

HERMETICISM AND THE PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS

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The capture of Constantinople in 1453 allowed Greek culture – in particular the works of Plato, who was only known from various extracts – to penetrate Italy. Cosimo di Medici, the ruler of Florence, was aware of the importance of this event, and so he created the Platonic Academy of Florence and requested that Marsilio Ficino (1433 – 1499) translate Plato. An indefatigable traveler, Ficino would provide the West with its first translation of Plato, as well as translations of Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblicus, and Dionysius the Areopagite. Soon afterwards, an important development took place. The *Corpus Hermeticum*, often mentioned in the Middle Ages, had disappeared and the *Asclepius* was the only text still extant. Then, in 1460, a monk in the service of the Medicis obtained a manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Cosimo I considered the document to be so important that he asked Marsilio Ficino to interrupt his translation of Plato so as to work on the newly discovered material. Shortly thereafter, in 1471, Ficino published the first translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This edition garnered such a widespread readership that

it would be reprinted sixteen times until the sixteenth century.¹

Philosophia Perennis

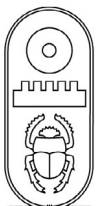
Marsilio Ficino was convinced that the original text of the *Corpus Hermeticum* had been written in Egyptian. Hermes Trismegistus was also described as an Egyptian priest who had originated and transmitted all of the secret wisdom. Marsilio Ficino, in his *Theologia Platonica*, published in 1482, devised a family tree of philosophers to whom this knowledge had descended from Hermes: Zoroaster, Orpheus, Aglaopheme, Pythagoras, Plato.² This vision gave birth to a new concept, that of the



A portrait of Marsilio Ficino, as seen in a fresco in the Santa Maria Novella Church in Florence, Italy.

Primordial Tradition, a primal revelation that was perpetuated from age to age, from initiate to initiate. This concept, previously endorsed by St. Augustine, experienced a renewal due to Ficino. It was formalized in 1540 by Agostino Steuco (1496–1549), in his concept of *Philosophia Perennis* – the eternal philosophy.

It is quite understandable that this concept of eternal philosophy would find such a favorable reception in Florence. It was claimed that after the Flood, Noah



had established twelve cities in Etruria (i.e., Tuscany), and a legend even claimed that his body was buried near Rome. From this arose the notion that the Tuscan dialect had its source in Etruscan, and was thus older and superior to Latin.³ Little effort was needed to connect Florence with the very sources of civilization – and even to the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum* – seeing that Hermes Trismegistus was claimed by some to be a contemporary of Noah. These ideas, debated fiercely within the Academy of Florence, were particularly cherished by Cosimo de Medici, who felt they provided proof of the superiority of Florence and Tuscany over the rest of Italy.

Natural Magic

Although the *Corpus Hermeticum* mentioned the secret knowledge of the Egyptians, it was rather imprecise concerning its implementation. In treatise thirteen of the *Corpus*, Hermes Trismegistus taught his son Tat the principles of mystical regeneration which could be obtained by suppressing the senses, in negating the ill-omened influences of the stars, and allowing the Divinity to be born in us.⁴ Marsilio Ficino was not only a priest but a physician; and thus, he had a sense of the concrete. He sought the application of these theories in Neoplatonism – primarily in the *Picatrix*, the works of Abu Ma'shar, and in the writings of his compatriot Peter of Abano (ca. 1250 – 1316), who had studied Arab magic.

Ficino arrived at a “natural magic” which linked these theories with the Christian

concept of the Creator's Word. His natural magic achieved considerable refinement. He made use of the sympathies – such as the planetary characters inscribed in all the elements, minerals, plants, as well as perfumes, wines, poetry, and music (Orphic hymns) to capture the *spiritus mundi*,⁵ the subtle energies of Creation. Marsilio Ficino is a prominent figure in the history of Western esotericism, not only for his role as translator and commentator on the ancient texts, but also for such works as *De Triplici*

Vita, which exerted great influence. As Antoine Faivre has remarked, thanks to Ficino “esotericism formed itself into a philosophy until being made an integral part of the thought of the Renaissance.”⁶



Peter Paul Ruben's Portrait of Cosimo de Medici.

Endnotes

1. Regarding Marsilio Ficino, see Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficin* (1433–1499) (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1958).
2. He sometimes gives a different hierarchy in which Moses either preceded or followed Hermes.
3. Alfredo Perifano, *L'Alchimie à cour de Côme Ier de Médicis, savoirs, culture et politique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), 144–150.
4. André-Jean Festugière, trans. *Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1983), 2: 200–207.
5. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 62–83; and Daniel-Pickering Walker, *La Magie spirituelle et angélique de Ficin à Campanella* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988). English edition: *Spiritual and Demonic Magic From Ficino to Campanella* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975).
6. *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidentale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 128. English edition: *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).