Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica

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There has been a growing awareness over the past thirty years of the need to approach the Corpus Hermeticum—that is, the body of Greek Hermetic texts which have come down to us via Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance—by viewing it against its Egyptian background. This is a far cry from the situation a generation earlier, when it was still possible to dismiss the Egyptian settings of the Hermetica—and their occasional very obvious use of Egyptian motifs—as nothing but decorative touches of local colour dabbed on so as to produce a false impression of alien and exotic wisdom. There are major issues at stake here. A great deal depends on our general views about the interaction between Greek philosophical literature and Oriental traditions: our attitudes determine the way that we approach the evidence but at the same time the evidence, if examined without prejudice, can profoundly alter our attitudes. With these points in mind I intend to focus on one particular word in the Hermetica and see where it leads us. The word in question is an especially significant one: it could in a real sense be described as the single most important word in the Hermetic corpus as a whole.

The being called Poimandres occupies a very special place in the Hermetica: in the first of the Hermetic texts he is apparently presented as none other than the teacher of Hermes Trismegistus himself. During the fifteenth century Marsilio Ficino made the mistake of assuming that the title ‘Poimandres’, given at the heading of this first treatise in the Greek manuscript he used, was meant to apply to the entire Hermetic corpus. As a result the name Poimandres, or Pimander, has often...
been given to editions and translations of the Hermetica right down to the present century. But in a fundamental sense Ficino’s mistake was justified. Apart from Poimandres’s major role in the first of the Hermetica, he is implicitly referred to in the eleventh. He is mentioned again—twice, and by name—half way through the thirteenth, here too as Hermes’s teacher and superior authority; later on in the same text we find an obvious pun on the name; and a prophecy-text preserved in Syriac presents the very beginning of this thirteenth treatise in an abbreviated form under the title ‘Poimandres on Christ’. And that is not all. The alchemist Zosimus, from Panopolis in Upper Egypt, refers to the fourth treatise while making an even more obvious pun on the name Poimandres—in spite of the fact that the name is not mentioned at all in the version of the fourth treatise known to us. In considering the significance of these various details we need to bear in mind that a far greater number of Hermetic texts used to exist than now survives. The Hermetic corpus in its present form is plainly the end result of a process of conscious or unconscious selection on the part of Christian editors, in Byzantium or perhaps elsewhere; and details such as the divine but pagan name Poimandres were among the most likely to fade into the background or even disappear altogether in this exclusion process. All in all it is safe to conclude, in the words of a recent writer, that ‘Poimandres was much better known in antiquity than appears from what we have of the Hermetic literature. After all, to have been Hermes Trismegistus’s teacher was no insubstantial claim to fame’.

Concern with the origin and meaning of the word Poimandres goes back a long way. As already mentioned, the thirteenth of the Hermetica contains what appears to be a pun on the name in the form of a partial etymology: the reference there to intelligence (nous) acting the role of a shepherd (poimainen) is almost certainly intended as an allusion to Poimandres, who introduces himself at the start of the first treatise with the words:

I am Poimandres, intelligence of the supreme author. I know what you want, and I am with you wherever you are.

It would also be wrong to ignore the possibility that the link between Poimandres and the role of shepherd (poimēn) is being hinted at even here, in this emphasis on his ever-present attentiveness and understanding. With Zosimus on the other hand, what at the most was only a passing pun has become unambiguous in the advice he gives to his alchemical ‘sister’ Theosebia to ‘hurry back to Poimenandra’ and return to her own spiritual kind. Here what was no more than a partial etymology

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3 Mahé (as in n. 1), i, pp. 22–24; Foxvden, op. cit., pp. 3–11; R. van den Broek and G. Quispel, Corpus Hermeticum, Amsterdam 1990, pp. 18–19; cf. also B. P. Copenhaver, Hermetica, Cambridge 1992, p. xii.

4 Foxvden, op. cit., p. 34.

5 Corp. Herm. 13.19, 1.2.


of the word has become a full one: Poimandres is the shepherd (poimēn) of men (andrēs).

Even if only because of their antiquity, these indications would seem a valuable guide to understanding the name Poimandres. But other factors have come into play as well. Ever since the seventeenth century, explaining the name as meaning ‘shepherd of men’ has provided convenient fuel for theological debates about the Hermetica’s links—and, most often, indebtedness—to either Christian or Jewish ideas of God as shepherd of his people. However, there is one apparently minor technicality which is often overlooked. As was pointed out a number of times at the beginning of the century, this Greek etymology of the word is linguistically unacceptable. The form Poimandres would be possible in this sense, as would Poimanor or perhaps Poimenanor, but not what we have in our texts: Poimandrēs. That leaves us in a very awkward situation. The etymology of Poimandres as ‘shepherd of men’ provides a rich and appropriate meaning which, what is more, ‘is supported in the Hermetic tradition itself’; but at the same time this etymology is excluded on basic linguistic grounds. It is only natural that many scholars have turned a blind eye to the problems and continued to embrace the Greek etymology—linguistic objections notwithstanding. And yet in fact, as we will see, there is no need to ignore anything. Paradoxically, admitting that the Greek etymology is untenable does not mean we have to abandon it: all it does mean is that for the real etymology of the word we have to look elsewhere.

The Hermetica as a whole are plainly a product of Greek culture in Egypt. This naturally raises the possibility that the word Poimandres is Egyptian in origin. Here a number of points should immediately attract our attention. First, the self-declaration ‘I am Poimandres, intelligence of the supreme authority’ is a perfect example of the ‘I am...’ formula which is well-known from the ancient Near East but was, specifically, a very common feature in Egyptian religious literature. One among many parallels is the famous case from Edfu of Thoth, the Egyptian Hermes, introducing himself and establishing his direct descent from the supreme god Re. In short, the occurrence of the ‘I am...’ formula in a text from Egypt is immediately suggestive of native religious tradition. But at the same time it is also important to appreciate that this is particularly true in the case of one of the Hermetica. To understand why, we need to bear in mind that the ‘I am...’ formula is very frequent both in Egyptian magic—where the god or magician often uses it to establish not

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8 I. Casaubon, De rebus sacrīs et ecclēsiasticis exercitationes xvii, Geneva 1655 (1st edn London 1614), p. 71; R. Reitzenstein, Poimandres, Leipzig 1904, pp. 8–13; Haenchen (as in n. 6), p. 338; Pearson (as in n. 6), p. 340; Büchli (as in n. 6), pp. 15–21, 203.

9 F. Granger, ‘The Poemandres of Hermes Trismegistus’, Journal of Theological Studies, v. 1904, p. 405; C. F. G. Heinrici, Die Hermes-Mystik und das Neue Testament, Leipzig 1918, pp. 15–16; W. Scott, Hermetica, Oxford 1924–36, ii, p. 15. The last-ditch attempt (Heinrich, op. cit., p. 16 n. 1; Büchli, as in n. 6, p. 16) to maintain a Greek etymology by appealing to the name Mandēr—which is not only rare but also patently foreign in origin: F. Bechtel, Die historischen Personennamen, Halle 1917, pp. 293–94—is self-defeating, and needs no refutation.

10 Pearson (as in n. 2), p. 340 n. 12.

only his or her divine origin but also a formal role of dominance and supremacy—and in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, and that there are very clear affinities between this type of Graeco-Egyptian text and the Hermetic corpus: affinities which were almost certainly clearer still before being whittled away and effaced by Christian editors or excerptors.\(^\text{12}\)

Then there is the form of the name Poimandres itself. Its first letter happens to be the masculine singular definite article in later Egyptian. Both in Demotic and in the final form of Egyptian, Coptic, this article very often occurs at the front of people’s names—and this is particularly true in the case of personal names built around the name of a divinity, such as ‘The gift of Isis’ (Petiese), ‘The gift of Re’ or ‘The son of Re’.\(^\text{13}\) And to return to the word Poimandres, the final syllable \(\text{rês}\) just so happens to be the standard form of Greek transcription for Egyptian names ending with the divine name ‘Ré’: for instance ‘The gift of Horus-Re’ becomes \(\text{Petearpres}\), while ‘The son of Re’ becomes \(\text{Psenprès}\).\(^\text{14}\) The signs could hardly be more propitious.

To date, three explanations of the name Poimandres in terms of an Egyptian origin have been proposed: by Frank Granger in 1904, by Francis Llewellyn Griffith in 1925, and by Ralph Marcus in 1949. Granger’s and Marcus’s etymologies must for a number of reasons be rejected.\(^\text{15}\) But Griffith’s proposal is a different matter altogether. According to him the name is a Greek version of what in Coptic would have almost certainly been clearer still before being whittled away and effaced by the people’s names—and this is particularly true in the case of personal names built around the name of a divinity, such as ‘The gift of Isis’ (Petiese), ‘The gift of Re’ or ‘The son of Re’.\(^\text{13}\) And to return to the word Poimandres, the final syllable \(\text{rês}\) just so happens to be the standard form of Greek transcription for Egyptian names ending with the divine name ‘Ré’: for instance ‘The gift of Horus-Re’ becomes \(\text{Petearpres}\), while ‘The son of Re’ becomes \(\text{Psenprès}\).\(^\text{14}\) The signs could hardly be more propitious.

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\(^{12}\) For the formula in Egyptian magic see Bergman (as in n. 11), pp. 222 n. 1, 285–89; in the magical papyri, Merkelbach and Totti (as in n. 11), locc. cit. For the excision of magical content from the Hermetica see Fowden (as in n. 1), pp. 8–9; van den Broek and Quispel (as in n. 3), pp. 17–19; and Copenhaver (as in n. 3), p. xii. On the interrelations between Hermetica and magical papyri see also F. Boll, Aus der Offenbarung Johanni, Leipzig 1914, p. 54 with n. 1; C. Bonner, ‘Liturgische Fragmente von Gnostischen Amuletten’, Harvard Theological Review, xxv, 1932, pp. 362–65; M. P. Nilsson, Opuscula selecta, Lund 1951–60, iii, pp. 139–40, 153–57; Festugière, Révélations (as in n. 1), i, pp. 283–87 and passim; W. C. Grese, Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature, Leiden 1979, p. 89 n. 157, p. 172 nn. 626–27 and passim; and Fowden (as in n. 1), pp. 1–3, 168–73.


\(^{15}\) The proposal by Granger (as in n. 9), p. 400—\(\text{P-monitor, The Witness’}—\text{is correctly doubted by W. Scott (as in n. 9, ii, p. 16) on formal grounds and adequately refuted by R. Marcus, ‘The Name Poimandres’, \textit{Journal of Near Eastern Studies}, viii, 1949, pp. 41–42. Marcus’s suggestion (ibid., pp. 42–43)—\(\text{P-eime n-monitor, The Reason of Sovereignty’}—\text{was intended as an improvement on Griffith’s; but (apart from the fact that the proposal is based on some very confused ideas about Greek philosophical terminology) his final syllable is too far wide of the mark, while the need to reduce \(\text{P-eime n-monitor to Peimentero plus the meaning of the word monitor itself present yet further problems.}"

\(^{16}\) F. L. Griffith in W. Scott (as in n. 9), ii, pp. 16–17.
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syllable ṭēres when transliterating Egyptian names ending with the god-name Re into Greek is—as also mentioned earlier—routine and well-attested. The one improvement that needs making to Griffith’s etymology has to do with the form of the genitive n-ṭērē, ‘of Re’.18 In fact Coptic had an alternative form of the genitive to the simple n-, and this alternative form, nte-, is preferable here for two reasons. First, it brings us even closer to the Greek Poimandres: Egyptian –ntērē was almost bound to become –nḏrēṣ in Greek. Second, although the factors determining which of these two forms of the genitive was used on any particular occasion seem to have varied according to dialect, the form nte– does often occur in cases where a word with a general and abstract meaning—like eime or ‘knowledge’ here—is preceded by the definite article and given a specific application by the following word in the genitive.19 But, these linguistic technicalities apart, it is also important to appreciate how close this title P-eime nte-ṛē—‘The knowledge of Re’ or ‘The understanding of Re’—brings us to the type of semi-abstract and semi-personified expressions that are so common in the Gnostic texts discovered near Nag Hammadi. So for instance in the Gospel of Truth an important role is attributed to ‘the intelligence of the father’, translated from Greek into Coptic as P-ēnōma n-ṭ-ḥōnt; the Apocryphon of John introduces a divine personification called ‘the foreknowledge of the supreme’ (T-pronōia n-t-αuthenteia); and the title of another work reads P-noēma n-t-noq ṭqom, ‘The understanding of the supreme power’. Such parallels are, needless to say, particularly relevant when we consider the extraordinary extent to which the Nag Hammadi texts have helped to throw light on the common background and interrelationship between Gnostic and Hermetic writings.20

Taken together, these linguistic and also stylistic considerations are already enough to establish Griffith’s etymology as very probable. But they are not all. There is one other factor which turns probability into certainty, and it has been the failure to appreciate the significance of this factor which has created so many problems with the word Poimandres in the past. Already at the start of the century Richard Reitzenstein noted that the way in which Poimandres introduces himself—


18 As W. Scott (as in n. 9, ii, p. 16) notes in referring to Griffith, ‘ṛē without the article would have a more learned and solemn appearance than the ordinary p-ṛē’—although it is hardly true that omission of the article in such a case is out of the ordinary: cf. e.g. Ranke (as in n. 13), i, pp. 72.28 (see further Lüdeckens, as in n. 13, i, p. 113), 119.1 with 118.17, 124.16 with 123.11.


‘I am Poimandres, intelligence of the supreme authority’—tends to suggest the words ‘intelligence of the supreme authority’ could have been intended as an explanation or interpretation of the name Poimandres itself. Walter Scott later gave body to this idea when, in reporting the etymology Griffith had proposed to him, he hinted at a correspondence between Griffith’s explanation of the word—‘knowledge (eïme) of Re’—and the following ‘intelligence of the supreme authority’ (nous ës authentias).21 We can in fact be more precise. The Coptic word eïme has the spread of meaning not just of ‘knowledge’ but also of understanding, intelligence and the faculties of perception and recognition, while the Greek word nous means not just intelligence or intellect but also consciousness, understanding and the faculties of perception and recognition; considering this overlap of meaning it is not surprising that the Coptic eïme often corresponds closely to the verb noêin or its derivatives in Greek.22 As for the Greek term authentia, it is unattested before the start of the Christian era; where it does occur it has the sense of special authority, power or self-determination. But to understand its exact meaning in the Hermetica we need to turn to the roughly contemporary literature of Graeco-Egyptian Gnosticism and magic, where the word assumes a semi-technical role and has the specific meaning of ‘supreme authority’ in a spiritual sense;23 enough has already been said about the relevance of these literary sources to our Hermetic texts. As for the sun-god Re, on the other hand, he was very often presented in Egyptian religion as lord of the universe and, precisely, the ‘supreme authority’ 24 In short, one and the same expression in English not only conveys the exact meaning of the word authentia but also corresponds exactly to one of Re’s most characteristic and famous attributes in Egyptian religious tradition; it is important here to remember that from the earliest of times Egyptian gods were often referred to by their attributes or epithets rather than by their names, although this became truer than ever with the extra proliferation of epithets during the Graeco-Roman period.25 And to bridge any remaining gap between the Greek term authentia and the Egyptian sun-god, we only need to note that this same word authentia was often used in Gnostic sources as a term of reference for the supreme authority which is located in, and emanates from, the celestial realm of light; that in a Graeco-Egyptian magical papyrus the sun-god is addressed as authentês, ‘supreme in authority’; and that the same magical papyrus also quotes twice from an important hymn which is of plainly Egyptian inspiration, which the papyrus itself apparently introduces as ‘Hermetic’ (Hermaïkos), and which presents the sun-god as ‘the one endowed with the supreme authority (ta authentika)’.26 With this exact correspondence between the Greek

21 Reitzenstein (as in n. 8), p. 8; W. Scott (as in n. 9), ii, p. 17.
22 So, for example, in the Apocryphon of John, where noêin is used in one of the Coptic versions instead of eïme in two of the others: M. Krause and P. Labih, Die drei Versionen des Apokryphon des Johannes, Wiesbaden 1962, pp. 64 (III 11.13) and 128 (II 7.27); W. C. Tilly, Die gnostische Schriften des koptischen Pap. Berol. 8502, 2nd edn, Berlin 1972, p. 104 (32.17). For other cases see Crum (as in n. 19), pp. 77–78; and F. Siegert, Nag-Hammadi-Register, Tübingen 1982, p. 19.
23 W. Scott (as in n. 9), ii, p. 17; cf. also Büchli (as in n. 6), pp. 22–25.
25 Cf. Derchain-Urtel (as in n. 11), p. 130.
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authentia and the Egyptian Re the correctness of Griffith’s etymology—which was anyway very probable—is established beyond question. The name Poimandres means ‘Understanding of Re’ or ‘Intelligence of Re’; and, in introducing him to us, the first of the Hermetica explains the name by immediately translating it into Greek.

We can also go a step further. It would be easy to assume that the creation of an abstract entity called ‘Understanding of Re’ is the work of the Greeks, with their supposedly unique facility for philosophical abstraction. But that is not the case. The hypostasising—or personifying as a divine being in its own right—of a specific abstraction called Pe-ime nk-re, ‘Understanding of Re’ or ‘Intelligence of Re’, may not be attested elsewhere in Coptic; however, it is very familiar indeed in Egyptian religion itself. From the earliest known period the Egyptians were extremely fond of personifying—and divinising—abstractions, but the most important of all these deities were two in particular: Sia, ‘Understanding’ or ‘Intelligence’, and Hu, ‘Word’ or ‘Command’. Already in the Pyramid Texts Sia stands at the right hand of Re. From then on he is ‘the representative of Re’ or Re’s messenger; sometimes he is effectively equated with Re, but usually he is ‘the son of Re’, his chief assistant—along with Hu—in the creation of the universe. It is certainly no coincidence that we find the same fundamental idea of a divine, personified Intelligence coupled with a divine, personified Word in the first of the Hermetica, where Poimandres as the divine Intelligence (Nous) is assisted by a personified Word (Logos) in the creation of the universe. But that is a matter we shall come back to later.

Whenever in ancient Egyptian theology it was a question of emphasising a particular divinity’s intelligence and understanding, Sia could easily be associated now with one god and now with another. But the one divinity with whom he was most often associated and in fact identified was, not surprisingly, another son of Re: the Egyptian god of knowledge and wisdom, Thoth. By the Graeco-Roman period there was nothing at all problematic about referring to Thoth as ‘Sia Lord of Hermopolis’. The identification was so frequent and so complete that, to quote one scholar, Sia was ‘simply a second name of Thoth’. In addition to this equation with Sia, Thoth acquired one particular epithet which has its roots in much earlier tradition but became especially common in Graeco-Roman times: ib n Ra ‘the heart of Re’. To understand this expression we need first of all to appreciate that for the Egyptians the heart was the seat of the faculty of understanding and intelligence—just as, for the Greeks, it was traditionally the seat of intelligence or nous. In practice, however, the seat of the faculty and the faculty itself became indistinguishable, and as a result Thoth’s epithet ‘heart of Re’ is often best translated as ‘the understanding of Re’. This epithet had strong

381.2; Papyri Graecae magicae, ed. K. Preisendanz and A. Henrichs, Stuttgart 1973–74. XIII.258 (cf. III.197, 218); ibid., XIII.138–41 (with Preisendanz’s plausible restoration Hermelis: for the implications of the term see already A. Dieterich, Abydos, Leipzig 1891, pp. 62–72 with Fowden, as in n. 1, pp. 171–72) and 442–46.


29 Erman and Grapow (as in n. 14), i, p. 59.16. Cf. also Horapallo, Hieroglyphica I.36, ed. F. Sbdronde, Naples 1940, pp. 81.3–82.3 with Sbdronde ad loc.; Pap. Graec. mag. (as in n. 26) IV.2983, XIII.173–74, 486–90;
cosmological overtones. It referred specifically to the seat of supreme intelligence which masterminded the creation of the universe, and in this context the ‘heart’ (ib) of Re was identical to the ‘intelligence’ (sia) of Re: according to this creation theory the existence of the universe is the result of the activity of the creative Word which itself originated from the heart (ib) and therefore from the supreme intelligence (sia) of the god Re’. In a theological framework in which it was common to refer to gods by their epithets rather than by their names, Thoth and Sia, ‘heart of Re’ and ‘intelligence of Re’, were one and the same.30 ‘Heart of Re’ does occur as an epithet for Sia—but of course Sia himself had become an epithet for Thoth. From the time of the Ptolemies onwards there could be no doubting who was meant by the expressions ‘the heart of Re’ or ‘the intelligence of Re’: it was Thoth.

The relevance to the name Poimandres of this overlap between heart of Re and intelligence of Re, Sia and Thoth, should be obvious. In the Demotic or ‘common’ form of later Egyptian the word ib—with its special connotations of understanding and perception—rapidly died out, while in Coptic it had virtually disappeared: in this situation it would be perfectly natural to reformulate the epithet using more contemporary language as p-eime nte-re, the ‘intelligence’ or ‘knowing’ of Re. And here we need also to bear in mind that the Egyptian word both corresponding and cognate to the Coptic eime, ‘to know’, is itself well attested as a component in epithets unique to Thoth.31 But however exactly the epithet p-eime nte-re evolved, there could have been no misunderstanding about whom it referred to. It referred to Thoth in his role as the creative intelligence of the supreme god, the delegate and representative of Re who—at least on some occasions and in some cult contexts32—seems effectively to have merged with Re himself.

That presents us with a very interesting situation. On one hand, the unnamed recipient of the divine revelation in the first of the Hermetica—and, by implication, its author as well—was understood in Hermetic tradition itself to be Hermes Trismegistus.33 On the other hand, as we have just seen, the teacher of Hermes and the source of his revelation was plainly Thoth. That might seem bizarre: Thoth was, after all, considered by Greeks the divine equivalent of their own Hermes. But this is not to say that the authors of the Hermetica always considered the two gods identical. In fact both inside and outside the Hermetic writings we find a tradition that there were two Hermeses: first Thoth—who is presented as a primordial source of wisdom and revelation—and then his descendant, Hermes Trismegistus.34 In this regard a passage preserved by Georgius Syncellus is especially significant, as it describes how Egyptian religious traditions were originally recorded in hieroglyphs

30 For the quotation see Derchain-Urteil (as in n. 11), p. 81. For Thoth’s epithet ‘heart of Re’, and its relation to Sia, see ibid., pp. 81–94; Gardiner (as in n. 27), p. 53; Boylan (as in n. 28), pp. 113–23; Junger (as in n. 28), pp. 42–47; H. Altenmüller, art. ‘Hu’, Lexikon der Ägyptologie, iii, 1980, cols 65–66; D. Kurth, art. ‘Thot’, ibid., vi, 1986, col. 506.

31 Boylan, op. cit., p. 185; Erman and Grapow (as in n. 14), i, p. 184.21; Derchain-Urteil, op. cit., pp. 51–52.


33 See above, pp. 1–2 with the further refs in n. 2.

34 Cf. the Latin Asclepius 37 = Nock and Festugière, ii, p. 348.3–6; Zosimus (ed. Tonelli, as in n. 7), pp. 92.24–94.19; and the passage from Syncellus cited below. For the same tradition in the Islamic world see M. Asín Palacios, The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Masarra and his Followers, Leiden 1978, p. 8 n. 17.
by Thoth, the first Hermes, and then after the flood were translated (hermēneutheisón) out of the sacred script into the Greek language and deposited in the form of books in the Egyptian temple sanctuaries by the second Hermes, the son of Agathodaimon and the father of Tat.\(^{35}\)

Part of the rationale underlying this adoption of two separate individuals—Thoth, the initial revealer, and Hermes, his translator into Greek—has been well explained by Garth Fowden. In Graeco-Roman Egypt the authority of original Egyptian texts went without saying; but to claim authority for Greek translations of Egyptian texts presented more of a problem considering the notorious difficulties involved in translating from Egyptian into Greek. To ascribe these translations themselves to the authority of no less a figure than Hermes Trismegistus provided the perfect solution.\(^{36}\) But at the same time, of course, it is important not to underestimate the significance of the linguistic fact that the Greek word for ‘interpreter’ or ‘translator’—hermēneus—was a derivative from the god-name Hermes. The Hermes-hermēneus pun was a well-worn one in the Greek language, inside as well as outside of Hermetic circles. Hermes was automatically associated with the function of interpreter and translator; and in the Graeco-Egyptian world a hermēneus was almost bound to be a translator from Egyptian into Greek.\(^{37}\) There was a real appropriateness in making Hermes Trismegistus the key recipient and transmitter—rather than the originator—of traditions deriving from the older Hermes: the great god Thoth.

We are now at last in a position where we can understand and appreciate every aspect of Poimandres’s introductory declaration:

I am Poimandres, intelligence of the supreme authority. I know what you want, and I am with you wherever you are.

The Egyptian god of wisdom—executor and intelligence of Re—presents himself by using one of his epithets instead of his name, as so often in Egyptian tradition; transliterated into Greek, the name is Poimandres. Thoth then goes on in our text to do something extremely significant. Via the Hermetic author of our text, identified by later Hermetists as Hermes Trismegistus, he interprets his name by translating it into Greek; and in terms of the Greek vocabulary which was current during the first few centuries AD, the resulting interpretation—‘the intelligence of

\(^{35}\) Ecola chronographica 72–73, ed. A. A. Moshammer, Leipzig 1984, pp. 40.31–41.7; for the text see Fowden (as in n. 1), p. 31 n. 108. There can be no real doubt that this is how the passage must be punctuated and read. To interpret it as saying that the original hieroglyphic texts were translated and deposited ‘by Agathodaimon, son of the second Hermes and father of Tat’ is, firstly, to violate the usual genealogy: see Nock and Festugiére, iii, p. cxiii n. 1; Mahé (as in n. 1), ii, pp. 77–78, 281. Secondly, it is to ignore the obvious pun on hermēneutheisón and Hermes: cf. Plato, Cratylus 407c; Orphic Hymn 28.6; Orphicorum fragmenta, ed. O. Kern, Berlin 1992, fr. 297a1; Pap. Graec. mag. (as in n. 26) XIII.488; Diodorus Siculus, Bibliotheca 1.16.2; Hippolytus, Refutatio omnium haeresium 5.7.29; Synclluss himself, op. cit. 73, ed. Moshammer p. 41.20; and esp. Zosimus (ed. Tonelli, as in n. 7), pp. 92.24–94.7. Thirdly, it is less probable syntactically: one would expect a μην in the Greek after huios. But, above all, it is to overlook the explicit statement a little further on in Syncllus that the translating was done, precisely, by Hermes the younger: ‘...this is what he says about the translation (hermēneutis) of the books by Hermes the second’ (73, ed. Mossmmer p. 41.20).

\(^{36}\) Fowden (as in n. 1), pp. 29–31.

the supreme authority’, *ho nous tés authentias*—could hardly be more fitting or precise. Of course there is nothing at all inappropriate or accidental in this translation of Thoth’s epithet into Greek: even Thoth himself, as Hermes the elder, was known in Hermetic circles as the ‘interpreter’ or ‘translator’—*hermēneus*. The role of Hermes as translator from Egyptian into Greek simply serves to throw an even brighter light both on the Egyptian origin of the name Poimandres and on the fact that the immediately following words were intended as an interpretative translation of the name itself; while on the other hand this example of an Egyptian name being translated and interpreted in Greek provides a remarkably vivid—and, from the point of view of the Hermetica as a whole, highly significant—example of what Hermetists meant when they attributed the role of interpreter and translator not only to the transmitter but even to the originator of their tradition. In short, here right at the start of the Hermetic corpus we have a startling reminder of *the role of Hermetism as a tradition of translation*.

After Thoth-Poimandres has introduced himself, and after the translation of his name into Greek, we have the further very simple statement: ‘I know what you want’ (*oida ho boulei*). Once again, in terms of Egyptian theology there can be little doubt as to the identity of this god: he is Thoth, ‘he who knows’ and, in particular, ‘he who reads people’s hearts’ (*ip ib*). Of particular relevance to our text is a memorable passage in one of the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri which opens with the familiar words ‘I am Thoth’, which has Thoth go on to repeat three times how it is impossible for him not to know and understand everything and everyone, and which then continues:

I know through and through what is in the souls of all men...when they put their questions to me and come into my sight, when they talk and when they are silent, so that I can tell them what has happened to them in the past, what is happening and what will happen to them in future; and I know their skills and their lifestyle and their habits and what they do...

Thoth’s mention here of people ‘putting their questions to me’ (*eperōlōnton me*) is an obvious reference to the Egyptian practice of temple incubation, which involved the deliberate questioning of gods through visions and dreams: a practice that happens to be well attested for Thoth. But it is an equally obvious reminder of the opening to the first of the Hermetica, where Thoth-Poimandres introduces himself and immediately goes on—throughout the rest of the dialogue—to answer the questions put to him by the writer of the text. So here we come to a crucial point for our understanding of the Greek Hermetic corpus: its apparent origin in the Egyptian temple practice of consulting dream oracles.

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42 *Corp. Herm.* 1.1–3 and passim.
And, finally, we come to the statement ‘I am with you wherever you are’ (suneimi soi pantachou). This is an assertion that would have been well understood during Graeco-Roman times by anyone at all familiar with the ancient cult of Thoth, which had its major centre at Hermoupolis in Upper Egypt: there, in strikingly similar and almost identical language, we find the Egyptian Hermes referred to on papyrus as ‘he who stands by you wherever you are’ (hos paristatai soi pantachou), while in a letter originating from a similar milieu he is described as ‘the protector-god’ (tou phylattachtos theou Hermou). The identity of Poimandres and Thoth is confirmed, only to be confirmed again. With these opening remarks by Thoth-Poimandres the stage has been set for the grand revelation to come: a revelation which, in turn, was to strike the keynote for the Hermetic corpus as a whole.

That may seem all there is to be said about the name Poimandres. In fact it is only half of the story. As we saw earlier, transcription of the Egyptian name P-eime nte-re into Greek in the specific form Poimandres is—in itself—perfectly understandable; and yet there can be little doubt that at the same time other factors were at work here as well. Any Greek-speaking native of Egypt would almost certainly have been aware that ‘shepherd of the people’ was a standard phrase in Homer; Aeschylus had used the one-word expression ‘shepherd-of-men’ (poimenan o), while the theme of a shepherd of men (poimen andron) received a further boost from Platonic literature; and, last but not least, personal names formed from the basic word Poimen, ‘shepherd’, were far from unusual in Graeco-Roman Egypt. The transition from et in Coptic to o in Greek may have been easy enough by itself, but in this case we can be sure that the Greek idea of a shepherd of men helped to nudge it in that particular direction.

We are now in a position to understand why so many scholars have found the decision as to whether or not to reject a Greek etymology for the word so difficult: the name does look like the Greek ‘shepherd of men’, and this is the interpretation given to it in later Hermetic tradition. But, as we have seen, appearances are deceptive: this Greek ‘etymology’ simply masks another, Egyptian one. The complexity of the situation may appear unusual and even unique, and yet it is not. In fact it is very common, far more so than is often appreciated.

The phenomenon in question is best described as double etymology or re-etymologising. The label ‘folk etymology’ has become standard in theoretical discussions of the phenomenon, but this has only served to prevent any real understanding of it from the very outset: it implies—quite wrongly—that the kind of etymologising involved was an unintelligent pastime only indulged in by the

45 G. Méautis, Hermoupolis-la-Grande, Lausanne 1918, p. 175, col. 1.8; A. Moscani, ‘Le lettere dell’archivio di Teofane’, Aegyptus, 1, 1970, p. 119.10; Fowden (as in n. 1), p. 175; and cf. Corp. Herm. 1.22 (paragionmai...). Fowden correctly dismisses Méautis’s theory (op. cit., p. 176) that the statement on the papyrus was intended as a conscious allusion to the Hermetica; but he fails to consider the other possibility that the statements in the first of the Hermetica are deliberate allusions to the Egyptian cult of Thoth.

44 Homer, Iliad 2.243, etc.; Aeschylus, Persians 241; Plato, Statesman 274e and the Platonic Minos 321b-c, and cf. Iamblichus’s amusing comment in his Pythagorean Life 35, 259–60; F. Preisigke, Namenbuch, Heidelberg 1922, p. 335; G. Heuser, Die Personennamen der Kopten, Leipzig 1929, i, p. 82; D. Foraboschi, Onomasticon alterum papyrologicum, Milan 1971, pp. 71, 263.
masses, who were misled by their ignorance into giving explanations of foreign words that are nothing but uninformed mistakes. This idea of ‘folk’ etymology ignores the fact that for all ancient peoples—including Greeks and Egyptians—etymologising and punning did not have the frivolous connotations which they usually do for us. Instead, they tended to be both viewed and used by the intellectual elites—whether philosophers or priests—as a means of touching and bringing to the surface the innermost meaning of a word or name. There was no question here of making ‘mistakes’ because such people did not operate with, and often consciously flouted, our criteria of etymological correctness. And there is no dividing line to be drawn between popular and learned etymologising: they both fed into and informed each other.45

What is special about the phenomenon of re-etymologising is, firstly, that as a rule it involves adapting a word from one language to another, and secondly that in this process of adaptation the original form and sound of the word are often subtly modified in line with the new meaning it is being given. As far as the Greeks are concerned, this phenomenon occurred wherever they encountered foreign languages and cultures; a few examples will help to illustrate.

On the southern slope of Mount Etna the Greeks discovered a small town called Geleatis, famous for its family of dream-interpreters; they called the family Galeotai or ‘sword-fish’, and subsequently described them as ‘sea-prophets’—playing on the fact that the sea around Sicily abounded in sword-fish.46 Contact with Iran gave rise to a good number of complete and partial re-etymologies. The Black Sea became Euxenos, ‘the hospitable’, from Old Persian akhshaina (‘dark blue’ or ‘black’); the king-name Kurush became Kuros (the modern ‘Cyrus’), which in Greek meant ‘supreme power’; and the name Chithrakhvarnah—‘whose essence is glory’—was partially re-etymologised as Tetraphernes (from tetra-, ‘four’).47 The same applied to contacts with Mesopotamia. The Akkadian river-name Purattu was re-etymologised by the Iranians as Hufratu, ‘well-endowed with fords’, and then partially re-etymologised yet again by the Greeks as the Euphrates (from eu-, ‘well’); the healing goddess Gula’s title Azugallatu (‘Great Lady Doctor’) became attached in the eastern Mediterranean to Apollo and was eventually re-etymologised as Aigletes, ‘The Radiant One’; while the famous name Heracles was often understood by the Greeks as meaning ‘Glory of Hera’—and could just about be accepted now as meaning that except for the troublesome middle vowel—but is almost certainly a


re-etyymology of the Akkadian god-name Erragal. And the same thing naturally happened as a result of contact with the Jews: the name Jerusalem, which meant ‘city of peace’, became known to the Greeks as Hierosolyma—the ‘holy’ city.

Egypt, of course, is no exception. The word that has given rise to our ‘oasis’ occurs in Greek literature as *auasis*, the ‘dry’ place; and the title which in Egyptian meant ‘living statue’ (shesep ankh) ended up in Greek as *Sphinx*, ‘the throttler’. But there is one word which for our purposes is especially significant. Lucian of Samosata refers in a dialogue of his to a revered Egyptian magician called Pancrates. We should be none the wiser if it were not for the fact that one of the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri mentions someone who was no doubt the same person; but on this occasion the papyrus calls him by his original Egyptian name—Pachrates, which means ‘the child’. The name Pancrates was by no means exceptional in Graeco-Roman Egypt, but what is certainly significant in the case of Pachrates-Pancrates is the meaning of this Hellenised version of his name as preserved by Lucian: ‘the master over all’. As Karl Preisendanz has pointed out, this new form of Pachrates’s name has an obvious connection with the theme of magical domination and in particular with the epithet *pantokrator*, which means exactly the same and is frequently used in the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri as an epithet both for the god whom the magician invokes with the intention of identifying with him and—by implication and transference—for the successful magician himself. In fact it is hardly a coincidence that in the papyrus where he is mentioned Pachrates is described as a priest-magician from Heliopolis, the traditional centre for the worship of Re: the title *pantokrator* is particularly at home elsewhere in the magical papyri as an epithet of the supreme sun-god Helios-Re—and not surprisingly, considering that it is a more or less exact equivalent in Greek of Re’s long-standing epithet *neb r djer*, ‘lord to the limits’.

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49 L. Parmentier, Recherches sur le trai té d’Isis et d’Osiris de Plutarque, Brussels 1913, pp. 83–84; add Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses 2.72, and On Dreams 2.246, 2.250.


51 Lucian, Philopseudes 34–36; Pap. Graec. mag. (as in n. 26) IV.2446. Cf. B. Kuster, De tribus carminibus papyri Parisiensi magiae, Königsberg 1911, pp. 12–13; Fowden (as in n. 1), pp. 166–67; and for the Egyptian name Pachrates, Lüdeckens (as in n. 13), i, p. 211. On the title ‘child’ as a divine epithet—for, among other deities, the sun-god Re—see T. McA. Scott (as in n. 1), pp. 169–73; and below, n. 53.

52 K. Preisendanz, art. ‘Pachrates’, Pauly’s Realencyclopadie (as in n. 46), xviii.ii, 1, 1942, cols 2071–74. For use of the epithet *pantokrator* in the context of magical identification with a god see e.g. Pap. Graec. mag. (as in n. 26) XIII.231–32 (Crates) with Preisendanz, op. cit., col. 2072.

53 Pap. Graec. mag. (as in n. 26) IV.2446. Cf. e.g. ibid., III.197, 218, and for the Egyptian title see n. 24 and the further refs in T. McA. Scott (as in n. 1), pp. 58–62, 68–71; note also Horapollo, Hieroglyphica 1.64, ed. Sbordone (as in n. 29) pp. 128.1–129.2. On the names ‘child’ and ‘lord of all’ as alternative epithets of the sun-god in both Egyptian and Graeco-Egyptian sources see J. Bergman, ‘Ancient Egyptian Theogony in a Greek Magical Papyrus’, Studies in Egyptian Religion... (as in n. 37), pp. 28–37.
The example of Pachrates-Pancrates is remarkable not only because of its immediate relevance to the world of the Hermetic\textsuperscript{54} but also because of the effortless way in which, through the intermeshing reticulation of Graeco-Egyptian culture, a motif of Egyptian origin finds itself transferred into Greek. Whatever Pachrates may have lost in terms of the significance of his original name as a result of its being Hellenised he more than made up for in terms of the new name he acquired: this was re-etymologising at its serendipitous best. And there can be little doubt that much the same thing happened in the case of the name Poimandres. As noted earlier, the tendency among scholars who adhere to the Greek etymology of the name has been to claim—with more than a little proprietorial interest—that here we have a revealing example of the Hermetica’s indebtedness to Judaeo-Christian tradition, in the form of the idea of a divine ‘shepherd of men’.\textsuperscript{55} But apart from the fact that the notion of a shepherd of men has a long history stretching back to the dawn of Greek literature, and apart from the further fact that this history can be traced back earlier still, via Mycenaean culture, to its roots in the Near East,\textsuperscript{56} what has also been missed is the evidence indicating that the Jewish and Christian ideas of God, saviour or spiritual guide as a shepherd evolved out of one religious tradition in particular: the Egyptian. There, naturally enough, the role was associated with one god above all—Re, ‘the good shepherd of men’, ever-attentive, ever-conscious of the needs of his flock—and also with other Egyptian gods who performed the function of delegate or executor for Re.\textsuperscript{57} For Thoth, ‘minister and counsellor of Re in the government of the world’,\textsuperscript{58} there could be few more appropriate resurrections. In the case of Poimandres, just as in the case of Pancrates, the process of re-etymologising validates itself: the end justifies the means. Everything becomes very simple when we start to approach the Hermetica as arising in the first instance out of the humus of Egyptian social, cultural and religious traditions. From this basic perspective all the other contributing factors—Greek and also Jewish (although not Christian: of Christian influence on the Hermetica there is not a trace)—fit naturally into place.

The double-etymology phenomenon has, all in all, some important lessons to teach us about the name Poimandres. First, scholars have assumed that any approach to understanding the word must mean opting for either an Egyptian or a Greek etymology.\textsuperscript{59} But the situation is in fact far more subtle and complex than that: ironically, by giving up the shepherd etymology we end up finding it again.

Second, it will have become clear that the process of re-etymologising need not be arbitrary but, on the contrary, can play a vital role in perpetuating strands of tradition from one language and culture into another. The validity as well as the significance of this process lie in its dynamism and modernity: old ideas reappear in a refreshingly new, refreshingly contemporary shape and form. Literal translation

\textsuperscript{54} For the magical papyri and the Hermetic corpus see above, pp. 3–4 and n. 12.

\textsuperscript{55} Above, p. 3 with n. 8.


\textsuperscript{58} Bovlan (as in n. 28), p. 82.

\textsuperscript{59} Grese (as in n. 1), pp. 44–47, 55–58, Fowden (as in n. 1), pp. 38–39.

\textsuperscript{60} So e.g. Fowden, op. cit., p. 32 and n. 120.
of the name Poimandres from Egyptian into Greek as ‘intelligence of the supreme authority’ was useful up to a point; but for a primarily Greek-speaking audience—which of course is the audience to which our Hermetica were addressed—there would soon be no awareness that this translation of the name was in fact just that. Re-etymologising the word provided a more permanent solution. And to avoid misjudging this solution as mere frivolity we need to remember that—even for the earliest of Greeks as for the Egyptians—to find an etymology for the name of a divinity was viewed as a crucial part of getting to know the god’s true nature. It is also important in this connection to appreciate how valuable an instrument the practice of re-etymologising could be for members of esoteric traditions, which often tend to place considerable emphasis on the need for each new generation to reformulate traditional ideas by adapting them to contemporary circumstances and audiences.61

Finally, the phenomenon of double etymology is a dramatic reminder that appearances can be misleading. Its very success lies in the ability to lure people into assuming that the secondary etymology is the primary one, and classical scholars unwilling to stretch themselves to consider the possibility that something written or spoken in Greek could have a rich and fertile non-Greek background are likely to prove the perfect victims. Often a name that has been re-etymologised in Greek betray its non-Greek origin through some small flaw, as with the final syllable of the name Poimandres; we ignore such tell-tale details at our peril. And of course the more successful the new etymology, the better it covers its tracks by appearing as what it once was not.

There are, obviously, some important implications here for our understanding of the Hermetica. It is not just a question of one isolated example of Egyptian traditions being carried through into Greek, although that would be significant enough in itself. Instead, as we have seen, the name Poimandres throws its shadow across the Hermetic corpus as a whole. And what makes this particular example even more significant is the fact that here, right at the start of the Hermetica, there is no need for any translation process to be inferred. On the contrary, it is presented to us quite consciously and quite deliberately: the name Poimandres is translated into Greek as ‘intelligence of the supreme authority’, nous tès authentias, which is a remarkably appropriate and effective way of translating the original Egyptian expression into the Greek philosophical and religious terminology of the first few centuries AD.

And this, too, is not all. As an example of the transfer of Egyptian ideas into the Greek text of our Hermetica the case of the name Poimandres is not alone: as soon as we get a grip on it, a whole number of other examples start to come to the surface as well. The very first sentence of the Hermetica sets the scene for the vision of Poimandres by describing the preliminary state of consciousness required—a state similar to, but different from, deep sleep—and then describes the initial form

and appearance of Poimandres himself. In doing so it plunges us into the easily recognisable world of Graeco-Egyptian practices for incubation and the inducing of visions: practices which may have had certain analogies with incubation practices among the Greeks, but which also had characteristically native features because their roots were fixed firmly in indigenous Egyptian tradition. As for Poimandres’s two opening statements—‘I know what you want, and I am with you wherever you are’—enough has already been said about their particular relevance to the cult of Thoth; but here it is worth adding that an emphasis on Thoth’s all-knowingness and omnipresence is especially appropriate in the case of someone who has just been visited by Thoth in a vision or dream.

Then we come to the roles attributed, throughout the first of the Hermetica, to a divine personified Intelligence (nous) and a divine personified Word (logos) as responsible for the creation of the universe. Certain superficial, and dissatisfying, analogies can be drawn here with the roles played by logos and nous in earlier Greek philosophical tradition or in Philo of Alexandria; but in the vividness of the personifications and the exactness of the details these Hermetic figures correspond unmistakably to the functions of Thoth—or Sia—and Hu in Egyptian theological tradition. It is the same with the repeated identification, again running through the first of the Hermetica, of the divine Poimandres or Poimandres with Life. This, too, makes little sense in terms of Greek philosophy; but it corresponds exactly to the fact that in Egyptian tradition Thoth, like Sia, is the giver of abundance and the ‘lord of life’. Similarly, Poimandres’s revelation starts with him undergoing a number of changes in appearance: he turns into light, then the light turns into dark, then the darkness turns into a watery, primal chaos. Scholars have repeatedly insisted on reducing the role of light and darkness in this first Hermetic treatise to one of strict dualism. But when we put aside these schematisations and read the text with fresh eyes we see that this is not the case at all. The light turns into darkness, fire leaps up out of the darkness. Here is no radical dualism: in Greek philosophical terms it is more or less baffling, but what it does correspond to exactly is the


63 See the refs in nn. 40–41 above, and esp. Ray (as in n. 39), pp. 64–65, § 17.20–22.

64 See the refs in nn. 27–28 above; also Reitzenstein (as in n. 8), pp. 23–24 with 24 n. 1 (nous), 39–43 (logos). For some fundamental remarks on the relation between the Egyptian ideas of Sia and Hu and the Greek ideas of nous and logos see J. H. Breasted, ‘The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest’, Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde, xxxix, 1901, p. 54. Regarding the dissonance between the Hermetic and the traditional Greek philosophical notions of logos and nous cf. J. Dillon’s comments, The Middle Platonists, London 1977, pp. 391–92.

65 Corp. Herm. 1.9, 12, 21, 32. For Thoth see R. Petschmann, Hermes Traumgestor, Leipzig 1875, p. 24; Boylan (as in n. 28), pp. 117, 181, 188 (web askh), 189, 191, 196, 198; Ray (as in n. 39), p. 161; and also Reitzenstein (as in n. 8), p. 20 § 2 with n. 3. For Sia see Ringgren (as in n. 27), pp. 13, 23; and Baines (as in n. 27), p. 116. The frequent reference to Thoth-Poimandres as life and light is, of course, equally understandable: see Boylan (as in n. 28), pp. 62–75, 81–82; and also Iversen (as in n. 1), p. 33.
fundamental, subtle and often highly ambiguous idea in ancient Egypt of cosmology mirroring the everyday disappearance and reappearance of the sun, with darkness in one sense the opposite of the light but in another sense simply its primeval form. And to disperse any possible doubt that this is indeed the idea involved here, one need only add that our Hermetic text describes the frightful darkness which is transmuted into the primeval, watery chaos as being a coiled serpent. It is usual to compare this image with the theme of the ‘outer darkness’ as a great serpent in the Gnostic Pistis Sophia. But this, yet again, is to miss the essential point. The description in the Pistis Sophia, like similar ones in other Gnostic texts, derives its origin from Egyptian cosmological tradition. As for our Hermetic passage, it has far more exact and detailed parallels not in these contemporary or slightly later Gnostic texts but in ancient Egyptian descriptions—dating back to the Pyramid Texts—of the cosmic serpent coiled ‘with its many coils’ in the dark, chaotic waters of the primal abyss, representing the first stage of divine manifestation in the mythological past prior even to the appearance of the sun, and ‘arising out of the darkness of the Primeval Waters before any definite thing yet existed’. What is more, this serpent—whose outer coils are the limits of creation—is the primordial form of God as he ‘devises the Logos, the creative Word which lays down the laws of what is to be made’. And to that we have to add that this divine serpent—as the symbol of primeval chaos and darkness, just as in our Hermetic text—had a special link with the ancient cult-centre of Thoth at Hermopolis. This helps to explain why Philo of Byblos refers to the divine status of the serpent as a matter discussed in the ‘sacred writings’ of Thoth; and it also has a bearing on the way that Graeco-Egyptian magical literature presents the serpent as one of the divine shapes assumed by Thoth in his cosmic metamorphoses.

66 Corp. Herm. 1.4–5. Cf. e.g. de Wit (as in n. 50), pp. 158–61; R. T. Rundle Clark, Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt, London 1959, pp. 50–53, 239–42, 252–56. It will be noted that the description in Corp. Herm. 1.5 of the fire emerging and ascending out of the primal darkness closely corresponds to the account of the emergence of the sun in Hermopolitan fragment 33 (Nock and Festugière, iv, pp. 140–41).

67 Cf. Corp. Herm. 1.4 with the commentary in Nock and Festugière, i, p. 12 n. 9. The text should be read, ‘skolios esperammon hos ekiasai me ophi, eita eidon metaballonemon to skoton’: ‘...twisting round and round in coils, to me it seemed just like a snake. Then, as I watched, the darkness started to change...’. For the reading esperammon (Parisinus 1297 in marg.) cf. the lexica s.v. speira, speiraomai, and the Hermes Trismegistus text ed. C.-E. Ruelle, ‘Hermès à Asclépios, Le livre sacré sur les dééans’, Revue de Philologie, xxxii, 1908, p. 258.85–86. Ophi is by far the best supplement after hos ekiasai me, where a point of comparison is required (cf. Corp. Herm. 1.4 ad fin.; Hippolytus, Refutatio 5.19.18); it is difficult not to suspect that this omission of the word for ‘snake’ from the manuscript tradition was at least partly theological in motive rather than purely accidental. Finally, eita eidon—‘then I saw’—should be considered the best reconstruction of the manuscripts’ impossible eidota. For the Egyptian origin of the image in the Pistis Sophia see Iversen (as in n. 1), p. 30; and cf. also idem, ‘Horapollo and the Egyptian Conceptions of Eternity’, Rivista di studi orientali, xxxviii, 1963, pp. 177–86. For the recurrence of the image in Egyptian monastic Christianity see E. A. W. Budge, The Paradise of the Fathers, London 1907, 1, p. li. It will be noted that the exact term used in Corp. Herm. 1.4–6 and 20 for the primordial waters—hygra physis—recurs in Plutarch’s account of Egyptian cosmology, On Isis and Osiris 365c: see also the following note.


69 For the serpent and Hermopolis cf. Rundle Clark (as in n. 66), pp. 52–55, 240; for the passage from Philo of Byblos, Eusebius, Praeparatio evangelica 1.10.46–51, with Fouwen (as in n. 1), p. 217 for the evidence of Hermopolitan influence on Philo’s statements; and for Thoth transforming himself into a serpent (ophis), Reitzenstein (as in n. 8), p. 20 n. 6 (cf. p. 22 n. 2). See also below, n. 84.
What are we to make of these parallels? More specifically, why have they either not been noticed at all or, if noticed, hardly been given the attention they deserve? To answer these questions we need in the first instance to take a brief look at the recent history of Hermetic scholarship. In 1904 Reitzenstein published his *Poimandres*: an admirable preliminary attempt to uncover the Egyptian theological background of the Greek Hermetic texts. The book met with remarkably hostile rejection—so hostile that Reitzenstein eventually lost his nerve and recanted. But on closer analysis the assumptions underlying this rejection turn out to be fundamentally flawed. First, Reitzenstein’s critics felt that for their purposes no real knowledge of Egyptian tradition was necessary; instead, they simply assumed that because the Hermetic texts used recognisably Greek philosophical terms there could be no possible justification for looking outside of Greek philosophy for their origin. Second, they made the other basic mistake of considering themselves justified in distinguishing sharply between the supposedly ‘philosophical’ texts contained in the Corpus Hermeticum and the magical, astrological and alchemical Hermetica. As Thaddeus Zielinski was to write, ‘Reitzenstein’s chief error lay in the fact that he obliterated the distinction between Higher Hermetica and Lower Hermetica’. Zielinski was quite prepared to accept that what he called the Lower Hermetica—the magical and alchemical texts—were essentially Egyptian in inspiration, but he insisted that none of this had any relevance at all to the ‘higher’ philosophy of the Hermetic corpus: these texts were purely Greek, and he expressed his ‘fear of the damage that could be inflicted by the sickly vapours of Egyptian theology if no steps are taken in time to provide some draughts of critical fresh air’. He ended, poetically, by urging the ‘need to turn our backs on the entire fog-bound sea of Egyptian theology’—ironically turning back at the Egyptians the same language of apocalyptic condemnation which, in the Hermetica, they themselves had implicitly directed against the barbaric influence of Greek ‘wisdom’ and lifestyle on their country.70 The other irony was to come. The after-effects of this onslaught on Reitzenstein’s position still linger on—in spite of the fact that the discovery of new Hermetic texts near Nag Hammadi in the 1940s has shown Reitzenstein was justified all along in refusing to draw any categorical distinction between the ‘philosophical’ and the so-called ‘technical’, or magical, Hermetica. Any appearance that our Hermetic corpus is free of all such supposedly base and superstitious tendencies is, it has now become clear, likely to be due more to Byzantine editorial scruple than to any significant difference in origin or milieu.71 And if the starting-points for Reitzenstein’s critics were far from satisfactory, so were their conclusions. In their attempts to explain the Hermetic corpus in terms of Greek philosophical trends they were not only obliged to assume different philosophical allegiances for almost every individual treatise (and, sometimes, even for

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70 T. Zielinski, ‘Hermes und die Hermetik II: Der Ursprung der Hermetik’, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, ix, 1906, pp. 27–30; and compare for instance the comments by G. van Moorsel, *The Mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus*, Utrecht 1955, p. 10, on the ‘popular Hermetic writings, ... revelling in magic, witchcraft and alchemy’, as ‘a disgrace to the cream of the family’ and as ‘Hermetic bastards’ with their ‘hocus-pocus in the lower regions’. For Zielinski’s own choice of imagery compare the Latin *Asclepius* 24–26, esp. 25 ad fin. (‘et aër ipse maesto torpore languescet’: cf. Nock and Festugiére, ii, pp. 329.23, 382 n. 219, with Fowden, as in n. 1, p. 41). Further refs to the Reitzenstein controversy are given by Iversen (as in n. 1), p. 28.

71 Mahé (as in n. 1), ii, pp. 449–50; Fowden (as in n. 1), pp. 116–18, 172; van den Broek and Quispel (as in n. 3), pp. 17–19; and cf. J. Doresse (as in n. 20), p. 68.
different parts of one and the same text) but, even more strikingly, each scholar who experimented with this categorisation came up with totally different results from everyone else. The chaotic situation that resulted has, predictably, been laid at the door of ‘syncretism’ and attributed to the lack of any real concern on the part of the Hermetic authors with philosophical consistency or integrity. But the questions which seem not to have occurred to these critics are to ask whether in trying to approach the Hermetica from a purely Greek philosophical angle they are not missing something more essential, or to ask what—if the authors of the Hermetica were not really concerned with the rigours of Greek philosophy—their primary concerns actually were.

The results of this destructive analysis of the Hermetic corpus have been embodied in the now-standard edition and commentary by Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugière: virtually every page of the work announces that this or that statement in the Hermetica is a mere ‘banality’ or ‘commonplace’, yet another Greek philosophical ‘cliché’. But this vast structure of criticism is, for a number of reasons, unsustainable. To begin with, there can be no doubting that originally the Hermetica were not written as mere philosophical and intellectual exercises. On the contrary, they were clearly the products of specific circles of people belonging to a living tradition; and they arose out of, and served as pointers towards, a way of life based on mystical practice and realisation. The crucial point here, which in a scholarly context can hardly be overemphasised, is that whereas in the eyes of a philosopher or intellectual a familiar idea may appear ‘banal’ or ‘commonplace’, for a mystic the situation is entirely different. What counts for him or her is the practical grasp and personal realisation of the idea. Once that has been achieved its banality or rarity is irrelevant; it may be the seemingly most banal of ideas which proves the most profound once it has been experienced.

The second point leads on naturally from the first. To judge ideas in the Hermetica at face value is to overlook the crucial question as to what these ideas meant to the writers of the texts, and as to how they used them. By the start of the Christian era Stoic and Platonic terminology had, as we well know, become an integral part of Greek theoretical language throughout the Near East. But if every time that a writer uses Stoic or Platonic terminology, or themes, we assume he was a Stoic or Platonist we are likely to make some fundamental misjudgements. Alchemical literature, with its close ties to Hermetic literature, is a good case in point. Alchemists were especially fond of using Stoic vocabulary to describe the ‘upward’ and ‘downward’ processes of cosmic creation: vocabulary which occurs also in the first of the Hermetica. But for the alchemists this terminology had a more complex and profound significance than it did for the Stoics because they

72 See the summary by Grese (as in n. 12), pp. 43–44.  
used it to describe not just cosmic phenomena but also the alchemical processes of sublimation and distillation.  

Again, Zosimus of Panopolis—who, as we have already seen, is an important representative of the interplay between Hermetic and alchemical tradition—refers on one occasion to a philosophical principle mentioned by Porphyry; but when we look more carefully at what he is saying we find that he has transformed what was a philosophical formulation into an item of mystical doctrine. And the same applies to the occurrence of Jewish elements in the Hermetica: the fact that they do occur is not at all surprising when we consider the widespread influence of Judaism in Egypt from the early Hellenistic period on. But the real question, which is hardly ever asked, is how these Jewish elements were used in Hermetic circles: how they were adapted and transformed.

Lastly, of course, the reduction of the Hermetica to the status of an anthology of philosophical banalities is contradicted by the phenomenon we have already noted on a number of occasions: the use of Greek technical terminology to translate traditional Egyptian concepts. The case of P-\(\phi\alpha\sigma\tau\lambda\varepsilon\varepsilon\alpha\nu\tau\eta\nu\)—translated as \(\text{nous té\(\varepsilon\) authentias, \text{intelligence of the supreme power'}—is worth citing not only because it occurs so prominently at the very start of the Hermetica but also because it is such a self-conscious example. And the possibilities of being deceived by this translation process are almost endless. For instance Isaac Casaubon, in the early seventeenth century, effectively instigated the modern critical approach to the Hermetica by claiming that the use of language such as the word \(\text{authentia} \) here proved they could not be the primordial texts which in the Renaissance they were supposed to be but must have been written around or shortly after the time of Christ. He was partly right, in his actual dating of the texts, but partly wrong: the word \(\text{authentia} \) was used, as we have seen, to translate an earlier Egyptian idea. For all his philological acumen, Casaubon was in the last resort as far away from a real understanding of the Hermetica as anyone before him: he was taken in by the appearance and overlooked what the appearance concealed. We encountered the same basic problem earlier, on a smaller scale, with the phenomenon of double etymology. Now we need to face all the implications of the problem on a much larger scale. In short, we have to consider the possibility that the Hermetic corpus as a whole could in a sense be a huge example of double etymology: of ideas being re-interpreted, ‘re-etymologised’ as it were, through being transferred into the terms of Greek culture and language.

We are fortunate in still being allowed some insight into the problems associated with religious ‘translation’ in the Graeco-Egyptian world; this word ‘translation’ must, for a number of reasons, be understood in very broad terms when

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75 E. O. von Lippmann, *Entstehung und Ausbreitung der Alchemie*, Berlin and Weimar 1919–54, i, pp. 52, 57–58, 67, 199, 222, 344–45. The specific word \(\kata\phi\nu\rho\nu\) occurs both in *Corp. Herm. 1.4* and in alchemical tradition (Berthelot and Ruelle, as in n. 7, ii, p. 85.17–18; von Lippmann, op. cit., i, p. 99); simply to label the occurrence in the Hermetic text as ‘Stoic’ (Büchi, as in n. 6, p. 42) contributes nothing to our understanding of the term.

76 Zosimus in Berthelot and Ruelle (as in n. 7), ii, p. 203.13–14; cf. e.g. Porphyry, *In Aristotelis categorias*, ed. A. Busse, Berlin 1887, pp. 94.18, 122.6.


78 Casaubon (as in n. 8), pp. 65–66 (‘... voces antiquis Graecis ignotae, \(\omega\varepsilon\kappa\varepsilon\varepsilon\tau\iota\varsigma\alpha\varsigma\ldots\)’).
considering the transfer of traditions from Egyptian into Greek. Basically, Egyptian natives who viewed themselves as heirs to the ancient traditions of their country were faced with two alternatives of attitude and action—alternatives which had many shades of ambiguity and compromise in between. Either they could turn away from the Greek invaders and wish to see them, along with the Greek settlement at Alexandria, destroyed; or they could deliberately join forces with the alien presence by accepting and adapting. The resulting tension had something of the quality of a life and death struggle about it—simultaneously personal and cultural—which we do wrong to overlook. One particular text, from Oxyrhynchus, provides a human glimpse into the realities of the situation. The text is all the more valuable because, as Fowden has shown, it ‘emanated from a milieu similar to that of Hermetism’ and bears important general similarities to the Hermetica as a whole; what Fowden failed to point out is that it bears a particularly close resemblance in certain details to the first of our Hermetic texts, the revelation from Poimandres. In it the author describes how he found himself faced with the task of translating into Greek an Egyptian religious text concerned with the nature and worship of the god Imhotep, and how he felt overwhelmed by the enormity of trying to translate sacred traditions into the ‘popular’ language of the Greeks. He kept putting off the job; as a result he fell ill, and almost died. Only when the god himself, Imhotep, appeared in a vision—a vision remarkably similar to the vision of Poimandres described at the opening to the first of the Hermetica—was the man cured. But his cure had a price: he would have to honour his commitment and finish the translation. The reasons why he had felt so daunted to begin with become clear when we see what this task of translation actually involved. As mentioned earlier, the word hermenæa meant not only ‘translation’ in our modern sense but also ‘interpretation’: even in the case of a definite text it was not just a question of producing a literal rendering, word for word. Instead, our writer took as his model the ‘inventiveness’ of the god whose nature he felt committed to reveal: one obvious example of those divine attributes which Imhotep shared with Thoth. Instead of reproducing his Egyptian text in Greek he took key ideas from the original work and ‘unfolded them in the form of a physical treatise in another book’; and he proceeded in this way in conscious imitation of, and as a conscious act of service towards, his god. He is also very clear both about his methods and about his aim. His method ‘in everything he wrote’ involved ‘filling out what was lacking and removing whatever was excessive’: the excision of material he considered redundant and the introduction of new ideas that had no equivalent in the original text. As for his aim in pursuing this course of ‘inventiveness’, it was—in his own words—‘to make plausible and convincing’ the spiritual traditions which he felt obliged to perpetuate and popularise by making them available for a Greek-speaking audience.
How exactly, and to what degree, these principles of composition and transmission apply to the writing of our Hermetica is an issue which by its very nature can only be approached with the greatest of difficulty: there are far too many opportunities for drawing the wrong conclusions. But the points of similarity linking this first-hand report with the Hermetica as a whole and with the Poimandres text in particular, together with the obvious correspondences between certain of the details in the account and the traces of translation and re-interpretation which we have discovered in the same Poimandres text, make its relevance to our understanding of the Hermetic corpus undeniable. The time is long gone when we can afford to believe that because the Hermetica use Greek philosophical language they have no Egyptian prehistory.

By reading between the lines of a passage from Iamblichus we can see that the Neoplatonist Porphyry—who considered forgery-hunting an important way of helping to keep the Platonic tradition uncorrupted and pure—wanted to dismiss the Hermetic texts he knew as falsifications, devoid of any antiquity, because they used Greek philosophical terminology. A little later on in the third century AD Iamblichus published his reply:

The problems you claim you have encountered in these particular texts can be resolved quite surely and clearly. The texts published under the name of Hermes do indeed contain Hermetic doctrines, even though they do often make use of philosophical terminology. This is because they were translated out of the Egyptian language by men who were not unacquainted with Greek philosophy.

The same controversy resurfaced in the sixteenth century. Isaac Casaubon elaborated the charge of forgery in considerable detail; it was left to Ralph Cudworth to reply that although Casaubon’s vast learning may have been well-intentioned, it was fundamentally misguided. There are some, he wrote, who might suspect, that these Hermaick books had been counterfeited by Greek philosophers, and contained nothing but the Greek learning in them, because they speak so much the philosophick language; Jamblichus gives an account of this also, that the reason hereof was, because they were translated out of the Egyptian language by men skilled in the Greek philosophy, who therefore added something of their own phrase and notion to them.

difficult not to be reminded by this emphasis on ‘filling out what is lacking’ (to hysteron prospodron) of Thoth’s ancient role as the divine scribe ‘who says what is and causes to exist what is not’—in the sense that he ‘reads what is written, and what is not written he supplies’: cf. already Pyramid Texts, utterance 510 §1146 (where the idea occurs immediately after the description of the primordial waters and the cosmic serpent with its coils: above, p. 17 with n. 68), Mercer (as in n. 68), iii, p. 565.


It is interesting to note how closely this final expression of Cudworth’s about the translators ‘adding something of their own’ corresponds to the wording used by the author of the Imhotep text—which was only discovered centuries later—in the autobiographical preface to his work. The tendency until recently has been to dismiss Iamblichus for his ‘Egyptomania’ and to present his answer to Porphyry as simply a desperate attempt to wriggle out of an impossible situation;

Cudworth’s reply to Casaubon has been, and remains, totally ignored. And yet both times and attitudes are changing, with an increasing awareness that Casaubon may be partly right—as far as his dating of the Hermetic texts is concerned—but that in other respects Iamblichus is likely to prove a far better guide. However, it is important at this point of transition in Hermetic studies to understand as exactly as possible why such a new assessment is required. In the first instance it is required because Casaubon’s emotive idea of Hermetic ‘forgeries’ involves a fundamental misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the factors involved. To attribute one’s own work to Hermes was not so much an attempt to deceive as a gesture confirming that one belonged to a specific spiritual tradition. Iamblichus had already stated the matter quite clearly: the Egyptian Hermes-Thoth is the ‘protector’ of all true knowledge of the gods, and as such it was to him that our ancestors attributed their discoveries in wisdom by presenting their own writings under the name of Hermes.

Cudworth, appropriately, elaborated further by emphasising that this attributing of one’s works to Hermes was an acknowledgement not just of affiliation but also of inspiration.

Secondly, Iamblichus’s assessment reflects what Casaubon’s does not: the religious, social and linguistic conditions in Egypt during the first few centuries AD. Long-preserved traditions were in a state of crisis; translation, adaptation and reinterpretation were not exceptional or isolated phenomena but epitomised the mood and the need of the time. Iamblichus appreciated what Casaubon could not or would not—the dynamism of the historical situation. And finally, there is the point already touched on earlier. The Hermetic tradition was, almost by definition, a tradition of translation: the hermeneutical tradition *par excellence*, dedicated to upholding its originator’s name for continually inventing, re-assessing, re-interpreting. This basic dynamic is one aspect of Hermetism which has somehow eluded modern scholarship, but which should be the starting-point for research into the Hermetica—not a conclusion.

It has become an almost unspoken assumption that the world of Hermes Trismegistus has nothing to do with the shiftiness and antics of the classical Greek Hermes. Partly, one suspects, as a result of misunderstanding of Egyptian art, and partly due to lack of familiarity with Egyptian literature, the god Thoth has come to be known as a stiff and wooden figure: the pedantic scribe of the gods. Little

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88 Cf. e.g. Stricker (as in n. 1), pp. 111–14 (although his summarising of the Hermetica as ‘Egyptian in content, Greek in form’ is far too simplistic); F. van Lamoen, *Hermes Trismegistus, Pater Philosophorum*, Amsterdam 1990, p. xvii; A. R. Sodano, *Giamblico, I misteri egiziani*, Milan 1984, p. 361.
could be further from the truth. As the god of wisdom Thoth was, above all, ‘the mysterious’ (*pu sheta*) and ‘the unknown’. In Graeco-Egyptian literature this elusiveness of his found natural expression in descriptions of him as ‘all-seeing but unseen’, because ‘no one even among the gods is able to perceive his true form’. The emphasis here is on his ‘true form’, because he was notorious for his ability to keep changing his shape and appearing as this or that, or simply as the whole of creation; we find the same basic idea expressed in the hymn that brings the first of the Hermetica to a close, where Poimandres-Thoth is addressed as holy (*hagios*) because ‘all of creation has become your image’. In fact in Egyptian theology Thoth was well known for his ambiguity, deception and dissimulation—very much like the Greek Hermes. And to return to the first of the Hermetica, it is remarkable that whereas the document has been stripped by critics time and time again of its Greek or vaguely Jewish terminology and left as nothing, there is one fundamental aspect of it which seems not to have been appreciated. At the very beginning of the text Thoth-Poimandres suddenly appears in a dramatic vision out of nowhere, only to emphasise that he is everywhere; he then immediately starts to change his shape—into endless light, into darkness and a serpent, into water, into fire, into the divine ‘powers’—and finally he vanishes back into nowhere. It should be obvious that texts describing experiences of this kind need to be approached with an equal degree of agility on the part of the reader. They are too subtle to be understood through attempts at hedging them in and fencing them off. Or rather, they are so subtle that they will simply reflect back to us whatever strategies we use and whatever preconceptions we have.

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90 Boylan (as in n. 28), pp. 100, 102, 119 n. 4, 189, 198, Ringgren (as in n. 27), p. 22, T. McA. Scott (as in n. 1), pp. 100–02.
91 *Corp. Herm.* 1.31; cf. Reitzenstein (as in n. 8), p. 20—‘I know your forms’—with n. 6, pp. 22–23—‘You who transform yourself into holy forms...Holy (*Hagios*) Thoth, no one among the gods is able to endure the true vision of your face... When you manifested yourself, the universe came into being and light appeared... No one among the gods is able to perceive your true form, you who metamorphose yourself into all forms...’—and Boylan (as in n. 28), p. 102 n. 2.
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