

Chapter 2. Late Antiquity: Hermetica

We have seen in Section 1.3, The Long Line of Plato, a more or less continuous line from Ancient Egypt to the Renaissance. We now skip over a considerable segment of this line, from Aristotle to Plotinus, a segment of about six centuries, including the middle Platonists, and especially Philo. Our goal in this chapter and the next is to recall the paradigm of late antiquity at the time when Early Christianity and the Middle Ages took over the field.

The influence of Aristotle eventually outstripped that of Plato, but Platonism continued as an underground current, with occasional surges to the surface. One such surge was the Middle Platonism of the Hellenistic period, another was the Neoplatonist movement of Roman times.

But first, we shall review the Hermetica: philosophical and technical. And in addition to the three cities of Chapter 1, we have now a fourth city, Byzantium.

2.1. Alexandria

The relocation of Aristotle's library from Athens to Alexandria is symbolic of the rise of Alexandria as the dominant center of intellectual activity. The arrival of Euclid around 300 BCE made it the leading mathematical center. Athens remained the center of philosophy until 2nd century CE. The Ptolemaic period begins with the death of Alexander, and ends with the domination of Rome in 50 BCE.

Sources

[Abraham, 1994, p. 221], [Canfora, 1989], [Empereur, 1998], [Forster, 1961], [Fraser, 1972], [Parsons, 1952]

2.2. Corpus Hermeticum

There was a myth, from ancient times to the 17th century, of the *prisci theologi* (sing., *prisca theologia*). According to this myth, civilization — theology, philosophy, mathematics, writing, and the like — were brought to humankind by a series of sages, the *prisci theologi*: Thoth/Hermes, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and occasionally others. [Copenhaver, p. xlviii]

Names: Thoth, pronounced, Te-how-ti. Greek form of the Egyptian Teh, alias Tehu (ibis), Tehut, or Tehuti. Ibis-headed moon god. The Ancient Greek Hermes, Hermes Trismegistus, Thrice-greatest Hermes, the first Hermes. Attributes: Master of Wisdom and Truth. Lord of the Moon. Master builder of temples and monuments. Representative of reason in the world. Initiator of universal order, rules, and laws. God of writing, arts, sciences, medicine, and magic. Inventor of hieroglyphics. Patron of all libraries and scribes. Lord of rebirth. Speaks the Divine Word, or Logos. The teacher of Osiris and Isis. The measurer of times and seasons. The highest idea of deity in Ancient Egypt. His spouse, Nehe-maut or Maat, is associated with truth and righteousness. Thoth and Maat are companions of the sun god Ra in the Book of the Dead. [Mead, 1992, pp. 33-56]

Corpus hermeticum, CH, hermetic corpus, hermetica: body of writings traditionally ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, the Greek name given to the Egyptian god Thoth (pronounced “tooth”), who brought the gifts of writing, mathematics, etc. There are 17 (19 according to some authors) extant Libelli (documents) of the CH, the first 14 of which were translated into Latin by Ficino and published in 1471. The first of these is known as the Poimandres. A MS from Macedonia (probably based on the 11th century restoration by Michael Psellus of the Platonic Academy of Byzantium) was purchased by Cosimo and given to Ficino for translation. Due to the supposed antiquity of the author, Cosimo asked for the translation before any other works in his collection,

including the platonic corpus. Ficino thought the CH had come from ancient Egypt to Plato by way of Pythagoras, and the CH was an essential text of all of the Platonic academies until the great debunker, Isaac Casaubon, showed in 1614 that the CH was written in Alexandria in the 2nd century AD. There remain some who believe the essence of the CH is much older. Besides the libelli, there are also excerpts and fragments from later authors.

This section is condensed from [Copenhaver, 1992].

The CH was important in the early Florentine Renaissance, when it was understood to be the ancient work of Thoth, or Hermes Trismegistus, contemporary of Moses, and the basis of an ancient theology (the *prisca theologia*) culminating with Plato. Some idea of the content may be gleaned from the titles.

1. Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: Poimandres.
2. (untitled)
3. A sacred discourse of Hermes.
4. A discourse of Hermes to Tat: The mixing bowl or the monad.
5. A discourse of Hermes to Tat, his son: That god is invisible and entirely visible.
6. That the good is in god alone and nowhere else.
7. That the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance concerning god.
8. That none of the things that are is destroyed, and they are mistaken who say that changes are deaths and destructions.
9. On understanding and sensation: That the beautiful and good are in god alone and nowhere else.
10. Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: The key.
11. Mind to Hermes.
12. Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus: On the mind shared in common, to Tat.
13. A secret dialogue of Hermes Trismegistus on the mountain to his son Tat: On being born again, and on the promise to be silent. Singing the secret hymn, Formula IV.
14. From Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius: Health of mind.
15. (missing)
16. Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon on god, matter, vice, fate, the sun, intellectual essence, divine essence, mankind, the arrangement of the plenitude, the seven stars, and mankind according to the image.
17. (untitled)
18. On the soul hindered by the body's affections. On praise for the almighty and a royal panegyric.

Asclepius: To me this Asclepius is like the sun. A Holy Book of Hermes Trismegistus addressed to Asclepius.

The 17 discourses amount to 66 pages, and the *Asclepius* 26 pages, in the English version of [Copenhaver, 1992]. Tat is a variant of Thoth.

Precis of CH 1, Poimandres.

While Tat was in an altered state, an enormous being, Poimandres, appeared to him, shows him a vision. Light, dark, earth, water, fire, a voice. Poimandres teaches Tat on the creation of the cosmos and humans, the divinity of mind, gender, the ascent of the soul through an eight level cosmology, the ogdoad. [Copenhaver, 1992; pp. 1-7]

Precis of the Asclepius

The Latin Asclepius, like the 17 Greek Hermetica, is not greatly concerned with astrology, magic, nor alchemy, but rather with theology and philosophy: technical, rather than popular, Hermetism.

The text is a divine discourse involving god and four men: Hermes, Asclepius, Tat, and Hammon. Primarily, it is instruction from Hermes to Asclepius in a question and answer form. It begins with an affirmation of the immortality of the soul. Instructions for theurgic rituals, developed further by Iamblichus, are included. [Copenhaver, 1992; pp. xxxiii, xxxiv, xl]

Sources

Copenhaver, 1992], [Faivre, 1995], [Fowden, 1987], and [Mead, 1906].

2.3. Magic

Magical beliefs and practices were very popular in ancient Greco-Roman daily life. But this aspect of popular culture nearly escaped the historical record, due to systematic suppressions and book burnings both before and after the birth of Christianity. Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic philosophers used magical books. Fortunately, a large library of Greek and Demotic (Egyptian) papyri, collected by an unknown person in Thebes at sometime in the Middle Ages, came into the hands of a diplomat named Anastasi in Alexandria the 19th century. These were auctioned off, and now reside in various museums in London, Paris, Berlin, and Leiden. Translations of the papyri were first published between 1853 and 1925, and the whole collection became known as the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM). A handy study edition appeared in two volumes, in 1928 and 1931, edited by Karl Preisendanz. A revised and expanded edition was published in 1973-74, edited by Albert Henrichs. The PGM are in Greek, Demotic, bilingual Greek-Demotic, and Old Coptic. While Preisendanz translated only the Greek portions of the texts, Henrichs translated all of the 81 texts. A new edition of the entire corpus, including an additional 50 papyri more recently discovered, appeared in 1986, edited by Hans Dieter Betz.

These texts are primary documents for ancient religio-magical practices. Based on older Egyptian practices, they indicate an extensive syncretic process, harmonizing and Hellenizing Egyptian, Greek, Babylonian, and Jewish magic, mythology, and religion throughout late antiquity (ca 200-600 CE), effected by an eclectic group of temple priests, itinerant magicians, and creating what amounted to a new popular religion, or rather, a revival of a perennial tradition. With these spells, evolved over centuries, one might (by correct use of the spells and hymns) communicate with the gods, command subtle energies, acquire wealth, love, health, knowledge of the future, and so forth. The most powerful allies were the gods and goddesses of the underworld: Erishkegal, Persephone, Hekate, and the like.

We are left with the impression that magic is a human creation which exists on a level above religion. While religions come and go, magic is eternal.

Sources

[Betz, 1986, v.1; pp. xli-lviii]

2.4. Astrology

Archeoastronomy began deep in prehistoric times, while our theoretical astronomy began about 1800 BCE in the early historical cultures of India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. The earliest

surviving Babylonian horoscope is from 410 BCE. Later in the 5th century, mathematical astronomy and its sibling, astrology, arrived in ancient Greece from Babylonia.

Babylonian astrology is mentioned in Greek in the Hippocratic medical text, *On Diets*, of 400 BCE. According to Greek tradition, astrology was brought to Greece by the Chaldean priest Berosus, who settled on the Greek island of Cos, the home of the Hippocratic school of medicine. The connection between astrology and medicine dates from this earliest period. [Tester, 1987; pp.15-16, 23]

In the 4th century began an explosive development of astronomy and astrology, along with the other sciences and philosophy. The earliest astrological texts we have are Alexandrian, from the late 3rd century.

According to conservative historians, western astrology as practiced today in the USA and Europe follows very closely the scheme put down by Ptolemy in middle of the second century CE, in his work *Apotelesmatica*, also known as the *Tetrabiblos*. The chief features of astrology by the time of Ptolemy included:

- * the zodiac of equal signs beginning at the zero point of Aries,
- * the finer divisions of the zodiac, such as the decans,
- * various systems of house division,
- * exaltations and rulerships of the signs and houses by the planets,
- * the conventional interpretation of positions, aspects, and transits,
- * sophisticated schemes for progressions,
- * the procession of the equinox,

and so on.

Sources

[Tester, 1987]

2.5. Alchemy

For alchemy, as with magic and in fact all areas of the technical *Hermetica*, the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians contributed basic ideas, but the main developments came in Graeco-Egyptian times. Alchemy begins with the occult properties of materials, and the most important alchemical text of the occult *Hermetica* we have is the *Cyranides*, ca 150 CE, which catalogues the occult properties of birds, fishes, plants, and stones. Another important text, *The Emerald Table*, was believed to have been discovered in the tomb of Hermes Trismegistus. The Alexandrian development of alchemy included both the transmutation of lead into gold, and the relationship of the individual human soul to God. The climax of this evolution came with Zosimus of Panopolis around 300 CE, who was much influenced by the philosophical *Hermetica*.

Sources

[Fowden, 1987; pp. 67, 87-91], [Kieckhefer, 1989; pp. 133-139]

2.6. Medicine

We outline, very compactly, the line of development of medical science and practice from early history up to the end of antiquity. That is, we span the time frames of our Chapters 1 and 2 within this one short section of Chapter 2. The close connections of Astrology, magic, and medicine will be discussed in a later chapter. As we know nothing of prehistoric medicine -- excepting

the practice of trephination, which may or may not have been a medical operation -- we will begin with ancient Egypt and the contemporary Mesopotamian histories.

Ancient Egypt

The Ebers Papyrus, written ca 1570 BCE but based on older books, is a series of recipes for various diseases credited to Thoth and Isis. Imhotep, ca 2,700 BCE, was regarded as the first physician. Early physicians were magicians, using spells from magical papyri as well as drugs, some of which are still in use. By late antiquity, surgery was well developed, and Egyptian physicians were in great demand all over the ancient world.

Ancient Mesopotamia

Surviving medical texts -- on cuneiform tablets -- date only from the time of Ashurbanipal, 7th century BCE, but draw upon older texts, probably contemporary with those of ancient Egypt. Medical practice here also was magico-religious. Many illnesses were thought to be caused by evil spirits. There were three types of practitioners: diviners, exorcists, and physicians. The latter used surgery and drugs, and were regulated by the strict code of Hammurabi of about 2,000 BCE. The materia medica included 250 plants and 120 minerals.

Ancient Greece

Through an unknown syncretic process, the materia medica and astrology of Mesopotamia and the materia medica, surgical procedures, and magico-religious elements of Egypt were combined, in the 7th century BCE, by Dorian and Ionian Greeks in western Asia Minor. In the 6th century BCE, medical schools were flourishing in Cos and Cnidos. These were associated with temples of the god, Asklepios, the Asklepieia. The earliest surviving medical records in Greek, the Hippocratic Corpus, date from the 4th century. This comprises about 70 works -- textbooks, lectures, notebooks, case histories, and so on. These were inspired, to some extent, by the famous Hippocrates of Cos (460-377), of the generation before Plato. This tradition is regarded as the beginning of medical science, the experimental method, and the whole continuous line to which our modern medical science belongs. In the development of Greek medicine after Hippocrates, Aristotle had a major influence, especially, his developments of comparative anatomy, embryology, and basic biology.

Following Aristotle, an important medical center was established in Alexandria. Here were founded human anatomy and physiology, around 300 BCE. This center ceased after the absorption of Alexandria into the Roman Empire, 50 BCE.

The earliest medical text in Latin, the *De re medica* of Celsus, was written about 30 CE. Rome became a center of medical instruction by 70 CE, and soon satellite schools flourished all over the Roman Empire, and a system of public hospital emerged. Galen of Pergamon (129-199) studied medicine in Pergamon, Smyrna, and Alexandria, and became a leading physician in Rome, and the author of voluminous medical writings on anatomy, physiology, bones, muscles, blood circulation, nutrition, vital spirits, nervous system, function of the spinal cord, and so on and on. His death signaled the end of Greek medicine, and the beginning of the Dark Ages of medicine.

Sources

[Singer, 1962; chs.1,2,3]
