, 2012; Bull, 2018; [Immortality](#)).

Such a defined notion of a way of spiritual progress implies the existence of a community, but there is not yet a clear consensus about the character of this community. Some have argued for a masonic-type Alexandrian lodge, others a fraternity similar to gnostic groups (a notion entailing its own problems) or philosophical schools, and yet others a type of voluntary association associated with Egyptian priests. The Egyptian motifs, earlier discounted as an exoticizing fiction, are now for the most part accepted as indications that the authors had real engagements with the traditional culture and theology of Egypt, however Hellenized their products (Mahé, 1978–1982; Fowden, 1986; Van den Kerchove, 2012; Bull, 2018).

## Reception and Influence

Plutarch refers to and makes use of Books of Hermes in his essay *On Isis and Osiris*, though there is no indication that these were the same as the surviving *Hermetica*. Albinus identified the Egyptian Hermes as the origin of Plato's doctrine of the soul, according to [Tertullian](#). Iamblichus of Chalcis makes heavy use of Hermes Trismegistus in his *Response to Porphyry* (also known as *De mysteriis*), and claims that the *Hermetica* were authored by Hellenized priests, though he does not quote any of the treatises in our possession. Direct quotations come only with Christian authors: amongst them, [Lactantius](#) makes extensive use of Hermes in his *Divine Institutes*, as does [Cyril of Alexandria](#) in his *Against Julian* (Moreschini, 2011). Both are sympathetic to Hermes and see him as a prophet of Christianity. [Augustine of Hippo](#), on the other hand, while admitting that Hermes had valuable insights, claimed he must have been demon-possessed ([Demonology/Demons](#)), since he recommends idolatry in a famous passage of the *Asclepius*. [Quodvultdeus of Carthage](#) was more positive, and since he was confused with Augustine by posterity, Hermes retained some status among Latin Christians. A substantial production of Arabic technical *Hermetica* later took place, some of which may have Greek *Vorlagen* via Syriac intermediaries (Van Bladel, 2009). With the arrival of the Greek texts to the West after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Hermes Trismegistus became fashionable among humanists, and was widely believed to have been a close contemporary of [Moses](#) until the more recent date of the texts were demonstrated by Isaac Casaubon in 1614. After this, Hermes Trismegistus remained an important figure of perennial wisdom in traditions often referred to as western esotericism (Hanegraaff, 2006, 483–486).

## Historiography

The modern academic study of Hermetism was inaugurated by R. Reitzenstein (1904), who claimed that an Egyptian priest was behind the first Hermes-community, which later spread throughout the Roman Empire and influenced Gnosticism. R. Reitzenstein was immediately accused of Egyptomania, and scholars such as T. Zielinski, W. Bousset, W. Kroll, and J. Kroll argued for a philhellenic view, that Hermetism was an offspring of Greek philosophy, and that the variety of mutually exclusive teachings in the Hermetic treatises precluded any sort of Hermetic community. This current of thought culminated in the *magnum opus* of A.-J. Festugière (1944–1954), who admitted an Egyptian background to the technical *Hermetica*, but divided the theoretical *Hermetica* into a “gnostic” dualist group, and a “philosophical” monist group. Until the 1980s this was the dominant position, but

then J.-P. Mahé (1978–1982) and G. Fowden (1986) reoriented Hermetic studies by emphasizing the Hellenistic-Egyptian background of the treatises and arguing that the disparate Hermetic teachings could have been integrated at different stages of a cohesive Way of Hermes. This is now the predominant position, and more recent studies (e.g. Van den Kerchove, 2012; Bull, 2018) have elaborated upon it. Modern English translations of the theoretical *Hermetica* are available, published by B.P. Copenhaver (1992) and M.D. Litwa (2018).

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