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The *Hermetica* are a body of theological-philosophical texts written in late antiquity, but believed during the Renaissance (when they became well known) to be much older. Their supposed author, a mythical figure called Hermes Trismegistus, was thought to be a contemporary of Moses. The Hermetic philosophy was regarded as an ancient theology, parallel to the revealed wisdom of the Bible, supporting biblical revelation and culminating in the philosophy of Plato, Plotinus and others in the Platonic tradition. This new translation is the only English version based on reliable texts of the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Latin *Asclepius*. Professor Copenhaver's introduction and notes provide a context of interpretation taking into account recent advances in Hermetic scholarship, making this accessible edition an indispensable resource to scholars in ancient philosophy and religion, early Christianity, Renaissance literature and history, the history of science, and the occultist tradition in which the *Hermetica* have become canonical texts.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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# HERMETICA

The Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Latin  
*Asclepius* in a new English translation, with  
notes and introduction

BRIAN P. COPENHAVER

*Provost, College of Letters and Science  
and Professor of History  
University of California, Los Angeles*



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Many bear the wand, but few become Bakchoi:

Frances Amelia Yates, 1899–1981

Daniel Pickering Walker, 1914–85

Charles Bernard Schmitt, 1933–86

## CONTENTS

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Preface	<i>page</i> xi
Introduction	xiii
Hor and Manetho	xiii
The world of the <i>Hermetica</i>	xvi
Technical and theoretical <i>Hermetica</i>	xxxii
Hermetic collections	xl
Hermes and his readers	xlv
A new English <i>Hermetica</i>	lix
Bibliography and abbreviations	lxii
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> I	1
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> II	8
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> III	13
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> IV	15
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> V	18
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> VI	21
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> VII	24
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> VIII	25
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> IX	27
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> X	30
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XI	37
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XII	43
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XIII	49
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XIV	55
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XVI	58
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XVII	62
<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i> XVIII	63
<i>Asclepius</i>	67
Notes	93
Indexes	261

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*  
in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## PREFACE

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For reasons explained at the end of the introduction, I began this book about ten years ago; I continued it because a number of friends and colleagues encouraged me to think that it would be useful. My first debt is to the late Charles Schmitt, who saw parts of the work in its earliest form and first put me in touch with Cambridge University Press. Others who have read the typescript in whole or in part – Michael Allen, Tony Grafton, Brian Murphy, Doug Parrott – have given me important advice and criticism for which I am most grateful. Librarians and other staff at Oakland University and the University of California, Riverside, have also been most helpful. Though I do not know the names of the three generous and perceptive readers who examined and corrected the typescript, I wish at least to thank their nameless *genii* for rescuing me from ignorance or imprudence in more cases than I can comfortably contemplate. My more public thanks go to Kevin Taylor and Jonathan Sinclair-Wilson, who handled the project for Cambridge with patience and skill. Patience, long-suffering patience, has also been the chief virtue of my wife, Kathleen, and my children, Gregory and Rebecca; while I was lost in the temples of Hermes. My son, in particular, may at last be convinced, when he sees the book in print, that it was others and not I who invented the myth of Hermes Trismegistus.

Riverside, California

Die festo Sancti Valentini, 1991

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Frontmatter[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

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### Hor and Manetho

A few miles west of the Nile and just below the tip of its delta lies the modern Sakkara, site of the necropolis of ancient Memphis, center of Lower Egypt from the days of the pharaohs through the time of Egypt's Roman conquerors. The sacred ibis, the graceful black and white bird in which the god Thoth showed himself, no longer visits the Nile at Memphis, but when the Ptolemies and their Roman successors drank from the holy river, the god's bird still came to its banks in great plenty. So huge were its flocks that those who wished to honor Thoth with mummies of his bird were able to prepare thousands of such offerings every year, thus proving their piety in a cult of the ibis, just as devotees of Osiris-Apis or Sarapis worshipped their god in the bull cult of the great Serapeion, the temple that dominated the landscape of Ptolemaic Memphis. Many gods dwelled in the precincts of the Serapeion: Isis of the hundred names, whose worship had already begun to spread from Egypt through the Mediterranean basin; Imhotep or Imouthes, a god of healing whom the Greeks called *Asklēpios*; and Thoth, god of the moon and messages and writing, *Hermēs* to the Greeks, and like Hermes the guide of dead souls.<sup>1</sup> In Sakkara, north of the Serapeion proper, archeologists have uncovered structures built for Thoth's ibis, a lunar bird of the night, and also for the hawk of Horus, a solar daytime bird. In these buildings attendants of the sacred birds hatched, reared, venerated and eventually mummified them for burial in urns. The number of birds buried in the galleries of "the house of rest of the ibis" has been reckoned at four million or more, implying that perhaps ten thousand

<sup>1</sup> On Thoth, see below, note on *C.H.* I. Title; notes to the introduction have been kept to a minimum, but notes to the texts contain fuller documentation with references keyed to the bibliography that follows the introduction; the bibliography explains abbreviations.



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

dead ibises were stacked in these corridors in each year of the four centuries when the Sakkara complex was active.

Shortly before the year 200 BCE, late in the reign of the fourth Ptolemy, called Philopator, began three decades and more of disorder in the ibis cult. Around the same time, in the district of Sebennytos north of Memphis, in the Damietta branch of the delta, a man named for the hawk god, Hor or Horus, was born. Hor's birthplace was probably called Pi-Thoth, *Hermopolis* in Greek, but this delta town was not the great Hermopolis that lay far to the south at modern Ashmounein, where Lower and Upper Egypt meet. For some years, well into the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor, Hor of Sebennytos stayed near home in Temenesi, the city of Isis, as a servant of that mighty goddess, but eventually, at some unknown date, he went south to Memphis and the ibis shrine in Sakkara. By 166 Hor's dreams had told him to follow Thoth and no other, perhaps as *katachos* or "recluse," a cloistered servant of the god. Earlier, while still in Isiospolis, he had stirred Thoth's anger by some unnamed complicity in a scandal involving the feeding of the ibises, but then, beginning in 174, reforms in Sakkara ended the long misuse of the sacred birds, which may have included fraudulent delivery of empty burial jars to those who had paid for their mummified contents. Hor dictated, or in some cases wrote, the Demotic ostraca or inscribed potsherds that record this reform. One of them contains the minutes of a meeting of the council of the ibis cult held on June 1, 172; this session related the history of the cult's decay and decided to arrest six "servants of the ibises" and jail them in stocks. The ostraca opens with this warning:

From the scribe of the nome of Sebennytos, Hor, son of Harendjotef. No man shall be able to lapse from a matter which concerns Thoth, the god in person who holds sway in the temple in Memphis, and likewise Harthoth within it. The benefit which is performed for the ibis, the soul of Thoth, *the three times great*, is made for the hawk also, the soul of Ptah . . . , the soul of Horus.<sup>2</sup>

Hor's title for Thoth is the Demotic equivalent of *megistou kai megistou theou megalou Hermou*, the Greek that he scratched on another ostrakon – two superlative forms of "great" followed by a positive form of the same word – and this phrase is the earliest surviving instance, whether in Egyptian or in Greek, of the triple form of the god's title.<sup>3</sup> Thus,

<sup>2</sup> This quotation (and all other material on Hor of Sebennytos) comes from Ray, *Archive*, pp. 14–20, 73–80, 117–24, 132–6, 149, 159–60; see also C.H. I. Title. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Greek and Latin (but not Egyptian, Coptic or Armenian) as well as modern languages are my own throughout the volume.

<sup>3</sup> C.H. I. Title.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Hor's words foreshadow the later Greek title *Trismegistos*, the name given to Hermes as author of the treatises translated here, the name that would signify a new way of sanctifying the heathen past for Christian scholars of the Renaissance, a name that still charms the learned in our own time.

Manetho was another native of Sebennetos. In a letter from a much later time but attributed to Manetho by the Byzantine George Syncellus and addressed to Ptolemy II Philadelphus (282–229), the Egyptian introduced his *Book of Sothis* and identified himself as “high priest and scribe of the sacred shrines of Egypt . . . dwelling at Heliopolis,” the city of Re. Of several works attributed to Manetho, the most important authentic survivals come from his *Aegyptiaca* or *History of Egypt*, written in Greek to impress the Hellenic world with the antiquity and authority of Egyptian culture. But Greco-Roman authors took little note of Manetho's annals, which are now preserved in excerpts and epitomes by Josephus and various Christian chronographers. Even before later Christian scholars made use of Manetho's history, it had been reworked, excised and otherwise distorted, so that by the time the universal chronicler Syncellus adapted it to his own purposes in the early ninth century, Manetho's work had already been through a complex process of selection and redaction. Although the remains of the *Aegyptiaca* are not reliable history, they impressed Josephus, Eusebius, Julius Africanus and other ancient students of the deeper past because they provided at least a skeleton of data on the passage of Egypt's dynasties over the millennia. Manetho wrote that his duties as priest and scribe gave him access to archival documents; whatever the truth of his claim, his work became authoritative for ancient and medieval users. Introducing the pseudonymous letter to Ptolemy, the monk Syncellus says that Manetho knew

stelae in the land of Seiria . . . inscribed in the sacred tongue in hieroglyphic letters by Thoth, the first Hermes, and translated after the flood from the sacred tongue into the Greek language . . . and set down in books by the son of Agathodaimon, the second Hermes, father of Tat, in the sanctuaries of the temples of Egypt; [Manetho] dedicated [them] to . . . Ptolemy . . . , writing thus: “. . . since you seek to know what will come to be in the cosmos, I shall present to you the sacred books that I have learned about, written by your ancestor, Hermes Trismegistus. . . .” This is what he says about the translation of the books written by the second Hermes.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, according to the records of a Byzantine monk, reading what he took to be reports made a thousand years earlier by an Egyptian priest,

<sup>4</sup> Waddell, *Manetho*, pp. vii–xxviii, 14–17, 208–11; Helck, *KP*; Laqueur, *PW* XIV/1; Adler, *Time*, pp. 1–14, 24–42, 55–71, 172–5; cf. Fowden, *EH*, pp. 29–31, 53–7, 214.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica*: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

there were two gods named Hermes. The first was Thoth, who originally carved the sacred writings on stelae in hieroglyphics. The second Hermes, named Trismegistus, was the son of Agathodaimon and the father of Tat; after the flood he transferred the carvings to books, which came to be translated from Egyptian to Greek.<sup>5</sup> Although the last Ptolemy, Cleopatra VII, was the first of her line who spoke Egyptian, her predecessor would surely have been pleased if indeed Manetho assured him that Greeks had access to revered deposits of ancient native wisdom. The mention of the flood by Syncellus was the sort of clue that would eventually permit Christians to fit the Hermetic ancient theology into their own doxographies and genealogies.

Writing his long treatise on the *Mysteries of Egypt* around 300 CE, the Neoplatonist Iamblichus noted that

the opinions found in the writings of the ancient scribes are many and diverse, as also those of the wise still living. . . [From] classifications differing from one to the other among the priests of old, Hermes has put everything together in his twenty thousand books (as Seleucus listed them) or thirty-six thousand five hundred and fifty-five (as Manetho tells it).<sup>6</sup>

The numbers of actual survivals from the earliest Hermetic literature, some conceivably as early as the fourth century BCE, are less imposing, something more than two dozen known titles of Greek works attributed to, or otherwise involving, one or more of the same Hermetic cast (Hermes Trismegistus, Agathodaimon, Asclepius, Ammon, Tat) that appears in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but dealing with a different subject matter – astrology, alchemy, magic and other beliefs and practices called “occult” in modern English speech.<sup>7</sup>

### The world of the *Hermetica*

It was in ancient Egypt that the *Hermetica* emerged, evolved and reached the state now visible in the individual treatises. But this was not the Egypt of the pharaohs. Nectanebo II, the last pharaoh of the last dynasty, had already fled the Persian armies of Artaxerxes III when Alexander came to Egypt in 332 to found a city in his own name west of the Nile's Canopic mouth. Greeks had been active in Egypt since the time of

<sup>5</sup> See notes on the titles of *C.H.* I, XI, XIII, XVI and the *Asclepius*; also *C.H.* II.1, IV.3, X.23.

<sup>6</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 8.1.260–1.

<sup>7</sup> Festugière, *HMP*, pp. 30–2; FR I, 89–308.

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Psammetichus I, who permitted the Milesians to plant a delta colony called Naucratis in the seventh century. When Alexander went to consult Amon's oracle at the Libyan oasis of Siwa, far to the west of Memphis, the attendant priest assured him that he was the god's son. An even more ambitious Egyptian story claimed a romance between Olympias (Alexander's mother) and Nectanebo himself. Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals, took control of Egypt in 323 when his master died, styling himself Ptolemy Soter (Savior) in 305. Twenty monarchs of his dynasty followed him over the next three centuries, until Cleopatra VII killed herself in 30 BCE. All his ruling male heirs were called Ptolemy, but the family also produced six queens named Cleopatra or Berenike. Once he took power in Egypt, Ptolemy I joined the long conflict to divide Alexander's empire. Egypt went to war five times with the Seleucids of western Asia before the end of the third century. By the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, who died of poisoning in 180, the reach of Egypt's external ambitions had shrunk to the island of Cyprus and the territory of Cyrene in North Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Egypt saw greater danger in 170 when Antiochus IV Epiphanes invaded, but in 168 Rome stopped the Seleucid king with an astounding gesture – Polybius called it “peremptory and exceedingly arrogant.” The historian tells us that when the Senate's ambassador found Antiochus, he took a stick, drew a circle round the great king and commanded him to decide to leave Egypt before crossing the line. Antiochus, having lived in Rome and gauged her might, complied. His exit verified a dream “of the safety of Alexandria and the journeyings of Antiochus” that Hor of Sebennytyos reported in that same year. As early as 273, Ptolemy II Philadelphus had already seen the point of good relations with Rome, and by the close of the third century the Romans were trading with Egypt and aiding her politically. After the dramatic intervention of 168, Rome had more power than the Ptolemies in their own land but saw no need to exercise it in this period of Egypt's political dormancy. Only when struggles of the first century in the West hastened the end of the Republic did Egypt again make serious trouble for Rome. Sulla installed the Ptolemy of his choice in 80, and in 49 Pompey became guardian of Ptolemy XIII, while his sister, Cleopatra VII, was dethroned. After Julius Caesar defeated Pompey at Pharsalus in 48, the victor went to Egypt. Finding his rival murdered by Egyptians, Caesar restored

<sup>8</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 22–9, 235–6; what follows in this section is taken primarily from Bowman's recent book and from Lewis, *Life*; from the many relevant works in the bibliography see also especially: Cumont, *Egypte*; Fraser, *Alexandria*; Fowden, *EH*; and Lewis, *Egypt*.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cleopatra and spent two months with her; she thought well enough of the great commander to name her baby Ptolemy Caesarion. Six years later began the queen's long liaison with another threat to the Julian family, Mark Antony, who fathered three of her children. Antony's Egyptian escapades made it easy for Octavian to smear him for debauchery in the decadent Orient, and in 31 Octavian's navy won at Actium, leading to the capture of Alexandria and the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra.<sup>9</sup>

Octavian became Augustus in 27 BCE, but he dated Egypt's official absorption into his empire from the year 30. For the next three centuries, Egypt's fortunes rose and fell with the rhythms of the Pax Romana. Remembering her part in the civil wars before his principate, the first emperor applied special administrative and military policies to keep Egypt on a tighter leash than other provinces. Although Rome suppressed and divided Egypt's political energies to make her a safe granary for the empire, the wealth and location of this richest of provinces always presented some level of risk. Nearby was rebellious Judea, where Nero sent Vespasian in 67 CE, before Vespasian emerged triumphant from the civil wars of 69; it was the Alexandrians who first named him emperor. Destruction came to the Alexandrian Jews in the revolt of 115–17, when news of a Messiah from Cyrene incited rebellion in the city and brought harsh reprisals from Rome. For the most part, however, imperial relations with Egypt were smoother. When Hadrian brought his lover Antinous to the Nile in 130–1, their idyll was shattered only by the young man's drowning, which moved the emperor to found the new city of Antinoopolis and to Egyptianize the decoration of his remarkable villa near Tivoli. Caracalla's trip in 215 was the most brutal of the imperial visitations. Alexandrian disloyalty fired his wrath, provoking him to harsh measures of massacre and exile in the city. By the late third century, Roman control in Egypt had weakened as Sassanian power threatened from Persia, tempting the Syrian rulers of Palmyra to move on Egypt and causing Aurelian to destroy their city in 273. Rebellions in the 290s required Diocletian to besiege Alexandria itself in 298, and in 302 he returned to the city – the last emperor to visit Egypt – before persecution of Christians began at Nicomedia in 303.<sup>10</sup>

Persecutions stopped with an edict of Galerius in 311, but he died soon after, and repression resumed briefly, until it ended for good after Constantine defeated Maxentius in 312. The new imperial religious

<sup>9</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 31–7; Polybius, *Histories* 29.27 cited in Lewis, *Life*, pp. 9–14.

<sup>10</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 41–6; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 30–1.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

policy, the foundation of Constantinople in 330 and other administrative measures ended the Roman era of Egypt's history and began her Byzantine period. Her future now looked to the East again, toward the new Rome, and her culture acquired a deeply Christian character. Paganism did not simply vanish, least of all among the more Hellenized Egyptians, but some scholars believe that most of the population became Christian before the end of the fourth century. Egyptian Christianity was a power in the world of late antiquity and the early middle ages, producing the social novelties of desert monasticism and the intellectual innovations of Alexandrian theology. In Egypt itself, Christianity was as mighty a force in secular affairs as in spiritual, and at its center stood the patriarch of Alexandria. Doctrinal controversies culminated in the Council of Chalcedon in 451, after which the Coptic church in Egypt stood for a Monophysite Christology while another line of patriarchs supported the contrary views approved at Chalcedon. The old enemy from Persia grew daring enough by 618 to capture Alexandria, retreating a decade later, but this was the final pause before Christian Egypt's catastrophe in 642, when the last troops of Byzantium abandoned the country to the new armies of Islam.<sup>11</sup>

Continuities of culture and politics unify the nearly ten centuries between Alexander's arrival and the departure of the Byzantines, but the Ptolemaic, Roman and Byzantine lords of Egypt each had their different ways of governing. The Ptolemies were regional but alien monarchs, who ruled through a small group of equally foreign officials, dividing the country into districts called *nomes* (*nomoi* in Greek) and constructing an administration that forced some degree of Hellenization – especially in language – on any Egyptian who wished to cope with the new rulers. As the power of the Ptolemies declined, distinctions between Greeks and Egyptians may have blurred a little, only to be sharpened and hardened by the more efficient Romans, who managed Egypt for the benefit of their empire. Rome kept the Ptolemaic *nomes* but deprived the district heads (*stratēgoi*) of military command and made them subordinate to a prefect appointed by the emperor. The Roman administration in Egypt was an unarmed civil service responsible solely to the emperor, who also controlled the separate military establishment. Unlike the Ptolemies, the Romans eventually allowed city councils and other institutions of Hellenic local government to develop in the towns, though they long forbade the honor of a *boulē* to the restive Alexandrians. The Byzantine emperors were less concerned than the Romans to distinguish

<sup>11</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 46–52.

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0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Egypt from other provinces by direct imperial control, and they also reformed the bureaucracy, though without due regard for the growing influence of the Christian church on secular affairs.<sup>12</sup>

Egypt's primary value to Roman and Byzantine emperors was economic. The Nile valley supplied as much as a third of Rome's grain, and Egypt was also a rich producer of grapes, olives, dates and other foods. Irrigation and other aids to agriculture improved under the Ptolemies, and the economy of Roman times would not be equalled in strength or complexity until the modern era. Under the Romans the population reached its peak in antiquity, numbering as many as eight million. Alexandria was the largest city by far, growing to perhaps half a million during the reign of Augustus; several dozen towns were a tenth the size or less, and hundreds of villages were much smaller. Centers like Oxyrhynchus or Hermopolis housed up to thirty thousand people. Alexandria and three other cities had special political status: Naucratis, Ptolemais and Antinoopolis. Residents of these cities were especially proud of their Hellenic constitutions, but Hellenism was the dominant cultural mode everywhere in Egypt except the countryside, as one can see from the Hellenization of language and literature.<sup>13</sup> Records written in Egyptian Demotic script are plentiful through early Roman times, rarer after the first century CE. No hieroglyphic inscription can be dated later than the end of the fourth century CE. Coptic emerged in the third century when the church found it still necessary to use an Egyptian dialect but wanted it written in modified Greek letters. Latin never had wide application outside the army and government. The many papyri that survive from Hellenistic times and later suggest that Greeks and Hellenizing Egyptians had access to the whole scope of Greek literature. Greek culture was rich enough in Roman Egypt to produce a scholar as learned as Athenaeus, a philosopher as profound as Plotinus and a theologian as subtle as Origen. Native Egyptian letters were still lively under the Ptolemies but soon took on Greek coloration. Roman xenophobia found a good target for its anxieties in Egypt, which became proverbial in Latin writing for opulence and degeneracy. Juvenal's abuse of Egyptian village religion in his fifteenth *Satire* is the most celebrated example of this aspect of Roman racism:

who does not know what monsters lunatic Egypt  
 Chooses to cherish? One part goes in for crocodile worship;  
 One bows down to the ibis that feeds upon serpents; elsewhere  
 A golden effigy shines, of a long-tailed holy monkey!

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–81; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 16–19, 36–7, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 13–19, 57, 141; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 15, 25–7, 107–16, 124–33.



Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

No respect from the Tiber for the Nile's holy bird, sacred to Thoth.<sup>14</sup>

Greeks first came to Egypt in large numbers with the Ptolemies, and the new lords of the land also welcomed the Jews, who had come back to Egypt as early as the sixth century. The prospects of Alexandria attracted some; others fled such perils as the Maccabean revolt in Judea. The Romans protected the Jews in the practice of their religion and granted them other privileges resented by Egyptians, especially in Alexandria. Romans applied the term "Egyptian" to everyone living in Egypt who was neither a Roman citizen nor an urban Greek or Jew – by Roman standards. Until the extension of Roman citizenship in 212 CE, various legal, social and economic benefits attended these categories and aggrieved the native population, many of whom, especially in the cities, prided themselves on their Greek heritage. The Roman administration enforced the odious distinctions, wishing to keep Egypt plump and paralyzed by making its people socially immobile and politically disorganized. Army veterans who were not Roman citizens could become so upon discharge, but the rules barred Egyptians from the military careers that opened this door. If a veteran cashed in his savings to buy land in a village, Egyptians could only despise his good luck and begrudge his immunity from taxation. Everyone wanted to be Roman or Greek in some sense, but the Romans scornfully treated everyone but themselves as subject to "Egyptian law" – whatever law was not Roman, in other words. They considered no one Greek who could not prove Greek parentage on both sides. The key to all prestige was Hellenism, to all power Roman citizenship, so it was natural that those who could claim any Greek identity or Roman rights would parade their status and annoy their neighbors. Romans mocked Egyptians for their incestuous marriages, without understanding how endogamy protected people from the risks of marrying outside the charmed circle of Hellenic birth and Roman nationality.<sup>15</sup>

Literary signs of Egyptian nativism emerged in the mid-third century BCE with the *Demotic Chronicle*, which tells nostalgic stories of better days when the pharaohs ruled. The *Potter's Oracle* also claimed a setting in pharaonic times, but it appeared in the late second century and again in the Roman period to make a darker apocalyptic promise: Alexandria, city of the hated aliens, will fall; ancient Memphis will be restored. The *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* voiced a different complaint, not so much

<sup>14</sup> Juvenal, *Satire* 15.1–4, trans. R. Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), p. 175; Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 129, 157–64; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 34–5, 59–62.

<sup>15</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 122–9; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 18–44, 186.



Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxii

Introduction

Egyptian as Hellenic and anti-Roman. The heroes of the Acts were Alexandrians, proud of their city, hostile to Jews and ready to confront the Roman emperor himself to insist on their rights as Hellenes. Through the first century CE, the Alexandrians who wanted to be Greek spent their rage mainly on the Jews, erupting in pogroms first in 38 and twice thereafter. But after Rome annihilated Alexandria's Jews in 115–17, the city turned its hatred toward the center of empire and kept it directed there through the next century – lending support to enemies of the emperor, proclaiming new pharaohs, gathering for public protests, starting riots and otherwise threatening the Roman order, and inviting the sort of revenge that Caracalla wreaked upon the city in 215.<sup>16</sup>

Greek and Roman imperialism naturally left its traces on religion, but – with the important exception of the Jewish persecutions – Egypt usually accommodated the beliefs of her alien residents, who in turn adapted their own to the Egyptian milieu. The following inscription from 238 BCE shows how Egyptians responded to the new realities while keeping their customs intact:

Since King Ptolemy . . . and Queen Berenike his sister and wife, the Benefactor Gods, constantly confer many great benefactions on the temples . . . and show constant care for Apis and Mnevis and all the other famous sacred animals . . . at great expense and outlay . . . be it resolved by the priests . . . to increase the honours . . . for King Ptolemy and Queen Berenike . . . and to their parents the Brother-sister Gods and to their grandparents the Saviour Gods, and be it resolved that the priests in all the temples . . . should also be called priests of the Benefactor Gods.

Throughout the post-pharaonic period, large temples continued to be built in the traditional style, decorated with images of Greek or Roman rulers whose appearance is entirely Egyptian and whose identity can be told only from the royal cartouche, the last example of which belonged to the Emperor Decius of the mid-third century. The survival of Egyptian religious forms is all the more impressive because they were so strange and (sometimes) repellent to others. Priesthood was a temporary civic function in the Hellenic world, but in Egypt priests formed a distinct hereditary group marked off from society by dress, behavior and occupation. Even odder were the many Egyptian gods, with bodies in human shape and heads of animals – inverted centaurs and satyrs.<sup>17</sup>

Greeks and Romans responded by finding Hellenic matches for the Egyptian deities – Thoth and Hermes, Imhotep and Asclepius, Zeus

<sup>16</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 30–1; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 196–207.

<sup>17</sup> Inscription cited in Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 168–70, 179; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 84, 91–2.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

and Amon, and so on – but the resulting combinations were more complex and mobile than a few simple pairings can suggest. Sometimes an Egyptian god appealed to foreigners with little adaptation; even in Rome when a patriot called for the demolition of the temple of Isis in 50 BCE, no workers could be found bold enough for the job. And sometimes syncretism was a political tool for the aliens, the most famous instance being the cult of Sarapis manufactured under Ptolemy I. Given the association of Osiris with death and rebirth, it was natural to suppose that the dying bull of Apis became Osiris, yielding the amalgamated Osarapis or Sarapis. Sculptors depicted Sarapis with the head of Zeus, which expressed Ptolemy's wish to show Egyptians how their beliefs could blend with the Greek. If the popularity of Sarapis is any sign, Ptolemy's new god struck the right chord. Emperor worship was another foreign religious custom as intelligible to the Egyptians as it was expedient for the Romans. More often than not, the religious usages of Egypt, Rome and Greece flowed easily into each other.<sup>18</sup>

Like Judaism, Christianity made exclusive claims on religious loyalty and thus became more truculent, but not at first in Egypt. Since the first Christians were Judeans, their gospel arrived quickly in the neighboring Nile region, where the large Jewish population of Alexandria could easily understand, and sometimes accept, the claims of the new covenant. Alexandrian Jews had been well prepared by the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, to read the Gospels and Epistles in Greek. Since Egyptians knew the resurrection myth of Osiris, they too might find certain features of Christianity intelligible. Gospel fragments survive in Egyptian papyri from around 100 CE, and direct literary evidence of Gnostic Christianity among laypersons remains from the third century. But the old religion did not simply disappear, even though paganism was in retreat by this time. Nor, on the other hand, did Egyptian pagans often attack Christians before the persecution of Decius in 249–51, and there was no official trouble from Rome before that time. Worried that Christianity might corrupt the loyalties of his armies, Decius caused many believers to be tortured and killed all over the empire – including Egypt, as shown by papyrus certificates probably meant to prove that suspect Christians were willing “to sacrifice and show piety to the gods.” Even after the epochal transition from the policies of Diocletian to those of Constantine, evidence of pagan belief survives plentifully from the fourth century, but Christian persecution of pagans had begun. In 385 a visiting Byzantine official prohibited

<sup>18</sup> Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 168–80; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 15, 87–94; Ferguson, *Religions*, p. 74.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

sacrifices and ordered the temples shut, but when the patriarch Theophilus tried six years later to make a temple into a church, he started a riot – which did not stop him from destroying the temple. By the early fifth century only southern districts still held out against the church, though some individuals still professed Hellenic paganism in the sixth century. The Christian theology that grew out of these conflicts was enriched by the fertile culture of Alexandria and shaped by Greek, Jewish and Iranian influences that found a home in Egypt. By the late second century, some of the Christian faithful had become hostile even to the claims of their co-religionists, which were as yet unrestrained by strong central institutions and still luxuriating in the hothouse of Mediterranean piety. One set of beliefs, eventually labelled “orthodox” by those who held them, challenged and eventually vanquished or at least displaced other views called “heretical” – Gnostic, Manichaean, Monophysite and many, many others.<sup>19</sup> In Egypt, in the midst of this cultural and spiritual turmoil, over the course of several centuries when the Ptolemies, the Romans and the Byzantines ruled the Nile valley, other persons unknown to us produced the writings that we call the *Hermetica*.

Far from Egypt, in the Danube region in 174 CE, occurred a celebrated incident that conveys the religious commotion of the period and tells us something about another set of sacred texts, the *Chaldaean Oracles*. That year, when Marcus Aurelius began his *Meditations*, was the eighth in the wars between the Danube tribes and the Stoic emperor. A Byzantine epitome of the historian Cassius Dio explains that after subduing the Marcomanni, the imperial armies confronted the Quadi, who trapped *Legio XII Fulminata* – the “Thunderstruck” – in a closed place that exposed the troops to parching sun. Miraculously, the thunder of a sudden cloudburst shook the barbarians, while the heaven-sent rain eased the Roman thirst. The Byzantine epitomizer denies that an Egyptian magician called Arnouphis brought the rain by praying to “the aerial Hermes,” claiming instead that it was his own God who heard the pleas of Christian soldiers in the Twelfth Legion. This famous episode interested many other writers, some of whom maintained that the emperor himself called down the rain. One version, preserved in a Byzantine lexicon, mentions

Ioulianos, Chaldaean and philosopher, father of the Ioulianos called *theourgos* . . . [who] wrote works on theurgy, ritual and verse oracles, as well as many . . .

<sup>19</sup> Papyrus certificate cited in Fox, *Pagans*, pp. 419–23, 450–62; Bowman, *Egypt*, pp. 190–8; Lewis, *Life*, pp. 100–2.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

other secret books on knowledge of this sort. . . . They say that once, when the Romans were exhausted by thirst, he made the dark clouds come together all at once and send forth a furious thunderstorm with continuous thunder and lightning, and that Ioulianos accomplished this by some kind of wisdom. But there are those who say that Arnouphis, the Egyptian philosopher, worked this wonder.<sup>20</sup>

This rival of Arnouphis, servant of Thoth, was the younger of two Julians, both called “Chaldaean.” The father was known simply as a philosopher, the son as a theurge; and it was the son who may have written or redacted the texts that we know in the obscure fragments entitled *Chaldaean Oracles*. Christian authors from Arnobius in the late third century through Synesius in the early fifth knew the *Oracles*, but it was Porphyry and later pagan Neoplatonists who most valued them; Plotinus alone of his school ignored them. Like other Greek oracles, their form is hexameter verse; their subject is philosophical theology and theurgic ritual. The point of the rites, which call a god down into a statue or into a human medium, is to help the human soul escape its bodily prison and rise up to divinity. The theology of the *Oracles* provides intellectual justification for these ritual prescriptions. In some particulars, especially the notion of First and Second Intellects, the Chaldaean system resembles that of Numenius of Apamea, a Neopythagorean of the second century. Porphyry wrote a lost commentary on the *Oracles*, and many of his followers through the Byzantine period and later shared his fascination with their involved doctrine. Except that it was conventional to attribute theological wisdom to one of the sacred peoples of the East, why the *Oracles* were called *Chaldaean* is unclear.<sup>21</sup>

The highest entities mentioned in the *Oracles* are a First Paternal Intellect, absolutely transcendent; a Second Demiurgic Intellect, who proceeds from the Father and knows the cosmos as well as himself; and, within the First Intellect, a female Power, called Hecate, who produces or is the World Soul. Hecate is a conduit for influences traveling between the intelligible and sensible realms. At the nether end of the All lies Matter, made by the Demiurge. The physical world is a foul tomb and a jail from which the higher human soul must escape, shedding the lower soul’s *ochēma* (“vehicle”) or *chitōn* (“garment”) acquired during its descent through the stars and planets. Ascetic conduct and correct ritual will free the soul from the astrological bonds of Fate and defend it against the demonic powers who fill the ontological space between

<sup>20</sup> *Suda I*. 433.4 (Adler II, pp. 641–2); Cook, *Zeus*, III, pp. 324–33; below, n. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Lewy, *Oracles*, pp. 3–13, 34–43, 60, 461–71, 487–96; Dodds, *Irrational*, pp. 283–99; (1961), pp. 694–701; Hadot (1978), pp. 703–19.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi

Introduction

gods and mortals.<sup>22</sup> In their theology and theurgy, the *Oracles* testify to the desire to hear the gods talk about themselves, a wish that still ran strong among pagan believers in the first Christian centuries. Late in the first century, Plutarch of Chaeroneia seems to have thought for a while that the old oracles had waned. But Ammonius, the Athenian Platonist who taught Plutarch and studied with Alexandrian philosophers, traveled to Delphi to quiz Apollo on his place in the divine hierarchies. A century later, when Plotinus died, his student Porphyry sent a questioner there to ask Apollo about the fate of his master's soul, and the god's reassuring reply showed a good grasp of Plotinian terminology. Oracles of theological content answering large questions about the soul and divinity came not just from Delphi but from Claros, Didyma and other sites across the eastern Mediterranean, where civic delegations and private persons traveled in the first three centuries of the new era to query the god and then return home to inscribe what they heard on public monuments. As of the early second century, over three hundred such civic inscriptions are to be found just from Claros; displays of religious curiosity so conspicuous and expensive were not the simple annals of the poor. Moreover, some of them show that Apollo had studied his philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

From Hellenistic times forward, the theologies of the eastern Mediterranean were complicated by the tangle of correspondences between the traditional Greek pantheon and the newfound gods of nations subjugated by Alexander and later conquerors. Even a simple cultic act without theological embroidery would require the worshipper to address the god and hence to know the correct divine names and titles. One response to this crisis of identity was syncretism, blending several gods into one; monotheism, henotheism or simply clarifying a lower god's relation to some higher deity might resolve the same problem. Deeper theological puzzles could evolve from simple ignorance of what to call a god in prayer or ritual. When a delegation from Oenoanda in southwest Asia Minor traveled north toward the coast at Claros in the second century, they seem to have had something profounder in mind than nomenclature, for this is part of what they had carved on an altar when they came home:

Self-born, untaught, motherless, unshakeable,  
 Giving place to no name, many-named, dwelling in fire,  
 Such is God: we are a portion of God, his angels.  
 This, then, to the questioners about God's nature  
 The god replied.

<sup>22</sup> Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, pp. 392–6.

<sup>23</sup> Fox, *Pagans*, pp. 168–209.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

That Lactantius and other Christians cited these lines is not surprising; such language (R.L. Fox calls the inscription “a burst of negative theology”) showed heathens making the case against polytheism. Neoplatonist pagans had similar impulses, which moved Porphyry in the late third century to collect related material in his *Philosophy from Oracles*. Whether or not this work of Porphyry’s reveals traces of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, the community of interest is clear enough. The triadic godhead of the *Oracles* seemed not only to reflect the metaphysics of Plato’s *Philebus* but also to foreshadow the hypostases of Plotinus as well as Augustine’s Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

A less likely triad – Kronos, Rhea and Zeus – in which the ancients read the same theological lessons appeared in another sacred text, the Rhapsodic *Theogony* or *Sacred Discourse in Twenty-Four Rhapsodies* attributed to Orpheus. It was mainly this theogonical literature that made the Neoplatonists regard Orpheus as the supreme theologian, but his renown was far more ancient. His origins were from outside Hellas, from Thrace and Scythia, where shamans practiced an ecstatic religion of soul-travel and attached their doctrines to the names of Orpheus and other mythic sages. Some of the myths of Orpheus, especially his journey to the underworld, suited the ecstasies of the shamans, and so it was his name that chiefly identified these ideas when they entered Ionia in the seventh or sixth century BCE. Also in the sixth century, Greeks heard from the East about cosmogonies that they called Orphic; these new myths said that the cosmos was born from an egg and that time was the god who engendered the world. These stories about the begetting of the gods and other accounts of the soul’s origin and destiny were attributed to Orpheus in the sixth and fifth centuries, after which time it was commonplace to connect him with theological material of the widest variety. Thus, while there is an Orphic literature comprising the many and diverse texts fathered on this mythic figure, there was no single Orphic dogma or Orphic cult. Pythagoreans – including perhaps the master himself – sometimes made Orpheus the author of their writings, and practitioners of Bacchic cults claimed him for their own. Euripides, Plato and other authors of the classical period knew him well, and their advertisement of Orphic materials assured his fame in later times.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For the inscription, see Fox, *Pagans*, pp. 169–71, also 195–8; Lewy, *Oracles*, pp. 7–11; Hadot (1978), pp. 711–14; Dodds (1961), pp. 694–7; Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp. 105–6, 132–3.

<sup>25</sup> Guthrie, *Orpheus*, pp. 69–70, 256–7; Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp. 132–3; West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 1–26, 68, 227–8, 259–60.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

One group that revered Orpheus lived in western Asia Minor in the second or third century CE. Their cult sang hymns by torchlight to a number of gods – mostly the usual Homeric figures – offering them fumigations and libations. One member of the sect may have written the eighty-seven *Orphic Hymns* that survive; they seem to be a coherent collection. Judged by the number (eight) of hymns given him, Dionysos was the god most honored in the cult. The hymns vary from thirty lines to six, most of them devoted to the god's names and attributes. The hopes that the hymns express are predictable: good health, economic success, peace and so on. Some of the terminology of the hymns shows that their author knew the language of the mysteries. Others who borrowed the name of Orpheus had different aims. Neopythagorean *Orphica* revived the literary habits of the first Pythagoreans, and Jewish students of Orpheus exploited his traditional association with Musaeus; they claimed that he was really Moses and that he was Orpheus' teacher – rather than the reverse. An *Orphic Testament*, probably of the first century BCE, makes Orpheus recant his polytheism and teach Musaeus about the one God. Alexandria produced syncretist *Orphica* in the next century. It was hard for any Hellenistic philosophical school or any religion of late antiquity to resist the versatile Orpheus. There were even *Orphica* dealing with astrology, alchemy, magical gems and other topics like those treated in the technical *Hermetica*.<sup>26</sup>

But the Orphic text that inspired Neoplatonic metaphysics and theology was the Rhapsodic Theogony. Damascius, last head of the Academy in the early sixth century, detected three separate Orphic theogonies, and subsequent scholarship has discovered three more, tracing the earliest to about 500 BCE. The “rhapsodies” were the twenty-four sections of the whole, numbered like Homeric books, and they told an incredibly intricate tale of theogony and mythology. In the form known to the Neoplatonists, the Rhapsodic Theogony seems to have circulated as early as the first century BCE. One example will illustrate what Plato's followers saw in this bizarre Orphic mythology, which was far more complex and contradictory than the account in Hesiod's *Theogony*. In its primeval state, according to the Orphic rhapsodist, the world had been made by a god called *Phanēs* (the Manifest) or *Prōtogenos* (Firstborn), but Zeus swallowed Phanes and then produced the world known to mankind. From a Neoplatonic perspective, the universe of Phanes corresponded to Plato's intelligible world of Ideas,

<sup>26</sup> Linforth, *Orpheus*, pp. 180–9; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, pp. 255–9; West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 1, 26–37; below, pp. xxxii–xl.



Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

while Zeus gave rise to a sensible cosmos of matter. From the time of Plutarch of Athens in the early fifth century through the period of Olympiodorus in the Alexandrian school of the later sixth century, the Neoplatonists returned time and again to the Orphic theogony. Proclus, who headed the Athenian Academy in the second half of the fifth century, was the most prolific interpreter of Orpheus among the Neoplatonists, and he may have learned his devotion to the *Orphica* from Iamblichus and Porphyry.<sup>27</sup>

Another source of divine wisdom with an equally long and complex pedigree survives in the twelve books of *Sibylline Oracles*, composed between the second century BCE and the seventh century CE and assembled toward the end of that period by a Byzantine editor. About half the material in the existing collection can be traced to Jewish communities in Egypt, other parts to Syria and Asia Minor. The prevailing theme is Jewish apocalyptic in a loosely pagan framework with some Christian interpolation. Like the Orphic *Rhapsodies* and *Chaldaean Oracles*, the *Sibylline Oracles* are poetic in form – hexameter verse – and their subject matter is the standard apocalyptic catalogue of public disasters, set in the context of universal history from Creation through Judgment to the Golden Age beyond. The Sibyl is a woman old enough to have watched the parade of war, flood, plague and famine from a primordial vantage point; like the biblical Isaiah or Jeremiah, she makes prophecy out of current events or recent history, but she authenticates her predictions by claiming to be a thousand years old. Her message is that idolatry and animal worship are doomed; the one God alone deserves worship. Her language is loose enough to satisfy many questioners. The third book of the *Sibylline Oracles* is one of the older parts of the collection, dating from the middle of the second century BCE. It may have been written in the Egyptian city of Leontopolis, north of Memphis, where Onias IV of the great family of Jewish high priests built a temple under Ptolemy VI Philometor. This third book speaks favorably of the Ptolemies, echoing the *Potter's Oracle* in the promise that “God will send a King from the Sun.”<sup>28</sup> The composite fourth book is a Jewish revision from the late first century CE of earlier Hellenistic material. It may come from Syria, while the fifth book takes us back to Leontopolis, where the Egyptian Jews of the early second century CE were no longer happy with their pagan neighbors. Book twelve is from the middle of

<sup>27</sup> Guthrie, *Orpheus*, pp. 72–6, 137–42; West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 68–75, 100–11, 138–9, 174–5, 203, 223–9, 246–64.

<sup>28</sup> *Sibylline Oracles* 3.635–56; Collins, *Oracles*, pp. 332, 355–6; Parke, *Sibyls*, pp. 1–15; Russell, *Jews*, pp. 36, 105; below, notes on *Asclep.* 24.



Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxx

Introduction

the third century CE, more likely from Alexandria than Leontopolis. In describing the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the Sibyl of book twelve predicts that “at his prayer he will shower rainwater out of season” – another memory of the rain-miracle attributed elsewhere to Julian, the Chaldaean theurge.<sup>29</sup>

Vergil may have been influenced by a Jewish Sibyl in his fourth *Eclogue*. He called it a “Cumaean poem,” but the vision of a Golden Age of peace when the lion will lie down with the lamb and a divine child will inaugurate a new era of justice contains much that is non-classical, though precise correspondences to the *Sibylline Oracles* are also lacking. In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Vergil has his hero seek out Apollo’s temple in Cumae to consult the Sibyl, who leads him down through Hades to the Elysian fields and Anchises, the hero’s father; paternal promises of hard-won glory for Aeneas and Rome reinforce the Sibyl’s predictions. Christian writers were naturally taken with Vergil’s messianic *Eclogue*, but the drama of Aeneas at Cumae left a larger mark on the greater world of letters in antiquity, where the Sibyl had long been a familiar figure. Her title was at first a person’s name, perhaps, and her style of prophecy appeared in northwestern Asia Minor toward the end of the seventh century BCE. Heraclitus left the first surviving text that mentions her, and the cities of Ionia knew of her sisters in archaic times, as did the Italian outpost of Cumae by the late sixth century. Modern archeology may have found her cave in that eerie place of power near Naples. A much older legend says that a Roman king, Tarquinius Superbus, bought prophetic books from a Sibyl, and Varro linked this story with the oracle of Cumae. From early times the Romans seem actually to have kept a set of Greek verse oracles on the Capitoline. Until the temple of Jupiter that housed them perished in 83 BCE, the Sibylline books instructed the Romans many times (about fifty known instances) after the early fifth century. When some public catastrophe or weird phenomenon warned that the gods were unhappy, the Senate directed the guardians of the books to consult them, and the usual advice was to build a temple or institute a new rite – measures seldom as terrible as the practice of burying alive two Gauls and two Greeks, first noted in 228. So valued were the books that the Republic appointed a commission to search for replacements a few years after the temple of Jupiter was destroyed. Augustus and his successors also respected them, at least as a source of propaganda, but controlled them closely.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Sibylline Oracles* 12.187–205; Collins, *Oracles*, pp. 380–3, 390, 443; Bartlett, *Jews*, pp. 39–41; above, n. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Vergil, *Eclogue* 4.4; Parke, *Sibyls*, pp. 14, 51–64, 72–93, 137–47, 190–212.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver  
Frontmatter[More information](#)

The most important work of Greek literature showing Sibylline influence was the *Alexandra* written in the early third century BCE in Alexandria by Lycophron, who transformed Homer's Cassandra into a Sibyl and made her rave in muddled fury. But fine literature for leisured readers was not the main medium of Sibylline prophecy; the professionals who collected the oracles for ready dissemination and explication among broader social circles had the special name of *chrēmologoi* or "oracle-mongers." We know that the *Sibylline Oracles* were in Rome by the later first century BCE because Alexander Polyhistor used the third book for the biblical story of the Tower of Babel in his *Chaldaean History*. Vergil wrote his fourth *Eclogue* around 40 BCE. Early Christian authors after Hermas in the middle of the second century were well acquainted with Vergil's Sibyl and with others. Clement of Alexandria saw them as useful pagans, but Tertullian found no good in them. By the late second century, however, some Christians put as much trust in the Sibyls as in biblical prophets. Theophilus was the first Christian to make extensive use of the *Sibylline Oracles*, especially book three, but their chief Christian advocate was also the main champion of the *Hermetica* among Christians – Lactantius. His *Divine Institutes* contains hundreds of brief quotations from six books of the *Sibylline Oracles*, and he transmitted to the middle ages the names of the ten Sibyls in their traditional configuration. Eusebius recorded a speech of the Emperor Constantine that describes the judgment day by way of the eighth book of the *Sibylline Oracles*, but, unlike Lactantius and other church Fathers, the emperor treated the Sibyl more as a pagan priestess than a biblical prophet.<sup>31</sup> Having read Lactantius' account of the Sibylline prophecies, Augustine eventually admitted the Cumaeon, Erythraean and other Sibyls to the heavenly city, but elsewhere he expressed his doubts:

The Sibyl or Sibyls, Orpheus, some Hermes or other, and various seers, divines, sages or philosophers of the gentiles are reputed to have told or foretold the truth about the Son of God or God the Father. In fact, this somewhat serves to refute the foolishness of the pagans, not to embrace their authority, since we show ourselves worshipping that God about whom they cannot stay silent, daring in some cases to teach their kindred peoples to worship idols and demons, in other cases not daring to prohibit them.<sup>32</sup>

In Augustine's eyes, the Sibyl was no fit companion for a Christian as long as she kept company with Orpheus and Hermes – though ten Sibyls

<sup>31</sup> Parke, *Sibyls*, pp. 16–18, 144–5, 152–67.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Against Faustus* 13.1, 2, 15, 17 (Migne, *PL* 42: 281–2, 290, 292); *City of God* 18.23; both are cited in Parke, *Sibyls*, pp. 169–70.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica*: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxxii

Introduction

would later surround the great image of Hermes carved in the pavement of the cathedral of Siena in 1488 by Giovanni di Stefano and also accompany the prophets on Michelangelo's ceiling of 1512. One reason for Augustine's ambivalence about the Sibyl was that Lactantius and others had linked her books with *Orphica*, *Hermetica* and *Chaldaean Oracles* which condoned the magical practices that Augustine thought to be the snares of demons. Augustine was right to worry about magic in the *Hermetica*, though – with a few important exceptions – he would not have found it in the theoretical *Hermetica* translated here.

### Technical and theoretical *Hermetica*

Two modern experts on the *Hermetica*, Walter Scott and André-Jean Festugière, distinguished the “popular” occultist writings attributed to Hermes from the “learned” or “philosophical” treatises translated in this volume. Critics have questioned the meaning and historicity of their categories – would they have been recognized, for example, by an author of a work of either sort? – and Garth Fowden has argued persuasively that all the *Hermetica*, whether practical or theoretical, magical or philosophical, can be understood as responses to the same milieu, the very complex Greco-Egyptian culture of Ptolemaic, Roman and early Christian times.<sup>33</sup> With regard to origins and interrelations, the claim that both types of *Hermetica* come from a common environment rings true, yet two other facts also bear consideration: first, that the seventeen Greek treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* came to be treated as a distinct body of writing, though perhaps for no better reason than the accidents of textual transmission or the prejudices of Byzantine compilers; and second, that these seventeen Greek *logoi* are not much concerned with astrology, very little with magic and not at all with alchemy. They deal instead with theological or, in some loose sense, philosophical issues: they reveal to man knowledge of the origins, nature and moral properties of divine, human and material being so that man can use this knowledge to save himself. The same pious philosophy or philosophical piety – a blend of theology, cosmogony, anthropogony, ethics, soteriology and eschatology – also characterizes the Latin *Asclepius*, the forty Hermetic texts and fragments collected in the *Anthology* of Stobaeus, the three *Hermetica* found with the *Nag Hammadi Codices*, the Armenian

<sup>33</sup> Scott I, 1–2; Festugière, *HMP*, p. 30; FR II, 1–2; Mahé, *Hermès* II, 21–2; Fowden, *EH*, pp. 1–4, 140–1, 161–213.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Definitions* and the Vienna fragments. Although traces of occult belief, astrology especially, are evident in many of these works, even dominant in three or four not translated here, their central philosophical and theological concerns do, in fact, distinguish them from what Father Festugière called “popular Hermetism.”<sup>34</sup>

Around 200 CE the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria knew of “forty-two books of Hermes” considered indispensable for the rituals of Egyptian priests; the list, four of whose items he calls “the astrological books of Hermes,” somewhat resembles a description of sacred writings inscribed in the second century BCE on the wall of an Egyptian temple in Edfu.<sup>35</sup> Clement’s report accords with our fragmentary knowledge of the Greco-Egyptian astrology that began to develop as early as the third century BCE. Although it was a Greek work of the third or second century BCE, composed perhaps in Alexandria and dealing with configurations of stars regarded as divinities, the title and other features of the *Salmeschiniaka* hint of Babylonian origins, though nothing proves such a connection. In the middle of the second century BCE, the unknown author of an astrology manual fathered his work on a pharaoh who ruled five centuries earlier, Nechepso, and on the high priest Petosiris, who reputedly took his revelation from Hermes and may correspond to an historical figure of the fourth century. The fragments of the handbook bearing the names of Nechepso and Petosiris survive mainly in the *Anthology* of Vettius Valens, a Roman astrologer who wrote in Greek in the second century CE. The most important of the astrological *Hermetica* known to us is the *Liber Hermetis*, a Latin text whose Greek original contained elements traceable to the third century BCE. This *Book of Hermes* describes the decans, a peculiarly Egyptian way of dividing the zodiacal circle into thirty-six compartments, each with its own complex of astrological attributes. Some Hermetic texts were tight in their focus, applying astrological theory to special circumstances: a *Brontologion* analyzed the significance of thunder as it was heard in various months, and a treatise *Peri seismōn* related earthquakes to astrological signs. Of broader use were the *Iatromathēmatika* or tracts on astrological medicine, such as the *Book of Asclepius Called Myriogenesis* which discussed medical consequences of the theory of correspondence between human microcosm and universal macrocosm. Astrological

<sup>34</sup> Festugière, *HMP*, pp. 50–69; Mahé, *Hermès* II, 22; for the *Excerpts* of Stobaeus, see NF III–IV; for the Nag Hammadi *Hermetica*, see Parrott, *NHC* VI, pp. 1–7, 341–51, and Robinson, *Library*, pp. 321–38; for the Armenian *Definitions*, see Mahé, *Hermès* II, pp. 320–406; and for the Vienna fragments, see Mahé (1984).

<sup>35</sup> Clement, *Miscellanies* 6.4; Fowden, *EH*, pp. 57–9.

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0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

botany and mineralogy were also favored topics. The *Holy Book of Hermes to Asclepius* based its botanical prescriptions on relations between plants and decans, while the *Fifteen Stars, Stones, Plants and Images* singled out particular stars as determinants of pharmaceutical power.<sup>36</sup>

Another kind of occult wisdom attractive to early Hermetic authors was alchemy, which made its first literary mark on Egypt after 200 BCE in the writings of Bolos Democritus of Mendes; the vestiges of his work show that Bolos described processes involving gold, silver, gems, dyes and other substances that became the main ingredients of the alchemical work. After Bolos but before the Christian era, a number of alchemical treatises began to appear under the names of Hermes, Agathodaimon, Isis and others. The latest of these alchemical apocrypha date from the second or third century CE, and today we know them only as fragments – no more than thirty or so – from later alchemical treatises that mention either Hermes or another Hermetic figure. One of the larger remains of this literature, the *Anepigraphos* (“*Untitled*”), cites the authority of Hermes and Agathodaimon for an allegory on the making of silver, called “the moon,” by cooking and melting various substances. In another, entitled *Isis the Prophetess to her Son Horus*, the angel Amnael reveals the alchemical mystery: that just as wheat engenders wheat or man begets man so gold breeds gold. These alchemical *Hermetica* were known to Zosimus, a native of Panopolis who lived in Alexandria around 300 CE. Zosimus has greatly interested students of the *Corpus Hermeticum* because he mingled Hermetic theosophy with the alchemist’s pragmatic aims and left at least two works that shed light on the larger Hermetic project, especially on the kinship between the “popular” and “learned” treatises.<sup>37</sup>

The prologue of the first book of the collection called *Kuranides* says that “the god Hermes Trismegistus received this book from the angels as god’s greatest gift and passed it on to all men fit to receive secrets (*mustika*).” The book also claims to be a compilation from two others by Kuranos, which may be a version of the Persian name Cyrus, and by Harpocraton, an otherwise unknown author of late imperial times (not the rhetorician, Valerius Harpocraton); the same work refers internally to an *Archaikos Biblos*, an *Old-Time Book*, probably an early bestiary. This first of the six surviving *Kuranides* has twenty-four chap-

<sup>36</sup> Festugière, *HMP*, pp. 30–1; FR I, 89–186; Fraser, *Alexandria*, I, pp. 435–9; Tester, *Astrology*, pp. 21–2; W. Gundel, *Texte*; idem, *Dekane*; Fowden, *EH*, pp. 91–5.

<sup>37</sup> Festugière, *HMP*, pp. 30–2; FR I, 217–82; Fowden, *EH*, pp. 89–91, 120–6; Wellman (1928), pp. 1–6; cf. Fraser, *Alexandria*, I, pp. 440–4; also: Multhaus, *Chemistry*, pp. 82–5, 92–116; Forbes, *Technology*, I, pp. 131–42; Jackson, *Zosimos*; *C.H.* I.15.

Cambridge University Press

0521425433 - *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* - Brian P. Copenhaver

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ters, one each for the letter of the Greek alphabet that begins the names of the plant, bird, fish and stone treated in the chapter. The second *Kuranis* has forty-seven alphabetized chapters on quadrupeds and their medical properties; the four others handle birds, fish, plants and stones in the same way. Manuscripts of all but the last two books carry ascriptions to Hermes Trismegistus, but philology has traced them to the same Bolos Democritus who was a fountainhead of alchemical wisdom. If Bolos was their progenitor, the *Kuranides* represent the largest survival in Greek of a literature initiated by him that treated a wide range of natural phenomena and emphasized their medical and magical uses.<sup>38</sup>

Healing and magic were also prominent aims of another large body of texts that often refer to Hermes and his retinue, the Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri. The documents that scholars have included in this category cover a considerable span of time, from the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, and their contents are mainly spells of practical intent, meant to conjure a god or demon, bring a vision or a dream, foretell the future, attain invisibility, compel a lover, thwart an enemy, catch a thief, ease the pain of gout or drive insects from a house. The people who wrote the papyri had hundreds of reasons for needing a magic spell and scores of gods and spirits to call upon. Hermes, naturally, was one of them, as for example in *PGM* VII.919–24:

Hermes' wondrous victory charm which you are to keep in your sandals: Take a tablet gold like the sun and inscribe on it with a bronze stylus and put it on whatever you want and see what it does on a boat, on a horse, and you will be amazed. These are the characters: [magic symbols, then] THOOUTH, give victory, strength, influence to the wearer.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the papyri are less pedestrian in their ambitions and more imaginative in their décor; *PGM* V.370–446, provides the following recipe:

Take 28 leaves from a pithy laurel tree and some virgin earth and seed of wormwood, wheat meal and the herb calf's snout . . . pounded together with . . . the liquid of an ibis egg and made into a uniform dough and into a figure of Hermes wearing a mantle, while the moon is ascending. . . . Let Hermes be holding a herald's staff. And write the spell on hieratic papyrus or on a goose's windpipe . . . and insert it into the figure for . . . inspiration (*enpneumatōsis*). . . . [Put the spell] at the feet of Hermes . . . and recite as on the altar you burn incense.

<sup>38</sup> Kamaikis, *Kyraniden*, pp. 1–5, 14–21, 112, 188, 244, 300, 309; Festugière, *HMP*, p. 32; FR I, 187–216; Fowden, *EH*, pp. 87–9; Wellman, *Koiraniden*; above, n. 37.

<sup>39</sup> Betz, *Papyri*, pp. xi–xxii, xli–lviii, 142; Festugière, *HMP*, pp. 31–2; FR I, 283–308; Fowden, *EH*, pp. 168–73.