

An Excursion in Greek-Egyptian Hermetism

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1 Hermes Trismegistus

Most authors date Hermes Trismegistus around 4th century B.C. Although we can't be sure about a historical Hermes Trismegistus, the origins of the philosophical-religious trend called hermeticism are closely linked to the Greek-Egyptian syncretism of the gods Hermes and Thoth, as well as to a period of development and prosperity of Alexandria. P. A. Riffard dates Greek-Egyptian hermetism between 323 B.C. or the end of 3rd century B.C. and c. 300 A.D. [12]. A. Faivre, in [7] mentions that Alexandria, founded in 332 B.C., had known a rapid growth and became one of the most important cities in Antiquity. He characterizes hermetism as one of the four new, sometimes rival, religions between the 2nd and 4th century A.D. : hermetism, gnosticism, neoplatonism and Christianity, noting the fact that they shared important concepts.

The result of the above mentioned syncretism yields the mythical aura of Hermes Trismegistus. His first name, Hermes, is borrowed from the Greek god. The fundamental attributes of the Greek Hermes esoterically relate to the principle of transcending Duality to reach Unity. Thus, Hermes is a messenger god, both “horizontally”, between the figures of the Greek pantheon, and, more importantly, “vertically”, between man and divinity. Hermes is considered a psychopomp, guiding the soul of man in the afterlife, and, with a similar function, a god of travel and borders of any kind. The “folkloric” attributes of patronage over thieves and liars can be interpreted symbolically as a Promethean attitude, as well as, paradoxically, a secretive disposition of guarding mysteries from profane curiosity. In the same spirit, the foreword to the “Virgin of the World” from [4] asserts that: “Hermes, the Divine and the Confessor, was jokingly called by the Greeks the Thief (...). But in this manner they subtly hinted at his power and art of understanding and assimilating ideas”.

Protector of shepherds and herders in general, Hermes appears again as a guide, and also a spiritual one, if we relate to the first chapter of Corpus Hermeticum, titled “Poemandres”, which literally translates as “shepherd of men”. A patron of orators, poets, athletes and merchants, god of measurement and invention, Hermes seems to synergize dynamism and prudence, action and contemplation, will and knowledge. The foreword to the “Virgin of the World” from [4] enumerates the accessories of Hermes: “the staff, wings, sword and hat, denoting the magician’s science, the adventurer’s courage, the hero’s will and the adept’s discretion”. Card XII in the Mantegna Tarocchi deck is called Mercurio [6], and portrays, next to the god, the severed head of Argos, with the symbolic meaning of escaping the chains of Fate through hermetic knowledge, transcending the 12 houses of the Zodiac in the ascension under the sign of the Decad, or, finally, the triumph of Life over death.

Some attributes of Hermes are highlighted in the medieval allegorical writing “Marriage of Philology and Mercury” by Martianus Capella, in which Jupiter asserts that Mercury is “our lyre, our speech, our

Note on terminology. We call “hermetism” the Greek-Egyptian philosophy expressed in the works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, as well as influences in the early centuries A.D. We call “hermeticism” the influence of hermetism from Medieval Times up to this day.

Note on translations. Authors’ translations are:

- the citations from the foreword of “The Virgin of the World” [4] (Romanian)
- the citations from A. Faivre [7] (Romanian)

H. Corbin [5] cites from A. J. Festugière [3]. We preferred the English translation of G.R.S. Mead [1].

Note on freemasonry and hermetism (and also hermeticism). The section “Influences and correspondences” concisely presents a few *symbolic* connections between the Craft and the mythical figure of Hermes Trismegistus and his (attributed) work. Most research on the origins of freemasonry and the extrapolation of symbolism in masonic degrees through hermetic lenses has been fuelled more by “esoteric” enthusiasm, rather than rigorous historical and philological analysis. This problem has been highlighted, for example, in an article by R. A. Gilbert [8], where “pure Antient Masonry”, containing Craft Freemasonry and the Holy Royal Arch, is delimited from further elaborations, and some misinterpretations of masonic symbols by occult scholars are exposed.

kindness,/ and true genius”¹, but also an interpret of the human mind. In early Renaissance, G. Boccaccio mentions Mercury in “De genealogia deorum” as master of the wind (“*ventos agere Mercurii est*”), suggesting the power, flexibility and lucidity of the human Intellect. Finally, the name of Hermes is the etymological root of words such as “herma”, “hermetic” as in “hermetic seal” and “hermeneutics”.

The Egyptian homologue of Hermes, the ibis-headed god Thoth, is similarly represented as a mediator of and between gods, a judge of the dead and inventor of magic, writing (i.e. the hieroglyphs) and science.

Having reasonably well explained the first name of our protagonist, we shall now focus on the Greek epithet of “Trismegistus”, meaning “thrice great”. The foreword of [4] presents the opinion of the author of “Chronicon Alexandrinum” (47 A.D.), who believes that although Hermes teaches the unity of God, he also claims the existence of three supreme powers. This opinion is shared by Suidas, in his 10th century encyclopedia, “Suda”. The principle of this interpretation is that of trinity within unity, a fundamental idea spread in the most important religions, traditions and philosophies. In the Emerald Tablet (in Latin “Tabula Smaragdina”), the 12th (and last) point states: “Hence I am called Hermes Trismegist, having the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world”. The three parts are believed to be: alchemy, astrology and theurgy. We remind that, esoterically, the subject of alchemy is not an external operation, but an internal transmutation, and astrology is not interpreted as divination, but in a symbolic manner. Regarding theurgy, Faivre, in [7], defines it as: “the knowledge of a theory and practice that enables us to connect with the gods not only through the elevation of our intellect, but also by concrete rites and material objects that summon the divine influence when and where we desire, even allowing the vision of angelic entities”.

The comparison and influences between the god Mercury-Hermes-Thoth and the legendary Hermes Trismegistus are analyzed by A. Faivre in [6], chapter 3, “From Hermes-Mercury to Hermes Trismegistus: The Confluence of Myth and the Mythical”. Strabo, a writer/historian from Antiquity, considers Hermes the lawgiver of Egypt, teaching the Theban high priest philosophy and astronomy, and in the early Christian era, Church Father Saint Augustine mentions in “De civitate Dei” that Hermes Trismegistus is the grandson of the first Hermes (the god), invoking a quote from “Asclepius”: “3. For thy forebear, Asclepius, the first discoverer of medicine, to whom there is a temple hallowed on Libya’s Mount, hard by the shore of crocodiles, in which his cosmic man reposes, that is to say his body; for that the rest [of him], or better still, the whole (if that a man when wholly [plunged] in consciousness of life, be better), hath gone back home to heaven, still furnishing, [but] now by his divinity, the sick with all the remedies which he was wont in days gone by to give by art of medicine. 4. Hermes, which is the name of my forebear, whose home is in a place called after him, doth aid and guard all mortal [men] who come to him from every side”².

2 The Hermetic Opus

The hermetic literature is generally called “Hermetica”. In the restricted sense of the term, we will only focus the works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. According to Clement of Alexandria (“Strômates”, VI, 4), Hermes was the author of 42 treaties, 10 of which discuss religion, 6 medicine, 4 astrology and astronomy, 10 cosmography, geography and ritual. A. J. Festugière divides hermetic literature into “popular” and “savant” hermetism. The former includes works such as “Liber Hermetis”, “Kyranides” and the “Mithras Liturgy”. The latter is composed of “Corpus Hermeticum”, a collection of 17 treaties written in Greek. A. Faivre suggests that it represents the most famous hermetic work, which will leave an indelible mark on Western thought, together with “Asclepius” and “Fragments from Stobaeus”. In what follows we will only focus on this second kind of hermetic work.

Corpus Hermeticum was first accessible to the Western scholars due to Marsilio Ficino, one of the most important humanist philosophers of the Renaissance, who translated the text in Latin in 1463. There have been many other translations, we will only mention the French translation of A.J. Festugière [3], and the English one of G. R. S. Mead [1], which, although it is not the best (cf. its introduction), is however in public domain, thus freely available to anyone.

P. A. Riffard [12] promotes A. J. Festugière’s opinion that “Corpus Hermeticum” gives rise to two schools of thought: the first one, optimistic, and monistic, which sees the world as a good model and recommends man to contemplate it in order to reach Divinity (treaties V, VIII, IX), and the second one, pessimistic and dualistic, which sees the world as evil, created by the Demiurge, and not God, and from whose materialism we must detach in order to attain Unity (treaties I, IV, VI, VII, XIII). Faivre, in [7], advances a very similar idea: “The optimistic and pessimistic aspect, which share their inspiration from ‘Hermetica’, can be traced in modern hermeticism; an optimistic aspect in the sense that it is possible to unite with the divine through a mental representation of the universe and a pessimistic aspect due to the emphasis of the Fall on the current state of nature”.

¹ “*nam nostra ille fides, sermo, benignitas / ac verus genius. fida recursio / interpretesque menae mentis, o nous socer*”, cited in [6], Ch. I “Hermes in the Western Imagination, “The Metamorphoses of Hermes in the High Middle Ages”, p. 24.

²[1], The Perfect Sermon (The Asclepius), XXXVII,3-4

3 A Selection of Hermetic ideas

3.1 Corpus Hermeticum

We will focus on the first treaty of Corpus Hermeticum, titled “Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men” after the interlocutor of Hermes: “2. And I do say: Who art thou? He saith: I am Man-Shepherd, Mind of all-masterhood; I know what thou desirest and I’m with thee everywhere”³. The premise of the dialogue is the desire of Hermes to gain superior knowledge: “I long to learn the things that are, and comprehend their nature, and know God”, to which Poemandres answers: “Hold in thy mind all thou wouldst know, and I will teach thee”⁴. His answer can be interpreted as an urge towards introspection and ascension, such that man’s effort will be mirrored in the descent of divine knowledge, thus accessible to the initiate.

Poemandres narrates a cosmogony of the fundamental elements, and reveals his role in it: “That Light, He said, am I, thy God, Mind, prior to Moist Nature which appeared from Darkness; the Light-Word (Logos) [that appeared] from Mind is Son of God. (...) Know that what sees in thee and hears is the Lord’s Word (Logos); but Mind is Father-God. Not separate are they the one from other; just in their union [rather] is it Life consists”⁵. The “Son of God” represents the archetypal world, matrix of the future material creation. One could compare the Hermetic cosmogony with the biblical Genesis when considering the symbols of the Light (“*Fiat lux*”) and the Word (“*In principio erat verbum*”). The sublime connection between them is meant to be understood and realized by the divinely exalted Hermes. “Life” in this context means the manifestation of an immortal soul, free from the chains of Fate. In what follows, Nature “received the Word (Logos), and gazing on the Cosmos Beautiful did copy it, making herself into a cosmos, by means of her own elements and by the births of souls”⁶.

The creation of Man is also similar to the biblical version: “But All-Father Mind, being Life and Light, did bring forth Man co-equal to Himself, with whom He fell in love, as being His own child; for he was beautiful beyond compare, the Image of his Sire”⁷. Additionally, Man instantly becomes creator himself: “[Man] too wished to enform; and [so] assent was given him by the Father”⁸. Man’s nature is defined by duality: “And this is why beyond all creatures on the earth man is twofold; mortal because of body, but because of the essential Man immortal. Though deathless and possessed of sway o’er all, yet doth he suffer as a mortal doth, subject to Fate. Thus though above the Harmony, within the Harmony he hath become a slave. Though male-female, as from a Father male-female, and though he’s sleepless from a sleepless [Sire], yet is he overcome [by sleep]”⁹.

Material creation and its offspring are initially androgynous, and only afterwards split according to gender. Poemandres teaches Hermes the meaning of “*Nosce te ipsum*”: “he who knows himself, go unto Him”, and “if then thou learnest that thou art thyself of [paragraph continues] Life and Light, and that thou [only] happen’st to be out of them, thou shalt return again to Life”, such that “the man who hath Mind in him, let him learn to know that he himself [is deathless]”¹⁰. Not every man has Mind, but only the virtuous and the worthy. Finally, the ascension of Hermes entails passing through Seven Spheres, and in each of them defeating a characteristic Vice. Hermes concludes: “But I recorded in my heart Man-Shepherd’s benefaction, and with my every hope fulfilled more than rejoiced. For body’s sleep became the souls awakening, and closing of the eyes-true vision, pregnant with Good my silence, and the utterance of my word (logos) begetting of good things”¹¹.

3.2 Asclepius

The Greek original of the Hermetic text “The Perfect Sermon or The Asclepius” is lost, and only a Latin version has survived. The Hermetic discourse begins with presenting the principle of correspondence between unity and totality: “‘All’ is of ‘One’ or ‘One’ is ‘All’. So closely bound is each to other, that neither can be parted from its mate”¹². This idea, recalling the famous second part of the Emerald Tablet, is further expanded by Hermes in relation to the divine name(s): “Indeed, I have no hope that the Creator of the whole of Greatness, the Father and the Lord of all the things [that are], could ever have one name, even although it should be made up of a multitude – He who cannot be named, or rather He who can be called by every name. For He, indeed, is One and All; so that it needs must be that all things should be called by

³[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 2

⁴[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 3

⁵[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 6

⁶[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 8

⁷[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 12

⁸[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 13

⁹[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 15

¹⁰[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 21

¹¹[1], I Poemandres, the Shepherd of Men, 30

¹²[1], Asclepius, I, 1

the same name as His, or He Himself called by the names of all”¹³.

Notice the courage of the Trismegist in assigning a name to the divinity (“it needs must be that all things should be called by the same name as His”), refusing an agnostic and passive attitude. The whole text is written from an optimist perspective, one of the many possible examples being the description of the human condition: “man is a mighty wonder,-an animal meet for our worship and for our respect. For he doth pass into God’s Nature, as though himself were God. This genus [also] knows the genus of the daimons, as though man knew he had a [common] origin with them. He thinketh little of the part of human nature in him, from confidence in the divineness of [his] other part”¹⁴. Similarly, “[man] hath his place in the more blessed station of the Midst; so that he loves [all] those below himself, and in his turn is loved by those above”¹⁵.

Yet another hermetic idea is the opinion of Hermes on philosophy, a term whose meaning would perhaps be closer to what we understand now by theosophy: “For I will tell thee, as though it were prophetic-ly, that no one after us shall have the Single Love, the Love of wisdom-loving, which consists in Gnosis of Divinity alone,—[the practice of] perpetual contemplation and of holy piety. For that the many do confound philosophy with multifarious reasoning”¹⁶.

Finally, Asclepius also highlights the hermetic perspective on vice and virtue, in relation with man and his destiny. Regarding virtue, Hermes states that: “Now of that dual nature, – that is to say of man, – there is a chief capacity. [And that is] piety, which goodness follows after. [And] this [capacity] then, and then only, seems to be perfected, if it be fortified with virtue of despising all desires for alien things”. To avoid equivocation, we also cite the explanation that follows the cited text: “For alien from every part of kinship with the Gods are all things on the Earth, whatever are possessed from bodily desires, – to which we rightly give the name ‘possessions’, in that they are not born with us, but later on begin to be possessed by us; wherefore we call them by the name possessions”¹⁷.

Regarding evil and vice, although the World, i.e. the second God, is unborn, perfect, yet Matter “produces bad as well [as good]”¹⁸. Consequently, “God ought to have freed the World from bad in every way; for so much is it in the World, that it doth seem to be as though it were one of its limbs. This was foreseen by Highest God and [due] provision made, as much as ever could have been in reason made, then when He thought it proper to endow the minds of men with sense, and science and intelligence. For it is by these things alone whereby we stand above the rest of animals, that we are able to avoid the snares and crimes of ill”¹⁹. In another part of Asclepius, Hermes gives a warning: “when unknowingness and ignorance persist, all vicious things wax strong, and plague the soul with wounds incurable; so that, infected with them, and invitiated, it swells up, as though it were with poisons,-except for those who know the Discipline of souls and highest Cure of intellect”²⁰.

3.3 Fragments from Stobaeus

Our short presentation will focus on selected ideas from the treaty “The Virgin of the World” (*Kore Kosmou*), a title which recalls the role of Persephone in the Eleusinian mysteries. Isis, in her dialogue with Horus, describes divinity as “God the Monarch, the universal Orderer and Architect”²¹, emphasizing both the exoteric and esoteric knowledge of Hermes: “’Tis they who will, says Hermes, learn to know the secrets of my records all, and will make separation of them; and some they will keep for themselves, while those that are best suited for the benefit of mortal men, they will engrave on tablet and on obelisk”²².

Hermes appears also as a civilizing hero: “’Tis they alone who, taught by Hermes in God’s hidden codes, became the authors of the arts, and sciences, and all pursuits which men do practise, and givers of their laws. ’Tis they who, taught by Hermes that the things below have been disposed by God to be in sympathy with things above, established on the earth the sacred rites o’er which the mysteries in Heaven preside”²³.

4 Influences and correspondences

The influences of hermetism open a vast theme, yet most studies focus on the contribution of hermetism to the development of Western esoterism. A possible starting point are chapters I, II, VI from [6], and a popular book that analyzes Giordano Bruno from a Hermetic perspective is [15]. Furthermore, the interested reader

¹³[1], Asclepius, XX, 2

¹⁴[1], Asclepius, VI, 1

¹⁵[1], Asclepius, VI, 2

¹⁶[1], Asclepius, XII, 3

¹⁷[1], Asclepius, XII, 3

¹⁸[1], Asclepius, XV, 2

¹⁹[1], Asclepius, XVI, 1 and 2

²⁰[1], Asclepius, XXII, 1

²¹[1], I. Excerpts by Stobaeus, Excerpt XXV. The Virgin of the World, I, 36

²²[1], I. Excerpts by Stobaeus, Excerpt XXV. The Virgin of the World, I, 36

²³[1], I. Excerpts by Stobaeus, Excerpt XXV. The Virgin of the World, I, 36

will appreciate the contemporary literature of Greek-Egyptian hermetism: “The Chaldean oracles”, and the works of Apuleius of Madaura, among which the most famous is “The Golden Ass (or Metamorphoses)”. The influence of hermetism on esoteric and occult thought continued through the modern and contemporary era. Two well-known examples are the philosophic society “The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn” and the quasi-anonymous work “The Kybalion” [2]. In this article, we will focus only on two independent aspects: the “traditional” (i.e. symbolic) connection with Freemasonry and the similarities with the Zoroastrian concept of Xvarnah (The Light of Glory), and with the medieval narratives on the Holy Grail, based on the premise that the Hermetic ideas have been conserved in the Arabic world, and only afterwards they were discovered by the Western man.

4.1 Freemasonry

D. Merkur [11] mentions the Killwinning Manuscript containing the Old Charges, commented by D. Stevenson: “As to the origins of masonry/geometry, all the crafts in the world were founded by the sons of Lamech, who is mentioned in Genesis. Lamech’s eldest son, Jabal, founded geometry, but he and his brothers feared the wrath of God for their sins, and therefore wrote down their great discoveries on pillars of stone that could survive fire or flood. In due course the Great Flood came, but subsequently one of the pillars was discovered by ‘The great Hermarius’, a great grandson of Noah. This was Hermes Trismegistus, and from this pillar he taught the sciences to man”²⁴.

In A. G. Mackey’s encyclopedia [10], the entry on Hermes mentions that: “In all the old manuscript records which contain the Legend of the Craft, mention is made of Hermes as one of the founders of Masonry. Thus, in the ‘Grand Lodge, No. 1, MS.’, whose date is 1583 - and the statement is substantially and almost verbally the same in all the others - that ‘The great Hermarines that was Cubys sonne, the which Cubye was Semmes sonne, that was Noes sonne. This same Hermarines was afterwards called Hermes the father of Wysdome; he found one of the two pillars of stone, and found the science written therein, and he taught it to other men’”²⁵. Additionally, the first Hermes, the divine one, is distinguished from the second Hermes, the Trismegist, and A. G. Mackey states that the work of Hermes has influenced the hermetic rites and degrees, however without mentioning what these rites and degrees are. Some authors describe some degrees of the Memphis-Misraim rite as hermetic, but we are not able to properly justify this attribute. A. G. Mackey refers to the “hermetic art” as a predecessor/synonym for alchemy. Finally, the author suggests that operative masons could have found out about Hermes from the “Polycronycon” by Ranulf Higden, but since we have no historical expertise on this subject, we will classify this idea as a speculative one.

The fact that the Old Charges mention a character which seems to be Hermes the Trismegist does not, in our opinion, validate any opinion on the “origin” or even “continuity” of freemasonry in the Greek-Egyptian hermetism: A. G. Mackey talks about the “legend of the Craft”. The correspondences between hermetism and freemasonry are considered from a symbolic-ideational perspective. Keeping this in mind, Hermes is mentioned in the Fellowcraft degree (in AASR), a degree dedicated to the study of the “mstrs. of ntr. and scns.”, next to Mss., Ptgrs., Plt. and Prcss.

4.2 Zoroastrianism, Islam and the Holy Grail

H. Corbin [5] shows the correspondences between the Corpus Hermeticum, the Holy Grail, as presented in the romance “Parzival” of Wolfram von Eschenbach, Xvarnah, the Zoroastrian Light of Glory, and on the “oriental theosophy” of Sohrawardî, based on the Zoroastrian influence. His discourse is based on two independent works of research, the first of which compares the hermetic Crater with the Holy Grail, while the second one highlights the influences of the Xvarnah on the themes of the Holy Grail and chivalric orders. In this article, we will focus on two aspects which relate directly to hermetism, or, more precisely, to the Corpus Hermeticum: the Crater and the magnetic stone.

The premise of H. Corbin is that Hermes is to Sohrawardî the father of Wise Men and of the whole Wisdom. The author also mentions the similarities between the spiritual destinies of the mystic, whether he is called Zoroaster, Kay Khosraw or Hermes: descent into this world, forgetfulness (of his true origin), reception of a calling, the return, regeneration and apotheosis. H. Corbin proceeds to develop his argument based on the article “The Krater and the Grail” [9], which describes the three stages of transmission of the hermetic works, from the source to the German author of the Holy Grail novel. These are:

1. the conservation of the Greek documents in Syrian and Arabic literature
2. the perpetuation of the hermetic tradition in the medieval Islamic civilization, especially among the Sabians of Harran, who survived in Islam until the 11th century.

²⁴[14], Chapter 2, “The Medieval Contribution”, Section “Old Charges”, p. 20.

²⁵For an example closer to the historic source, cf. [13], Appendix A, “Transcript of a ‘Constitutional Roll’ or the Ancient Charges and History of Masonry”.

3. the transmission of the Greek-Arabic knowledge in the West.

D. Merkur, in [11], mentions, regarding the Sabians of Harran, that the main advocate of hermetism, Thabit ibn Ourra (836-901) established a “pagan” hermetic school in Bagdad.

Returning to H. Corbin’s work, the author describes the image of this “Urpazival”, an image which will blend with the concept of the hermetic Crater. The relevant cited fragment from Corpus Hermeticum is from the 4th part, entitled in Mead’s translation “The Cup or Monad”:

“Reason (Logos) indeed, O Tat, among all men hath He distributed, but Mind not yet; not that He grudgeth any, for grudging cometh not from Him, but hath its place below, within the souls of men who have no Mind.

Tat. Why then did God, O father, not on all bestow a share of Mind?

Her. He willed, my son, to have it set up in the midst for souls, just as it were a prize.

Tat. And where hath He had it set up?

Her. He tilled a mighty Cup with it, and sent it down, joining a Herald [to it], to whom He gave command to make this proclamation to the hearts of men:

Baptize thyself with this Cup’s baptism, what heart can do so, thou that hast faith thou canst ascend to Him that hath sent down the Cup, thou that dost know for what thou didst come into being!

As many then as understood the Herald’s tidings and doused themselves in Mind, became partakers in the Gnosis; and when they had ’received the Mind’ they were made ’perfect men’ ”²⁶.

At a linguistic level, it is suggested that the Greek term is translated in Latin as “crater” and “cratera”, and subsequently, as “gradale” and “graal”. H. Corbin reminds of the motif of the two cups, one of knowledge, and one of forgetfulness, encountered in the work of Macrobius and in the Gnostic opus “Pistis Sophia”. Another possible correspondence is the Crater constellation, the function of the Grail becoming that of a “vas mysticum”.

Another important symbol analyzed by the author appears at the end of “The Cup or Monad”, the “magnetic stone” (“magnētis lithos”): “And now, O Tat, God’s Image hath been sketched for thee, as far as it can be; and if thou wilt attentively dwell on it and observe it with thy heart’s eyes, believe me, son, thou’lt find the Path that leads above; nay, that Image shall become thy Guide itself, because the Sight [Divine] hath this peculiar [charm], it holdeth fast and draweth unto it those who succeed in opening their eyes, just as, they say, the magnet [draweth] iron”²⁷. Regarding the symbolism of the stone, the French historian recalls the stone in the orient of the Ka’ba temple, as well as the tradition of the sixth Imam, Ja’far Sâdiq (in the Shi’ite denomination), according to which the companion angel of Adam is not recognized by man immediately after the fall due to its mineral form. Once man opens his eyes, it becomes the cornerstone of the Spiritual Temple.

Finally, the American article cited by H. Corbin compares the idea of the soul being attracted to the Monad or Grail, with the Phoenix being drawn to the magnetic stone, and thus the purification and regeneration of the soul is symbolized by the death and rebirth through the fire of the Phoenix. The symbolism of the Phoenix is vast, recurrent in numerous mythologies and folkloric traditions, and the exoteric sense is always double by an esoteric one (e.g. in Michale Maier’s work, the Phoenix is used in alchemical metaphor).

5 Conclusions

The presentation of Greek-Egyptian hermetism in this article has an introductory and synthetic role. We intentionally emphasized aspects related to the mythical figure of Hermes Trismegistus and the works attributed to him, and from the many literary sources we have chosen to focus on Corpus Hermeticum.

Regarding the influences of hermetism, we abandoned the idea of a general characterization, selecting only two particular and independent themes: freemasonry and zoroastrianism/the legend of the Holy Grail. As future work, we set out to analyze more profoundly the indirect connections between hermetic ideas and the “morals and dogma” of freemasonry, using as a mediator the Western esoteric imagery, from Medieval times up to the modern era.

Another theme of research we would like to elaborate is that of the role of hermetism in its thriving period, as well as the relation with the other philosophical and religious currents in the first centuries A.D.

We conclude by reminding that the hermetic opus, in general, and Corpus Hermeticum, in particular, represent a testimony of philosophic and esoteric knowledge in Egypt, a privileged area which radiated vast beams of science and art during ancient times. Hermes Trismegistus is the legendary hero endowed with the plethora of human virtue, at the same time condemning vice and ignorance, thus guiding men of all epochs towards their betterment, in the spirit of the God denoted by his first name.

²⁶[1], IV The Cup or Monad, 3 and 4

²⁷[1], IV The Cup or Monad, 11

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