

## Hermes Trismegistus and Hermetism



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### Abstract

The so-called philosophical Hermetica were written down in Egypt in the second to third centuries. They are concerned with philosophical and spiritual teachings about how to find salvation through the attainment of suprarational knowledge (gnosis). Western intellectuals during the Middle Ages had access only to the Latin *Asclepius*, and the core teachings of this tradition were no longer understood. They became available again during the second half of the fifteenth century, when manuscripts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* reached Italy from Byzantium and were translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino (C.H. I–XIV) and Lodovico Lazzarelli (C.H. XVI–XVIII). According to a highly influential but now discredited narrative created by Frances A. Yates since the 1960s, this led to a “Hermetic tradition” represented by major Renaissance intellectuals such as Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno. In fact, none of these thinkers can be properly described as “Hermeticists” or adherents of a “Hermetic philosophy”: most of them are more appropriately labeled “Platonic

Orientalists” with a special interest in ancient Egyptian, Persian, or Hebrew wisdom (attributed, respectively, to Hermes, Zoroaster, or Moses). The true story of Renaissance Hermetism is considerably more modest but fascinating on its own terms. Its central representative was the relatively unknown poet and humanist Lodovico Lazzarelli, whose work became a major influence on Cornelius Agrippa.

### Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

The concept of a “Hermetic tradition” in the Renaissance was placed on the academic agenda by Paul Oskar Kristeller in 1938 and popularized by Frances A. Yates since 1964 (Kristeller 1938; Yates 1964). According to Yates, Marsilio Ficino’s translation of the late Hellenistic *Corpus Hermeticum*, first published in 1471, stood at the origin of a neglected but highly important intellectual tradition that had a great impact on the scientific revolution. Yates’ perspective has remained extremely influential in the academic community and among the wider public and keeps dominating current perceptions of “the Hermetic tradition”; but unfortunately, most of her guiding assumptions have proved to be incorrect. She misidentified important thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno as “Hermetic philosophers”; she marginalized the actual Hermetic

philosophers active in the Renaissance period; and she miscontextualized the *Corpus Hermeticum*, suggesting incorrectly that it was grounded in astral magic and concerned with questions leading up to modern science (Hanegraaff 2015: 180–183). In the wake of Frances Yates’ works, the term “Hermeticism” is still being used as a vaguely defined and highly confusing umbrella term, comprising not only the general belief in an ancient wisdom from the Orient transmitted through the Platonic tradition (Hanegraaff 2012, and see below) but also the general fascination with traditional arts or sciences such as astrology, alchemy, and natural magic.

It is therefore advisable to abandon the popular term “Hermeticism,” as it is burdened with the Yatesian legacy, and use the alternative “Hermetism” to refer strictly to the religio-philosophical writings attributed to or connected with Hermes Trismegistus (most importantly the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*) and their commentaries (van den Broek 2005b). As for the much wider domain of traditional arts, theories, and practices concerned with the workings of nature – the so-called occult sciences (see Hanegraaff 2013a) – the fact is that some of the relevant textual materials happened to be attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, while many others were not. This makes it misleading to call such materials “Hermetic” in a general sense. The rest of this entry will therefore focus on the figure of Hermes Trismegistus as an ancient authority in the domains of both spiritual wisdom and the secrets of nature; and, more specifically, on the Renaissance tradition of Hermetism based upon the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*.

### Heritage: Hermetism in Late Antiquity

In the Hellenistic culture of late antiquity, the legendary figure of Hermes Trismegistus (“thrice greatest Hermes”) emerged from a fusion between the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek Hermes (Fowden 1986). As a semidivine teacher of ancient spiritual wisdom and a supreme authority on the secrets of the universe, his name appears in many textual materials that are either attributed to him directly or were believed to be based upon his

knowledge (van den Broek 2005a). In the wake of André-Jean Festugière’s foundational studies of the Hermetic literature of antiquity (Festugière 1950–1954), it has become common practice to distinguish between the “technical Hermetica” (magical, astrological, and alchemical texts that go under the name of Hermes) and the “philosophical Hermetica” (concerned with philosophical and spiritual teachings relevant to the search for a salvational gnosis). During the Middle Ages, a great variety of texts pertaining to the technical Hermetica began to circulate, some in original Latin versions, others in Latin and Arabic translations from Greek originals, and others in Latin translations from the Arabic (Lucentini, Parri & Perrone Compagni 2003). As for the philosophical Hermetica, only the Latin *Asclepius* (based upon a Greek original of which only a fragment survives) was available to scholars in Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

We do not know how many philosophical Hermetica may once have existed, or in what order they were originally supposed to be read. The collection known today as the *Corpus Hermeticum* was collated in Byzantium during the Middle Ages and seems to have been known in roughly its present form at least since Michael Psellus in the eleventh century. It consists of 17 treatises, numbered rather confusingly as I–XIV and XVI–XVIII since the sixteenth century (the standard numbering derives from the first modern editor of the Greek text, Adrien Turnèbe, who in 1554 included some Hermetic excerpts by Stobaeus as CH XV; later editors retained Turnèbe’s numbering but left out CH XV). It is plausible to assume that the philosophical Hermetica were once part of a spiritual curriculum that began with rational philosophy but should ideally culminate in the attainment of a suprarational gnosis (Fowden 1986; Hanegraaff 2008). The majority of the philosophical Hermetica, including the *Asclepius*, are concerned essentially with standard discussions about the nature of the world, God, and the divine, based upon prevailing Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic perspectives. From a philosophical point of view, these texts are interesting but not particularly original or profound. Known as the “general” and “more

specific” discourses (*genikoi logoi* and *exodiakoi logoi*; see Hanegraaff 2008: 136), their chief function seems to have consisted in providing a solid intellectual foundation for those who desired to go beyond philosophy to attain ultimate religious salvation through firsthand experience of and unity with the divine.

The first steps toward that goal are described in C.H. I. The anonymous author (conventionally identified as Hermes) relates how one day, after having pondered philosophical problems for a long time, he fell into a trance-like or altered state of consciousness and found himself in the awe-inspiring presence of Poimandres, “mind of sovereignty,” who offered to answer his questions (CH I 1–2). He answers that he wants to understand the nature of “the things that are” and know God. He immediately receives an answer to both questions, not through verbal instruction but by means of direct vision. First he sees the world emerging from the encounter between a frightening mass of dark primal substance (*physis*) and a “holy word” (*logos hagnos*) that descends on it from the light above. Having watched the conception and birth of the world in this manner, the protagonist is then instructed to “fix his mind on the light . . . and get to know it,” after which Poimandres holds his gaze for a long time. This episode contains the answer to his second question: the divine light that is Poimandres’ spiritual essence turns out to be identical with the visionary’s own spiritual essence. In other words, while looking into Poimandres’ eyes he is looking at himself, and in watching himself he is watching the divine light that is watching him. In this manner, he receives knowledge not only about the nature of the world and the nature of God but about the nature of man as well: knowledge of God means knowledge of one’s self, and the reverse, because in their ultimate essence, they are both the same uncreated light. The rest of C.H. I is devoted to verbal instructions in which Poimandres discusses and extrapolates upon these mystical visions by means of philosophical discourse.

The “Way of Hermes” is continued in C.H. XIII, the most explicitly initiatic treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Hermes Trismegistus

tells his pupil Tat how he has been “born again” into an immortal body that cannot be seen by mortal eyes. His words cause Tat to fall into an ecstatic state of *mania* (divine madness according to Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a–d) that turns out to be the beginning of a similar process of spiritual rebirth. Because Tat’s mode of perception still does not change, Hermes proceeds to invoke 10 “healing powers” of light that expel the 12 irrational “tormentors” of materiality that, as he explains, have been “blocking” Tat’s understanding. These 12 tormentors (personified as demonic entities, linked to the astrological signs, and named “ignorance,” “grief,” “incontinence,” “lust,” “injustice,” “greed,” “deceit,” “envy,” “treachery,” “anger,” “recklessness,” and “malice”) are forced out of Tat’s body and leave “with a flapping of wings.” As a result of this exorcism, Tat finds that his understanding is indeed unblocked; he now sees external reality not “with the sight of the eyes [but] with the mental energy that comes through the powers” and finds that he is one with the whole of reality: “I am in heaven, in earth, in water, in air; I am in animals and in plants; in the womb, before the womb, after the womb; everywhere” (CH XIII 11). In a parallel passage in CH XI 20, precisely this mode of “cosmic consciousness” is described as what true knowledge of God is all about.

Thus having been “born a god and a child of the One” (CH XIII 14) in a new immortal body, Tat should now be able to rise above the seven planetary spheres of the cosmos and reach the luminous spheres of the eight and the ninth, for “such is the happy end for those who have received gnosis: to become God” (CH I 26). This final ascent is described in a crucial treatise known as “The Ogdoad and the Ennead,” discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and therefore unknown to Renaissance readers. Assisted and guided by Hermes, Tat’s soul travels upward toward the eight and the ninth spheres, where he sees “unspeakable depths,” “the beginning of the Power above all Powers . . . who does not himself have a beginning” (NH VI<sup>6</sup> 57–58). Most of all, in looking at this ultimate divine reality, he finds that he is looking at himself (*ibid.*, cf. NH VI<sup>6</sup> 60–61). In other words, the final salvation consists not so

much in unification with the divine as in the recognition that he has always been one with it.

### Transmission: The Middle Ages

This core message of the philosophical Hermetica got lost during the Middle Ages. Most early Christian authors with an African background (notably Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine) were familiar with the Hermetic literature (Mahé 1982, 56–58) and interested in comparing it to the Christian faith. Lactantius saw only a perfect concordance between the teachings of Hermetic and Christian theology, “both as to substance and verbatim” (*Div. Inst.* VI, 25.10); but in a crucial discussion of Platonic thought, Augustine analyzed the passages in *Asclepius* 23–24/37–38 where Hermes praises the Egyptian practice of animating temple statues, and concluded that Hermes must be condemned as an advocate of idolatry (*De Civ. Dei* VIII, 23–26). The effect of Augustine’s condemnation on medieval discussions was mitigated by a case of mistaken attribution: an anti-Arian tract known as *Adversus quinque Haereses*, attributed to Quodvultdeus since the early twentieth century but previously believed to be by Augustine, contained a positive discussion of Hermes based on Lactantius while making no mention of idolatry. In medieval authors such as Hermann of Carinthia (*De essentiis* 1143), John of Salisbury (*Policraticus* 1159) or Alan of Lille (*Summa quoniam homines* 1.2.31), the positive Lactantian perspective remained dominant; but Augustine’s condemnation made a strong comeback with William of Auvergne (*De legibus* 1228; *De universo*, 1231–6). At this time, Augustine’s perspective was given a new urgency because of its relevance to the potentially idolatrous “science of images,” based upon a range of technical Hermetica concerned with astrology and astral magic that had now become available from Arabic sources (Weill-Parot 2002). Later medieval authorities such as Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Bradwardine, Berthold of Moosburg, and Nicholas of Cusa took different positions between the conflicting Lactantian and Augustinian perspectives (Hanegraaff 2013b; Lucentini et al. 2003), and these intellectual traditions were inherited by the

Italian humanists central to the revival of Hermetic literature during the fifteenth century.

### Revival: The Platonic-Orientalist Context

The revival of interest in Hermetic literature during the Renaissance should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. It must be understood within the much broader context of the Platonic revival, based upon some very specific assumptions derived ultimately from Patristic literature, notably Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Eusebius, but also Augustine (Hanegraaff 2012, 17–28). First of all, Plato was not just perceived as a philosopher in the modern sense (that is, as a rational thinker whose conclusions are reached through the discursive technique of Socratic dialogue) but, more broadly, as an inspired teacher who revealed authoritative religious or spiritual wisdom pertaining to the salvation of the soul. Second, the assumption was that this wisdom had not originated with Plato or Socrates himself but had come from much more ancient Oriental teachers of wisdom. This general perspective on the nature of Platonism may be referred to as “Platonic Orientalism” (Walbridge 2001; Hanegraaff 2012, 12–17). It came in several variants, depending on who was identified as the most ancient teacher of wisdom. Depending on whether the sources of Platonism were assumed to be Persian, Hebrew, or Egyptian, we can distinguish between a “Zoroastrian,” a “Mosaic,” and a “Hermetic” interpretation of Platonic Orientalism.

For religious philosophers during the Renaissance, the Platonic-Orientalist framework implied that Christianity was the inheritor of an extremely ancient tradition of universal wisdom that had reached the Christians through Platonic sources, and Christian doctrine could therefore be harmonized with the most profound teachings of pagan philosophy and religion. According to a first perspective, known as *prisca theologia* and represented notably by Marsilio Ficino, the original purity and perfection of the ancient wisdom had been contaminated and lost through a long process of historical degeneration, and a restoration or revival was therefore needed. An alternative perspective, known as *philosophia perennis* and represented notably by Agostino Steuco,

placed the emphasis on continuity rather than decline, arguing that the great tradition of true wisdom had always been kept alive and remained available to anyone who needed it. During the Renaissance, the former perspective carried revolutionary implications of religious reform, as it suggested that the Church had lost its connection with the ancient wisdom and needed to be restored to its original purity. The latter perspective was inherently conservative and could be used to highlight the Church of Rome as the divinely appointed institution charged with preserving the ancient and universal tradition of wisdom.

The revival of Platonic Orientalism during the Italian Renaissance can be traced to the Council of Ferrara and Florence of 1437–1438. At this occasion, the Byzantine philosopher George Gemistos (c. 1355/60–1452), who called himself Plethon, made personal contact with the circles of Italian humanists in Florence and greatly impressed them with his knowledge of Plato and Aristotle (Hanegraaff 2012, 28–41). He had no interest in Hermes and Egypt, but strongly defended a “Zoroastrian” interpretation of Platonic Orientalism, claiming that the true wisdom had originated with Zoroaster in ancient Persia and had been transmitted to Plato and the Platonic tradition from there. Among those present on whom Plethon’s message made a lasting impression was the young Cosimo de’ Medici, the later ruler of Florence and Maecenas of philosophy and the arts. About two decades after the council, around 1460, Cosimo met the young Marsilio Ficino and recognized a golden opportunity to realize Plethon’s dream of restoring the Platonic philosophy. He put Ficino in charge of translating Plato’s complete dialogues into Latin, thereby creating the foundations for the subsequent Renaissance revival of Platonic philosophy, including the “Hermetic” sources from which it was believed to have sprung.

### Marsilio Ficino and Hermetic Philosophy

While Ficino was still in the early stages of his Plato translations, a manuscript from Byzantium arrived in Florence that contained the first 14 treatises of what is known today as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Cosimo ordered Ficino to interrupt

his work on Plato to translate the writings of Hermes first, presumably because he wanted to have a chance to read them before his death. From a Platonic-Orientalist perspective, his motivation is easy to understand: it was believed that Hermes Trismegistus had lived much earlier than Plato, and so his writings might be the ultimate Oriental source from which the Platonic wisdom tradition had emerged. Ficino’s translation was finished in 1464 and survives in many different manuscripts (see Campanelli 2011). However, it was not printed until 8 years later – and even that famous first edition of 1471 (to which we will return) was published without Ficino’s knowledge or authorization, as *Liber de Potestate et Sapientia Dei* or *Pimander*. In fact, it would seem that the *Corpus Hermeticum* had not given Ficino and Cosimo what they had been hoping for. Plato’s dialogues turned out to be far more complex and profound; and in fact, Ficino’s translation shows that he did not grasp the core message of the Hermetic literature all that well. We can see this from the rather careless way he handles some of the most crucial Hermetic passages about the attainment of gnosis, and his failure to understand the specificity of this terminology as referring to a salvational “knowledge” unattainable by reason (Hanegraaff 2015).

In the oft-quoted “Argumentum” to the *Pimander*, Ficino provided a famous genealogy of six *prisci theologi*: Mercurius (Hermes) Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, Philolaus, and Plato. Except for Hermes, this list was taken from Proclus’ *Theologia Platonica* 1.5. Ficino quoted Augustine’s opinion that Trismegistus had lived several generations after Moses, next to the alternative views of Cicero and Lactantius, who had mentioned no fewer than five “Mercuries,” the fifth of whom had been Trismegistus. Otherwise than has often been assumed, Ficino expressed no clear opinion of his own. Regardless of how he may have thought of Hermes’ relation to Moses, just one year later he seems to have made up his mind once and for all: from 1464 until the end of his life, he highlighted Zoroaster as the most ancient source of wisdom, prior to both Moses and Hermes. Inspired by both Plethon’s work and the biblical story of the *Magi* (interpreted as



Zoroastrians), he assumed that far before Moses, Abraham had taken the Chaldaean and Persian wisdom with him when he set out from Ur of the Chaldeans in quest of the promised land (Hanegraaff 2012, 45–46).

Ficino therefore did not adhere to the “Hermetic” interpretation of Platonic Orientalism (nor to the “Mosaic” one, as done by his contemporary Giovanni Pico della Mirandola) but to a “Zoroastrian” alternative. The *Corpus Hermeticum* does not seem to have had any deep impact on his thinking: in his later work, notably *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*, all the attention goes clearly to the notorious “god-making” passages in the *Asclepius* that had been condemned by Augustine and discussed since William of Auvergne (see above). If Ficino paid so much attention to these passages, this was not because of any deep wish to highlight the wisdom of Hermes but because he needed to counter suspicions that by defending talismanic “images” (with much attention to the medieval *Picatrix*), he might be defending the kind of “Hermetic” idolatry condemned by Augustine.

For these various reasons, it does not make sense to describe Ficino as a “Hermetic philosopher.” This interpretation comes from Frances Yates, who consistently overemphasized the god-making passages throughout her famous book of 1964: the *Asclepius* (which, it bears repeating, was nothing new in the fifteenth century) was mentioned at least 80 times, with at least 45 references to *Asclepius* 23–24/37–38, while C.H. I was mentioned about 24 times, and the other treatises were mentioned rarely or not at all (Hanegraaff 2012, 333 n 285).

### The Renaissance Transmission of the *Corpus Hermeticum*

Ficino’s *Corpus Hermeticum* translation was published almost simultaneously in two different editions: the well-known Treviso edition appeared on 18 December 1471, just 20 days earlier than the largely forgotten Ferrara edition, which came out on the 8th of January 1472. They were based upon two different manuscripts, but although the second edition turns out to be much more reliable, it remained a “stand-alone” version without much

further influence. The first edition, on the other hand, became the basis for no less than 9 of the 17 later editions of the C.H. that appeared in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Campanelli 2011; summary overview in Hanegraaff 2015, 183–186, with figure on p. 185). The Treviso edition was published by Geraert van der Leye and Francesco Rolandello, without Ficino’s authorization, and turns out to be seriously defective: it has been described as nothing less than “an authentic textual disaster” based upon “scandalous negligence” (Campanelli 2011, cx–cxi). As later editors tried to correct these many errors and omissions without having access to the Greek original or Ficino’s manuscripts, the predictable result was an ever-increasing range of variant readings and misunderstandings. An edition based upon a third manuscript appeared in Florence in 1513 and led to two later editions (Basle 1532, edited by Michael Isengrin, and Cracow 1585, edited by Annibale Rosselli with very lengthy commentaries). Finally – not counting vernacular versions – we have three editions independent of Ficino: the Greek original was published by Adrien Turnèbe (Paris 1554), and new Latin translations by Francois Foix de Candale and Francesco Patrizi came out in Bordeaux in 1574 and Ferrara in 1591, respectively.

None of these editions succeeded in transmitting the original Hermetic doctrine to Renaissance readers. If Hermes was seen as important, this had much less to do with the intrinsic contents of the writings attributed to him than with his traditional authority as an ancient teacher of divine wisdom, a pagan prophet of Christian doctrine, and an expert in the so-called occult sciences. These elements were all based upon the original Christian and medieval reception of the Hermetic writings and owed little to the new materials now available in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It is only in the works of a few French authors writing in the mid- and later sixteenth century, Gabriel du Préau and François Foix de Candale, that one begins to see signs of a more adequate understanding of the Hermetic message (Hanegraaff 2015, 199–204).

With her usual flair and sense of drama, Frances Yates claimed that when Isaac Casaubon undermined Hermes’ great antiquity by dating the

*Corpus Hermeticum* to the second or third century (in his *De Rebus Sacris & Ecclesiasticis* of 1614), he killed the Hermetic tradition “at one blow” (Yates 1964, 398). Referring to Casaubon’s heavily annotated edition of Turnèbe’s Greek edition, she wrote that “holding this little book in one’s hand one realises, with a certain awe, that it represents the death of the Hermes Trismegistus of the Renaissance” (ibid., 401). Today we know that Turnèbe’s pupil Gilbert Genebrard (1567), Matthieu Béroalde (1575), and Jean van Gorp (1580) had been criticizing the great antiquity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* since 1567 (Mulsow 2002). During the 1580s, Genebrard’s pupil Teodoro Angelucci attacked Francesco Patrizi’s ideas about Hermes at great length, leading to vehement discussions with Patrizi and his friends Francesco Muti and Antonio Persio (ibid.). Casaubon therefore seems to have been the closing and culminating protagonist in a debate that had started almost half a century earlier. Moreover, that debate was not yet over. Positive interpretations of the C.H. as well as translations into vernacular languages were published by authors such as Heinrich Noll (1617), Abraham Willemsz van Beyerland (Dutch translations, 1643/1652), and John Everard (English translation, 1650/1657); and in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth argued that Casaubon’s arguments were relevant to only some of the Hermetic treatises – the others, including the *Asclepius*, might still be as ancient as had always been claimed. The first German translation of the C.H. by “Aletophilus” appeared in 1706, followed by Dietrich Tiedemann’s in 1781 (for the further debate on Hermetism during the Enlightenment and afterward, see Faivre 2005, 539–543).

### Lodovico Lazzarelli and Hermetic Gnosis

When Kristeller placed the Hermetic tradition back on the agenda of Renaissance studies, in his seminal article of 1938, he highlighted two central authors: Marsilio Ficino and Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500). A second milestone publication on Renaissance Hermetism (Garin et al. 1955) likewise placed Lazzarelli in the center of the Hermetic revival. However, Frances Yates

marginalized him in her famous book on Bruno, dismissing him in a footnote as “a most enthusiastic and exaggerated Hermetist” and directing all further attention to Ficino, Pico, and Bruno. A whole generation of Renaissance scholars followed in her footsteps and forgot about Lazzarelli. This now turns out to have been a dramatic mistake with far-reaching consequences, for whereas Yates’ favorites can hardly be referred to as “Hermetists” at all, Lazzarelli is the clearest and most explicit example of a Hermetic philosopher that one will find in the entire Renaissance period. The real “Hermetic tradition” of the Renaissance has relatively little to do with Ficino and even less with Pico and Bruno. Its crucial representatives were Lazzarelli, his “spiritual master” Giovanni da Correggio (ca. 1451?–after 1503; see below), followed by Frances Yates’ *bête noire* Cornelius Agrippa.

Lazzarelli was born in San Severino in 1447 and moved to Rome in the first half of the 1470s. He joined the Roman Academy and hoped to achieve fame as a poet until a fateful day in 1481 when he met the strange apocalyptic prophet Giovanni da Correggio. Correggio’s sermons made such an impression that Lazzarelli “left the Parnassian hills and everything else, and right away followed him to Mount Zion – the first of his pupils” (Lazzarelli, *Epistola Enoch* 13.1). In other words, he abandoned profane poetry to pursue a spiritual path. One year later, in 1482, Lazzarelli offered his teacher a beautiful manuscript that contained all the philosophical *Hermetica* in Latin, preceded by Prefaces in prose and poetry. Next to the *Asclepius* and Ficino’s *Pimander* (C.H. I–XIV), it also contained C.H. XVI–XVIII, translated by Lazzarelli from an independent manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, more complete than the one that had been used by Ficino. These so-called *Diffinitiones Hermetici* were published after Lazzarelli’s death by Symphorien Champier (1507).

Lazzarelli’s prefaces to the philosophical *Hermetica* (see Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn 2005, 151–163; Lazzarelli 2009, 81–85) show his deep admiration for the Hermetic wisdom, which he considers to be the key to the true meaning of

the Christian message. Most surprisingly, it appears that Lazzarelli identified his teacher Correggio with no one less than Hermes himself: "Father Mercurius, teacher by fatherly love,/Hail to you, who are like a god to me./You have begotten me anew by ethereal seed,/And taught me to be born again without deceit" (ibid., 159). A later manuscript by Lazzarelli, the *Epistola Enoch*, confirms that – no doubt on Lazzarelli's instigation – by 1484, Correggio had come to think of himself as the "Hermetic Christ." On Palm Sunday that year, he made a spectacular appearance in Rome: sitting on a donkey, dressed like Jesus, and wearing a crown of thorns, he entered the city and announced the coming of the end of times. Above his head he carried a silver-plated disc shaped like the crescent moon, with a text that identified him as both Pimander and Jesus Christ (ibid., 107–149).

Some time in the later 1480s, Lazzarelli moved to Naples, where he tried to gain the attention of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Sicily (known as Ferrante). His most important work, a "Dialogue on the Supreme Dignity of Man, entitled the Way of Christ and the Mixing-Bowl of Hermes" (usually referred to as the *Crater Hermetis*), was written here probably between 1492 and 1494. Modeled closely after the Hermetic dialogues, it casts Lazzarelli himself in the role of a teacher of wisdom who initiates two pupils into the Hermetic mysteries. Those pupils are none else than King Ferrante himself and his Secretary of State, the poet and astrologer Giovanni Pontano. Although Lazzarelli succeeded in gaining an audience with the king to present his large poem *Fasti Christiani Religionis*, we have no evidence that Ferrante ever received or read the *Crater Hermetis*. When Charles VIII took possession of Naples on 21 February 1494, a year after Ferrante's death, Lazzarelli made a half-hearted attempt to replace the name "Ferdinandus" by "Caroli," but his new copy dedicated to the French king was never finished.

The *Crater Hermetis* is a unique and powerful text, impressive for its literary qualities no less than for its extremely original interpretation of the Hermetic message. Lazzarelli argues that Poimandres was no one else than the divine

Logos himself, the second person of the Trinity, who thus appeared to Hermes prior to his incarnation as Jesus Christ. This same Poimandres/Christ has now taken residence in Lazzarelli and has illumined his mind, so that he is able to instruct his two pupils about the road toward true felicity through attaining self-knowledge or gnosis. Prompted by the questions of his pupils, Lazzarelli embarks on an allegorical exegesis of various biblical passages, explaining such topics as the meaning of the trees in paradise, the women in Proverbs, the Daughters of Men, and the nature of the Fall. These explanations are full of references to the Hermetic writings and cause his pupils to gradually move toward a state of ecstasy that makes them receptive to the true mystery. Remarkably, that mystery appears to be hidden precisely in the most controversial passages of the Hermetic literature, the "god-making" passages about the animation of statues. Lazzarelli agrees with Augustine that Hermes Trismegistus did indeed lapse into idolatry; but he proceeds to argue that this happened because, as a pagan living before the Incarnation, he was not yet capable of fully understanding the message that Poimandres/Christ was revealing to him. The Egyptians attracted souls into their temple statues because they did not know the secret by which they could create souls themselves. Only the *Christian* Hermetist is able to attain perfect self-knowledge and knowledge of God, and this allows him to unite with God's innermost being so completely that he even participates in God's "fertility" – that is to say, his very power of creation. As a result, he can do what only God can do: create souls. In all likelihood, this doctrine of soul creation comes from Eleazar of Worms' commentary on the *Sepher Yetzirah* and related interpretations in the school of Abraham Abulafia, which Lazzarelli seems to have found in the writings of Pico della Mirandola's Jewish teacher Yohanan Alemanno. Of course, Lazzarelli's pupils Ferrante and Pontano express their desire to be initiated into the supreme knowledge that will allow them to create souls; but Lazzarelli postpones his final revelation to a future time.



### The Transmission of Lazzarellian Hermetism

One year after Lazzarelli's death, in 1501, Giovanni da Correggio appeared in Lyons where he managed to gain an audience with King Louis XII. He offered his own *Exhortationes in Barbaros Thurcos Scijthas* to the king, and "a similar work" to the French ambassador, who passed it on to an Italian manuscript hunter, Pietro Aleandro (Hanegraaff 2005, 40–41). In all likelihood, this was Lazzarelli's deluxe manuscript of Ficino's *Pimander* (C.H. I–XIV), the *Asclepius*, and the *Diffinitiones Asclepii* (C.H. XVI–XVIII), with Lazzarelli's introductions. Aleandro took it to Venice and then to Rome, from where Egidio da Viterbo seems to have brought it to Viterbo, where it is still kept today. Aleandro described how Correggio was disputing with two of the king's physicians, one of whom can be identified as Symphorien Champier. Champier would seem to have used the occasion to have a copy made of the *Diffinitiones Asclepii*, which he published in 1507, thereby completing Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* with the final three treatises that were missing from the *Pimander* (Champier 1507).

Correggio's visit to Lyons thus seems to have been crucial to the subsequent diffusion of the Hermetica from Italy to France and more generally to the French tradition of *prisca theologia* (Walker 1954). Next to Champier's important publication of 1507, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples published Lazzarelli's *Crater Hermetis* together with the other Hermetica, in an equally crucial edition two years earlier (Lefèvre d'Étaples 1505). However, Lefèvre's edition was edited to purify it of potentially heretical elements and even deleted all references to Giovanni Pontano: the dialogue now seemed to take place between Lazzarelli and Ferrante alone.

Lefèvre d'Étaples' edition of Lazzarelli's *Crater* had a very great impact on Cornelius Agrippa during his "Hermetic" and largely Italian period (1509–1518): as it turns out, he was reading the Hermetica entirely through Lazzarelli's eyes, and at the core of Agrippa's religious message, we find Lazzarelli's innovative doctrine that the man who achieves true knowledge is thereby restored to his pre-lapsarian state and comes to participate in

God's own power of creation. As such, the deified human being can literally "do anything" (Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* 2.50). Agrippa concealed this message behind allusive hints, enigmatic statements, and the evocation of secrets "which should not be publicly discussed" (ibid., 3.36); but if he emphasized the supremacy of Christian "faith" in his later work, what he really meant was Lazzarelli's doctrine of deification through gnosis (Hanegraaff 2009).

### Conclusion

We have seen that current notions of an early modern "Hermetic tradition" are grounded in Frances Yates' grand narrative and find little support in documented evidence. It is more accurate to speak of a Hermetic interpretation of Platonic Orientalism, in competition with a Zoroastrian and a Mosaic (Christian kabbalistic) interpretation. Interestingly, while Yates' favorites Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola were explicit and consistent in their adherence to these two latter interpretations, the Hermetic option remained little more than a theoretical possibility. The true founder of Christian Hermetism in the Renaissance period, Lodovico Lazzarelli, showed little interest in Plato or later Platonic authors and focused almost exclusively on Hermes and the Bible (with some additional interest in kabbalah). He understood the Hermetic writings better than any of his contemporaries or early modern successors, but his influence remained limited to Lefèvre's edition and the use that Agrippa made of it. In short, while the dissemination of Hermetic texts during the Renaissance caused a lively *discourse* about Hermes and the Hermetica, we have almost no evidence for a Hermetic *tradition* (Hanegraaff 2015, 205).

### Cross-References

- Giordano Bruno
- Giovanni Pico della Mirandola
- Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa
- Marsilio Ficino

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