

# Hermeticism

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**Hermeticism**, or **Hermetism**, is a philosophical and religious tradition rooted in the teachings attributed to **Hermes Trismegistus**, a syncretic figure combining elements of the Greek god **Hermes** and the Egyptian god **Thoth**.<sup>[a]</sup> This system encompasses a wide range of esoteric knowledge, including aspects of alchemy, astrology and theurgy, significantly influencing various mystical and occult traditions throughout history. The writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, often referred to as the *Hermetica*, were produced over a period spanning many centuries (c. 300 BCE – 1200 CE) and may be very different in content and scope.<sup>[b]</sup>

One particular form of Hermetic teaching is the religio-philosophical system found in a specific subgroup of Hermetic writings known as the 'religio-philosophical' *Hermetica*. The most famous of these are the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of seventeen Greek treatises written between approximately 100 and 300 CE, and the *Asclepius*, a treatise from the same period, mainly surviving in a Latin translation.<sup>[c]</sup> This specific historical form of Hermetic philosophy is sometimes more narrowly referred to as Hermetism,<sup>[d]</sup> to distinguish it from other philosophies inspired by Hermetic writings of different periods and natures.

The broader term, Hermeticism, may refer to a wide variety of philosophical systems drawing on Hermetic writings or other subject matter associated with Hermes. Notably, alchemy often went by the name of "the Hermetic art" or "the Hermetic philosophy".<sup>[1]</sup> The most famous use of the term in this broader sense is in the concept of Renaissance Hermeticism, which refers to the early modern philosophies inspired by the translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500), as well as by Paracelsus' (1494–1541) introduction of a new medical philosophy drawing upon the 'technical' *Hermetica*, such as the *Emerald Tablet*.<sup>[2]</sup>

Throughout its history, Hermeticism has been closely associated with the idea of a primeval, divine wisdom revealed only to the most ancient of sages, such as Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>[e]</sup> During the Renaissance, this evolved into the concept of *prisca theologia* or "ancient theology", which asserted that a single, true theology was given by God to the earliest humans and that traces of it could still be found in various ancient systems of thought.<sup>[3]</sup> This idea, popular among Renaissance thinkers like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), eventually developed into the notion that divine truth could be found across different religious and philosophical traditions, a concept that came to be known as the perennial philosophy.<sup>[4]</sup> In this context, the term 'Hermetic' gradually lost its specificity, eventually becoming synonymous with the divine knowledge of the ancient Egyptians, particularly as related to alchemy and magic, a view that was later popularized by nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultists.<sup>[5]</sup>

# Origins and early development

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## Late Antiquity

In Late Antiquity, Hermetism<sup>[4]</sup> originated in the cultural and religious melting pot of Hellenistic Egypt, a period marked by the fusion of Greek, Egyptian, and other Near Eastern religious and philosophical traditions. The central figure of Hermes Trismegistus, who embodies both the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth, emerged as a symbol of this syncretism. Hermes Trismegistus was revered as a divine sage and is credited with a vast corpus of writings known as the Hermetica, which expound on various aspects of theology, cosmology, and spiritual practice.<sup>[6]</sup>

Hermetism developed alongside other significant religious and philosophical movements such as early Christianity, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, the Chaldean Oracles, and late Orphic and Pythagorean literature. These doctrines were "characterized by a resistance to the dominance of either pure rationality or doctrinal faith."<sup>[7]</sup> Plutarch's mention of Hermes Trismegistus dates back to the first century CE, indicating the early recognition of this figure in Greek and Roman thought. Other significant figures of the time, such as Tertullian, Iamblichus, and Porphyry, were also familiar with Hermetic writings, which influenced their own philosophical and religious ideas.<sup>[8]</sup>

The texts now known as the Corpus Hermeticum are generally dated by modern scholars to the beginning of the second century or earlier. These writings focus on the oneness and goodness of God, the purification of the soul, and the relationship between mind and spirit. Their predominant literary form is the dialogue, where Hermes Trismegistus instructs a perplexed disciple on various teachings of hidden wisdom.<sup>[9]</sup>

In fifth-century Macedonia, Joannes Stobaeus compiled an extensive Anthology of Greek poetical, rhetorical, historical, and philosophical literature. Among the preserved excerpts are significant numbers of discourses and dialogues attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Influence on Early Christianity and Gnosticism

Hermeticism had a significant impact on early Christian thought, particularly in the development of Christian mysticism and esoteric interpretations of scripture. Some early Church Fathers, such as Lactantius, viewed Hermes Trismegistus as a wise pagan prophet whose teachings were compatible with Christianity. The Hermetic idea of a transcendent, ineffable God who created the cosmos through a process of emanation resonated with early Christian theologians, who sought to reconcile their faith with classical philosophy.<sup>[11]</sup>

However, Hermeticism's influence was most pronounced in Gnostic traditions, which shared with Hermeticism an emphasis on esoteric knowledge as the key to salvation. Both movements taught that the soul's true home was in the divine realm and that the material world was a place of exile, albeit with a more positive view in Hermeticism. The Hermetic tradition of ascension through knowledge and purification paralleled Gnostic teachings about the soul's journey back to the divine source, linking the two esoteric traditions.<sup>[6]</sup>

# Core texts

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## The *Hermetica*

The *Hermetica* is a collection of texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, and it forms the foundational literature of the Hermetic tradition. These writings were composed over several centuries, primarily during the Hellenistic, Roman, and early Christian periods, roughly between 200 BCE and 300 CE. The *Hermetica* is traditionally divided into two categories: the philosophical or theological Hermetica, and the technical Hermetica, which covers alchemy, astrology, and other forms of occult science.<sup>[6]</sup>

The most famous and influential of the philosophical Hermetica is the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of seventeen treatises that articulate the core doctrines of Hermeticism. These treatises are primarily dialogues in which Hermes Trismegistus imparts esoteric wisdom to a disciple, exploring themes such as the nature of the divine, the cosmos, the soul, and the path to spiritual enlightenment. Key texts within the *Corpus Hermeticum* include *Poimandres*, which presents a vision of the cosmos and the role of humanity within it, and *Asclepius*, which discusses theurgy, magic, and the divine spirit residing in all things.<sup>[6]</sup>

Another significant text within the Hermetica is the *Emerald Tablet*, a concise work that has become central to Western alchemical tradition. Although its exact origins are obscure, the *Emerald Tablet* encapsulates the Hermetic principle of "as above, so below", which suggests a correspondence between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the individual soul).<sup>[9]</sup> The *Emerald Tablet* has been extensively commented upon and has significantly influenced medieval and Renaissance alchemy.

The technical *Hermetica* includes works focused on astrology, alchemy, and theurgy—practices that were seen as methods to understand and manipulate the divine forces in the world. These texts were highly influential in the development of the Western esoteric tradition, contributing to the knowledge base of medieval alchemists and astrologers, as well as to the broader tradition of occultism.<sup>[11]</sup>

Other important original Hermetic texts include *Isis the Prophetess to Her Son Horus*,<sup>[12]</sup> which consists of a long dialogue between Isis and Horus on the fall of man and other matters; the *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*,<sup>[13]</sup> and many fragments, which are chiefly preserved in the anthology of Stobaeus.

## Interpretation and transmission

The transmission and interpretation of the *Hermetica* played a crucial role in its influence on Western thought. During the Renaissance, these texts were rediscovered and translated into Latin, leading to a revival of interest in Hermetic philosophy. The translations by Marsilio Ficino and Lodovico Lazzarelli were particularly significant, as they introduced Hermetic ideas to Renaissance scholars and contributed to the development of early modern esotericism.<sup>[14]</sup>

Renaissance thinkers like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno saw in Hermeticism a source of ancient wisdom that could be harmonized with Christian teachings and classical philosophy. The Hermetic emphasis on the divine nature of humanity and the potential for spiritual ascent resonated with the Renaissance ideal of human dignity and the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>[15]</sup>

Throughout history, the *Hermetica* has been subject to various interpretations, ranging from philosophical and mystical readings to more practical applications in alchemy and magic. The esoteric nature of these texts has allowed them to be adapted to different cultural and intellectual contexts, ensuring their enduring influence across centuries.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Philosophical and theological concepts

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### Cosmology and theology

#### God as 'the All'

In the religio-philosophical *Hermetica*, the ultimate reality is called by many names, such as God, Lord, Father, Mind (*Nous*), the Creator, the All, the One, etc.<sup>[16]</sup> In the Hermetic view, God is both the all (Greek: *to pan*) and the creator of the all: all created things pre-exist in God<sup>[17]</sup> and God is the nature of the cosmos (being both the substance from which it proceeds and the governing principle which orders it),<sup>[18]</sup> yet the things themselves and the cosmos were all created by God. Thus, God ('the All') creates itself,<sup>[19]</sup> and is both transcendent (as the creator of the cosmos) and immanent (as the created cosmos).<sup>[17]</sup> These ideas are closely related to the cosmo-theological views of the Stoics.<sup>[20]</sup>

#### *Prima materia*

In Hermeticism, *prima materia* is a key concept in the alchemical tradition, representing the raw, undifferentiated substance from which all things originate. It is often associated with chaos, the formless and potential-filled state that precedes creation. The idea of *prima materia* has roots in Greco-Roman traditions, particularly in Orphic cosmogony, where it is linked to the cosmic egg, and in the biblical concept of Tehom from Genesis, reflecting a synthesis of classical and Christian thought during the Renaissance.<sup>[6]</sup>

In alchemy, *prima materia* is the substance that undergoes transformation through processes such as nigredo, the blackening stage associated with chaos, which ultimately leads to the creation of the philosopher's stone. This transformation symbolizes the magnum opus ('Great Work') of the alchemist, seeking to purify and elevate the material to its perfected state. Renaissance figures like Paracelsus expanded on this concept,<sup>[g]</sup> connecting it to the elements and the broader Hermetic belief in the unity of matter and spirit.<sup>[15]</sup>

The significance of *prima materia* in Hermeticism lies in its representation of the potential for both material and spiritual transformation, embodying the Hermetic principle of "as above, so below", where the macrocosm and microcosm reflect each other in the alchemical process.<sup>[9]</sup>



*Magnum Chaos*, wood-inlay by Giovan Francesco Capoferri at the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo, based on a design by Lorenzo Lotto.

## The nature of divinity

### *Prisca theologia*

Hermeticists adhere to the doctrine of *prisca theologia*, the belief that a single, true theology exists, which is present in all religions and was revealed by God to humanity in antiquity.<sup>[21]</sup> Early Christian theologians, including Church Fathers such as Lactantius and Augustine, referenced Hermes Trismegistus, sometimes portraying him as a wise pagan prophet whose teachings could complement Christian doctrine.<sup>[14]</sup>

During the Renaissance, scholars such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola sought to integrate Hermetic teachings into Christian theology, viewing the Hermetic writings as remnants of an ancient wisdom that predated and influenced all religious traditions, including Christianity. It was during this period that the association of Hermes Trismegistus with biblical figures like Moses, or as part of a lineage including Enoch and Noah, was more explicitly developed by these scholars to harmonize Hermetic thought with biblical narratives.<sup>[22]</sup> This blending of traditions was part of a broader intellectual effort to reconcile pagan and Christian wisdom during this period.<sup>[23]</sup>

### As above, so below

"As above, so below" is a popular modern paraphrase of the second verse of the *Emerald Tablet* (a compact and cryptic text attributed to Hermes Trismegistus and first attested in a late eight or early ninth century Arabic source),<sup>[24]</sup> as it appears in its most widely divulged medieval Latin translation:<sup>[25]</sup>

*Quod est superius est sicut quod inferius, et quod inferius est sicut quod est superius.*

That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above.

—The Emerald Tablet

### The seven heavens

In addition to the principles of *prisca theologia* and "as above, so below," Hermeticism teaches that the soul's journey back to the divine involves ascending through the seven heavens. These heavens correspond to the seven classical planets and represent stages of spiritual purification and enlightenment. As the soul transcends each heavenly sphere, it sheds the material influences and attachments associated with that level, progressively aligning itself with the divine order. This process symbolizes the soul's return to its divine origin, ultimately seeking unity with The One—the source of all existence. The



The Magician, from the Rider–Waite tarot deck, is often thought to display the Hermetic concept of "as above, so below".

concept of the seven heavens underscores the Hermetic belief in the potential for spiritual transformation through divine knowledge and practice, guiding the soul toward its ultimate goal of reunification with the divine.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Creation, the human condition, and spiritual ascent

### Cosmogony and the fall of man

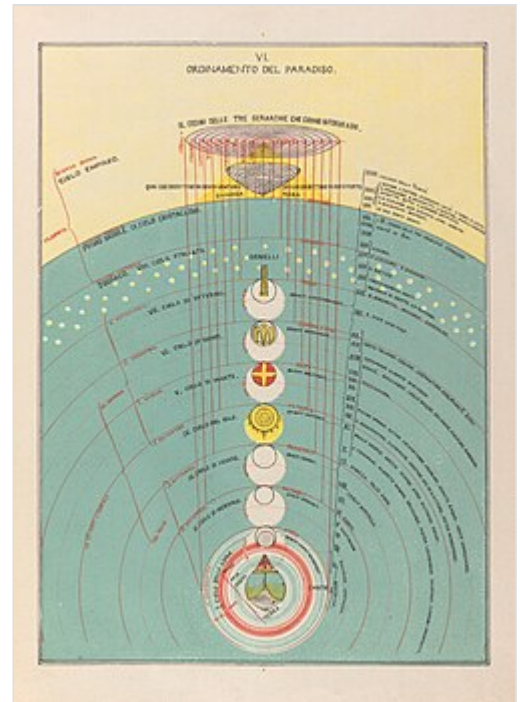
A creation story is told by God to Hermes in the first book of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It begins when God, by an act of will, creates the primary matter that is to constitute the cosmos. From primary matter God separates the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water). "The Word (Logos)" then leaps forth from the materializing four elements, which were unintelligent. Nous then makes the seven heavens spin, and from them spring forth creatures without speech. Earth is then separated from water, and animals (other than man) are brought forth. Then God orders the elements into the seven heavens (often held to be the spheres of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Sun, and the Moon, which travel in circles and govern destiny). The God then created androgynous man, in God's own image, and handed over his creation.<sup>[26]</sup>

Man carefully observed the creation of nous and received from God man's authority over all creation. Man then rose up above the spheres' paths to better view creation. He then showed the form of the All to Nature. Nature fell in love with the All, and man, seeing his reflection in water, fell in love with Nature and wished to dwell in it. Immediately, man became one with Nature and became a slave to its limitations, such as sex and sleep. In this way, man became speechless (having lost "the Word") and he became "double", being mortal in body yet immortal in spirit, and having authority over all creation yet subject to destiny.<sup>[27]</sup>

The alternative account of the fall of man, as preserved in *Isis the Prophetess to Her Son Horus*, describes a process in which God, after creating the universe and various deities, fashioned human souls from a mysterious substance and assigned them to dwell in the astral region. These souls were then tasked with creating life on Earth. However, the souls became prideful and sought equality with the highest gods, which displeased God. As a consequence, God instructed Hermes to create physical bodies to imprison the souls as a form of punishment. The souls were told that their time on Earth would be marked by suffering, but if they lived worthily of their divine origin, they would eventually return to the heavenly realm. If not, they would face repeated reincarnation on Earth.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Good and evil

Hermes explains in Book 9 of the *Corpus Hermeticum* that nous (reason and knowledge) brings forth either good or evil, depending upon whether one receives one's perceptions from God or from demons. God brings forth good, but demons bring forth evil. Among the evils brought forth by demons are:



La materia della *Divina commedia* di Dante Alighieri, Plate VI: "The Ordering of Paradise" by Michelangelo Caetani (1804–1882)

"adultery, murder, violence to one's father, sacrilege, ungodliness, strangling, suicide from a cliff and all such other demonic actions".<sup>[28]</sup>

The word "good" is used very strictly. It is restricted to references to God.<sup>[29]</sup> It is only God (in the sense of the nous, not in the sense of the All) who is completely free of evil. Men are prevented from being good because man, having a body, is consumed by his physical nature, and is ignorant of the Supreme Good.<sup>[30]</sup> *Asclepius* explains that evil is born from desire which itself is caused by ignorance, the intelligence bestowed by God is what allows some to rid themselves of desire.<sup>[31]</sup>

A focus upon the material life is said to be the only thing that offends God:

As processions passing in the road cannot achieve anything themselves yet still obstruct others, so these men merely process through the universe, led by the pleasures of the body.<sup>[32]</sup>

One must create, one must do something positive in one's life, because God is a generative power. Not creating anything leaves a person "sterile" (i.e., unable to accomplish anything).<sup>[33]</sup>

## Reincarnation and rebirth

Reincarnation is mentioned in Hermetic texts. Hermes Trismegistus asked:

O son, how many bodies have we to pass through, how many bands of demons, through how many series of repetitions and cycles of the stars, before we hasten to the One alone?<sup>[34]</sup>

Rebirth appears central to the practice of hermetic philosophy. The process would begin with a candidate separating themselves from the world before they rid themselves of material vices; they are then reborn as someone completely different from who they were before.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Historical development

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### Middle Ages

A few primarily Hermetic occult orders were founded in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. In England, it grew interwoven with the Lollard-Familist traditions.<sup>[36]</sup>

### Etymology

The term 'Hermetic' derives from *hermeticus*, a Latin adjective that first emerged in the medieval period, derived from the name of the Greek god Hermes, to describe the esoteric writings and practices associated with Hermes Trismegistus. This term became widely used in reference to the *Hermetica*, a body of texts considered to contain secret wisdom on the nature of the divine, the cosmos, and the human soul.

In English, the word 'Hermetic' appeared in the 17th century. One of the earliest instances in English literature is found in John Everard's translation of *The Pymander of Hermes*, published in 1650.<sup>[27]</sup> The term was used in reference to "Hermetic writers" such as Robert Fludd. The synonymous term 'Hermetical' is found in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643), where "Hermetical Philosophers" are mentioned, referring to scholars and alchemists who engaged in the study of the natural world through the lens of Hermetic wisdom.<sup>[37]</sup>

The phrase "hermetically sealed" originates from alchemical practices and refers to an airtight sealing method used in laboratories. This term became a metaphor for the safeguarding of esoteric knowledge, representing the idea that such wisdom should be kept hidden from the uninitiated.<sup>[38]</sup>

Over time, 'Hermetic' evolved to encompass a broader range of meanings, often signifying something mysterious, occult, or impenetrable. This evolution reflects the central theme of secrecy within the Hermetic tradition, which emphasizes the importance of protecting sacred knowledge from those unprepared to receive it.<sup>[39]</sup>

## Renaissance revival

The Western esoteric tradition has been greatly influenced by Hermeticism. After centuries of falling out of favor, Hermeticism was reintroduced to the West when, in 1460, a man named Leonardo di Pistoia brought the *Corpus Hermeticum* to Pistoia.<sup>[h]</sup> He was one of many agents sent out by Pistoia's ruler, Cosimo de' Medici, to scour European monasteries for lost ancient writings.<sup>[40]</sup> The work of such writers as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who attempted to reconcile Jewish kabbalah and Christian mysticism, brought Hermeticism into a context more easily understood by Europeans during the time of the Renaissance.



*Corpus Hermeticum*: first Latin edition, by Marsilio Ficino (1471).

In 1614, Isaac Casaubon, a Swiss philologist, analyzed the Greek Hermetic texts for linguistic style. He concluded that the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were not the work of an ancient Egyptian priest but in fact dated to the second and third centuries CE.<sup>[41]</sup>

Even in light of Casaubon's linguistic discovery (and typical of many adherents of Hermetic philosophy in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries), Thomas Browne in his *Religio Medici* (1643) confidently stated: "The severe schools shall never laugh me out of the philosophy of Hermes, that this visible world is but a portrait of the invisible."<sup>[42]</sup>

In 1678, flaws in Casaubon's dating were discerned by Ralph Cudworth, who argued that Casaubon's allegation of forgery could only be applied to three of the seventeen treatises contained within the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Moreover, Cudworth noted Casaubon's failure to acknowledge the codification of these treatises as a late formulation of a pre-existing oral tradition. According to Cudworth, the texts must be viewed as a terminus ad quem and not a terminus a quo. Lost Greek texts, and many of the surviving Vulgate books, contained discussions of alchemy clothed in philosophical metaphor.<sup>[43]</sup>

In 1964, Frances A. Yates advanced the thesis that Renaissance Hermeticism, or what she called "the Hermetic tradition", had been a crucial factor in the development of modern science.<sup>[44]</sup> While Yates's thesis has since been largely rejected,<sup>[45]</sup> the important role played by the 'Hermetic' science of alchemy in the thought of such figures as Jan Baptist van Helmont (1580–1644), Robert Boyle (1627–1691) or Isaac Newton (1642–1727) has been amply demonstrated.<sup>[46]</sup>

## Modern period

Rosicrucianism is a movement that incorporates the Hermetic philosophy. It dates back to the 17th century. The sources dating the existence of the Rosicrucians to the 17th century are three German pamphlets: the *Fama*, the *Confessio Fraternitatis*, and *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*.<sup>[47]</sup> Some scholars believe these to be hoaxes of the time and say that later Rosicrucian organizations are the first actual appearance of a Rosicrucian society.<sup>[48]</sup>

Hermetic magic underwent a 19th-century revival in Western Europe,<sup>[49]</sup> where it was practiced by groups such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. It was also practiced by individual persons, such as Eliphas Lévi, William Butler Yeats, Arthur Machen, and Frederick Hockley.<sup>[50]</sup> The *Kybalion* is a book anonymously published in 1908 by three people who called themselves the "Three Initiates", and which expounds upon essential Hermetic principles.

In 1924, Walter Scott placed the date of the Hermetic texts shortly after 200 CE, but W. Flinders Petrie placed their origin between 200 and 500 BCE.<sup>[51]</sup>

In 1945, Hermetic texts were found near the Egyptian town Nag Hammadi. One of these texts was in the form of a conversation between Hermes and Asclepius. A second text (titled *On the Ogdoad and Ennead*) told of the Hermetic mystery schools. It was written in the Coptic language, the latest and final form in which the Egyptian language was written.<sup>[52]</sup>

Gilles Quispel says, "It is now completely certain that there existed before and after the beginning of the Christian era in Alexandria a secret society, akin to a Masonic lodge. The members of this group called themselves 'brethren,' were initiated through a baptism of the Spirit, greeted each other with a sacred kiss, celebrated a sacred meal and read the Hermetic writings as edifying treatises for their spiritual progress."<sup>[53]</sup> On the other hand, Christian Bull argues that "there is no reason to identify [Alexandria] as the birthplace of a Hermetic lodge as several scholars have done. There is neither internal nor external evidence for such an Alexandrian lodge, a designation that is alien to the ancient world and carries Masonic connotations."<sup>[54]</sup>

According to Geza Vermes, Hermeticism was a Hellenistic mysticism contemporaneous with the Fourth Gospel, and Hermes Trismegistos was "the Hellenized reincarnation of the Egyptian deity Thoth, the source of wisdom, who was believed to deify man through knowledge (*gnosis*)."<sup>[55]</sup>

## Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a specifically Hermetic society that taught alchemy, qabalah, and the magic of Hermes, along with the principles of occult science during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Order was open to both sexes and treated them as equals.<sup>[56]</sup>

Arthur Edward Waite, a member and later the head of the Golden Dawn, wrote *The Hermetic Museum* and *The Hermetic Museum Restored and Enlarged*. He edited *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus*, which was published as a two-volume set. He considered himself to be a Hermeticist and was instrumental in adding the word "Hermetic" to the official title of the Golden Dawn.<sup>[57]</sup>

The Golden Dawn maintained the tightest of secrecy, which was enforced by severe penalties for those who disclosed its secrets. Overall, the general public was left oblivious of the actions and even the existence of the Order, so few, if any, secrets were disclosed.<sup>[58]</sup>

Its secrecy was broken first by Aleister Crowley in 1905 and later by Israel Regardie in 1937. Regardie gave the general public a detailed account of the Order's teachings.<sup>[59]</sup>

### **Scholarship on the *Hermetica***

After the Renaissance and even within the 20th century, scholars did not study Hermeticism nearly as much as other topics; however, the 1990s saw a renewed interest in Hermetic scholarly works and discussion.<sup>[60]</sup>

## **Hermetic practices**

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"The three parts of the wisdom of the whole universe" is a phrase derived from the Emerald Tablet referring to three disciplines of Hermeticism. Hermetic practices are diverse and deeply rooted in the esoteric traditions of alchemy, astrology, theurgy, and other occult disciplines. These practices are not merely ritualistic but are aimed at achieving spiritual transformation, aligning the practitioner with the divine order, and unlocking hidden knowledge about the self and the cosmos.

### **Alchemy**

Alchemy, or the operation of the Sun, is perhaps the most well-known of the Hermetic practices, often misunderstood as merely a proto-scientific attempt to turn base metals into gold. In Hermeticism, however, alchemy is primarily a spiritual discipline, where the physical transformation of materials is a metaphor for the spiritual purification and perfection of the soul. The ultimate goal of alchemical work is the creation of the philosopher's stone, which symbolizes the attainment of spiritual enlightenment and immortality. Alchemy is not merely the changing of lead into gold, which is called chrysopoeia.<sup>[61]</sup> It is an investigation into the spiritual constitution, or life, of matter and material existence through an application of the mysteries of birth, death, and resurrection.<sup>[62]</sup>

The alchemical process is divided into stages, such as nigredo (blackening), albedo (whitening), and rubedo (reddening), each representing different phases of spiritual purification and enlightenment. Prima materia, or the original chaotic substance from which all things are formed, is central to alchemy. The various stages of chemical distillation and fermentation, among other processes, are aspects of these mysteries that, when applied, quicken nature's processes to bring a natural body to perfection.<sup>[63]</sup> By transmuting prima materia into the philosopher's stone, the alchemist seeks to achieve unity with the divine and realize their true nature as a divine being.<sup>[64]</sup> This perfection is the accomplishment of the Great Work (Latin: *magnum opus*).

## Astrology

Astrology in Hermeticism is not merely the study of celestial bodies' influence on human affairs but a means of understanding the divine order of the cosmos. The positions and movements of the planets and stars are seen as reflections of divine will and the structure of the universe, holding metaphorical value as symbols in the mind of the All. Hermetic astrology seeks to decode these celestial messages to align the practitioner's life with the divine plan. It also plays a role in determining the timing of rituals and alchemical operations, as certain astrological conditions are believed to be more conducive to spiritual work.<sup>[9]</sup> The discovery of astrology is attributed to Zoroaster, who is said to have discovered this part of the wisdom of the whole universe and taught it to man.<sup>[65]</sup>

## Theurgy

Theurgy is a practice focused on invoking the presence of gods or divine powers to purify the soul and facilitate its ascent through the heavenly spheres. Unlike purely magical operations aimed at influencing the physical world, theurgical practices are intended to bring the practitioner into direct contact with the divine. By engaging in theurgy, the Hermetic practitioner seeks to align their soul with higher spiritual realities, ultimately leading to union with The One. This practice often involves the assumption of godforms or using sacred names and symbols to draw down divine energy.<sup>[66]</sup> In forms of Hermeticism influenced by Christian Kabbalah, this divine magic is reliant upon a hierarchy of angels, archangels, and the names of God.<sup>[67]</sup>

"Theurgy" translates to the "science or art of divine works" and is the practical aspect of the Hermetic art of alchemy.<sup>[68]</sup> Furthermore, alchemy is seen as the "key" to theurgy,<sup>[69]</sup> the ultimate goal of which is to become united with higher counterparts, leading to the attainment of divine consciousness.<sup>[68]</sup>

## Hermetic Qabalah

Hermetic Qabalah is an adaptation and expansion of Jewish Kabbalistic thought within the context of Western esotericism. It plays a significant role in Hermetic practices by providing a framework for understanding the relationship between the divine, the cosmos, and the self. The central symbol in Hermetic Qabalah is the Tree of Life, which represents the structure of creation and the path of spiritual ascent. Each of the ten spheres (sephiroth) on the Tree corresponds to different aspects of divinity and stages of spiritual development.

Hermetic Qabalah integrates alchemical, astrological, and theurgical elements, allowing practitioners to work with these disciplines in a unified system. Through the study and application of Qabalistic principles, Hermetic practitioners seek to achieve self-knowledge, spiritual enlightenment, and ultimately, unity with the divine.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Hermeticism and other religions

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Hermeticism has influenced and been influenced by major religious traditions, particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. During the Renaissance, Christian scholars like Marsilio Ficino integrated Hermetic teachings into Christian theology, viewing them as ancient wisdom compatible with Christian doctrine. This led to the development of a Christianized Hermeticism that saw Hermes Trismegistus as a figure of proto-Christian knowledge.<sup>[6]</sup>

Jewish philosophy and Jewish mystical traditions form the basis of Hermetic Qabalah, which syncretized Hermeticism and Kabbalah, the primary mystical aspect of Judaism. Qabalah integrates Hermetic principles, such as the Law of Correspondence, with Kabbalistic concepts like the Tree of Life and the Sefirot. Hermetic Qabalah significantly influenced Western esotericism, shaping various spiritual movements and philosophical inquiries within the broader mystical tradition.<sup>[15]</sup>

Islamic mysticism—particularly Sufism—and Islamic alchemy were influenced by Hermeticism. Islamic scholars preserved and transmitted Hermetic texts, integrating them into Islamic philosophy and spiritual practices.<sup>[66]</sup>

## Criticism and controversies

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Hermeticism, like many esoteric traditions, has faced criticism and sparked controversy over the centuries, particularly in relation to its origins, authenticity, and role in modern spiritual and occult movements.

### Scholarly debates

The authenticity and historical origins of Hermetic texts have been a major point of debate among scholars. Some researchers argue that the Corpus Hermeticum and other Hermetic writings are not the remnants of ancient wisdom but rather syncretic works composed during the Hellenistic period, blending Greek, Egyptian, and other influences. The dating of these texts has been particularly contentious, with some scholars placing their origins in the early centuries CE, while others suggest even earlier roots.<sup>[6]</sup>

Another scholarly debate revolves around the figure of Hermes Trismegistus himself. While traditionally considered an ancient sage or a syncretic combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth, modern scholars often view Hermes Trismegistus as a symbolic representation of a certain type of wisdom rather than a historical figure. This has led to discussions about the extent to which Hermeticism can be considered a coherent tradition versus a loose collection of related ideas and texts.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Reception and criticism in modern times

In modern times, Hermeticism has been both embraced and criticized by various spiritual and occult movements. Organizations like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn have drawn heavily on Hermetic principles, integrating them into their rituals and teachings. However, some critics argue that the modern use of Hermeticism often distorts its original meaning, blending it with other esoteric traditions in ways that obscure its true nature.<sup>[15]</sup>

Furthermore, Hermeticism's emphasis on personal spiritual knowledge and its sometimes ambiguous relationship with orthodox religious teachings have led to criticism from more conservative religious groups. These critics often view Hermeticism as a form of occultism that promotes a dangerous or misleading path away from traditional religious values.<sup>[70]</sup>

## Legacy and influence

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Hermeticism has left a profound legacy on Western thought, influencing a wide range of esoteric traditions, philosophical movements, and cultural expressions. Its impact can be traced from the Renaissance revival of Hermetic texts to modern esotericism and popular culture.

### Influence on Western esotericism

Hermeticism is one of the cornerstones of Western esotericism, with its ideas deeply embedded in various occult and mystical traditions. The Renaissance saw a revival of Hermeticism, particularly through the works of scholars like Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who integrated Hermetic teachings into Christian theology and philosophy. This revival laid the groundwork for the development of Western esoteric traditions, including Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Hermetic principle of "as above, so below" and the concept of *prisca theologia*—the idea that all true knowledge and religion stem from a single ancient source—became central tenets in these esoteric movements. Hermeticism's emphasis on personal spiritual transformation and the pursuit of esoteric knowledge has continued to resonate with various occult groups, influencing modern spiritual movements such as Thelema, founded by Aleister Crowley, and contemporary practices of alchemy, astrology, and magic.<sup>[66]</sup>

### Influence on literature and culture

Beyond its esoteric influence, Hermeticism has also permeated literature, art, and popular culture. The symbolism and themes found in Hermetic texts have inspired numerous writers, artists, and thinkers. For example, the works of William Blake, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Jorge Luis Borges contain elements of Hermetic philosophy, particularly its themes of spiritual ascent, divine knowledge, and the unity of all things.<sup>[15]</sup>

In modern literature, Hermetic motifs can be seen in the works of authors like Umberto Eco, John Crowley, and Dan Brown, who explore themes of hidden knowledge, secret societies, and the mystical connections between the microcosm and macrocosm. Hermetic symbols, such as the caduceus of Hermes and the philosopher's stone, have also found their way into popular culture, appearing in films, television shows, and video games as symbols of mystery, power, and transformation.<sup>[6]</sup>



The caduceus, a symbol of Hermes

## See also

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- Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica – Library of Hermetic works in Amsterdam
- Hermeneutics – Theory and methodology of text interpretation

- Hermeticists (category)

## Notes

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- A survey of the literary and archaeological evidence for the background of Hermes Trismegistus in the Greek Hermes and the Egyptian Thoth may be found in Bull 2018, pp. 33–96.
- The oldest texts attributed to Hermes are astrological texts (belonging to the 'technical' *Hermetica*) which may go back as far as to the second or third century BCE; see Copenhaver 1992, p. xxxiii; Bull 2018, pp. 2–3. Garth Fowden is somewhat more cautious, noting that our earliest testimonies date to the first century BCE (see Fowden 1986, p. 3, note 11). On the other end of the chronological spectrum, the *Kitāb fi zajr al-nafs* ("The Book of the Rebuke of the Soul") is commonly thought to date from the twelfth century; see Van Bladel 2009, p. 226.
- On the dating of the 'philosophical' *Hermetica*, see Copenhaver 1992, p. xlv; Bull 2018, p. 32. The sole exception to the general dating of c. 100–300 CE is *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, which may date to the first century CE (see Bull 2018, p. 9, referring to Mahé 1978–1982, vol. II, p. 278; cf. Mahé 1999, p. 101). Earlier dates have been suggested, most notably by Flinders Petrie (500–200 BCE) and Bruno H. Stricker (c. 300 BCE), but these suggestions have been rejected by most other scholars (see Bull 2018, p. 6, note 23). On the *Asclepius*, see Copenhaver 1992, pp. xliii–xliv, xlvii.
- This is a convention established by such scholars as Van Bladel 2009, pp. 17–22; Hanegraaff 2015, pp. 180–183; Bull 2018, pp. 27–30. Other authors (especially, though not exclusively, earlier authors) may use the terms 'Hermetism' and 'Hermeticism' synonymously, more loosely referring to any philosophical system drawing on Hermetic writings.
- Among medieval Muslims, Hermes was regarded as a "prophet of science" (see Van Bladel 2009). For Hermes' status as an ancient sage among medieval Latin philosophers like Abelard or Roger Bacon, see Marenbon 2015, pp. 74–76, 130–131. The ancient wisdom narrative as such goes back to the Hellenistic period; see Droge 1989; Pilhofer 1990; Boys-Stones 2001; Van Nuffelen 2011.
- Van den Broek & Hanegraaff 1998 distinguish *Hermetism* in late antiquity from *Hermeticism* in the Renaissance revival.
- Khunrath 1708, p. 68: "[t]he light of the soul, by the will of the Triune God, made all earthly things appear from the primal Chaos."
- This Leonardo di Pistoia was a monk "J.R. Ritman Library – Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070101222307/http://www.ritmanlibrary.nl/c/p/lib/coll.html>). Archived from the original (<http://www.ritmanlibrary.nl/c/p/lib/coll.html>) on 1 January 2007. Retrieved 27 January 2007., not to be confused with the artist Leonardo da Pistoia who was not born until c. 1483 CE.

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7. Van den Broek & Hanegraaff 1998, p. vii.
8. Fowden 1986; Copenhaver 1992; Hoeller 1996.
9. Copenhaver 1992; Hanegraaff 2012.
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## External links

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