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**INTRODUCTION TO THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF
WESTERN ESOTERICISM 2**

THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD: HERMETICISM & NEOPLATONISM

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Ways of knowing

WORKSHOP 3

The Hellenistic period has bequeathed us ideas, concepts, and belief systems that shaped our world to this day, but disentangling their earliest roots from the forms they have taken in our day is a tricky task. Historical context and interpretations of these related, but distinct traditions must be taken into account and handled carefully, or we run the risk of creating new interpretations rather than understanding them within their context.

KEY THEMES

- **Understanding different ‘ways of knowing’ and their historical context**
- **Learning how to handle them when encountered in various texts and traditions.**
- **Understanding how transmission and reception of ideas across cultures and through time impacts the content and influence of a given idea or tradition.**
- **Understanding the impact of translation and interpretation on our understanding of ‘foundational’ esoteric texts**

The aim of this lecture and workshop is to demonstrate:

How the turbulent Hellenistic period gave rise to a cluster of perspectives that sit at the core of what we call Western Esotericism.

These are not unique to esotericism - they are also at the core of Christianity and have also impacted Judaism and Islam, with significant interaction with Persian and other Near Eastern cultures.

As they have travelled through the centuries, they have been reinterpreted and readapted to the needs of the time by the lights of the individuals involved.

Our aim is to understand how this works and how to track it when working with such ideas and materials.

Learning Outcomes:

- Understand how the drive to know and understand humanity in relation to nature and the cosmos has evolved different ‘ways of

knowing' at the heart of specific traditions.

- Understand and be able to trace how these traditions have been shaped by the historical process of transmission and reception.
- Be sensitive to the impact of translation and interpretation on historical material.
- Develop awareness and strategies to handle such material.



LIST OF TEXTS

A significant, highly recommended accompanying text for this module is Wouter Hanegraaff's recent publication ***Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2022)**, which very specifically targets the themes explored here.

Also recommended for more historical background to the complex Hellenistic era is Brian Copenhaver's introduction to his *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum*, available here: <https://ia802801.us.archive.org/17/items/hermetica.thegreekcorpushermeticumandthelatinasclepiustranslatedbybriancopenhaver/Hermetica.%20The%20Greek%20Corpus%20Hermeticum%20and%20the%20Latin%20Asclepius%20translated%20by%20Brian%20Copenhaver.pdf>

Plotinus' *Enneads* are available here: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plotenn/index.htm>

You will find a couple of additional articles uploaded onto the course website. These are optional reading, but may be referred to in the activities that follow.

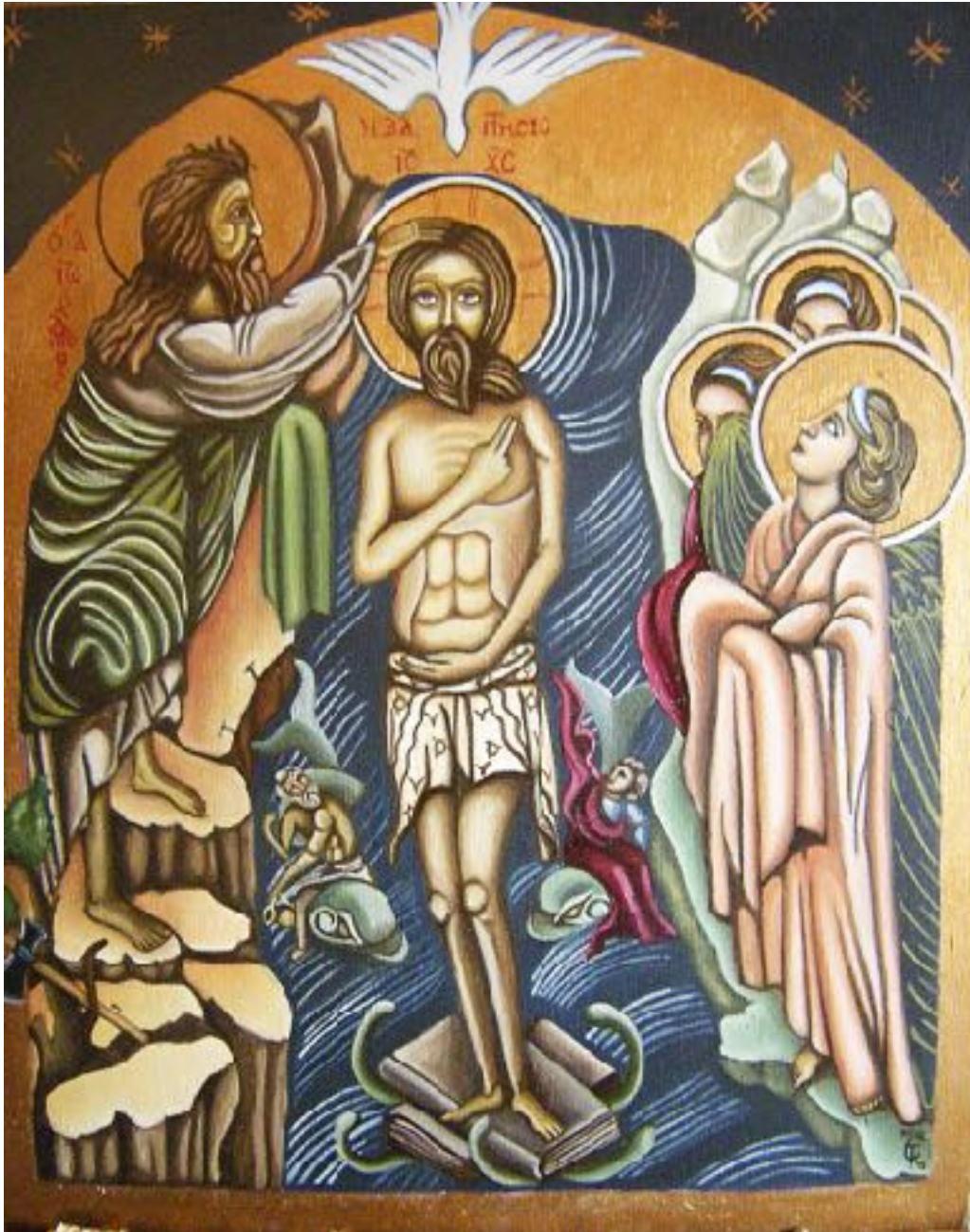
Additional sources are available in the **Further Reading** list depending on your personal area of interest.

ACTIVITY 1

Look at the two images below, one at a time. Consider them step by step according to the four levels of interpretation (listed below for ease of reference). In your groups, discuss and list your reading of these two images on all four levels.



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- **Literal Interpretation (what do I see):** Obvious references or metaphors and historical / cultural context.
- **Allegorical interpretation (what might this mean based on what I already know):** We know the object represents something else, regardless of whether this has an esoteric dimension or not.
- **Moral / Tropological interpretation (What are the ethical implications and deeper significance of its meaning? What does this mean to me):** Demands the

participation of the observer: causes change on an intellectual level. **Engagement begins.**

- **Anagogical interpretation (What does the interpretation mean in relation to the cosmos/my place in the cosmos as an individual and as a human. What are the implications of this for the human relationship to the divine?):** Identification of perception with the object that is perceived. Viewer internalizes the symbol, the perception of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, and the implication for the human condition. **Change occurs... if this changes us, then it resembles initiation (an altered state of consciousness and knowing...)**

ACTIVITY 2

Consider the following statements:

*"In translating, a person in effect rewrites a text entirely. The grammar and vocabulary of the original text are abandoned for an entirely different set of linguistic structures, and the only control of this rewriting process is **the idea or thought** of the source itself."*

*(Steiner, *After Babel*, 319 in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, Introduction).*

"A term is a paralysed word, and terminological use of a word is an act of violence committed against speech," a point that tends to be underestimated by modern interpreters of ancient texts."

*(Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I*, 419, with commentary by Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, Introduction, note 9.)*

"Historiography in general and art history in particular is always subject to information loss, depending on the judgement of the historian [or translator] in

the role of “relay,” striving “to recover the pristine signal” that travels down the centuries.”

(Sasha Chaitow, Son of Prometheus, 65, citing George Kubler, Shape of Time, 19-21).

Now read the excerpts that follow. I have deliberately avoided giving the sources. After reading them, do the following:

- Identify the terms that are most likely to be subject to reinterpretation as explained in the presentation (eg, knowledge, intellect, etc) and as identified in the statements above. Then consider the following questions:
 - **Make an educated guess as to the provenance of each excerpt. Use the terms you have highlighted to help you. Estimate the century and historical / cultural / thematic context if possible (eg, 5th century AD, Greek philosophy, or 12 century AD, scholastic theology, etc).**
 - What are your interpretations of the terms you have highlighted? What more familiar terms might they correspond to? What further steps could you take to “clear the signal” so that this excerpt speaks more clearly?
 - Scroll to the end of this document where you will find the sources for each excerpt. How close were your guesses? To what extent did the language of the translation lead you to guess correctly or wrongly?
 - Choose the one that interests you the most and begin to research it by drawing up a list of potential sources to explore.
 - Consider the excerpt and translations you have been given here in relation to the lecture and seminar presentation. What is problematic, what could be reinterpreted more faithfully to the source, and how? Consider Hanegraaff’s points on translation to guide your responses.
1. *When all things, in a word, come to harmony by division and union, without the methods being neglected in any way, the nature is transformed. For the nature being turned upon itself is transformed; and it is the nature and the bond of the virtue of the whole world.*

2. As Nature is the will of God, and God created her, or put her upon every imagination, so Nature made herself a seed, her will and pleasure in the elements. She indeed is but one and yet brings forth diverse things but works nothing without a seed.
3. And just as all things were created from one Chaos by the design of one God, so in our art all things, that is the four elements, are born from this one thing, which is our Chaos, by the design of our Artificer and the skilful adaptation of things... This is the source of all the perfection of the whole world... And just as the world was created from dark Chaos through the bringing forth of the light and through the separation of the very firmament and of the waters from the earth, so our work brings forth the beginning out of black Chaos and its first matter through the separation of the elements and the illumination of matter.
4. Knowledge is in a certain respect separated from its object by otherness. But prior to the knowledge, which as one thing knows another, is the uniform connection with divinity... The Gods have an existence which is always invariably the same, thus also the human soul is conjoined to them by knowledge, according to a sameness of substance... through the pure and blameless intellection which the soul received from eternity from the Gods, becoming united to them.
5. Just as a knowledge of the Principles of Geometry enables man to measure distant suns and their movements, while seated in his observatory, so a knowledge of the Principle of Correspondence enables Man to reason intelligently from the Known to the Unknown. Studying the monad, he understands the archangel.
6. The Intellectual-Principle on the other hand was never merely the Principle of an inviolable unity; it was a universal as well and, being so, was the Intellectual-Principle of all things. Being, thus, all things and the Principle of all, it must essentially include this part of itself [this element-of-plurality] which is universal and is all things: otherwise, it contains a part which is not Intellectual-Principle: it will be a juxtaposition of non-Intellectuals, a huddled heap waiting to be made over from the mass of things into the Intellectual-Principle!

GENERAL FURTHER RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Please remember these are entirely optional!

- How are the ways of thinking and interpretation you have been introduced to in this module different from those you are accustomed to, whether through practice or training? Which elements can you attribute to the prevalent worldview, which to conditioned belief, and which to education? What, if any, of your perspectives are you rethinking as a result and why (or why not?)
- What do the issues addressed in this module imply regarding the scholarly study of esotericism generally, and Hermeticism and Neoplatonism specifically?
- What issues are raised regarding the translation of esoteric texts? Which of these concerns you the most and why? How do you think it is best addressed (and why?) How would you explain this to someone entirely new to such material?
- In what ways does esotericism constitute a religious experience? (**TIP:** *Parse the question carefully and consider the elements needing definition and qualification before proceeding with this one*).
- After reading the Introduction to Copenhaver's *Hermetica* (see above for link), create a list of the main texts mentioned. Then do some preliminary research, taking care to focus on reliable sources, and write short summaries of each, noting their significance and impact on esoteric schools of thought. Then try to create a visual mind map tracking the interrelationships between the texts.

Sources for Activity 3

1. Zosimos of Panopolis, C3-4 AD. *Of Virtue*, Lesson 1. *Alchemy Reader* 52.
2. Michael Sendivogius, 2nd Treatise, *A New Light of Alchymie*, 1604. *Alchemy Reader* 176.
3. Isaac Newton, *The Commentary on the Emerald Tablet*, (Keynes MS 28), 1680s. *Alchemy Reader* 243. Combines ideas from the Emerald Table with Mosaic creation account.
4. Iamblichus, C. 3-4 CE. *De Mysteriis* 4.2 a,b.
5. 'Three Initiates' (William Walker Atkinson), *The Kybalion: Principle of Correspondence*, 1908.
6. Plotinus, *Ennead* III.8.8, C3 AD.