

Introduction

We view Ficino as the philosophical crux of the Italian Renaissance. Here is a brief list of the roots of Ficino, the main influences from his ancient and medieval sources. We intend to describe these in Part 1, following for simplicity a short list of references for each thread.

1. Orphica: Orpheus, Orphism, and the Orphic Hymns

Ancient Greece had many religions, Orphism is the most important of them.

2. Platonica: Plato and Platonism

The dialogues of Plato, their sources, their early derivatives, and certain ideas from them which we view as keys in the development of Ficino's ideas. The long line of Plato becomes Neoplatonism, jumps from Athens to Alexandria, and evolves its cosmology, before being absorbed into Kabbalah and Esoteric Christianity. The problem of Platonic love belongs in this line.

3. Hermetica

Comprising two subthreads — the philosophical and the technical Hermetica. The philosophical is represented mainly by the Corpus Hermeticum, thought in the Early Renaissance to be the work of Hermes Trismegistus, a contemporary of Moses. Although Isaac Casaubon proved (a century or so after Ficino) that the Corpus Hermeticum was not as ancient as Cosimo and Ficino had thought, by showing that it referred to Plotinus (ca AD 150), Ficino was probably right in assessing its paradigm as deriving from ancient Egypt. The technical Hermetica include magic, astrology, and alchemy.

4. Neoplatonism and the Chaldean Oracles

Neoplatonism evolved alongside the Hermetica. A connection between these parallel threads was made by the Chaldean Oracles, a product of late Alexandrian antiquity, but deriving from ancient Persian, Indian, and Egyptian esoterica. Full of magic, ritual, theurgy, and the like, it became a root text of the Neoplatonic academies. Traditionally ascribed to Zoroaster, or to have been channelled by oracles, it is now usually assigned to Julianus, ca 130 CE.

5. Medicine

Medicine is eternal, but scientific medicine began in Ancient Greece.

The Mediaval Transmissions and Renaissance Recovery

The recovery of ancient (classical) literature. First Latin, beginning around 1270, then Greek, around 1400. This movement exploded into many varieties, one of which, civic humanism, is especially important to our story. The ambiance of Christianity is an important root, which we will touch upon but briefly. Arabic and Jewish transmissions were also important, and deserve more space than we will give them. [Wilson-Reynolds]

The Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas of the spirit and soul, Orphic and Pythagorean applications of music, the Hermetic threads: magic, astrology, and alchemy, and classical Greek medicine, were integrated by Ficino with great originality.

The death and rebirth of the Renaissance

After tracing these threads from their roots to the synthesis of Ficino, we will then follow forward the further evolution through their submersion by modern science and the end of the Renaissance, to the new Renaissance of today, and the significance for our future.

