

# ANCIENT MAGIC: A SURVEY OF THE TECHNICAL HERMETICA

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**L**ess well known than the *Philosophical Hermetica* of the [Corpus Hermeticum](#), a large number of ancient technical or practical volumes on magic, alchemy, astrology, and a host of other subjects are also part of the Hermetic legacy. In this survey, Professor Kristin Pfanku introduces readers to the technical Hermetica and its wide array of themes. At first, these texts seem very different from the sublime mysticism of the *Philosophical Hermetica*, however, modern scholarship indicates that both are part of a consistent whole, the Hermetic transmission of the wisdom of ancient Egypt. The technical Hermetica begin here below and ascend, while the *Philosophical Hermetica* complete the journey above. As the *Emerald Tablet of Hermes* teaches, “As above, so below, and as below, so above, to accomplish the marvels of the One Work.”



Erect and dignified, the ancient Egyptian stands, swathed in a simple cloak, with shining armband and bracelet, scepter in his right hand. In front of him, smoke from an incense burner wafts upward from a small table. A shooting star, the astrological sign for Mercury, and the letter “A” gleam in the background. This ancient Egyptian is The Magus, represented on the first of twenty-two cards of the Tarot’s Major Arcana, part of an early Rosicrucian publication, which blends traditional Tarot themes with Egyptian symbolism.<sup>1</sup>

The Magus. The Magician. The one who uses secret knowledge of forces in the natural and divine worlds to perform miracles. Although Egyptian magic gradually changed

as the Greeks and Romans influenced it more than two thousand years ago, magic was still very much alive in Greco-Roman Egypt, where the technical Hermetica were created.

This ancient sense of magic can be seen in these technical Hermetica, the textual counterparts of the philosophical Hermetica. Focusing primarily on esoteric magic, astrology, and the alchemy of the last century BCE to the third century CE, these works build on Aristotle’s objective investigation and classification of phenomena, but mingled with this is a belief in universal forces that can be advantageous once one knows the esoteric, magical knowledge. The technical Hermetica show the human will and ability to penetrate and make use of the secret, hidden powers of the natural and divine worlds.



The Magus of the Egyptian Tarot. From the Rosicrucian Archives.



Egyptian Scribe Set (New Kingdom, 1549–1069 BCE). Since Thoth/Hermes was the patron of scribes, it is natural that the scribe's tools of ink and papyrus would have magical applications. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

### The *Greek Magical Papyri*

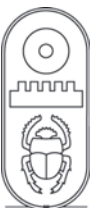
The *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM), a collection of hundreds of spells, formulae, rituals, and hymns, show the diverse uses for magic in late antiquity. The papyri, which contain material from Greco-Roman Egypt of the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, represent an eclectic blend of traditions and were created to control what the ancients saw as the “unfathomable scramble of energies coming out of the universe.”<sup>2</sup> The magicians using these spells functioned as “crisis managers”<sup>3</sup> who, with their handbooks of magic and code words, could persuade people that the magicians could make things work in a world where nothing seemed to work the way it used to.<sup>4</sup>

This catalog of spells spans nearly every situation imaginable. The spells relate to everyday life (catching a thief, keeping bugs out of the house, healing a scorpion sting), social relationships (gaining favor with another, going before a superior, getting friends), romance (attracting a lover, binding a lover, separating a man from a woman), and other miscellaneous desires (invoking a daemon or deity, bringing a vision or dream,

foretelling the future, attaining invisibility). Those using the spells had a multiplicity of spirits and deities to invoke. Moreover, the beauty of magic was its offering an extraordinary number of options to its practitioners.

The spells call for specific ingredients and actions to be followed very precisely. In PGM 1.232–47, for example (a memory spell), the one performing the ritual must take “hieratic papyrus” and write the “prescribed names” with Hermaic ink.<sup>5</sup> The names must then be washed off into spring water from seven springs. This water had to be drunk on an empty stomach for seven days while the Moon was in the east. Then five lines of specified text had to be written on a strip of papyrus, washed off, and drunk. The ink had to be composed of six specific ingredients, which were burned together.<sup>6</sup> The magical power of the names was produced after they were washed off and consumed.<sup>7</sup>

The *Greek Magical Papyri* promised their readers and users magical methods of controlling the natural and divine worlds for concrete, short-term purposes. Still, some of the *Greek Magical Papyri* move beyond



the mundane realm. PGM 4.475–829, for example, starts by requiring herb and spice juices and addresses the forces of earth, air, water, and fire with mystical noises. But the invocation asks for “immortal birth. . . to my underlying nature, so that. . . I may gaze upon the immortal.”<sup>8</sup> The initiate seeks divine rebirth through magical techniques.

Although many classical scholars have denigrated the magical Hermetic texts as merely superstitious, others see them as a collection of great religious literature.<sup>9</sup> The *Greek Magical Papyri* represent a broad range of religions and cultures, including Greek and Jewish, with an especially strong influence from Egyptian religion. They also reveal significant insights as to how Jews, Christians, and pagans perceived their world.<sup>10</sup> Magic strongly influenced the educated population in Hellenistic and Roman society as well as the less educated.<sup>11</sup>

### *Cyranides*: The Forces of Nature

*Cyranides*, another of the technical Hermetic texts, illustrates the secret forces

of nature and how they can be learned and magically used to ensure success, protection, and healing. A compilation from several earlier treatises, *Cyranides* dates to the first or second century CE (though a large portion goes back to the Hellenistic period from the fourth century BCE forward).

Book 1 (of six surviving books) of *Cyranides* uses the magical characteristics of animals, plants, birds, stones, and fish, which represent the four elements of nature: earth, air, water, and fire. With all four elements used in concert, the magical power of the remedy was strengthened. Further, the names of the bird, plant, stone, and fish all begin with the same letter and in some cases are homonyms, which, for the ancients, increased the curative power even further, since the word held the essence of the object it described. At the close of each chapter, directions for creating an amulet are given (a stone engraved with the animal, plant, stone, and fish for that chapter) as well as instructions as to when to wear it and what benefits the wearer can expect.

For example, in book 1, chapter 3 (entitled “Gamma”), the plant, bird, fish, and stone all begin with the Greek letter “gamma.” The accompanying description of the amulet reads:

If you engrave in a gnathios stone an owl and under its feet the fish glaucus, you enclose the latter’s eyes and you wear it. . . , you will seem noble to the people when darkness has come. For those who see you will think that you are inspired by the god. When daylight comes they will trust everything you say. If you wear it in bed. . . , it will show you unerring dreams.<sup>12</sup>

Although the owl (*glauco*) was thought to be the bearer of the evil eye,<sup>13</sup> the embodiment of envy (*phthonos / invidia*) and therefore an evil omen, the owl’s ability



Hathor Amulets (Second Intermediate Period–New Kingdom, 1650–1069 BCE). The creation and use of amulets was almost universal in the ancient Mediterranean. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.





Morning Flowers. Hermetists have always been interested in the mystical and medical properties of plants. From the Rosicrucian archives.

to foretell the future (the amulet promises “unerring dreams”)<sup>14</sup> is frequently mentioned in *Cyranides* and is sacred to Athena (the owl, too, has her wisdom). That the amulet with its owl confers a benefit on its wearer at night and in daytime comes from the idea that the owl is both a nocturnal bird and a Sun emblem in antiquity.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, the fish (*glaucus*) corresponds to a sea deity named Glaucus, famous for the gift of prophecy.<sup>16</sup> So both the owl and fish denote divination and prophecy, promising it to the hopeful amulet wearer.

The twenty-four amulets in book 1 promise success of all kinds, cures for medical problems, respect from others, freedom from fear—in general, a plethora of remedies for nearly all situations.

The theme dominating the amulet description is verbal magic, verbal homeopathy. Each of the four elements in the composition has its magical function, but the combination and magical link among the elements make the amulet more powerful.

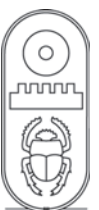
The magical link is usually a verbal one, using the alphabet, homonyms, or homophones.<sup>17</sup>

*Cyranides* is the largest surviving example of Greek literature that treats a broad spectrum of natural phenomena, highlighting their magical and medical uses.<sup>18</sup> This work would later have significant influence on medico-magical thought in Western Europe.

### Hermetic Botany and Medicine

There are other botanical works in the collection of technical Hermetica. The *Liber Sacer* (astrological botany), *From Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius: On Plants and the Seven Planets*, *On the Plants of the Twelve Signs by Hermes Trismegistus*, and the *Holy Book of Hermes to Asclepius* could be termed botanical. This last work uses plants and the decans as a basis for its botanical prescriptions. (A decan is a subdivision of the area covered by a sign of the zodiac.)

Other Hermetic treatises deal with astrological medicine, including *Kanonion*



or *Organon of Hermes Trismegistus*, *Iatromathematika of Hermes Trismegistus to Ammon the Egyptian*, and the *Book of Asclepius Called Myriogenesis*. *Myriogenesis* looks at the medical effects of the theory of correspondence between the human microcosm and the universal macrocosm.

In addition, one pharmacological Hermetic text still survives: *Fifteen Stars, Stones, Plants, and Images*, which singles out particular stars as determinants of pharmaceutical power.

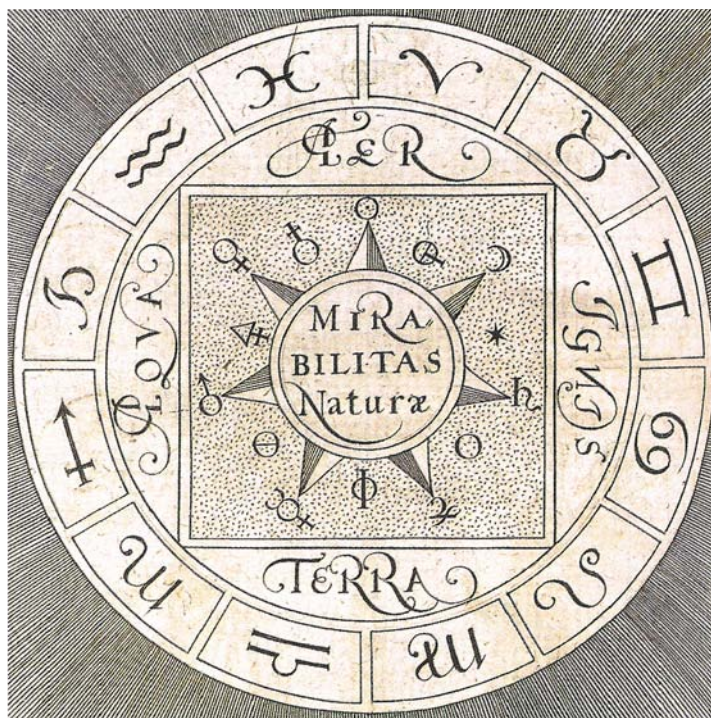
### Hermetic Astrology

In addition to the Hermetic works that discuss the magic of the forces in the natural world, several Hermetic treatises deal with astrology, which was a mix of Babylonian and Greek streams of thinking and practice.<sup>19</sup> The most important work, the *Liber Hermetis*, originally from the third century BCE, gives the fullest discussion on astrology. The work is a composite, with pieces spanning the period of the third

century BCE (astrological material used by Egyptian priests in the temples) to the third or fourth centuries CE.<sup>20</sup>

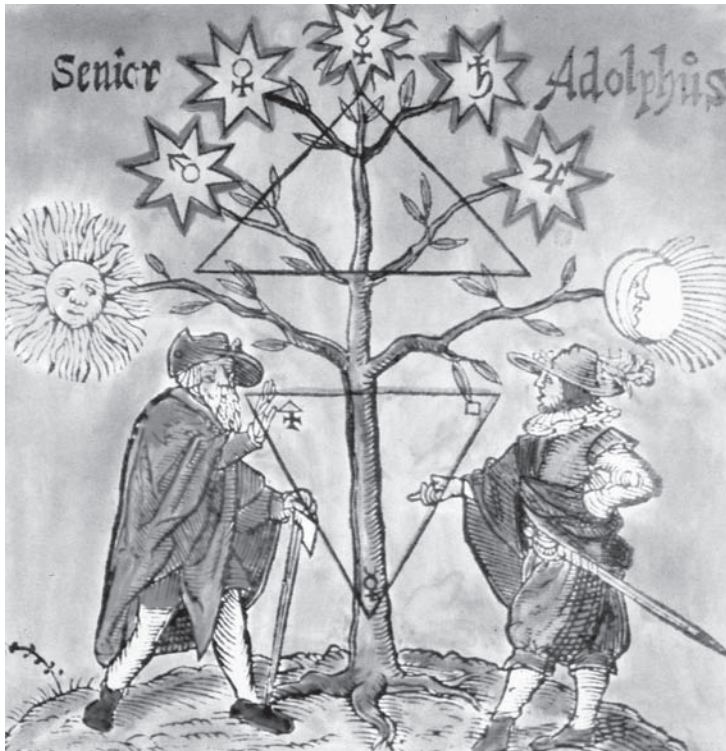
The first section of the book deals with the thirty-six decans, the forces that influence over one-third of a sign of the zodiac, each influencing ten degrees of the zodiacal circle. The thirty-six decans are listed; each is linked to what was considered the proper sign of the zodiac and related to a planet. Each decan is named, connected with a sign, and linked to a geographic area and an area of the human body influenced by the decan. The astrologer needed this information to make specific forecasts<sup>21</sup> and, in a sense, functioned as a kind of magician in possessing and using arcane astrological knowledge. The decans' influence on the terrestrial human world shows the "as above, so below" principle on which all astrology (and Hermetism) is founded.

The *Liber Hermetis* compares with the sixth excerpt of a Hermetic text found in the *Stobaei Hermetica*, an anthology of philosophical Hermetic excerpts collected



Michael Maier, *Alchemical Wheel with the Zodiac* (1618), in *Viatorium*. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Research Library.





Durch Johann Bringern, Senior and Adolphus with the alchemical tree of the metals between them (1613), in *Occulta Philosophia*. From the Rosicrucian Archives.

there are the astrological treatises the *Panaretos*, the *Secret Method of Hermes Trismegistus*, and *On the Denomination and Power of the Twelve Places*. Other works such as *Brontologion* discussed the meaning of thunder as it occurred in different months while *Peri seismon* linked earthquakes to astrological signs.

Astrology held a prominent place in the Hellenistic and Roman world-view and produced

by fifth century Greek compiler Joannes Stobaeus. In this excerpt, in a dialogue with his disciple Tat, Hermes explains the role that the decans play in determining what takes place in the world. At the conclusion of the dialogue, this knowledge of the decans is made a requirement for the vision of the Deity, which fosters an understanding of all reality.<sup>22</sup> For the writer of this Hermetic text, the decans had a very significant role in the cosmic system, and understanding the cosmos and how it functioned required an awareness of the role of these decans. However, later philosophical or spiritual Hermetists insisted on the soul's need to transcend the realm of fate before it could be joined with the Divine.<sup>23</sup>

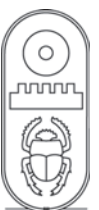
Other astrological works from the technical Hermetica include excerpts from the work attributed to Nechepso and Petosiris, an Egyptian pharaoh and high priest, respectively (the manuscript dates from about 300 BCE). It is an astrological textbook used as the principal source material for all later Greek astrology.<sup>24</sup> Further,

much Hermetic literature.<sup>25</sup> Its ideas greatly influenced both the technical and philosophical Hermetica.<sup>26</sup>

### Hermetic Alchemy

Hermetic writers were also attracted to the magic of alchemy, the transformation of base metals into precious ones (silver and gold). Before the common era, many alchemical tracts surfaced which were attributed to Hermes and others. The last of these treatises (of about thirty), which date from the second or third century CE, exist as fragments. One of the longer fragments, *Anepigraphos*, is an extended metaphor on creating silver by cooking and melting several different substances. Another alchemical work, *Isis the Prophetess to Her Son Horus*, is a dialogue in which the angel Amnael unveils the mystery of alchemy.

Some of the alchemists had a higher goal, which related to the human soul and its connection to the Divine. The alchemists' initial preoccupation with imitating the color and appearance of precious metals



gradually evolved into the thought that metals were made of a lifeless physical base or “body” and an animating principle or “soul” which gave uniqueness to the physical base.<sup>27</sup> They believed they could transmute base metals into gold by manipulating the “soul.”<sup>28</sup> This body/soul distinction inspired the more philosophically inclined alchemists to use alchemical imagery to describe the human soul’s purification.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the alchemical process became symbolic of a spiritual experience, one of transformation and renewal.

Still, most of the extant Hermetic alchemical literature is late, and none of the treatises shows much individual spiritual sentiment.<sup>30</sup> However, with the alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis, who lived in Alexandria around 300 CE, we see a spiritual quality in his alchemical work that has come from his reading of the philosophical Hermetica.<sup>31</sup>

### Creating Order and Enhancing Life

In this eclectic mix that make up the technical Hermetica, different types of and uses for magic can be seen. From the

*Greek Magical Papyri* and *Cyranides* to the astrological and alchemical texts, we see the human will to use magical knowledge to enhance life and health, create order and stability, and advance inchoate sciences such as alchemy. Many ancients undoubtedly viewed magic as mysterious and were awestruck by its efficacy in various situations. The Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, too, teaches its members marvelous things which might seem magical to others; however, the Order bases its teachings on natural laws that govern the universe. Still, the manifestations are not necessarily less awe-inspiring for that.

Scholar Antoine Faivre sums up the main point of Hermetic philosophy this way:

The characteristic of all Hermesian gnosis is to. . . [emphasize] human power and will in the climb or reascension [toward spiritual enlightenment]. . . . Each human being is considered to be a potential magus who can accomplish marvelous actions.<sup>32</sup>

As we readers of the technical Hermetica reflect upon the techniques and philosophy of the ancient Hermetists, even though very different from our own, we may better appreciate the forms their magic took. This may help us rekindle our own contemporary sense of awe, inspire us to spiritualize our experience, and, if we choose, gradually to become magi ourselves.



Athanasius Kircher, *The Sunflower* (1641) in *Magnes sive de Arte Magnetica*. From the Rosicrucian Archives.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This series was published in 1933 by then Emperor of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, H. Spencer Lewis. The images of the cards are available online at [http://www.rosicrucian.org/publications/digest/digest1\\_2007/table\\_of\\_contents.html](http://www.rosicrucian.org/publications/digest/digest1_2007/table_of_contents.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), xlvii.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 48.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., xlv–xlv.
- <sup>10</sup> John Scarborough, “Hermetic and Related Texts in Classical Antiquity,” *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 86.
- <sup>12</sup> Maryse Waegeman, *Amulet and Alphabet* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1987), 27.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 224.
- <sup>18</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xxxv.
- <sup>19</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 68. See note 11.
- <sup>20</sup> William C. Grese, “Magic in Hellenistic Hermeticism,” *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 46.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 47.
- <sup>22</sup> Grese, “Magic in Hellenistic Hermeticism,” 46. See note 20.
- <sup>23</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 78. See note 11.
- <sup>24</sup> <http://projecthindsight.com/reference/catalog.html>
- <sup>25</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 91. See note 11.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 89.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 89–90.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 90.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 91.
- <sup>32</sup> Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1995), 59.

