

Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination

In Egypt during the first centuries of the Common Era, men and women would meet discreetly in their homes, in temple sanctuaries, or in solitary places to learn a powerful practice of spiritual liberation. They thought of themselves as followers of Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary master of ancient wisdom. While many of their writings are lost, those that survived have been interpreted primarily as philosophical treatises about theological topics. Wouter J. Hanegraaff challenges this dominant narrative by demonstrating that Hermetic literature was concerned with experiential practices intended for healing the soul from mental delusion. The Way of Hermes involved radical alterations of consciousness in which practitioners claimed to perceive the true nature of reality behind the hallucinatory veil of appearances. Hanegraaff explores how practitioners went through a training regime that involved luminous visions, exorcism, spiritual rebirth, cosmic consciousness, and union with the divine beauty of universal goodness and truth to attain the salvational knowledge known as *gnōsis*.

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Wouter J. Hanegraaff
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and the Historical Imagination**

Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

University of Amsterdam



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For Margôt, ή πηγή μου τής ζωής και τοῦ φωτός

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Acknowledgments

In the spring of 1991, I bought a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in a brand-new Dutch translation that had just recently been published. There was quite some interest for Hermetic literature in the Netherlands at that time, largely due to the spectacular and widely publicized efforts of the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* in Amsterdam. This privately funded research library was in the midst of building up the world's largest collection of original editions and secondary literature about Hermetic philosophy and related currents, and it had made this new publication possible as well. As a young scholar in the early stages of my Ph.D. research at the University of Utrecht, I was fascinated by these developments and eager to learn more about those mysterious Hermetic writings. I happened to be part of a small reading group focused on “gnostic” traditions, and still have a written copy of a presentation I apparently gave in this context, titled “Salvation by Gnosis in the *Corpus Hermeticum*” – my first embryonic attempt at understanding what the Hermetic literature was all about. But as I kept coming back to these texts during the years that followed, I could never shake off the uncomfortable feeling that somehow, *something* remained less than fully convincing about how these texts were being discussed in the scholarly literature or translated into modern languages. What, if anything, was missing? This book is my attempt to answer that question in the only way that such questions can be answered, by going all the way *ad fontes*.

It has been an incredible adventure, for I discovered much more than I had ever imagined. But I would never have had the chance to even embark on such a project at all if it had not been for two people who changed the course of my life during the 1990s, Roelof van den Broek and Rosalie

Basten. It is thanks to them that I have been able to devote my life and my career to studying the Hermetic literature and a wide range of related historical currents from antiquity to the present. The historian of Christianity Roelof van den Broek, one of the two scholars responsible for the 1991 Dutch *Corpus Hermeticum* translation, became my first model of scholarly excellence in these domains. We first met in his office at the University of Utrecht, and ended up collaborating closely on a whole series of projects related to the Hermetic literature. Roelof's sharp and sober judgment as a scholar and his generosity as a human being have been invaluable to me, as have been his perceptive critical comments on earlier versions of this book, not to mention his detailed commentaries on the Hermetica that are available only in the Dutch language.

It so happened that around the same time, Rosalie Basten, a Dutch businesswoman fascinated by the Hermetica, was reading the Dutch *Corpus Hermeticum* as well. It made a big impression, and led her to contact Roelof van den Broek, in order to discuss with him a project she had been pondering for years: to create conditions that would make it possible for future students to study these traditions as an academic subject. Their meeting was a success, and what came out of their collaboration was a unique academic chair and Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP), created at the University of Amsterdam in 1999. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was therefore at the very origin of a remarkable chain of events that began in 1991, one outcome of which is this book about the Hermetica published more than thirty years later. It has been the honor and true miracle of my life that I was entrusted with the new academic chair in Amsterdam and was given the chance to devote myself, together with a group of dedicated colleagues and friends, to building up a program in teaching and research that had no parallel anywhere else in the academy worldwide. HHP has been like a pebble thrown in a pond, creating a ripple effect that keeps extending into ever-widening circles, so that today we have a large and vibrant international field of scholarship that is still branching out further into new directions. None of this would have happened without Rosalie's enormous determination and continuous support – not to mention a whole series of further initiatives that, with her uncanny intuition for always choosing “the right time and the right place,” she has been taking on behalf of our field over a period of several decades now. I am deeply grateful for her friendship and her incredible generosity.

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Very special thanks must go to a small group of brilliant younger friends and colleagues, endowed with superior specialist expertise and truly impressive linguistic skills, whose critical feedback, help and advice have been indispensable: Nicholas Banner, Christian Bull, Dylan Burns, and Korshi Dosoo. I owe each one of them a particularly great debt of gratitude for their willingness to read my chapter drafts with so much care and attention to even the tiniest details, for giving me precious advice about a wide range of important issues, for teaching me many things I did not know, and last but not least, for catching mistakes that would otherwise have escaped me. For any errors that might still remain, the responsibility is of course entirely mine. During the final stages of writing this book, it has been a special joy to participate in our small Zoom-fellowship of dedicated *kratērians* (created at Dylan's initiative), reading Hermetic treatises in Greek together while discussing the mysteries of translation and some other secrets as well.

Other colleagues and friends have been helping me out by answering questions and responding to specific requests. In particular, I want to thank Joscelyn Godwin for reassuring me about some musicological issues; Matteo Martelli for his help with translations from ancient Syriac; Matthew Melvin-Koushki for all his support and for sharing materials related to Suhrawardī and Pythagoreanism; Liana Saif for double-checking Arabic transliteration; Gregory Shaw for commenting on my chapters about Iamblichus and theurgy; Christian Wildberg for sharing a few of his unpublished translations and textual editions; and Timothy Williamson for clarifying my thinking about the very nature of

knowledge. Furthermore I want to thank my former student Bas Jacobs for his detailed remarks about the entire manuscript; my friend and colleague Jeffrey J. Kripal for his unwavering support and unique perspectives on what the study of religion is all about; and my even older friend and colleague Albert F. de Jong for all his warmth and generous enthusiasm about whatever I am up to at any time.

Finally, I want to thank three people whose importance and influence go far beyond scholarship and academic discussion. Whenever I think about the *pharmakon* of *gnōsis* and the Hermetic *kratēr* filled with *nous*, I see the face of Norberto Jurasek. His unexpected death in March 2020, at the age of just 45, has left a wound that will never be entirely healed. This book owes more to him and the inspiration he has given me than could or should be written down in words. In an entirely different way, the same is true of another extraordinary human being, my mother Leonie Hanegraaff-Lissenberg. She passed away just briefly before Norberto, in February 2020, at the age of 92. Whatever I have been able to do in my life, I owe to her unconditional love and support. And last but certainly not least, this book is dedicated to Margôt, the love of my life. Since you appeared on my horizon early in 2013, nothing has ever been the same. I want to thank you most of all for sharing with me the gifts of love and abundance that this book is ultimately all about – life, health, happiness, and open paths.

Abbreviations

- Ascl.* *Asclepius*
- CAA I M. Berthelot and Ch.-Em. Ruelle (eds.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, vol. 1, Georges Steinheil: Paris 1887.
- CAA II M. Berthelot and Ch.-Em. Ruelle (eds.), *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, vol. 2, Georges Steinheil: Paris 1888.
- CH *Corpus Hermeticum*
- CHD Carsten Colpe and Jens Holzhausen (eds.), *Das Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch*, vol. 1: Jens Holzhausen (transl. & introd.), *Die griechischen Traktate und der lateinische "Asclepius,"* & vol. 2: Jens Holzhausen (transl. & introd.), *Exzerpte, Nag-Hammadi-Texte, Testimonien*, frommann-holzboog: Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt 1997.
- CMA II M. Berthelot (ed.), *La chimie au moyen âge*, vol. 2, Imprimerie Nationale: Paris 1893.
- Cop Brian P. Copenhaver (transl. & comm.), *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction*, Cambridge University Press 1992.
- GWHT Dorothee Gall (ed.), *Die göttliche Weisheit des Hermes Trismegistos: Pseudo-Apuleius, Asclepius*, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2021.
- HD *Hermetic Definitions*
- HF Hermetic Fragments (= HT IV "Fragments Divers")
- HG Roelof van den Broek and Gilles Quispel (introd., transl., & comm.), *Hermetische geschriften*, In de Pelikaan: Amsterdam 2016.

- HHE I Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. 1: *Les textes Hermétiques de Nag Hammadi et leurs parallèles grecs et latins*, Les Presses de l'Université Laval: Québec 1978.
- HHE II Jean-Pierre Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. 2: *Le fragment du Discours Parfait et les Définitions Hermétiques Arméniennes*, Les Presses de l'Université Laval: Québec 1982.
- HO Hermetica Oxoniensa (Oxford Hermetica)
- HT I *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1: *Corpus Hermeticum I-XII* (A.D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière), Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1991 [1946].
- HT II *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 2: *Corpus Hermeticum XIII-XVIII*, Asclepius (A.D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière), Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1992 [1946].
- HT III *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 3: *Fragments extraits de Stobée I-XXII* (A.-J. Festugière), Les Belles Lettres: Paris 2002 [1954].
- HT IV *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 4: *Fragments extraits de Stobée XXIII-XXIX*, *Fragments divers* (A.-J. Festugière), Les Belles Lettres: Paris 2002 [1954].
- HT V *Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 5: *Paralipomènes* (Nag Hammadi VI, 6–8, Clarkianus 11, Hermetic Definitions, Divers Fragments) (J.-P. Mahé), Les Belles Lettres: Paris 2019.
- HV Hermetica Vindobonensia (Vienna Hermetica).
- Keizer Lewis S. Keizer, “The Eighth Reveals the Ninth: Tractate 6 of Nag Hammadi Codex VI,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union: Berkeley 1973.
- KL Martin Krause and Pahor Labib, *Gnostische und Hermetische Schriften aus Codex II und Codex VI*, J.J. Augustin: Glückstadt 1971.
- Meyer Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, Harper One: New York 2007.
- NH VI Nag Hammadi Codex VI
- NHD Hans-Martin Schenke, Hans-Gebhard Bethge, and Ursula Ulrike Kaiser, *Nag Hammadi Deutsch*, vol. 2: *NHC V,2-XIII,1, BG 1 und 4*, Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/New York 2003.
- NHDS Ursula Ulrike Kaiser and Hans-Gebhard Bethge (eds.), *Nag Hammadi Deutsch: Studienausgabe*, 3rd revised ed., Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/Boston 2013.

Abbreviations

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- PDM *Papyri Graecae Magicae*: Demotic Papyri
 PGM *Papyri Graecae Magicae*
 RHT I A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1: *Lastrologie et les sciences occultes*, Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1942.
 RHT II A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 2: *Le Dieu cosmique*, Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1949.
 RHT III A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 3: *Les doctrines de l'âme*, Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1953.
 RHT IV A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 4: *Le Dieu inconnu et la gnose*, Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1954.
 Rob James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, E.J. Brill: Leiden/New York/Copenhagen/Cologne 1988.
 SA Clement Salaman, *Asclepius: The Perfect Discourse of Hermes Trismegistus*, Duckworth: London 2007.
 Scott I Walter Scott, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, vol. 1: *Texts and Translation*, repr. Shambhala: Boston 1993 [1924].
 Scott II Walter Scott, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, vol. 2: *Notes on the Corpus Hermeticum*, repr. Shambhala: Boston 1985 [1925].
 Scott III Walter Scott, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, vol. 3: *Notes on the Latin Asclepius and the Hermetic Excerpts of Stobaeus*, repr. Shambhala: Boston 1985 [1926].
 Scott IV Walter Scott and A.S. Ferguson, *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, vol. 4: *Testimonia*, repr. Shambhala: Boston 1985 [1936].
 SEC Alberto Camplani, *Scritti ermetici in copto*, Paideia: Brescia 2000.
 SH *Stobaei Hermetica*
 Tröger Karl-Wolfgang Tröger, "Die sechste und siebte Schrift aus Nag-Hammadi-Codex VI," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 98:7 (1973), 495–503.

- WHCH Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen and William D. Wharton (transl.), *The Way of Hermes: The Corpus Hermeticum*, Duckworth: London 1999.
- WHDH Jean-Pierre Mahé (transl.), *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, in WHCH, 99–122.
- ZMA Zosimos of Panopolis, *Mémoires authentiques* (Les Alchimistes Grecs IV.1; Michèle Mertens, ed. & transl.), Les Belles Lettres: Paris 1995.