

rejuvenation - divine words - sapiental literature - hermetism



Hermes the Egyptian

Section 2

Alexandro-Egyptian Hellenism & Hermetism

by Wim van den Dungen

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Section 2

Alexandro-Egyptian Hellenism & Hermetism

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4 The Greeks in Egypt.

4.1 Egyptian civilization before and after Alexander the Great.

the Third Intermediate Period

"The history of Egypt's contact with the outside world is above all concerned with power and prestige. In the earliest commercial links between the Egyptians and their neighbours in Africa and the Near East, the principal motivation appears to have been to obtain rare or exotic materials and products that could serve to bolster the power base of the individuals or groups concerned."

[Shaw, 2000, p.329.](#)

The "golden" age and "renaissance era" of Ancient Egyptian civilization (ca.1539 - 1075), in which a renewed theology of Pharaoh had been combined with imperial internationalism, came to a close with the death of Ramesses XI (ca.1104 -1075 BCE) and a clear division between the North (Tanis) & the South (Thebes) of Egypt. With this split, the end of the Egyptian kingdoms (Archaic, Old, Middle & New) had eventuated, for in the period that followed, Pharaoh (a [divine power of powers](#)) would become *an administrative principle & hierarchy* wielded by those in charge, whether they be foreigners (Libyans, Nubians, Persians, Greeks or Romans), or, for that matter, native Egyptians.

Theologically, at the close of the New Kingdom, "[Amun](#) is king" ruled, and so Egypt was a theocracy (headed by the military). In the period which followed, the so-called Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1075 - 664 BCE), southern Nubia and the eastern desert were lost again (as well as the "Asiatic" northern regions). At the end of the Third Intermediate Period, and for the first time since 3000 BCE, Egypt lost its independence.

The last Pharaoh of the New Kingdom, Ramesses XI, had been unable to halt the internal collapse of the kingdom, which had already filled the relatively long reign of Ramesses IX (ca. 1127 - 1108 BCE). Tomb robberies (in the Theban necropolis) were now discovered at Karnak. Famine, conflicts and military dictatorship were the outcome of this degeneration. The native pharaonic scheme, with its solar myth, theology, monumental ceremonialism, philosophy, economy, art, science, administration, etc. initiated ca. 3000 BCE, had ended. It had only been interrupted two times, covering 5 centuries.

But in no way did this demise herald the end of Egyptian civilization, for its cultural form was flexible enough to assimilate new deities, ideas & practices (cf. New Kingdom multi-culturalism versus Old Kingdom isolationism). Meanwhile, the native Egyptians identified their venerable traditions foremost with their priesthood. This had become all powerful in the XXth Dynasty : Amun was Pharaoh and ruled by oracular decree revealed to the high priest : the first seer. Secondly, they cherished the Pharaonic institutions (foreign rulers posing as Egyptian

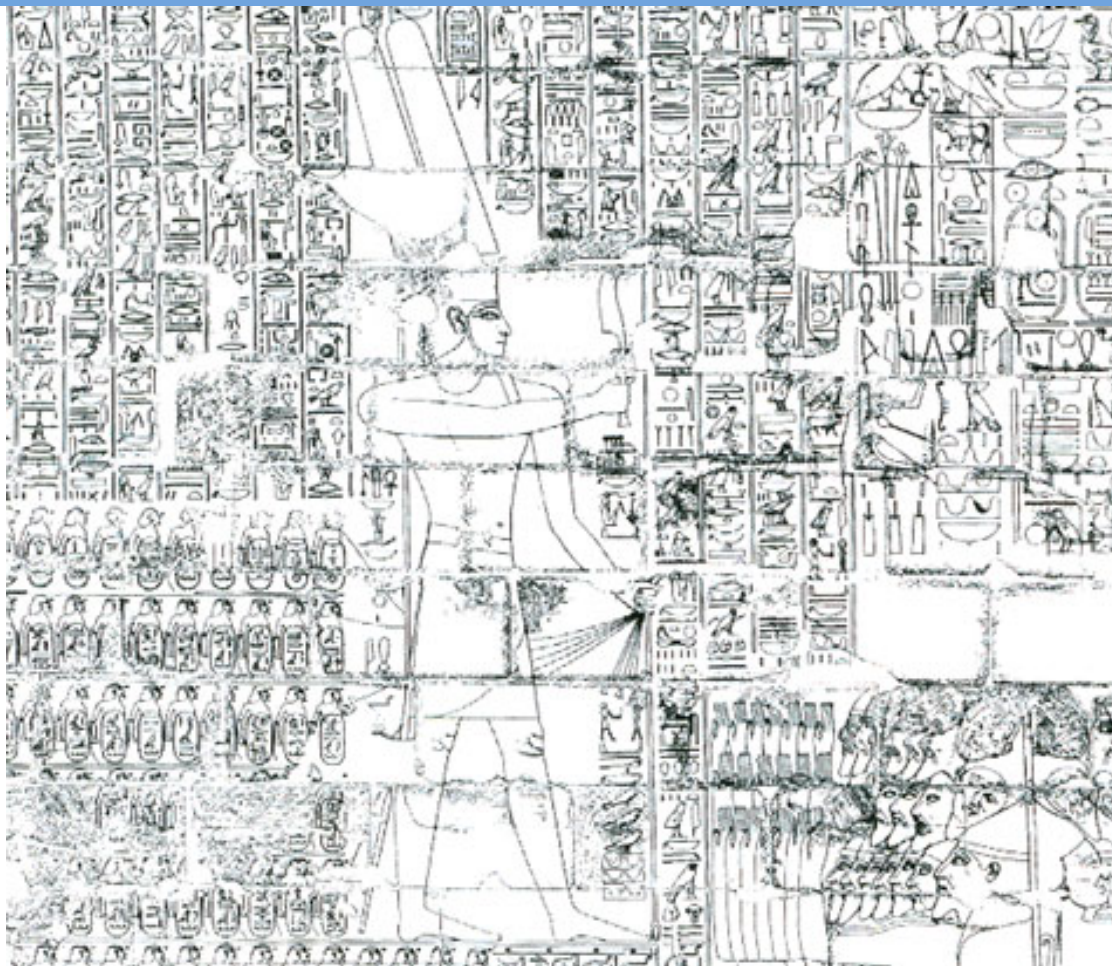
Pharaohs).

Dynasty XXI, founded by Pharaoh Smendes (ca. 1075 - 1044 BCE), formally maintained the unity of the Two Lands as it was in the Ramesside era. But his origins are obscure, as is the history of these rulers. Smendes was related by marriage to the royal family and founded the dynasty in the North (Tanis). There, as well as in southern Thebes, Amun theology & divination reigned (the name of Amun was even written in a cartouche), but in practice, the Thebaid was ruled by the chief general and high priest of Amun (military theocracy). At the inception of the Third Intermediate Period, the most prominent military commander was chief general Herihor, who assumed the title of high priest of Amun, and, on occasion, the titles and trappings of Pharaoh (although the temporal authority of the Pharaoh of Tanis was formally recognized through Egypt) ...



**funerary mask of Psusennes I
XXIth Dynasty - Cairo Museum**

The daughter of Tanite Psusennes I (ca. 1040 - 990 BCE), called Maatkare, was the first "Divine Adoratrice" or "god's wife", i.e. the spouse of Amun-Re, the king of the gods. She inaugurated a "dynasty" of 12 Divine Adoratrices, ruling the "domain of the Divine Adoratrice" at Thebes, until the Persian invasion of 525 BCE. From the XXIII Dynasty onward, the status of the "god's wife" began to approach that of Pharaoh himself, and in the XXVth Dynasty these woman appeared in greater prominence on monuments, with their names written in royal cartouches. They could even celebrate the Sed-festival, only attested for Pharaoh ! All this points to a radically changed conception of kingship, which became a political function (safeguarding unity) deprived of its former "religious" grandeur and importance (Pharaoh as "son of Re", living in [Maat](#)). Indeed, all was in the hands of Amun and Amun's wife was able to divine the god's wish and will ... Psusennes II (ca. 960 - 945 BCE) lost his power to the Libyan tribal chiefs, used by the Tanite kings as military leaders.



**triumphal relief of Shoshenq I
XXIIth Dynasty - Bubastite Portal at Karnak**

With Dynasty XXII ("Bubastids" or "Libyan"), founded by the Libyan Shoshenq I (ca. 945 - 924 BCE), Egypt came under the rule of its former "Aziatic" enemies. However, these Libyans had been assimilating Egyptian culture and customs for several generations, and the royal house of Bubastid did not differ much from Egyptian kingship, although Thebes hesitated. After the reign of Osorkon II (ca. 874 - 850 BCE), a steady decline set in. In Dynasty XXIII (ca. 818 - 715 BCE), the house of Bubastids split into two branches, and came to an end in Dynasty XXIV (ca. 725 - 712 BCE).

In the middle of the 8th century BCE, a new political power appeared in the extreme South (South of Nubia). It had for some generations been building up an important kingdom from their center at Napata at the 4th cataract. These "Ethiopians" (actually Upper Nubians) felt to be Egyptians in culture and religion (they worshipped Amun and had strong ties with Thebes). The first king of this Kushite kingdom was Kashta, who initiated Dynasty XXV, or "Ethiopian", characterized by the revival of archaic Old Kingdom forms (cf. [Shabaka Stone](#) - cf. picture) and the return of the traditional funerary practices. Indeed, because they possessed the gold-reserves of Nubia, they were able to adorn impoverished Egypt with formidable wealth. A short-lived revival of the "old forms" took place.



**irregular slab of basalt of 138,5 by 93 cm with
a written area of 132 by 69 cm
given by Earl Spencer to the British Museum in 1805
used as a mill-stone by farmers in post-Pharaonic times**

Piye (ca. 740 - 713 BCE), probably Kashta's eldest son, was crowned in the temple of Amun at Gebel Barkal (the traditional frontier between Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia), as "Horus, Mighty Bull, arising in Napata". He went to Thebes to be acknowledged there. After having consolidated his position in Upper Egypt, Piye returned to Napata (cf. "Victory Stela" at Gebel Barkal).

At the same time, in Lower Egypt, a future opponent, the Libyan Tefnakhte (XXIVth Dynasty) ruled the entire western Delta, with as capital Sais (city of the goddess Neit, one of the patrons of kingship). Near Sais were also the cities of Pe and Dep (Buto), of mythological importance since the earliest periods of Egyptian history, and cult centre of the serpent goddess Wadjet, the uræus protecting Pharaoh's forehead (cf. the Single [Eye](#) of Atum). When the rulers of Thebes asked for help, Piye's armies moved northwards. When he sent messengers ahead to Memphis with offers of peace, they closed the gates for him and sent out an army against him. Piye returned victoriously to Napata, contenting himself with the formal recognition of his power over Egypt, and never went to Egypt again. But the anarchic disunity of the many petty Delta states remained unchanged.



**portrait of Pharaoh Shabaka
from the naos he erected in the temple of Esna**

[Shabaka](#) (ca. 712 - 698 BC), this black African "Ethiopian", also a son of Kashta, was the first Kushite king to reunite Egypt by defeating the monarchy of Sais and establishing himself in Egypt. Shabaka, who figures in Graeco-Roman sources as a semi-legendary figure, settled the renewed conflicts between Kush and Sais and was crowned Pharaoh in Egypt, with his Residence and new seat of government in Memphis, the Old Kingdom capital. Pharaoh Shabaka modeled himself and his rule upon the Old Kingdom and represents the last attempt made to restore the traditional Pharaonic principle, embodied in the [Memphite](#) & [Heliopolitan](#) theologies : Pharaoh is the balance of the Two Lands, the mythical and divine mediator between his father Atum and creation. The Ethiopians could come to Egypt "from the South" as the mythical "Followers of Horus", and unity the Two Lands. This attempt at recapitulation failed. Egypt would soon loose its independence ...

The first Assyrian king who turned against Egypt -that had so often supported the small states of Palestine against this powerful new world order- was Esarhaddon (ca. 681 - 669 BCE). For him, the Delta states were natural allies, for -in his view- they had reluctantly accepted the rule of the Ethiopians. Between 667 and 666 BCE, his successor Assurbanipal conquered Egypt (Thebes was sacked in 663 BCE) and this Assyrian king placed Pharaoh Necho I (ca. 672 - 664) on the throne of Egypt. With him, the Late Period was initiated.

the Late Period

For the next six centuries (664 - 30 BCE), Egypt would be ruled by foreigners without the demise of its priesthood and Pharaonic institutions. The latter would go first, namely when Octavian takes Alexandria and Egypt becomes a Roman province (1 or 3 August 30 BCE) ... In Egypt, the traditional worship was forbidden by the Christian emperor Theodosius (347 - 395 CE) and the temples were officially closed. But the ancient rituals persevered, for statues of deities were worshipped in private houses as late as the sixth century CE ([Kamil](#), 2002). Between 30 BCE and 642 CE, Egypt was ruled by the Romans and the Byzantines, before it became Islamic as it still is today.

The XXVIth or "Saite" Dynasty (664 - 525 BCE) installed by Assurbanipal, allowed for the resurgence of Egypt's unity and power. Necho I was killed by the Nubians in 664 BCE and his son Psammetichus I (664 - 610 BCE) was an able statesman. He was trusted by the Assyrians and left alone by the Ethiopians. Because the Assyrians could not maintain their military presence in Egypt, he was able to reunite Egypt.



**Psammetichus I engaged in ritual activity
XXVth Dynasty - British Museum**

The Saite Dynasty sought to maintain the great heritage of the Egyptian past. Ancient works were copied and mortuary cults were revived. Demotic became the accepted form of cursive script in the royal chanceries. These Pharaohs focused on keeping Egypt's frontiers secure, and moved far into Asia, even further than the New Kingdom rulers Thutmose I and III. When Cyrus the Great of Persia ascended the throne in 559 BCE, leaving Pharaoh Ahmose II or Amasis (570 - 526 BCE) with no other option than to cultivate close relations with Greek states to prepare Egypt for the Persian invasion of 525, which led to the defeat and capture of Psammetichus III (526 - 525) by Cambyses (who died in 522 BCE). The latter had assumed the forms of Egyptian kingship and showed a deep respect for native Egyptian religion (he buried an Apis bull with all the ancient rituals).

Before and after the Assyrian conquest, Dynastic Rule was characterized by *a revival of archaic Egyptian forms*. Hence, when the Greeks arrived in Egypt, they did not find the Solar Imperialism of the New Kingdom, but nevertheless encountered a fully developed, operational and living Egyptian Pharaonic cultural form.

Under Persian rule (525 - 404 BCE), Egypt became a satrapy of the Persian Empire. The Persians left the Egyptian administration in place, but some of their rulers, like Xerxes (486 - 465 BCE) disregarded temple privilege. When Darius II died (404 BCE), a Libyan, Amyrtaios of Sais, led an uprising and again Egypt would again enjoy a period of independence under "native" rulers.

A second Persian invasion (343 BCE) ended these short Dynasties (XXVIII, XXIX & XXX, between 404 - 343 BCE). With Alexander the Great (332 BCE), Egypt came under Macedonian rule. In 305, the Ptolemaic Empire was initiated (it ended in 30 BCE).

Summarizing Greece/Egypt chronology (all dates BCE) :

- ca.2600 : Neolithic Crete : first sporadic contacts with Old Kingdom Egypt (Dynasty IV) ;
- ca.1700 : neopalatial Minoan Crete : Mediterranean network of artistic and iconographic exchange, communication between Minoan high culture and Egypt (XIIIth Dynasty) ;
- ca.1530 : Hyksos ruins in Minoan style (Avaris) are used by Pharaoh Ahmose I ;
- ca. 670 : Pharaoh Psammetichus I initiated the study of Greek, employed Greek mercenaries against the Assyrians, set up a camp that stayed in the western Delta and allowed the Miletians to found Naukratis ;
- 570 : under Pharaoh Ahmose II (Amasis) the Greeks were allowed to travel beyond the western Delta - Naukratis became an exclusive Greek trading centre complete with Greek temples. He cultivated close relations with Greek states to help him against the impending Persian onslaught ;
- 525 : Egypt a satrapy of the Persia empire, start of more pronounced Greek immigration to Egypt ;
- 332 : Egypt invaded & plundered by the Macedonians ;
- 305 : Egypt ruled by Greek Ptolemaic Pharaohs ;
- 30 : death of Queen Cleopatra, the last Egyptian ruler.

4.2. The Ptolemaic empire

the grand vision of Alexander the Great



**statue of Horus and Nectanebo II
XXXth Dynasty - Metropolitan
Museum of Art**

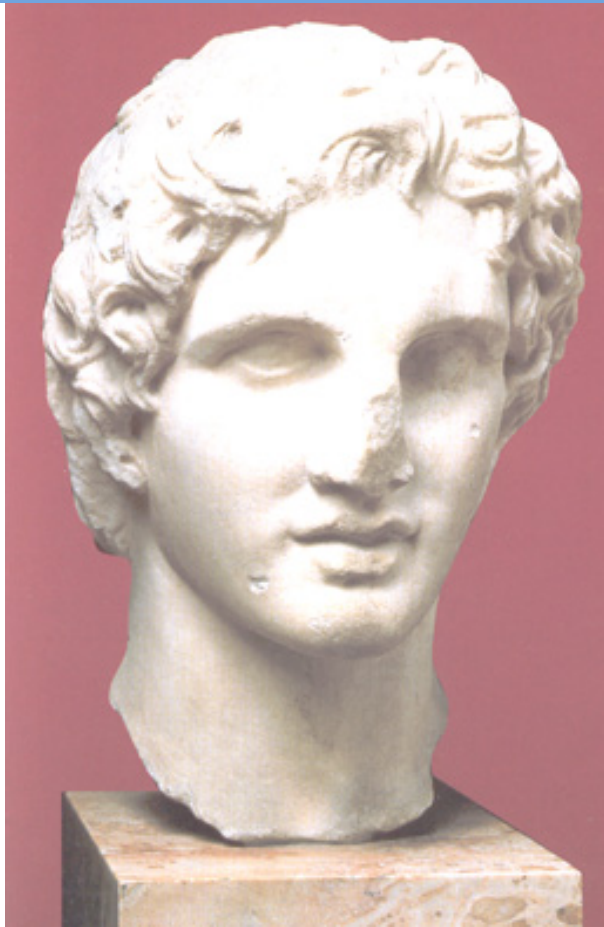
With Pharaoh Nectanebo I (380 - 362 BCE), the last native dynasty began.

The monarchs of this XXXth Dynasty (from Tanis to Elephantine & Philae) ruled over a unified Egypt, erected monuments & donated to the temples. Pharaoh Teos, the successor of Nectanebo I, imitated the dazzling XVIIIth Dynasty.

In 343 BCE, the Persian Artaxerxes III made the last native Pharaoh, Nectanebo II flee to Nubia.

The situation remained very unstable until Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BCE) entered Egypt in 332 BCE and had himself crowned Pharaoh in the temple of Ptah at Memphis.

In choosing Memphis as the setting for his coronation, Alexander underlined the perennial nature of Pharaoh, associating himself with the foundation of the united state and emulating Old Kingdom tradition (an archaic style fashionable since the Ethiopian XXVth Dynasty). All the Ptolemies would be crowned in Memphis. A strong co-operation existed between the priesthood of Ptah, representing the Egyptian priesthood as a whole, and the Greek rulers. Alexander sacrificed to Apis and he thereby set another precedent which would be followed by the Ptolemies. His personal belief in his own divine, superhuman nature harmonized with the concept of Pharaoh as the son of god.



**Alexander the Great as a youth
Acropolis Museum - Athens**

Alexander's great design was the idea that all peoples were to be subjugated for the formation of a new world order (had he understood his teacher Aristotle ?). The east-Mediterranean empire he had founded up to this point could be completed with the integration of Egypt. The pharaonic system provided a suitable framework, established for millennia. He ended the ten years of much detested Persian rule and presented himself as a new Pharaoh, carrying out the ritual required for the transmission of power as the son or the nominal son of the deceased and equally legitimate predecessor (Alexander accepted as ritual father Nectanebo II). His throne name was : "the one whom Re chose, beloved of Amun".

"The prospect of establishing this kind of ideological link to Nectanebo II appeared very promising owing to the latter's reputation as a favourite of the gods ; it was a distinction conferred upon him because of the achievements of his building programme, his devotion to animal cults, the gifts of the land he made to temples, his programme for the restoration of cult statues and the foundation of *naoi*, but above all because of his surprising victory over the Persian Great King in 350."

Hölbl, 2001, p.78.

In 331 BCE, Alexander founded the city of Alexandria on the isthmus between the ocean and Lake Mariut (traditionally celebrated on the 7th of April). Earlier that year, he had visited the oracle of Amun-Re in the Siwah oasis to seek confirmation of his rule and divine nature. In Greek though, the oracle was known as "Zeus Ammon", an offshoot of the Theban Amun, and honored in all of Greece, with a temple in Macedonian Aphytis (Chalkidike). The Egyptian priests identified him with Amun, the king of the gods. We know that in Siwah, Alexander was told that he was the son of Zeus = Amun, and thus Pharaoh. He was led into the holy of holies, faced the cult statue alone and asked the deity his questions. Only a Pharaoh was entitled to do so. He returned to Memphis and

sacrificed to "Zeus Basileus" or "Amun, king of the gods". He had three fathers : Philip II (actual), Nectanebo II (ritual) and Zeus-Ammon (spiritual). In the spring of 331 BCE, Alexander left Memphis on his famous final campaign of conquest.

the demise of the Argead kingdom

On the 10th of June 323 BCE, Alexander the Great dies in Babylon amid hectic preparations. On his deathbed he asks to be buried in the Ammoneion of Siwah. With the death of this autocrat, an enormous empire lost its leadership. In the division of the satrapies (cf. the settlement of Babylon of 323 BCE), Ptolemy, born in 367/6 as the son of a certain Lagos and a commander in Alexander's army, was allotted the best share, namely Egypt. He proposed to break with the Argead kingdom of Alexander and divide the empire in loosely united satrap-states that would occasionally supra-regional resolutions. This was rejected and a triumvirate took over the government until Alexander's unborn son was born (by Roxane). Regents were appointed.

This settlement did not last and the "War of the Successors" broke out. Unitarians and separatists confronted each other. The Hellenistic world was divided in three great kingdoms : Macedon, the Seleucid empire (Syria and Mesopotamia) and the domain of the Ptolemies. Ptolemy's ambition to carve out his own kingdom made him support the major political forces in the Greek world (Epirus, Aetolian & Achaeon leagues, Athens, Sparta). Between 323 and 306, Ptolemy ruled as satrap, and annexed Syria and Phoenicia (319/18). In the summer of 306 BCE, the regent of Macedon, Antigonos, became the first to assume the title of "king" ("basileus"). In the late summer of that year, Ptolemy was in turn acclaimed king by his own army. The other regents, Seleukos, Kassandros and Lysimachos quickly followed his example. Instead of united kingdoms, Alexander's kingdom had been divided in opposing states ...

Alexander the Great (332 - 323)

Philip Arrhidaeus (323 - 317)

Alexander IV (317 - 310)

Ptolemy Basileus as Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter



**head of a statue of Ptolemy I Soter
Fayyum - ca.280 BCE - Copenhagen**

Following Antigonos' attempted invasion of Egypt at the end of 306 BCE (he had laid claim to the entire kingdom of Alexander the Great), Ptolemy the Satrap chose for his coronation feast the next anniversary of Alexander's death. On the 12th of January 304, his reign as Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter began, with an eagle as his personal emblem. He had able counselors and took their advice.

On the basis of military might, Ptolemy I expanded his domain. He appropriated Cyrene, occupied southern Syria, seized Cyprus and moved to the Aegean Islands, with garrisons on the Greek mainland (no Pharaoh had gone so far before ...). But in Egypt, his foremost concern was to gain acceptance from the native Egyptians. In this, religious policies and royal ideology played an important part. No major socio-economical changes to the realities of Egyptian societies were introduced. In 311 (two decades after the foundation of the city by Alexander), the transfer of the royal residence to Alexandria was reported as complete (cf. Satrap Stele).

"... this city became the Ptolemaic capital and was vigourously exploited from the beginning of the period as the major showcase for Ptolemaic wealth and splendour and by the same token as the most significant non-military means by which the Ptolemies could vie with and surpass their rivals. It quickly became the most spectacular city in the Hellenistic world."

Shaw, 2000, p.404.

Alexandria was the home of the body of Alexander, the lighthouse on the east end of Pharos island and the Mouseion. The latter, conceived along the lines of Plato's & Aristotle's schools at Athens, had a walk (peripatos), an arcade (exedera), a library and a shrine to the Muses (mouseion). From these seven Greek goddesses, all artistic, philosophical and scientific inspiration was supposed to come. It was a centre of research and instruction and would make Alexandria under the Ptolemies the centre of Greek culture. Ptolemy I's master librarian Demetrius of Phalerum dispatched searchers all over the Greek world to obtain texts. His work took shape ca.300 BCE and when he died, fifteen years later, the Mouseion was already the gathering place of the elite of Hellenic culture. At

the end of the efforts of the Ptolemies, the library held no fewer than 700.000 volumes.

Ptolemy I explicitly associated himself with Alexander. He made the deification of the Ptolemaic dynasty a state matter. The particular characteristics of the Alexandrian "Basileus" (king and savior-god) made him elevate Alexander the Great to the level of a state god. The priest at the head of this purely Greek cult was made the highest priest in the land, who was named directly after the king in dating formulae (in Greek, Demotic and hieroglyphic decrees & documents made by the priests).

Hence, in the Ptolemaic empire, one has to make distinction between the personal figure of the "basileus" (rooted in the supranational kingship or imperialism of Alexander) and the honors of the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, bound to territory, nation & religion. Ptolemy I offered to Maat, but he also paid tribute to his own roots by deifying himself. He had tried to safeguard the supranational level, but had failed. Instead, he founded his own dynasty, lasting for three centuries.

In the winter of 283-2, Ptolemy I died at the age of 84, but Ptolemy II was already co-ruler and crowned in 282 BCE. He established a four-yearly festival called the "Ptolemaieia", to honor his father and the Ptolemaic dynasty he founded (with a military might powerfully expressed on the spectator by 57.600 infantry and 23.200 cavalry). From the time of Ptolemy II, we find the claim that the king belonged to a sacred family ("hiera oikia"), initiated by Alexander. Descent from Heracles, Dionysus, Zeus and Amun played an important role in Ptolemaic propaganda. In this family a recurrent full brother - sister marriage became usage, although it was not consistent (cf. Zeus and Hera, Osiris and Isis). In the late third and early second centuries, only two foreign provinces were left : Cyrenaica and Cyprus, for which character deficiencies of Ptolemy IV were deemed responsible. Dynastic schism, the fury of the Alexandrian mob, and the deterioration of the political situation outside Alexandria facilitated the elevation of able Egyptians, closing the gap between Greeks and Egyptians. Egyptians attained the rank of provincial governor (strategos) or governor-general (epistrategos). Strikes, flight, brigandage, attacks on villages, despoliation of temples and frequent recourse to the temples' right of asylum were other signs of the long decline.

"Uprisings by these people might easily be construed as nationalistic, given the close congruence between economic status and ethnic origin, and we can be confident that they acquired that dimension explicitly from time to time, but at the most fundamental level the uprisings were those of the oppressed against the establishment regarded as responsible for that oppression, and that establishment could just as easily be perceived as the Egyptian priesthood and their temples as Graeco-Macedonian officialdom."

[Shaw, 2000, p.420.](#)

The Ptolemaic empire was the background of the genesis of a Graeco-Egyptian consciousness, more specifically, an Alexandro-Egyptian subculture.

THE PTOLEMAIC DYNASTY

beginning and golden age :

Ptolemy I Soter (304 - 284)
 Ptolemy II Philadelphus (284 - 246)
 Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246 - 221)

change and decline :

Ptolemy IV Philopator (221 - 205)
Ptolemy V Epiphanes (225 - 180)
Ptolemy VI Philometor (180 - 145)

under Roman shadow :

Ptolemy VII Neos Philopator (145)
Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (170 - 116)
Ptolemy IX Soter II (116 - 107)
Ptolemy X Alexander I (107 - 88)
Ptolemy IX Soter II (88 - 80)
Ptolemy XI Alexander II (80)

the final period :

Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos Auletes (80 - 51)
Cleopatra VII Philopator (51 - 30)
Ptolemy XIII (51 - 47)
Ptolemy XIV (47 - 44)
Ptolemy XV Caesarion (44 - 30)



**statue of Ptolemy II Philadelphus
ca.260 BCE - Vatican**

After the fall of Alexandria, Egypt became a Roman province, but with a singular status. Its governor Octavian would be recognized as a living god by the Egyptian priesthood and assume the attributes of an Egyptian deity & Pharaoh. Egypt was Octavian's personal property, and for centuries was to remain a direct vassal of the emperor of Rome, while keeping its national character intact. Octavian took away the land of the priesthood, but thenceforth they received salaries and were showered with honors. No unauthorized senator could set foot on Egyptian soil and no Egyptian who was not Alexandrian could become a Roman citizen. The official language remained Greek. When emperor Diocletian (284 - 305 CE) attempted to reform the empire, Egypt had declined in importance and

was weakened by the continual draining of its resources. The Ancient Egyptian artistic canon was either lost or misunderstood.



**head of statue of Augustus
ca. 50 CE - Alexandria**



**statue of Caracalla
Cairo Museum**

At the partition of the Roman empire (395 CE), Egypt was attributed to the Eastern empire (Byzantium). The ability to read hieroglyphs would soon be lost, and the general persecution of Paganism by Christianity begun (with small islands of the ancient traditions surviving until Islam took over).

4.3 Elements of the pattern of exchange between Egyptian and Greek culture.

The native Egyptian priests and scribes were the pre-eminent repositories and exponents of Pharaonic Egyptian culture, a role in which they were particularly successful in the Ptolemaic empire. They were the intellectual elite and had been since the late New Kingdom, when the role of Pharaoh had changed by identifying Amun with Pharaoh. Indeed, in the Third Intermediary Period, the position of the priesthood of Thebes was legitimized by the importance of the oracle of Amun in state affairs and with the general tendency (at work in New Kingdom [wisdom teachings](#) like the instructions for life of Amenemope) to consider the will of the gods as the final answer in all fundamental political & moral questions (instead of one's adherence to Maat as reflected in the Old Kingdom [teachings of Ptahhotep](#)). Because of this new belief, divination (or the means to divine the will of the gods) was elevated to the rank of an official state office. Small nods of specially prepared statues, or seemingly random movements of the bark of the deity during festive processions were enough to divine a simple "yes" or a "no" answer. Divination by dream delineation was a common temple activity. Priests talking through statues was another, more elaborate technique, used for important visitors, such as maybe Basileus Alexander the Great.

He visited the oracle of Zeus-Ammon because the Amun priesthood of Thebes had retained its "oracular" aura. But as a Macedonian, Alexander did not go to Thebes (the home of Amun since the Middle Kingdom) to seek native

legitimation. He sought legitimation by Greeks & Egyptian deities alike and his syncretism (reflected in the choice for Zeus-Ammon of Siwah) would become one of the characteristics of Ptolemaic culture. So he moved to Memphis, the Old Kingdom capital, and was crowned Pharaoh by the priesthood of Ptah. Hence, of all Egyptian priests and scribes, the priesthood of Ptah would become the most powerful native group of intellectuals. Furthermore, the priesthood was virtually undiluted by Greek blood and absorbed in its own tradition. After the collapse of the Great Empire, Ptolemy I could dispense with a god who was also at home in Greece and Macedon. Zeus-Ammon would not play the role intended for him by Alexander. Instead, Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter initiated the state cult of Serapis, the Hellenized Egyptian Osiris-Hapi, worshipped by Greeks who had already settled in Memphis ...

Two images reflect the ambivalence of the pattern of exchange between native Egyptian traditions (Pharaoh, priesthood, united Egypt) and the Macedonian way of life. On the one hand, there is the slightly disdainful smile on the face of the Egyptian priests mentioned by Plato (Timaeus, 22b), and this coupled with their infuriating reserve, esoterism and mystification (compared with that of their Greek conquerors, theirs was a very old culture). On the other hand, there was the corrupt conduct of Kleomenes of Naukratis (promoted to satrap after Alexander left Egypt in 331 BCE) of whom it is said that he threatened to close the temples in order to be dissuaded by bribes, or Dio Chrysostom, who regarded Egypt as a mere "appendage" of Alexandria, as well as the Greek papyri, in which Egyptian priests that knew no Greek, were called "unlettered". Indeed, the Greeks were proud of their culture and had good reasons to be, for Greek thought had introduced the [rational mode of cognition](#), and its dialogal, linear and critical approach. The teachings of Plato and Aristotle had become "academic" and a new way of perceiving human freedom was in place. Hellenism deeply influenced all peoples it touched. The discovery of rationality was too tremendous to be grown over again by the multiplicities of ante-rational thought.

"Greek immigrants, and the more urban and educated among their descendants, often persevered in Greek ways of thought and behaviour. They spoke their own language, keeping it free even of loan-words, and exploiting its flexibility, consciously or not, to disguise the uniqueness of their adopted land, bequeathing us in the process 'pyramids', 'obelisks', 'sphinxes' and 'labyrinths'."

[Fowden, 1986, p.17.](#)

To the outsider, these Greeks were "Egyptians", but they themselves stuck to their own kith and kin. The priesthood of Alexander also points in that direction : the high priest of Ptah was the pontiff of the Egyptian priesthood as a whole, but above him stood the priest of Alexander, who was the high priest of the Ptolemaic empire and mentioned next to the Greek Pharaoh. It was this purely Greek priesthood that religiously formalized the deification of the Ptolemaic dynasty after the model of Alexandrian kingship (a supranational empire headed by a god-king).

So both native and immigrant cultures were proud of their traditions and were able to safeguard them despite the numerous fertile interactions between the institutional tradition of Pharaonic kingship (and its illustrious ancestral lineage deemed to end with Pharaoh Nectanebo II) and the linearizing mentality of warlike Greeks, taken by the Hellenistic rational ideal of supranationality (a world order is an abstraction of the idea of power). From the start, Ptolemy had more in mind than Egypt alone. At the death of Alexander, he had advanced the idea of a supranational council (the first united nations), but this proposal had been rejected. Ptolemy wanted to keep the Great Empire.

As none other, Ptolemy realized that the Pharaonic system would enable a dynasty to survive the death of its founder. His annexations beyond the wildest Egyptian dreams confirmed this "strong king". He understood (as Alexander before him) that by gifts to the temples, erecting monuments and ensuring dignified royal administration (as well as preserve his military might), he would have the intellectual, ante-rational elite of Egypt on his side and benefit from the perennial agricultural fruits of the "black land", as well as from the preserved scientific and artistic canons, expressed in multi-layered, contextual, proto-rational thoughts & practices. Native Egyptians loathed the

Persian rule and welcomed a new Pharaoh who would restore and maintain the old traditions. The blur between the human and the divine in Ptolemy's Macedonian mind (cf. the figure of the hero in Greek religion) blended in with the divine nature of Egyptian kingship confirmed by triumphant victories (Pharaoh being the incarnation of Horus the Elder as well as the son of Atum-Re, the Heliopolitan god of creation).

"The principal quality of the Ptolemaic kingship, inspired as it was by Hellenistic ideology, consisted of a charismatic invincibility which was upheld by the gods and which had to be proven if recognition by the kingdom's subjects was to be secured. This was essentially different from the sovereignty of the ancient Egyptian pharaoh, since the latter's invincibility, affirmed in his role as the victorious Horus, was principally understood in cultic and mythic terms. (...) In the heyday of Ptolemaic rule, the relationship between king and subjects had not yet been stifled by the bureaucratic structure ; the many petitions directed to the king, which have survived from that time indicate that the king was recognized as the source of justice and as a direct partner in a dialogue."

[Wilkinson, 2001, p.91.](#)

Although both communities were necessarily in touch but *maintained their own identities*, no native Egyptian could rise on the social ladder without absorbing Greek language, culture & manners of the politically dominant Greeks. So, among numerous Egyptians belonging to the elite, bilingualism became increasingly common. But, most members of this Egyptian elite were not prone to study and practice Greek ways.

On the other side of the equation, only a very small number of Greeks learned Egyptian (namely those that wanted direct access to the temple inscriptions). The Greeks took the initiative in comparing their gods with the native Egyptian deities. Purely Greek divinities were exceptional (the Nile had no Olympus) and Greek syncretism obvious (Serapis was a hybrid deity). Despite these Greek efforts, the native Egyptian system proved resistant to such conceptual "merging" (the Greeks had a rational religion but no old religious traditions, the Egyptian had a perennial cult but no rationality).

From the time of Ptolemy I, the Greeks tried to bring Greek and Egyptian peoples in one religious sphere (even Alexander had been respectful of both Theban and Memphite manifestations of the godhead - cf. the Egyptian *henotheist* system of religion). In the Serapeum (the necropolis district of the Apis bulls - "serapeum" refers to the ground structure of the "House of Oserapis") Greeks, who were already settled in Memphis, worshipped a god in the form of the sacred bull of Memphis, called Osiris-Apis (in Greek "Oserapis"). This deity was Hellenized as "Serapis" or "Sarapis" and used by Ptolemy I Soter to cement Greek religion with native Egyptian worship. In Greek mythology, the bull represented Zeus, the father of Alexander (son of Zeus = son of Ammon). But in Egypt, the Apis bull cult went back to the beginning of the Dynastic Period (ca. 3000 BCE - it is mentioned on the Palermo Stone) and represented Ptah, the god of Memphis, the fashioner of creation, the balance of the "Two Lands" (namely kingship) and the patron of the arts and of creativity. Precisely the set of attributes needed to maintain stability in the native population. The worship of the sacred bull of Memphis in his post mortem form (Osarapis : after death, the Apis bull becomes the god Osiris) existed prior to Ptolemy I Soter's decision to promote Serapis.



**diadem with Serapis wearing a kalathos crown
Roman Period (Hadrian) - Cairo Museum**

The Serapis cult is another powerful image of the mode of interaction between the natives and the Greeks. As Fowden mentions, in the Serapeum of Alexandria (the second necropolis for Apis bulls), Serapis was treated as a Greek god and worshipped in a temple built by Ptolemy III. This was a mainly Greek structure, while its Roman successor was Corinthian. The Serapeum was adorned with Egyptian objects, including a couple of statues of third-century Memphite priests. But, it is very likely that the priesthood and their rituals were largely Greek. But in the original Serapeum of Memphis :

"... priesthood and ritual, remained as Egyptian as ever, and in that the Greek community in Memphis, and (with some exceptions) their compatriots who came from afar to visit the sanctuary, were content to acquiesce."

Fowden, 1986, p.21.

One may conclude, as does Fowden, that "genuine cultural fusion" between, on the one hand, native Egyptian religion & philosophy and, on the other hand, Greek rationality, both scientific & philosophical, most likely took place in the "educated native milieu". The origin of Alexandro-Egyptian culture (of a genuine merge) is thus to be found in the relatively small upper classes of the native priesthood & administrators (open to the impact of Greek thought and different from the large majority of natives that did not adopt Greek beliefs and practices) as well as in the very limited number of Greeks that egyptianized. As only ca.10% of the total population was literate ([Davies, 1995, p.27](#)), we may conclude that the original "niche" of this emergent new Graeco-Egyptian consciousness (infusing fertile traditions with rationality) was rather small in number. Was it potent enough to initiate a new Alexandro-Egyptian cultural form, including a religious system, a philosophy, a ceremonial order as well as a vast number of popular magical practices, namely Hermetism ?

4.4 Religious syncretism & stellar fatalism.

syncretism as a political tool

Serapis was associated with Isis, to whom Alexander the Great had dedicated a temple in Alexandria. This divine pair was linked with the divine royal couple, Serapis to Pharaoh, Isis to the queen. With these linear equations, the Greeks introduced dual-natured syncretic deities, corresponding to the two-fold aspect of the Ptolemaic rulers, both

Basileus and Pharaoh. They deified themselves in the process. The dynastic cult was the political device with which the Ptolemies legitimized their rule : for the ruling classes Ptolemy I was Basileus, a divine person in Alexandrian style, for the natives he was Pharaoh, son of Re, Egypt personified.



Anubis as a Roman in the sarcophagus room of the hypogaeum - Roman period - first centuries CE - Alexandria

Ptolemaic kingship had to be upheld by the gods, and hence the Greek rulers worshipped Greek, Egyptian and Graeco-Egyptian deities.

Cultic syncretism is best evidenced in the Hellenized parts of Egypt, such as Alexandria (and the Fayyum) and was initiated by the Greek rulers.

The principle continued to be applied until the Roman period, when it ran against the canon of Egyptian art and involved a grotesque putting together of disparate elements, like the use of Roman vestments ...

In general, the native Egyptian remained loyal to the venerable cultic forms (preferably going back to the Old Kingdom) and religious syncretism is an ambiguous process :

"Although it presupposes the interaction of at least two religious cultures, interest in this process may fluctuate widely among different categories of worshippers, and produce an extremely uneven effect on their conception of the gods involved, and on the way in which they worship those gods."

Fowden, 1986, p.19.

As we know that both groups tended to keep to their own, it is unlikely that syncretic deities as Serapis were worshipped by native Egyptians without thinking of Osiris (as Amun might have been praised by a few exceptional Greeks, but never without considering Zeus). In many ways, syncretism downgrades the specificity of each archetype. In Ptolemaic Egypt, it was a diplomatic way for the ruler to honor both sides.

fatalism and the movement of the stars : "Aegyptus imago sit caeli"

Next to the traditional Egyptian religious forms (recapitulating Old Kingdom canons), and the particularities of the ideology of the Greek Basileus, we must stress the further development of a trend which started in the Late New Kingdom. It consisted in attributing less importance to worldly success (position in the Pharaonic state) and more to the inward man and his realization of modesty in the face of reality. This regrouping of values made the new ideal man humble before godhead. He realized that everything was decreed by god's will. Maat was still the divine order which governed the world, but, living according to Maat, was no longer described in terms of material rewards or position in society, but as the humility of man toward the omnipotent will of god. Worship was thus a way to please god, a sacrifice made to make the personal will coincide with the divine will (with magic the opposite was aimed at, namely influence over the divine will by assuming it).

Under Persian rule, Babylonian stellar science (astronomy plus astrology) came to Egypt. The Babylonians had a sexagesimal place-value system, which allowed for complex astronomical calculations, in particular with fractions (in Egyptian mathematics, only unit fractions were used). Hence, the will of the gods could be inferred by predicting and understanding celestial events. This astral religion had two sides : a technical one involving measurement (astronomy) and an "oracular", "prophetic" one dealing with inter-subjective meaning (astrology).

The distinction between astrology and astronomy is thus fairly simple, but has been blurred by the modern academia under the pressure of their prejudices and ignorance in the matter, as Popper, Feyerabend and other philosophers of science have pointed out. Astronomy, on the one hand, measures celestial phenomena in all possible ways and tries to advance an organized system of the universe and everything related to it. Because astronomy is measurement, it has no need of symbolical references beyond those necessary to allow for mathematics (like "point", "small time interval", "infinite" and others). ***Astronomy presents the syntax of the universe.*** Astrology, on the other hand, attributes inter-subjective meaning to certain celestial phenomena, such as planets, Lunar tides and the daily diurnal/nocturnal arc. Hence, astrology always symbolizes the measurements, and therefore presents the semantic of the universe, the meaning of the universe "for me".

That astronomical phenomena had mythologically significance, had not been new to the Egyptians. The linking of the Nile flood with the rising of Sirius, the Sothic year, the Lunar tides, the heliacal decans, the hours, the calendars and the integral relationship in late Egyptian religion between the stars and the gods mentioned by Plutarch in his [On Isis and Osiris](#), are manifestations of the stellar semantic used by the priesthood. In fact, the stars are an important part of the [funerary ideology of Pharaoh](#). Decans adorn IXth & Xth Dynasty (cf. 2160 - 1980 BCE) sarcophagi, which shows the antiquity of this astronomical division based on mythological & religious reasons, i.e. a semantic aimed at attributing inter-subjective meaning to objective events.



tomb of Seti I - ceiling with decans XIXth Dynasty - Luxor - valley of the kings

But the idea that the movements of these seven planets (or deities : Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) could be associated with a semantic allowing for predictions in individual royal affairs (like birth & death), was foreign to Egyptian astrology. In his Commentary on the Timaeus (Diehl - 3.151), Proclus (412 - 485 CE) wrote that Theophrastus (ca. 372 - 280 BCE) had said that his Chaldaean contemporaries had a theory predicting every event in the life and death of a human being, rather than just general, collective effects, such as good and bad weather.

For the evidence of the image of Ptolemaic Egypt as the home of Greek astrology, we need to realize that in the aftermath of Alexander's conquest, Greeks settled in Persia and their migration to Egypt brought Chaldaean astrology to Alexandria (and from there to Rome). Another interesting marker is the fact that only trained intellectuals were able to calculate the position of the planets. Astrology had no tools without astronomy.

Greek philosophy since Pythagoras had been stressing the geometrical, architectonic features of the universe (cf. Thales and Anaximander). The orderly rhythm of the seven sacred planetary orbits had been projected on the musical intervals of the string, to show the rationale of the numeric correspondences between the higher and the lower, the larger and the smaller. That somehow the movements of the planets translated (reflected), in numerical terms, the will of the deities, must have been appealing and in accord with the linearizing and rationalizing nature of Greek thought (cf. the grand formula or "idea of ideas"). Astronomical predictions were legendary (cf. Thales and the eclipse).

The decisive development from Babylonian omen-literature to Greek astrology proper, took thus place in Ptolemaic Egypt, and started in the third century BCE. The merging of, on the one hand, Egyptian stellar religion, Persian astronomy and Chaldaean astrology with, on the other hand, Alexandrian geometry, developed Greek astronomy (at work since the days of the Pre-Socratic) and initiated Graeco-Roman astrology, the first historical manifestation of what is now called "Western astrology". The reasons for this merging are also religious : instead of dubious oracles (whispers made by priests in the secret chamber above the sanctuary ?), the will of the gods could be "calculated" and "predicted" ... this meant a linearization of the oracular and the mysterious.

What started in ancient Ur as a system of celestial signs & omens (using as measuring-rod the *unequal* sidereal zodiac, i.e. a "belt of animals" 2 times 8° wide, imagined behind the apparent course of the Sun and of an unequal constellational length), became a Persian system of attributing dynamical meaning to the positions of planets and stars, moving against the background of stellar constellations, but this time catalogued by means of 12 segments of 30° (the *equal* sidereal zodiac, still in use in Hindu astrology).

Under the influence of Alexandrian mathematics, the constellational standard of measurement of the Babylonian or Chaldaean system (the sidereal zodiac, both unequal and equal) was replaced by the tropical standard, referring to the apparent (but illusionary) path of the Sun around the Earth (and no longer to the stars). By dividing this ecliptic in 12 tropical signs of 30°, starting at the eastern intersection of the celestial equator and the ecliptic (the vernal point of 0° Aries), Greek astrologers switched from a stellar to a planetary reference-system. Ideal standard relationships (0°, 60°, 90°, 120° & 180° - cf. Pythagoras' theory on musical ratio's and Euclid on angles) between these planets were given dynamical purposes.



**Babylonian tablet with disk of the Sun between its deity and mortals
Sun temple of Sippar - 9th BCE - British Museum**

Moreover, besides dividing the ecliptic in 12 equal parts, they also divided the local horizon in 12, thus positioning the same planet in a different local segment or "house" for every significant geographical change (the time factor being constant). Just as the vernal point started the tropical zodiac, the ascendant was the border (or cusp) of the first house. This eastern intersection of the celestial horizon with the ecliptic was the rising point of the local horizon, and deemed very significant to determine character and fate of any native or the outcome of any event, while 0° Aries provided the same initiative on a ecliptic scale (cf. the harmony or reflection of the general macro cosmos in every specific micro cosmos).

In the Ptolemaic empire, astrology became prominent and fused with the existing fatalistic tendencies to become a stellar fatalism. This same happened on a larger scale, for late Hellenism was a period of great insecurity and doubt. That the misfortunes of fate could be predicted was too good to be true. All depended on the will of the gods, but that will could be read in the sky. Moreover, the planets were conceived as the physical manifestations of the pantheon that ruled the affairs of Earth. Not only prediction, but praise & prayer could be offered to change the course of events (magic). These beliefs, belonging to the technical Hermetica, made astrology so popular in the Hellenistic age, prone to feelings of alienation and the pressing impact of the deities fate and fortune.

The first historical reference to astrology from contemporary sources, comes from Diodorus of Sicily, who wrote between 60 and 30 BCE. It is clear that for him, Egypt was already quite some time the home of Greek astrology :

"The positions and arrangements of the stars, as well as their motion, have always been the subject of careful observations among the Egyptians, if anywhere in the world (...) they have observed with the utmost keenness the motion, orbits and stoppings of each planet, as well as the influence of each of them on the generations of all living things - the good and evil things, namely, of which they are the cause. And while they often succeed in predicting to men the events that will befall them in the course of their lives, not infrequently they foretell destruction of the crops, or, on the other hand, abundant yields, and pestilences (...) they have prior knowledge of earthquakes and floods, and the risings of comets, and of all things which the ordinary man regards as quite beyond finding out."

Diodorus : World History, 1.81 (translated by C.H.Oldfather).

Traditional astrology got recorded by Claude Ptolemy (born towards the end of the first century CE) in his Tetrabiblos & the Centiloquim. In Demotic papyri of the Roman period, we find versions of texts going back to the mid-second century BCE. They concern kings of Egypt and wars with Syria and Parthia. The earliest papyrus horoscope concerns a birth in 10 BCE, while the first horoscope preserved in a literary texts deals with a birth in 72 BCE.



**zodiac of Denderah (eclipses, constellations, planets)
Ptolemaic Period - Hathor temple**

The most interesting Ptolemaic monumental piece called the "zodiac of Dendera", recording the event of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos Auletes founding a new Hathor temple at Dendera (54 BCE). In fact, it is the world's first monumental founding horoscope or "election horoscope".

"Are you then unaware, Asclepius, that Egypt is the copy of heaven, or, to be more precise, the place where the operations, that govern and put to work the celestial forces, are transferred and projected down here ? Even more so, if truth is to be spoken, our land is the temple of the whole world."

Asclepius, 24.

Most theoretical works on astrology were Alexandrian, and often they credit their authorship to the god Hermes Trismegistus or Asclepius. A second-century source (Clement of Alexandria) still refers to forty-two books of Hermes ... The discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, consisting of a collection of mainly Gnostic texts in Coptic (i. e. the latest stage of the Egyptian language), encouraged the view that the origins of Hermetic literature are to be found in the fusion of Egyptian and Graeco-Alexandrian ways of thought.

"Another factor which encourages us to look on Hellenistic Alexandria as the cradle of Greek astrology, is that it is clear that by the mid-first century Egypt had acquired a reputation as such."

Barton, 1994, p.30.

As part of the practical side of the Hellenistic astral religion, astrology played an important part and would continue

to do so. Clement of Alexandria (ca.150 - 215 BCE) denied the Platonic idea that the planets had spirits that moved them, but not that they influenced human affairs, although never outside the Divine will. Even much later, Thomas of Aquinas (1225 - 1274) would accept the influence of the "stars" on the physical body (the stars incline but do not necessitate). The fundamental problem raised by Christian philosophy in this context being the overall fatalistic undertones of traditional astrology (in conflict with the dogma of free will and subsequent human responsibility) and the Hermetical (and thus pagan) theoretical (ideological) superstructures it implied. Indeed, astral religion provided initiations to circumvent the necessities of planets & stars. It reemerged in the Renaissance, with a spectacular return of astrology and its esoteric adjacent : magic and alchemy (cf. Paracelsus' remark : "The wise command the stars."). The Hermetical division between theoretical and popular, between philosophical and technical (magical), remained a fundamental characteristic of these mystery traditions started on Egyptian soil, in the intellectual milieu of the natives, allowing for a slow Hellenization of Ancient Egyptian religious traditions, rituals & philosophies.

The religious implications of astrology (based on the Hermetical postulate) are tremendous : if this symbolical, inter-subjective sense is attributed and confirmed, then it begs the question how to escape the idea that an intelligent Architect created the universe ?

5 The Alexandrian "religio mentis" called "Hermetism".

5.1 Formative elements of Hermetism.

the Hermetical lament

"A time will come, when it will seem that in vain the Egyptians have honoured their gods with pious mind and with assiduous service. All their holy worship will fail inefficaciously, will be deprived of its fruit. The gods leaving the Earth will go back to heaven ; they will abandon Egypt ; this land, once the home of sacred liturgies, will be widowed of its gods and no longer profit from their presence. Strangers will fill this country, and not only will there no longer be care for religious observances, but, a yet more painful thing, it will be laid down under so-called laws, under pain of punishments, that all must abstain from acts of piety or cult towards the gods. Then this very holy land, home of sanctuaries and temple, will be all covered with tombs and the dead. O Egypt, Egypt, of your cults only fables will remain and later, your children will no longer believe in them ; nothing will be left but words carved in stone to tell of your pious exploits."

Asclepius, 24.

[Petrie](#) (1908) argued, from historical context, to identify the events described in this lamentation as the crisis Egyptian religion had gone through during the second Persian period (343 - 332 BCE). As the Hermetic texts also mention an Egyptian Pharaoh, the *terminus a quo* would be the fled Nectanebo II, the "traditional" last native king, used as a cultic father figure in the coronation of Alexander the Great, and thus part of the legitimization of the Ptolemaic religious order (with its Greek and Egyptian branches). For Petrie, at least some passages of the Corpus Hermeticum had to refer to the Persian period. Moreover, as this lament was in circulation before the Christian prohibition of paganism in 390 CE, it could only refer to the Persian plundering of temples and to the demolishing of the defenses of major cities. If Petrie was right, the traditional view, maintaining that Hermetism was a purely Greek phenomenon, was no longer valid.

"... the presence of this passage within the *Perfect Discourse* indicates a strain of passionate Egyptianism in the milieu which produced and preserved it. It was a milieu that has been long and, so it seemed, irreversibly Hellenized in its language and thought-patterns ; *but that had not made it a Greek milieu.*"

Fowden, 1986, p.43-44

The prophesy returns in the Hermetical texts found in codex VI of the Nag Hammadi library :

"For in the time when the gods have abandoned the land of Egypt, and have fled upwards to heaven, then all Egyptians will die. And Egypt will be made a desert by the gods and the Egyptians. And as for you, O River, there will be a day when you will flow with blood more than water. And dead bodies will be stacked higher than the dams. And he who is dead will not be mourned as much as he who is alive."

Asclepius, 71 (Robinson, 1984, p.303).

pre-Hellenistic roots of Hermetism

Since the subordination of Egyptology to Indo-European studies in the 1880s, it was considered normal that egyptologists had nothing to say about the Corpus Hermeticum. This text belonged to the Greek heritage. But with the discovery of the library of Nag Hammadi, in particular codex VI and its Hermetic texts in Coptic, Egyptian connection could no longer be denied or made secondary.

The epithet "Thoth great, great, great" ("DHwtii aA, aA, aA") is found at Esna in Upper Egypt from the early 3th century BCE (cf. the Ptolemaic "Hermes trismegistos"), whereas the expression "Thoth the great, the great, the great" ("DHwtii pA aA, pA aA, pA aA") can be read in Demotic texts outside of Memphis, and date from the early 2nd century BCE. Other writings have been found, that suggest a link between Hermetism and the Hermopolitan cosmology (the Ogdoad is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom), whereas in the Book of the Dead, Thoth was already an often-invoked deity.

The obvious Platonic elements in Hermetism (among others) are no reason to conclude that Hermetism was no Hellenization of Egyptian theology, especially that of Hermopolis and Memphis.

Already before the Greeks first interacted with Egypt (ca. 670 BCE), had the particularities of late New Kingdom theology been invoked on the Shabaka Stone and its Memphite theology, as discussed in section one of this paper. This XXVth Dynasty (ca. 716 - 702 BCE) stone copy of an important Ramesside papyrus scroll, contained thoughts which looked remarkably like those developed in the contexts of the Platonic, Philonic and Christian "logos". Regarding the Memphite theology, Breasted wrote more than a century ago :

"The above conception of the world forms quite a sufficient basis for suggesting that the later notions of *nous* and *logos*, hitherto supposed to have been introduced into Egypt from abroad at a much later date, were present at this early period. Thus the Greek tradition of the origin of their philosophy in Egypt undoubtedly contains more of the truth than has in recent years been conceded. (...) The habit, later so prevalent among the Greeks, of interpreting philosophically the function and relations of the Egyptian gods (...) had already begun in Egypt before the earliest Greek philosophers were born ..."

Breasted, 1901, p.54.

Although it is obvious that the Greeks initiated conceptual rationality, and decontextualized ante-rational thought, their syllogism, or deductive scheme had likely not enough practical, empirical experience to formulate enough minor premises, so as to be able to deduce a lot of general, major premises, draw valid conclusions and erect the Greek monument of science. Theirs was a young nation. Their sciences lacked the depth offered by recorded history.

Nowhere in the world had words been more eternalized than in Egypt. Pharaoh and his priesthood could delve in thousands of years of recorded experience. The many "houses of life" contained texts which dealt with all important areas of society and its interaction with nature. Because of their conservative, canonical, verbal, scribal, practical & artistic approach, this ruling minority had fashioned a proto-rational system, a storehouse of empirical relationships, layered and rooted in pre-rationality & myth. This system would serve as minor premises to the Greek scientists and their "theoria" (unknown to native Egyptians). The Ptolemaic Greeks interacted with an Egyptian elite which was highly cultured, self-aware, intelligent and wise. The Greeks never denied this. They remembered that

centuries before they ruled Egypt, Egyptian scribes knew Greek (cf. Pharaoh Psammetichus I). Although the Egyptians had no "science" in the Greek sense, they had perfected the proto-rational mode of cognition (as a culture), while individuals as [Ptahhotep](#), the authors of the [Hymns to Amun](#) or Pharaoh Akhenaten in his [Great Hymn to the Aten](#), stand out because of their abstract and decontextualized flights of thought.

According to [Stricker](#) (1949), the [Corpus Hermeticum](#) is a codification of the Egyptian religion. Ptolemy I Soter (304 - 282 BCE) and his son Ptolemy II Philadelphus (282 - 246 BCE) promised to publish the secret literature of the three groups of citizens of Egypt : native Egyptians, Greeks and Jews. Hermetism is the Greek version of a redaction of Egyptian literature. Its form is Greek, but its contents is Egyptian (the [Septuagint](#) being the equivalent Jewish redaction). On the other side of the spectrum, father [Festugière](#) (1945) claims that the [Corpus](#) contains extremely little Egyptian elements, except for the context, the ideas expressed being those of popular Greek thought, a mixture of Platonism, Aristotelism and Stoicism ... Both positions should be avoided.

A middle position would stress the emergence, under the first three Ptolemies, of a Greek version of the Egyptian religion, a Graeco-Egyptian religion, and this among the upper native classes. This Graeco-Egyptian religion would be based in Alexandria and Memphis, and (at first) entail a strong emphasis on the native component. It emerged in the priestly scribal class and had its focus on Thoth, who created the world by means of his divine words. For the Greek Thoth was "Hermes, trismegistos", indicative of both his antiquity and greatness. Today we realize that, because of the importance of the native intellectual milieu in the genesis of an Alexandro-Egyptian cultural form, "Graeco-Egyptian religion turns out to be based on a profound imbalance, in favour of the autochthonous, between its two constituent elements." ([Fowden](#), 1986, p.19). [Zandee](#) (1992, p.161) mentions a Hermetical text going back to the third century BCE.

But, the Hellenization entailed by using the Greek language and participating in the syncretic Alexandrian intellectual climate (Mouseion and Serapeion), should not be underestimated, and makes Stricker's proposals unlikely. The native Egyptians were proud of their Hermopolitan & Memphite [theologies](#) (both [verbal & scribal](#)), but eventually accepted to incorporate elements in their Hermetism which were uncompromisingly *un*-Egyptian (for example the popular Greek denial of the physical body).

"... when a soul has acquired no knowledge whatsoever of the beings, nor of their nature, neither of the Good, but is totally blind, she undergoes the violent quakes of the corporal passions. Then the unfortunate, for having ignored herself, becomes the slave of the monstrous and perverse body, she bears the body as a burden, she does not command, but she is commanded."

[Corpus Hermeticum](#), X, 8.

Many other Greek themes to be found in the [Corpus Hermeticum](#) show that Festugière was not completely wrong. In a study of [Zandee](#) published in 1992, the Egyptian influence was confirmed, although besides the negative view on the body, he also identified the depreciation of the world, the celestial voyage of the soul (or mystical initiation - cf. [Mahé](#), 1992) and reincarnation as Hermetic teachings *not* to be found in Ancient Egypt. To which should be added the Hermetic version of the Greek mysteries and those magical techniques aimed at changing the will of the gods. Indeed, the difference between [Egyptian initiation](#) and Greek mysteries is pertinent (the attitude of the worshipper as well as the responsiveness of the deities differ).

The conclusion must be that the [Corpus Hermeticum](#) and the Graeco-Egyptian religion of which it was the chief extant codification, was a spiritual way in its own right. Alexandrian Hermetism was a mixture of Greek thought with genuine Egyptian religious traditions, such as : the reverence for the [creative word](#), the [magical power](#) of divine statues, the [wisdom literature](#), the bi-sexual [nature of god](#), the [one and the many](#), the [Sun as creator](#), the cosmos as an [ordered whole](#), etc. Moreover, also Jewish components and imagery are to be noted.

the technical Hermetica

Eventually, the three pillars of Graeco-Egyptian Hermetism were recorded : the technical or magical Hermetica (cf. Greek magical papyri), astrology (Claude Ptolemy) and the philosophical Hermetica (treatises attributed to Hermes Trismegistos). It has been argued, that the technical side was rooted in perennial Egyptian traditions, such as [magic](#) ("heka") and the "books of Thoth", and that the philosophical Hermetica share certain features with the Egyptian [wisdom-discourses or instruction genre](#). It is probable that, at least insofar as medicine & magic were concerned, this indeed was the case.

A room in which sacred books were stored, survives intact in the temple of Horus at Edfu. Built between 237 and 57 BCE, the library dates from 140 to 124 BCE. On its inner walls, we find a catalogue of books that were kept in the room. It is divided in two sections, the first contains titles of mythological and ceremonial interest, the second runs as follows :

"I bring you {Horus and his Ennead} caskets containing excellent mysteries, to wit the choicest of the emanations of Re :

Book of the temple-inventory.
 Book of the threatening.
 Book containing all the writings about the struggle.
 Book of the plan of the temple.
 Book of the guardians of the temple.
 Specification for the painting of a wall.
 Book of the protection of the body.
 Book of the protection of the king in his house.
 Spells for the averting of the evil eye.
 Knowledge of the recurrence of the two stars.
 Control over the recurrence of the stars.
 Enumeration of all places, and knowledge of what is to be found in them.
 All the protective formulae for the departure of Your Majesty from your temple for your feasts."
[Chassinat, 1928, 3.339-51.](#)

In his [Stromata](#), Clement of Alexandria published a similar list. In a passage, he described a procession of Egyptian priests, each carrying the symbols and books associated with his particular position. For Clement, the thirty-six non-medical books of this collection, contained the whole philosophy of the Egyptians (as expressed in their religion). In total, forty-two treatises (clearly borrowed from somewhere else) are mentioned, and they are all attributed to Hermes :

"(1) Hymns to the gods.
 (2) Account of the king's life.
 (3) The astrological books (4) :
 (a) on the ordering of the fixed stars ;
 (b) on the position of the sun, the moon and the five planets ;
 (c) on the conjunctions and phases of the sun and the moon ;
 (d) on the times when the stars rise.
 (4) The hieroglyphic books (10), on cosmography and geography, Egypt and the Nile, the construction of temples, the lands dedicated to the temples, and provisions and utensils for the temples.
 (5) Books on education and the art of sacrifice (10), dealing in particular with sacrifices, first-fruits, hymns, prayers, processions and feasts.
 (6) The hieratic books (10), on laws, the gods and the whole of priestly training.

- (7) The medical books (6) :
- (a) on the construction of the body ;
 - (b) on diseases ;
 - (c) on organs ;
 - (d) on drugs ;
 - (e) on diseases of the eyes ;
 - (f) on the diseases of woman."

Clement of Alexandria : Stromata, VI.4.35.2-3.

It is important to realize, that under the Ptolemies, Egypt's sacred learning already suffered from sclerosis, although access to it was limited. The major preoccupations of the Thoth-literature were magical, medicinal and astrological. How deep did Alexandrian Hermetism delve into these books of Thoth ? Although Pharaonic magic was far more complex in terms of mythology, it is clear that the technical Hermetica were influenced by these concepts, although Babylonian influences were also present, especially in the case of native astrology.

"... the evidence for substantial continuities between the Egyptian priestly literature and the technical Hermetica is patchy, not surprisingly in view of Egypt's successive exposure to Babylonian influences (...) But Graeco-Egyptian magic, which was to a large extent conceived of a Hermetic, can certainly be seen in terms of translation and interpretation of native materials ; and the same can not be said of Hermetic alchemy and astrology ..."

Fowden, 1986, p.68.

the astral religion of Babylon : astrology

Native astrology was un-Egyptian and Persian of origin. Before the Persians, Egyptian astrology was mainly horary and agricultural, in tune with the liturgical calendar, the passing of the hours, the calculation of the decans and with the Nile flood. The gods as well as Pharaoh belonged to the stars and the importance of the Sun god Re (and his secretary, the Moon god Thoth) was put into evidence in the whole of Egypt (cf. the northern shaft in Khufu's Great Pyramid).

In ca.280 BCE, Berossus, priest of Marduk, presented to king Antiochus I his Babylonaika, or treatise on Chaldaean astral doctrine. The earliest individual horoscope dates from 410 BCE, whereas a cuneiform table dated 523 BCE indicates the ability to calculate monthly ephemerides for the Sun and Moon, the conjunctions of the planets and of the planets with each other, and eclipses. The Babylonian idea that individuals could be subject to stellar conditions (genethiological astrology) was in conflict with the dignified status of the Egyptian deities, who's celestial, enduring spirits abided in the light of the stars, in particular the circumpolar, northern stars. But at the end of the New Kingdom, the oracular & divinatory had become state preoccupations (cf. the oracle of Amun ruling Egypt). In the Late Period of Egypt's history, this Persian idea of using the movements of the planets to symbolize human fate in all its feathers and thus predict the "will of the gods" in advance, found a willing ear, especially in difficult times, when it seemed as if the gods had left Egypt. What would be coming next ? Egyptian priests studied Chaldaean astrology and under the Ptolemies the discipline flourished.

These Hellenistic astrologers saw themselves as men of religion, priests of an astral faith, using a sacred cult *to rise above* the seven planets that rule fate and -reassured of the Divine nature of our mind- resist and curtail the power of these "archons" of the created world. The traditional Greek "evasion" from the cave was "mechanized" in a series of astral initiations (from Earth, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter to Saturn associated with the *voces magicæ* and the harmony of the spheres). The need to "escape" this world is clearly un-Egyptian (cf. Discourse of a Man with his Ba), whereas the commanding power of the magical word (but then pulled to a cosmic level), was in accord with popular Egyptian magic since the Middle Kingdom and had been purely Pharaonic in the Old Kingdom (cf. Cannibal Hymn). Astrology was attributed to Hermes, identified with the planet Mercury. Astrology became an integral part of Hermetism, and acted as the cement between popular magic and the learned

Hermetica. Its vast role and importance has not yet been fully realized and studies are lacking ...

"... it has become certain that the Hermetic Gnosis was routed in a secret society in Alexandria, a sort of Masonic lodge, with certain rites like a kiss of peace, a baptism of rebirth in the spirit and a sacred meal of the brethren. It started with the astrologic lore contained in works like the Hermetic *Panaretos*, of the second century before the beginning of the common era. (...) Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews were members of the Hermetic lodge and unanimously contributed their specific traditions to the common views. Christian influences, however, are completely absent."

Quispel, 1998, p.74.

the philosophical Hermetica

For Mahé, the allusions to "the god" and "the gods" in the Egyptian instruction genre are an anticipation of the complex Hermetic God, both One and All. However, this position is disputed, for we are dealing here with a syncretistic culture whose elements were not easily separable. Indeed, the philosophical Hermetica also refer to Jewish (Septuagint) and Greek sources (Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics). Hence, these texts are *not* lineal descendants of the Egyptian wisdom teachings.

Egyptian wisdom is ethical, social and engaged with life here and now. The Hermetica are individualistic, theological, reflective, contemplative and invoke the inner, mystical initiation or celestial voyage of the soul (in trance) during life on Earth (cf. Dionysian and Orphic elements). Moreover, Hermetism is ascetical and rejects matter and the world (cf. the influence of Greek philosophy, Parmenides' two roads, Plato's two-world ontology and bi-polar anthropology).

"... the Hellenized Egyptian wrote the Greek language, to whose expressiveness he was sensitive, and thought in Greek categories, whose subtlety he exploited. But once he had been moulded by that culture, he became first its bearer, then its arbiter."

Fowden, 1986, p.73.

Hermetism is not a "Sammelbecken" (heterogeneous doctrines), nor a single synthesis, but an autonomous mode of discourse, a "way of Hermes" (Iamblichus), more theological than philosophical (like Plotinus, who -compared to Plato- was more religious than political) and foremost (in number) "technical". This Graeco-Egyptian religion was influenced by three major players : the Greeks, the native Egyptians and the Jews. In its mature stage, Hermetism manifested the religion of the mind ("religio mentis") of Mediterranean Antiquity. Not unlike Spinoza's "amor intellectualis Dei", Hermetism gave body to an intellectual love for the One, albeit *in modo antiquo*, and never without magic, alchemy and astrology.

The "gnosis" of Hermetism (the secret it shared through initiation) was an ecstasy born out of cognitive activities, involving trance, contemplation, ritual, music and astrology. In Hermetism, astrology served as the bridge between the purely technical Hermetica -magic, medicine- and the theological & philosophical Hermetica, who probably did not enjoy a wide circulation. Astrology was concerned with the timing of events, both festive, initiatory or individual.

"It is certain that the Hermetics had no cult, with priests, sacrifices, processions and the like. But the texts suggest the existence of (small) Hermetic 'communities', conventicles, groups or lodges, in which individual experiences and insights were collectively celebrated with rituals, hymns and prayers."

Quispel, 1992/1994, p.15.

the historical phases of Hermetism

Three fundamental phases appear :

1. ***native Hermopolitan theology*** : the perennial worship of the native Egyptian Thoth centered in Hermopolis ("Hermoupolis Magna"). Although the contents of this theology is only know from Ptolemaic sources, "Khnum Khemenu", "the Eight town" (also called "Per-Djehuty", the "house of Thoth") existed in the Vth Dynasty and was associated with the Ogdoad or company of eight precreational gods (frog heads) & goddesses (serpent-headed). A few of them were mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, but the complete list is first mentioned in the Middle Kingdom. These deities emerged from the Nun (the primordial, undifferentiated ocean) and constituted the soul of Thoth. They may also be understood as further characterizations of this dark, unlimited realm of before creation : Amun and Amaunet (hiddenness), Heh and Heket or Huh and Hauhet (eternity), Kek and Keket or Kuk and Kauket (darkness), Nun and Nunet or Nun and Naunet (primordial chaos). This dark, unlimited and eternal realm would return in Jewish qabalah as the "negative existence" of the "Ain Soph". Hermopolitan theology will provide the framework for Ptolemaic Hermetism.

2. ***historical Hermetism*** : the identification of Thoth, "Thrice Greatest", with Hermes Trismegistus, who, in his philosophical teachings, is Greek and human (although Egyptian elements persist), but who assumed, in the technical Hermetica, the cosmicity of the native Egyptian Thoth. The technical Hermetica are attested under the Ptolemies, and the existence of an Alexandrian multi-cultural Hermetic lodge in the first century BCE is likely. The theo-philosophical sources are the 17 treatises of the Corpus Hermeticum, the Latin Asclepius, the Armenian Hermetic Definitions and the Coptic Hermetica found at Nag Hammadi, in particular The Eighth and the Ninth Sphere (Codex VI.6), which all date from the first centuries CE. It is possible to see Hermetism as a "gnosticism", but then one particular to imperial Alexandrian culture, for the notion of an evil demiurge (cf. Christian gnosticism) is not present. Constituted by Egyptian, Greek and Jewish elements, Hermetism will influence Judaism (the Merkabah mystics of the Jewish gnostics of Alexandria), Christianity (Clement of Alexandria, the Greek Fathers, the "Orientale Lumen") and Islam (the Hermetic star worshippers of Harran) ;

3. ***literary Hermeticism*** : Renaissance Hermeticism produced a fictional Trismegistus as the godhead of its esoteric concept of the world as an organic whole, with an intimate sympathy between its material (natural) and spiritual (supernatural) components. This view was consistent with the humanistic phase of modernism, which was followed by a mechanization of the world and the "enlightenment" of the eighteenth century. These new forces ousted all formative & final causes from their physical inquiries, and reduced the four Aristotelian categories of determination to the material & efficient causes. Astrology, magic and alchemy were deemed scientifically backward & religiously suspect. "Actio-in-distans" was impossible, and Paganism was Satanical. In 1666, Colbert evicts astrology from the Academy of Sciences (the court-astrologer Morin de Villefranche had to take place behind a curtain to note the hour of birth of the dauphin). In the nineteenth century, under the influence of the morbid but exotical fancies of the Romantics, Hermeticism became part of Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Theosophy and generalized Egyptomania (cf. Golden Dawn, Thelemism, Pyramidology, etc.). Today it returns as the ideological core of the expanding New Age religion.

"True theology, was, of course, Christian ; and true philosophy was Platonic. Ultimately, it was argued, they were one : both were expressions of the primordial wisdom tradition known as *prisca theologia*, which derived from Hermes and Zoroaster and led up to Plato. Reconceptualized in the 16th century as *philosophia perennis*, this theme of an ancient genealogy of divinely inspired philosopher-sages became centrally important to the esoteric tradition ; reconstructed by nineteenth-century occultists under the influence of the 'oriental renaissance' and comparative religion, it was finally adopted in the New Age movement."

Hanegraaff, 1996, p.390.

5.2 "Nous" and the Hellenization of the divine triads.

the core teachings of Hermetism

Hermetic ontology distinguished between three spheres of being : God, the world and man. These were sympathetically interlinked (X.22-23), allowing us to glimpse His genius in these beauties (V.1-8), God is also conceived as the creator of All rather than Himself the All (i.e. pan-en-theism instead of pantheism), and immanentism is not exclusive. The Hermetist tried to rise from "episteme" towards "gnosis", i.e. from knowledge *about* God to knowledge *of* Him ("cognoscere Deum / cognitio Dei"). God is best known and worshipped in the absolute purity of silence (as the Pythagoreans had claimed, and the Ancient Egyptians had stressed for millennia - cf. [Hymns to Amun](#)). Like Late New Kingdom Amun-theology, Hermetism was [henotheist](#), but in a rational mode of cognition : the One God was deemed essentially hidden (cf. the [Nun](#)) but manifest in "millions of appearances" (cf. Atum-Re and the deities).

Hermes tells Tat (XIII), that "the tent" of the earthly body was formed by the circle of the zodiac (XIII.12 & Ascl.35) and dominated by fate, who's decrees, according to the astrologers, were unbreakable. The seven planets represented the "perfect movements" of the deities, the unalterable "will of the gods" as expressed in predictable astral phenomena. Magicians tried to compel this will, while Hermetism did not try to resist fate, but irreversibly moved beyond it. The existence of the deities was acknowledged (they belonged to the order of creation and were the object of sacrifices and processions as well as of the astrological septet), but the deities, Hermes and God were situated in the eighth, ninth and tenth sphere. The "eighth" involved purification, self-knowledge and the direct experience of the "Nous" as "logos", whereas in the "ninth" man was deified by assuming God's attributes, as did Hermes, in particular His Universal Mind, the Divine intellect, Nous or "soul of God" (XII.9).

In Ancient Egypt, man and the pantheon had never been directly in touch. Firstly, because the spirit of the deities remained for ever in the sky (the light of the stars), and secondly because gods only converse with gods. The only exception was Pharaoh, the mediator between mankind and the deities, for he himself was the son of the creator god Re and daily returned, by voice-offerings of truth & justice, the order of being back to its origin, hereby sustaining creation and sealing the unity of the "Two Lands", namely Egypt as "image of the world".

Man, the most glorious of God's creations, was animated by a Divine spark and was therefore -in the depth of his being- truly Divine (I.2, I.30 & XIII.14). In man, the divide between God and the world was bridged, and so to awaken him to his own inner being, was the goal of Hermetic initiation & ritual. Ignorance crippled man (VII), and this is overcome by helping him to understand his true nature, bringing him to know God and discovering his own Divinity (X.9). The crucial choice is therefore a choice between the "material" world (ruled by fate) and the "spiritual" Perfect Man, between the corporeal and the incorporeal. The attainment of self-knowledge (exposure to the true self) is described in terms of "rebirth" (palingenesia - XIII), viewed as a bursting into a new plane of existence, namely the "Ogdoadic nature", previously unsuspected and potential.

Palingenesia liberates the soul and is a reversal of physical birth (which imprisoned the soul in the body). This spiritual birth leads (thanks to the presence of a spiritual master and an initiatory father/son-relationship) to the soul's perfection through the knowledge of God, a "baptism in intellect" (IV.3-4). In the process of purification and self-knowledge, traditional rituals may have been used, but the higher mysteries (the Hermetic initiation proper) involved a "mental" or "spiritual" sacrifice (I.31), the offering of hymns of praise and thanksgiving. The ritual and the noetic were thus integrated.

Indeed, the "nous", Divine intellect or "soul" of God, binds together the hierarchy of God, the world (of the deities, minerals, plants & animals) and Man. In particular, "nous" is the way of the human soul to free itself from the snares of the flesh and be illuminated by the "light" of the "gnosis", for indeed, God is experienced as light. A "good nous" will be able to repel the assaults of the world. The spiritual master becomes a personification of this Divine intellect.

The master becomes one with the Divine "nous" (I am Mind) in the initiation of his disciple. In Hermetism, this "nous" is personified by Hermes Trismegistus, the Universal Mind of the "highest Power".

the Hermetic Divine triad

In Ancient Egyptian theology, divine triads were used to express the divine family-unit, usually composed out of Pharaoh (the son) and a divine couple (father & mother), legitimizing his rule as divine king. Pharaoh Akhenaten had introduced a monotheistic triad (exclusive and against all other deities) : Aten, Akhenaten and Nefertiti. In Heliopolis, the original triad was Atum, Shu and Tefnut, in Memphis, Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertem emerged, whereas Thebes worshipped Amun, Mut and Khonsu. The trinity naturally developed into three or one ennead.

In Hermetic triad reads as :

1. God, the Unbegotten One, the essence of being, the Father of All - the "Decad" ;
2. Nous, the First Intellect, the Self-Begotten One, the Mind of God - the "Ennead" ;
3. Logos, the "son" from "nous", the Begotten One above the Seven Archons - the "Ogdoad".

The One Entity or God (the "Tenth") is known to its creation as the One Mind or Hermes which contains the "noetic" root of every individual thing that exists (cf. Plato, Spinoza). This Divine Mind (the attributes or names of the nameless God) allows all things to be sympathetic transformations (adaptations, modi) of God. Hermetism is initiatory because it wants to elevate the soul to the level of its true nature. Palingenesia is *an ascension while alive*. It implies more than just a confrontation with the gods (as in Ancient Egypt), but a true interaction between Perfect Man and -thanks to the Presence of Mind- God. This interaction leads to a total emergence of the Divine spark in Man and hence to his deification (finally being completely his own Divine self and thus himself "a god", a being permanently realizing the Enneadic nature (XIII.3,10 & 14). This highest state may be attained in the afterlife, although the Ogdoadic nature may be realized while alive on Earth.

"Man is a Divine being, not to be compared with the other earthly beings, but with those who are called gods, up in the heavens. Rather, if one must dare to speak the truth, man truly is established above even these gods, or at least fully their equal. After all, none of the celestial gods will leave the heavenly frontiers and descend to earth ; yet man ascends even into heavens, and measured them, and knows their heights and depths, and everything else about them he learns with exactitude, and, supreme marvel, he even has no need to leave the earth to establish himself upon high, so far does his power extend ! We must thus dare to say : earthly man is a mortal god, the celestial God is an immortal man. And so it is through these two, the world and man, that all things exist ; but they were all created by the One."

Corpus Hermeticum, X.24-25.

The Hermetic triad can be traced back to Egyptian sources :

1. the one god alone, pre-existing before creation as the primordial ocean of Nun ;
2. the self-creative creator (in the form of Atum-Re), emerging out of the Nun (hatching out of his egg) as the origin of everything and the "father of the gods" ;
3. the unique "son of god" or Pharaoh, who mediates between the realm of the deities (sky) and the realm of humans (earth).

It is clear that 10 dimensions, ontological layers, strata or realms are postulated : supernatural Divine triad (agennetos, autogennetos, gennetos) and Seven natural "powers of fate" or "archons". Hermetism is a gnosticism because it claims that knowledge of God is possible and that to know God one has to merge with Universal Mind, conveying a "special" light, causing a private and inner illumination. The purified soul is absorbed into God. Hermetism is a "way of immortality" (X.7). But as an Alexandro-Egyptian gnosticism, Hermetism did not introduce "evil" in the archons : God our Father is good and His creation (including His deities) is beautiful, *the crucial moral choice is up to the individual*. As the archons or governors are the deities of Ancient Egypt (and not the Jewish Yahweh reinterpreted by Christian gnostics as Basilides and Valentinus to be a cruel and evil god of creation), Hermetism is the first henotheism in harmony with the conceptual rationality of Hellenism. It has been called a "pagan monotheism" because Hermetism strives to let the Divine triad dwell in and destroy the chains to liberate the soul and incarnate the Perfect Man, the Begotten One, who comes from the Nous and thus from God. In the Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth we find :

"For from thee, the unbegotten one, the begotten one came into being. The birth of the self-begotten one is through thee, giving birth to all begotten things that exists."

[Robinson](#), 1984, p.294.

The Hermetic Divine triad is modalistic and subordinates the hierarchy of being. God (10) is the first and ultimate level of existence, the One existing for Unity alone (the absolute in its absoluteness). God (the incomprehensible, unrevealable and unknowable Father) is unborn, the Logos autogenes and the "son of Nous" born. What this is can not be said (cf. apophatism : absolute silence, no tales). Hermes (9) is self-begotten (not created or generated by God) and is the "soul" of God, the mode of God's holding together His creation by Universal Mind (nous) and Word (logos). The Begotten One, again a level lower, has no power of self-generation, and is part of the process of time and space (this "son" is made by Hermes as master, teacher and father). This level of the Perfect(ed) Human beings is higher than the deities (or at least equal to them).

The Seven Archons, ruling fate and subordinated to supernatural command, are beautiful and good (demons may exist, but there is no evil god). That evil exists at all is due to man's nature and his slavish prostrations before his physical passions & vices. Clouding his true nature, these evils cause ignorance and make man subject to the fatal blows of the blind planetary forces, measured by astrologers and manipulated by magicians. On their own, both astrologers and magi fail to reach the Hermetic goal of life : "gnosis" or an inner awakening in the light of God's Mind, i.e. an entrance in the supernatural strata of being (the Ogdoad, which borders the natural world, and the Ennead). Resisting fate binds one to fate. Only the Divine light of "gnosis" allows the soul to move beyond nature and abide in the supernatural. Here, fate has no hold, for the gods never leave their heaven, and, as Paracelsus would claim centuries earlier : The wise command the stars !

5.3 The influence of Alexandrian Hermetism.

Paul's mystical experiences

The Old Testament mentions no celestial voyage. The prophet kept his feet on the ground and contemplated. Spiritual ascensions in or out of the physical body (trance ?, vision quest ?) were truly Hellenistic and typical for the Hermetic gnosis, which unfolded in steps. Jewish Merkabah gnosis was Alexandrian of origin. The Eighth and the Ninth Sphere (Codex VI,6 of the Nag Hammadi library, rendered in English by [Robinson](#)) is probably the oldest Hermetic treatise (composed under the late Ptolemies ?). It has little or no traces of Jewish influence and describes the Graeco-Egyptian Hermetical initiation.

"{O my Father}, yesterday you promised me that you would bring my mind into the eighth and afterwards you would bring me into the ninth. You said that this is the order of the tradition."

[Robinson](#), 1984, p.292.

The Seven planetary governors form the Hebdomad. Apparently Hermetism is a "higher" mystery, for the "lower" purifications were already completed at the start of the Hermetic initiation. The Ogdoad is the realm of the realized Perfect Man, the gods & goddesses and the fixed stars. Man may realize his Ogdoadic nature while alive. The Ennead represents the spiritual realm of the Divine Nous, Hermes Himself as autogenes. Absorption into this sphere is never permanent, except after physical death. The Decad, or God Himself, is unknowable.

"When he had finishing praising he shouted :

'Father Trismegistus ! What shall I say ? We have received this light. And I myself see this same vision in you. And I see the eight and the souls that are in it and the angels singing a hymn to the ninth and its powers. And I see Him who has power of them all, creating those that are in the spirit.'

'It is advantageous from now on that we keep silence in a reverent posture. Do not speak about the vision from now on. It is proper to {sing a hymn} to the Father until the day to quit the body.'

Robinson, 1984, p.295-296.

If the Hebdomad is called the "first heaven", then the Ennead is the "third" heaven. It is this voyage to the third heaven which turns the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus into the Christian Paul, the apostle of the gentiles and (together with Peter), the foundation of Christianity. Paul is reluctant to speak of his experiences, but does so when forced by his audience.

"And I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I cannot tell ; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell : God knoweth) ; and such a man was caught up to the third heaven ! And I knew such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell : God knoweth) ; how he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

2 Corinthians, 12.2-4.

Even fourteen years after this major experience, Paul language is still stumbling regarding the matter, so deep has it touched him. The reference to the paradoxal state of his physical body is typical for trance-experiences. It can also be found at the beginning of the Poimandros :

"One day, when I had begun to think about the things that are, and my thoughts had soared high aloft, while my bodily senses had been put under strain by sleep - yet not such sleep as that of man weighed down by fullness of food or by bodily weariness ..."

Poimandres or first treatise, I.1.

In the ninth sphere (the third heaven), Paul has the same celestial encounters as the "son" initiated by Hermes Trismegistus and is also bound to un-saying regarding it. Two times Paul invokes "God knoweth" in the same suggestive way as the Hermetic who claims :

"... it is right before God that we keep silent about what is hidden."

Robinson, 1984, p.295.

The apostle Luke tells us about Paul's spiritual realization :

"As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him."

Acts, 9:3

In that light, Paul and the men who were traveling with him, heard the voice of Jesus the Christ, but his companions could not see anyone. Paul fell down and the experience was so devastating that he saw nothing for three days.

"Tat.

'Father, you have given me my fill of this good and most beautiful sight ; and my mind's eye is almost blinded by the splendour of the vision.'

Hermes.

'Nay, the vision of the Good is not a thing of fire, as are the Sun's rays ; it does not blaze down upon us and force us to close our eyes ; it shines forth much or little, according as he who gazes on it is able to receive the inflow of the incorporeal radiance. It is more penetrating than visible light in its descent upon us ; but it cannot harm us ; it is full of all immortal life. Even those who are able to imbibe somewhat more than others of that vision are again and again sunk in blind sleep by the body ; but when they have been released from the body, then they attain to full fruition of that most lovely sight ...'"

Corpus Hermeticum, X.4-6

The Ennead was the Hermetic experience of Hermes Autogenes, who bordered the Decad or God Himself. And the light of Paul's "third heaven" ? In the Divine light that touched him, he saw and heard Jesus the Christ as the "glory" ("kabod") of God the Father. Hermes had been described as the "soul" of God.

"... there was something that looked like a throne made of sapphire, and sitting on the throne was a figure that looked like a human being. The figure seemed to be shining like bronze in the middle of a fire. It shone all over with a bright light that had in it all the colors of the rainbow. This was the dazzling light that shows the presence of the Lord."

Ezekiel, 1:26-28.

Instead of believing that the glory of God was the "second God" or "logos" (cf. Philo of Alexandria and the Gospel of John), Paul identified the "kabod" with Jesus the Christ. According to Paul, Christ was the eternal "anthropos" (1 Corinthians 15:45-49), the glory of God, who came down from heaven and fully incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. Christ, the logos of the Father, revealed Himself in Jesus. Both Hermes and Christ have a cosmic role, in that they hold creation together. Both are "human" and "Divine" (godmen). And in the same way as the Hermetist receives the Divine Nous, so did Paul receive the "spirit from Christ".

Could Paul have been directly influenced by the Hermetic lodge ? This can not be answered. But we may conclude that the Hermetic teachings clarify these dark corners of Paul's thought ...

John's gnosticism

In the "gnostic" fourth gospel (ca. 100 CE), we read :

"In the beginning the Word already existed ; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things ; not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness had never put it out."

John, 1:1-5.

This "Word" is "Christ" or the "logos", the creative utterance of God Himself. As His only Son, the Word receives the glory of the Father. The Word incarnated in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, so that Christ, being fully united with His humanity, could be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The Memphite theology (ca. 700 BCE) starts with the following words :

"There comes into being in (with) the mind, {something} as the image of Atum.
There comes into being by the tongue, {something} as the image of Atum.
Ptah is the very great, who gives life to all the gods and their doubles.

All of this in (with) this mind and by this tongue."

Memphis theology, line 53.

In the the Corpus Hermeticum we find :

"Because the demiurg has created the whole world not with his hand but with the Word, conceive Him then as present and always existing, who made it all being one-alone ..."

Corpus Hermeticum, IV.1.

In Hermetism, the demiurg or creator, namely the godman Hermes, corresponded with the Ninth Sphere, the spiritual abode of the Divine Nous, Autogenes. From the Light of this Divine Nous, the holy Word came forth, and the Eight Sphere is called into being. This Word is the "Son of the Light", "Son of Nous" or "Son of God".

LOGOS	
Hermetism	<p>The "logos" is a "holy word", coming forth from the Light of the Divine Nous, the Ninth Sphere of being, situated between the Decad of God Himself and the Ogdoad of the blessed souls, fixed stars and the deities.</p> <p>(1) Decad : God Himself ; (2) Ennead : the Divine Mind, the godman Hermes ; (3) Ogdoad : the Logos, or son of God ; (4) Hebdomad : the Seven Governors of the world.</p>
Johannite gnosticism	<p>The "logos" is Christ, the unique Son of God the Father, who incarnated in Jesus and is revealed by the Holy Spirit of the Father. Jesus Christ ascends to the Father so that this Holy Spirit may descent upon the faithful.</p> <p>(1) God the Father : God as principle ; (2) God the Son : God as Word, Logos and Mind ; (3) God the Spirit : God as Divine gift & comforter.</p>

In the Gospel of John, the Hermetic "logos" is the gift of God by virtue of the Son, who is called the Word. This gift is the grace of the Holy Spirit enabling the soul to partake in the Divine life of the energies that radiate from the Divine Trinity. Try to see the fundamental differences together with the family-likenesses between Alexandrian gnosis and John's Christianity.

It goes without saying that Hermetism influenced the first Christian heretics (second century CE). Hermes played a role in the gnosticism of Basilides and Valentinus (cf. [Early Christianity](#)) and continued to patronize medicine, astrology and magic.

We know that the Corpus Hermeticum was read by Tertullian, Cyprian & Augustine. They rejected its Paganism, but noticed some of the similarities with their theology. For the bishop of Hippo, the "way of Hermes", with its reverence and denial for the gods, was not the work of the Holy Spirit, but of a spirit of lies ("spiritus fallax"), although he admits that "... regarding the one, true God, the creator of the world, he {Hermes} indeed says much that corresponds with the truth." (De civitate Dei, VIII:23).

the gnosticism of Thomas

In December 1945, In Upper Egypt, some six miles north-east of the town of Nag Hammadi, a remarkable discovery was made : a library consisting of twelve books, plus eight leaves removed from a thirteenth book in Late Antiquity and placed inside the front cover of the sixth book, was found in a jar at the foot of a desert cliff known as the Gebel et-Tarif (below Luxor, near the village of Es-Sayyâd, the ancient Chenoboskion). Of these 13 codices or manuscripts, **eleven were complete with their bindings**, while of two only a few scattered leaves were found. In total, these codices contained 52 texts.

Of the 52 tractates (13 codices), only 6 were already extant, either in the original Greek or in Latin or Coptic translations. What a discovery ! These books had been translated one by one from the original Greek into the Coptic dialect of Upper Egypt (Sahidic), probably in Edessa. The library was written in two different Coptic dialects, and reflect the handwriting styles of several scribes.

One of these texts, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas (II,2), had been translated from a Greek original of which only fragments had been known. These texts were most probably buried as a result of the thirty-ninth festal Easter letter of Archbishop Athanasius who condemned heretics, mentioning the gospel of Jesus' twin brother by name. The head of the Pachomian monasteries, Theodore, who had just succeeded Pachomius as head of the monastery of Tabennisi, had the letter translated into Coptic and read throughout the monasteries of Egypt to serve as a rule (in 367 CE). Probably this library was buried to save it from destruction. Many of the Nag Hammadi texts are pseudonymous.

Peuch (1950) showed that the Thomas-collection seems to be ***an anthology made from texts disparate both in age & contents***. The text is a compilation, a miscellany gleaned from previously written apocrypha (Doresse, 1986). It goes back to the early Christian presence in Syria, especially in Edessa, where, between 30 & 75 CE, Jewish apostles had preached the gospels. Because of the strong ties between Syria and Egypt in the first centuries, it was translated into Egyptian, i.e. Coptic. For Mach (1993), the Greek original was composed in the last quarter of the first century.

The "incipit" of the collection mentions "Didymus Jude Thomas". A strong tradition attributes to him the role of ***special confidant*** of Jesus, His twin and heir to his most secret teachings. It is he who is said to be privileged to touch the "body of resurrection" of the "risen" Jesus. Ancient Church historians mention Thomas as having preached to the Parthians and in Persia. It was said that he was buried at Edessa. Thomas is credited with the evangelization of "India", probably denoting Central Asia

In the canonical gospels, Thomas hardly appears except in the Gospel of John. Thomas has been remembered as the apostle who does not believe without physical proof, wishing to touch the body of the "risen" Jesus (John, 20:24 - 29). Also in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas (§ 39) an unnamed personage praises Thomas as the "Twin of Christ, apostle of the Most High, initiated into the secret sayings of Christ and receiver of His secret oracles ..."

(77) Jesus said : "I am the Light that falls on all things. I am the All. From Me the All has gone out and to Me the All came back. Cleave a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find Me there."

(80) Jesus said : "He who knew the world has mastered the body, but he who has mastered the body is superior to the world."

(82) Jesus said : "Whoever is near Me is near the fire, and whoever who is far from Me is far from the Kingdom."

(83) Jesus said : "Images are visible to man, and the light which is in them is hidden in the image of the Light of the Father. He will reveal Himself and His image is hidden by His light."

(84) Jesus said : "When you see your own likeness, you rejoice. But when you see the images of yourselves which came into being before you, which do not die nor become visible, how much then will you be able to bear ?"

(111) Jesus said : "The heavens and the earth will be rolled up before you. And whoever is living from the Living One will not see death." Jesus says this : "He who finds himself, the world is not worthy of him."

(113) His disciples said to Him : "When will the Kingdom come ?" Jesus said : "It does not come by expecting it. It will not be a matter of saying : 'See, it is here !' or : 'Look, it is there !'. Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread over the Earth and men do not see it."

(114) Simon Peter said to them : "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said : "Look, I will guide her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit like you males. For every female who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Gospel of Thomas

the Christian Divine Trinity

The synod of ca. 220 bishops (only a small fraction of the total episcopate) gathered by Constantine in Nicæ in 325 CE had, in order to legitimize the imperial order, to canonize dogma's pertaining to the nature of the founder of Christianity : Who was Jesus the Christ ?

Regarding Jesus' true nature, a lot of conflicts had arisen between the Latin position of Rome and the Greek bishops of the East. The Latin formula adopted was :

"Credimus in unum Dominum nostrum Iesum Christum Dei, natum ex Patre unigenitum, hoc est de substantia Patris, Deum ex Deo, lumen ex lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, natum, non factum, unius substantiae cum Padre ..."

Denzinger, H. : Enchiridion Symbolorum, 125 - 19th of June AD 325.

In the East, Christ's co-substantiality was never accepted by all, and permanent schisms ensued. That the Son was "like" the Father ("homoiousion"), and somehow subordinated to Him became the unorthodox Greek position. Here Hellenism was still as work, for it seemed totally unlogical to attribute incarnational qualities to the Word of God and continue to maintain that this Word was not limited by this and thus "identical" to the impassible Father in the ontological order of Divine things.

The godman Hermes and the godman Jesus the Christ were quite different. Although both were human and Divine, Hermes was Autogenes. Christ did not create Himself, for He was generated by the Father as His Word, Image and Masterplan.

Hermes and Christ integrate the "anthropos", the "archetype of humanity". In both cases, *humanity is truly raised to the Divine level*. In Hermetism, this was the "Ninth Sphere". But in Christianity, the idea of humanity is Deified through the complete incarnation of the Divine "Son of God" in the human Jesus of Nazareth. This unique and singular incarnation of the celestial Christ in the earthly Jesus, eventually transformed the mortified mortal flesh of the man Jesus into the unique glorious body of light of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. When Jesus the Christ left His apostles, He returned as the completed Godman to the house of His Father, integrating humanity in the Divine Trinity, making thus the Father cast His Holy Spirit upon those who were, are and will be baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (early Christians baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ only).

Co-substantiality and the incarnation of the Word define a definite departure from the Hellenistic Divine triad. The orthodox Greek Fathers (ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, the Cappadocians) will finalize the Christian dogma of the Divine Trinity in terms of mystical theology. Their approach is Christocentric and ecclesiastical (communal). The

generation of the Son is stressed, and the Latins add that the Spirit also proceeds from the Son (cf. the "Filioque"). The role of the Holy Spirit is not well understood and the gifts of the Spirit were and are measured using canonical systems.

In Hellenism, the *individual* was able to realize the Ogdoad and glimpse (thanks to his teacher) in the Ennead. The teacher (a man absorbed by Hermes) was Hermes, the godman, *autogenes*. The teacher created Himself, becoming Hermes by ontologically merging with the Ennead and thus becoming a god.

In Christianity, the mystical voyage (cf. Paul) never ends with an identification with the Word. Neither is Logos unbegotten, on the contrary. Christ is generated by the Father. The Word is revealed in the Spirit. The orthodox Christian voyage ends in the Ogdoad (Holy Spirit), and the absorption in the Ennead (Jesus the Christ) is deemed post-apocalyptic (cf. the New Jerusalem).

Influence of Hermetism on Jewish Qabalah

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Judah (the Greek Judea), and this was the start of the rule of a succession of Hellenistic dynasties until 152 BCE, when resistance led by the Maccabees, led to a semi-independent state, to be conquered by the Romans a century later.

Under Macedonian rule, the Jews had adopted the Greek alphabetic system of numeration, and the system was even introduced in the Temple (using letters to indicate numerals). This influence of Greek culture only increased, and soon their customs, ideas and language became common goods.

In Alexandria, there were more Jews than in Jerusalem itself. These Jews had a relatively high level of education and Jewish literature in the third and second centuries BCE demonstrates the extent to which Greek culture had been adapted by this community, which, despite their open-minded culture, remained a closed community.

The only tangible evidence of the project know as the "Septuagint" ("seventy") can be approximately dated to the middle of the second century BCE. This project involved the translation from Hebrew to Greek of the most influential books of Jewish religious literature. Legend has it that Ptolemy Philadelphus delegated this task to seventy-two separate translators, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, and after seventy-two days each of them came up with identical translations ...

The growing influence of the Jews in Alexandria made the tensions with the Greek population increase, and in the first century, anti-Semitism reached a high point with the local Jews being treated in a brutal and bloody manner. In Judea, the second failed Jewish revolt (132 - 135 BCE), made emperor Hadrian expell all Jews from Jerusalem on pain of death, renaming the city Aelia Capitolina ...

We know that numerous sects and schools arose from the Alexandrian mixture during the Graeco-Roman rules. The most important individual in the development of the Hebrew qabalah, resulting from a merger of Hebrew mysticism, Platonism and Pythagorism, was Philo Judaeus (ca.30 BCE - 45 CE). Philo of Alexandria was the leader of a large Jewish community at Alexandria and he was the first to apply Greek traditions to Hebrew scriptures. He hardly knew Hebrew and considered the Greek Septuagint as of Divine inspiration. He was acquainted with arithmology, attributing numbers to letters to gain access to a deeper level of meaning (cf. gematria). This isopsephy was used to interpret the Torah and gematria first appears in the rabbinic literature of the second century CE.

We should realize that most of the Old Testament's texts date from the Persian Period, i.e. between the exile to Babylon, following the sack of Jerusalem in 587 BCE (destruction of the first Temple) to the conquest of Alexander (332 BCE). Even the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses) show traces of major revision during this period (the latest texts date from the third and second centuries BCE).

"Of the large number of Hebrew sacred writings, the canon of books that were eventually selected for the Hebrew Bible, or 'Old Testament', as the Christians later called it, was only established after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE, by surviving rabbis at Jamnia who were anxious to preserve their religion from the catastrophe of the failed Jewish revolt."

Barry, 1999, p.175.

It is therefore possible to argue that the translation of the Hebrew books into Greek caused the development of the Hebrew qabalah, since the Hellenistic alphabetical symbolism did not exist before the Greeks. The correspondences set forth in qabalah (or Jewish gnosis) were, at best, an adaptation to the Hebrew alphabet of the existing Greek practice already many centuries old. The Merkabah mystics too, can be traced back to Alexandria and the Hellenistic celestial voyages of the soul.

Considering recent evidence, there is no reason to support Scholem's attempt to split off the role of the alphabet in the Sepher Yetzirah, the earliest surviving qabalistic work, from the acknowledged Greek influences. Scholem concluded in the Encyclopaedia Judaica, that this work was written by a devout Jew endeavoring the "Judaize" *non-Jewish* gnostic and Pythagorean speculations.

"... it is sufficient to note that Hebrew Qabalist doctrines reached their pinnacle of importance in Judaism in Europe during the Middle Ages. Consequently they also had a huge influence on Western magical tradition, which drew heavily on Jewish esoteric lore, and as a source for the inner gnosis of orthodox Christian thought."

Barry, 1999, p.185.

Regarding Christian mysticism, it should also be noted that under the influence of the high days of Cistercian spirituality (XI - XIIIth century), Hermetism reached Europe as part of the "Orientale Lumen" (cf. Willem of St. Thierry).

Influence of Hermetism on Sufism

"Those who have believed, those who follow the Jewish religion, the Christians, and the Sabians, and anyone who will have believed in ALLAH and the last day and will have done works of righteousness, all of them receive their wage from their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow. "

Koran, 2:62.

"Surely those who believe, the Jews, the Sabians, and those Christians who believe in ALLAH and the last day, and those who do works of righteousness, no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow."

Koran, 5:69

"On the day of resurrection, ALLAH shall distinguish between the true believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians and the idolaters. ALLAH is witness over everything."

Koran, 22:17.

Who were these Sabians (or Sabeans) ? Maimonides described them in the 12th century as worshippers of the stars :

"... they consider the stars as deities, and the sun as the chief deity. They believe that all the seven stars are gods, but the two luminaries are greater than all the rest. They say distinctly that the sun governs the world, both that which is above and that which is below ; these are exactly their expressions. (...) All the Sabeans thus believe in the eternity of the Universe, the heavens being in their opinion God."

Moses Maimonides : Moreh Nebukim (Guide for the Perplexed), part III, chapter XXIX.

In a later version of the synthesis of alchemical Hermetism, known as the Tabula Smaragdina (ca. first century CE), we understand why Maimonides added : "these are exactly their expressions" :

- "1. Truly, without deceit, certain and most veritable :
2. That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracles of the One Entity.
3. And just as all things come from the One Entity, through the mediation of its One Mind, so do all created things originate from this One Entity through transformation.
4. Its father is the Sun. Its mother the Moon. The Wind carries it in its belly. Its nurse is the Earth. The origin of all the perfections of the world is here. Its force is entire, if it is converted into Earth.
5. Separate Earth from Fire, the subtle from the gross, gently and with great ingenuity. It rises from Earth to Heaven and descends again to Earth, thereby receiving the force of both things superior & inferior. In this way, you shall obtain the glory of the whole world and thereby all obscurity shall fly away from you.
6. This is a force, strong with all forces, for it overcomes every subtle thing and penetrates every solid thing.
7. In this way the world was created.
8. From this will come many admirable applications, the means of which is in this.
9. Therefore I am called Hermes Trismegistus, having the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.
10. What I have said of the operation of the Sun is finished."

Emerald Table, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

Twenty-five miles southeast of the city of Urfa in Turkey, once called Edessa, lie the ruins of the city of Harran, founded in the early second millenium BCE, which, at its height, had 20.000 inhabitants, and Sin, the Moon god, as its protecting deity. The oracles of these star gazers were sought by succeeding generations of Semites, Persians, Greeks and Romans. Divination through celestial phenomena was just one aspect of Harranian prophesy, for incubation and haruspicy (divination by the entrails of sacrificed animals) were even more popular during the Babylonian and Assyrian periods. The Persian rule started with Cyrus in the sixth century BCE and continued until the arrival of Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, who probably never visited Harran, but left a Macedonian military colony.

After the coming of the Greeks, and although its past had guaranteed Harran a place in a great variety of contemporary accounts, its history became increasingly dominated by the importance of Edessa in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine eras. The sources tell little about the "old faith" of Harran, but they do confirm the continuing power of the oracle of the Moon god and the persistence of its typical astral religion. At the end of the fourth century CE, Harran was still pagan and no mention is made of a bishop from that city until 361 CE, when Barsai, the prelate of Harran, was ordained bishop of Edessa. But he did not chose to reside in Harran, for his Harranians lacked interest in Christianity ...

It took three centuries (1 - 300 CE), to diffuse the original Hermetic tradition from Alexandria to the intellectual circles of the Near East. This process went hand in hand with the final redaction of the philosophical Hermetica. Bar Daysan of Edessa (154 - 222 BCE) has been seen as one of the most important links in the chain of transmission of Hermetism to the Near East. [Drijvers](#) (1970) showed that the soteriology, cosmology, anthropology and theology of Bar Daysan are consistent with the Hermetic world view as expressed in the Poimandres. But, Harranian beliefs were not exclusively derived from Hermetic sources, for other influences were also present. By the time of the Muslim conquest, Babylonian, Assyrian, Jewish, Greek, Graeco-Egyptian and Roman religion as well as Syriac Christianity had made their interpretation of Harranian religion, rooted in the worship of the stars, i.e. astrology raised to the level of a religion of its own.

In the Hastings Encylopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Margoliouth (1913) offered evidence for the identification of the Harranian pagans as the Sabians of the Koran. For this author (and in conflict with previous etymologies), the name "sabah" was derived from the verb "sba", signifying "to desire", pointing to the fact that the Harranians

desired to know God ! The Sabians of Harran were a gnostic sect, with a particular ritual and structure, founded by some person or persons. In Traces of the Past, Biruni (ca.1050 CE), describes a variety of "Sabians", living in India, Central Asia, Turkey and Syria. These peoples were called "Sabians", because they shared a number of beliefs which may be categorized as Hermetic. The Harranians were thus understood to be the remnant of the Sabians of Egypt. The Sabeans of the Koran were the worshippers of the Divine Nous, the Alexandro-Egyptian Hermetic gnostics. They too received a sacred scripture attesting the unity and singularity of God, namely a corpus of Hermetic texts.

"Sabian, then, is a synonym for gnostic. Given this definition, the stories found in certain Muslim authors connecting Sabian beliefs with those of the Egyptians, the references to Hermes, Enos, Seth and the Agathodaimon, the supposed pilgrimages of Sabians to the pyramids and the secret rituals and prayers would all make sense in the context of this definition of Sabian."

Green, 1992, p.110.

The Sabian tradition entered Islam through the branches of the "Shi'at 'Ali", the Shiites of Islam. In the mid-ninth century and even in the time of Ma'mun, Muslim authors identified Hermes with Idris (or Elias) or Enoch, mentioned in the Koran. The latter was the grandson of Adam, and founder of the arts and sciences, gnosis ("hikmah") and philosophy ("falsafah"). Later, the "greatest teacher" and "seal of universal sainthood", Ibn al-'Arabī (1165 - 1240) wrote about Idris-Hermes (note the reference to the Hebdomad and the identification of the "way and word of Idris" with the "intellect" above the lower soul) :

"He resides at the heart of the seven celestial bodies, which is the sun. (...) Thus he became an intellect without any lust, retaining no link with the strivings of the lower soul. In him God was transcendent, so that he had half the gnosis of God. That is because the intellect, by itself, absorbing knowledge in its own way, knows only according to what is transcendent and nothing of the immanent."

Ibn al-'Arabī : The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusūs al-hikam), chapter XXII (translated by Burckhardt).

An extremist Shiite offshoot, the so-called "Brethren of Purity", which probably saw the light in Basra in the 10th century, filtered their vision through Hermetic & gnostic perceptions. They defined the "perfect man" as of "East Persian derivation Arabic in faith, of Iraqi, that is Babylonian education, a Hebrew in astuteness, a disciple of Christ in conduct, as pious as the Syrian monk, a Greek in the individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and especially, a Sufi in his spiritual life." (p.189). Shi'ite Sufism was the gateway to all gnostic traditions, as Corbin (Alone with the Alone, 1969) showed.

And all these spiritual outlooks were perceived to have come together at Harran.

Influence of Hermetism on the European Renaissance

Parts of the teachings of Alexandrian Hermetism got incorporated in the Christian theologies of Paul, John and the monastics (cf. the Nag Hammadi cache). The latter contemplative branch of the Roman Church stretched out from Egypt (4th century) to Ireland (9th century) and influenced the Cistercian movement and its mystics. The qabalah was directly influenced by Greek number symbolism and Alexandrian astral science. Lastly, via Harran, Hermetism was placed on the sacred map of Islam.

"The mystical powers of Hermes exerted themselves far beyond the pagan world of late antiquity, transmuting medieval Christian and Islamic understanding of the relationship between rational knowledge and revelation."

Green, 1992, p.85.

Around 1460 CE, a Greek manuscript from Macedonia arrived at Florence. Cosimo de' Medici was fascinated and asked his expert Plato-translator Marsilio Ficino (1433 - 1499) to look into the texts and promptly translate them, a work the latter terminated in a few months. Ficino too considered them as of extreme importance. The Latin version

of the Corpus Hermeticum was very influential, especially the first treatise, circulating in many copies before it was published in 1471. According to Ficino, Plato had been influenced by Hermes via Pythagoras (he was convinced that Hermes was a contemporary of Moses). For Ficino, these books were of a Divine origin. In them, Hermes claimed that every individual could be illuminated by the Divine Nous.

With Ficino's translation & comments, Hermeticism was born, i.e. a European, literary version of (a series of quasi-fictions about) the "way of Hermes", triggering Western esotericism, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Theosophy and the New Age movement, with its astrology, magic and alchemy. When Hermeticism began, nobody could read Egyptian and check whether this Greek revelation indeed contained important Ancient Egyptian components, such as the creation of the world by Divine speech, Self-creation (autogenes), the many deities and the One (the Sun). Nobody suspected that these texts were part of a Graeco-Egyptian initiatic mystery religion, which had a strong emphasis on native Egyptian materials and which had started in the native intellectual milieu of the Ptolemaic empire, to end as the multi-cultural Hermetic lodges of Alexandria, accepting Greeks, Egyptians and Jews alike. Until recently, it was accepted that Hermetism was a Greek phenomenon, and that its Egyptian setting was a literary framework with no bearing on the Greek subject (as one would play a Greek tragedy wearing Egyptian clothes).

With the decline of the organic & sympathetic mentality regarding the world, and the elimination of final causes in scientific thinking, a mechanization of thought ensued, which rejected the Hermetic postulate (so above as below) as retarded (material and efficient causes were deemed exclusive). When, mid-19th century, this literature and elitist practices returned on stage, Hermeticism had become part of the occult perspective on reality. Only recently, can the true meaning of Hermetism be appreciated and linked with its historical context, namely Egypt & Alexandria. The fact that Hermetism was an initiatic mystery religion being probably the most interesting discovery.



5.4 Crucial differences between Hermes and Christ.

In the Homiliae (XVI, 16) of ps.-Clement, Petrus affirms that the Father is unbegotten and the Son begotten, which is not the same as unbegotten or self-begotten. Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity is begotten from the Father, whereas Hermes is Autogenes, begotten by himself (cf. the Ancient Egyptian Sun god Atum-Re and Hellenistic individualism). Both Christ and Hermes do integrate humanity, the latter as the Greek "Idea tou anthropou", the Divine Nous personified as Hermes, and the former as the humanity of Christ as a deified nature. For what is deified in Christ (is not His Divine nature) but His human nature *assumed in its fullness* by the Divine Person of the Son of God. However, Hermes is his own creator, and as such detached from the Decad. This division in God between, on the one hand, unbegotten & begotten, and, on the other hand, self-begotten, is undone by making the Son begotten, and eliminating the independent status of the Divine mind or Logos within the Trinity.

Christ assumed the fullness of our human nature by incarnating in the human Jesus. The Word of God came down from the "third heaven" (the Ennead of Hermes) and took on moral flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Christ assimilated *the historical dimension of humanity* into His Divine Person, and this "kenosis" or Divine humiliation (the Son reduced to a slave without ceasing to be fully God) is the redemption brought. Before His resurrection, Jesus the Christ possessed in His humanity two poles : the perfect and Deified nature of His sin-free humanity, and the corruptible nature to which He kenotically submitted to free humanity of its own material nature, its sin and the humiliation of death.

Incarnation and kenosis are *the* crucial differences between the Judeo-Christian conception of God and the various Hellenistic noetic traditions. That God would become a man, be humiliated and die on the cross, was considered to be totally absurd (cf. Tertullian's "credo quia absurdum est"). Next to these stumbling-blocks, "creatio ex nihilo" is rather a minor issue (in the Greek concept, there is a necessary "pyramidal" continuity from the One to the many, whereas in the Judeo-Christian model, God has no need of creation, which is His gift).

With God's assumption of history (His Word becoming human flesh), a radically new theological perspective was born. The (hebdomadic) laws of the world would no longer have to be followed to outlive them (Judaism) or ogdoadically transcend them (Hermetism). With the incarnation of the Word of God, the Lawgiver Himself stepped into this sublunar world, proof of the immense love of God for humanity (made after and towards His image). The Enneadic Being had an ineffable descent, and become a man of sorrows (cf. Isaiah, 63:3), bringing the "Kingdom of the Father" to this world. The old laws of the world were abrogated by the incarnation of Christ in Jesus. This incarnation did not aim at a particular nation (Israel) or an elite (Gnosticism), for the Word of God incarnated and lived among us, so that the whole of humanity without distinction may be saved and baptized in the Name of Jesus the Christ, our Lord.

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