

MARSILIO FICINO AND RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM

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The Byzantine Legacy

The history of Western esotericism in the Middle Ages is largely one of exotic transmission. Following the sack of Rome in A.D. 410, the western part of the empire was engulfed by the mass migration of barbarian peoples, and the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium (Constantinople) became the principal channel of classical and Hellenistic civilization. Hellenism had not only assimilated Eastern ideas and religions, but also proved the most durable of all ancient cultures. By Arnold Toynbee’s reckoning, the Hellenistic world passed through several eras including the Ptolemies, the Roman Empire, and the advent of Christianity.¹ While the Latin West entered the Dark Ages, Byzantium still basked in the sunny climes of the Greek East and inherited the mantle of the eternal city as the “second Rome.” Its pagan schools in Athens remained loyal to the Neoplatonists until the sixth century. As the major regional power across the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Near East, Byzantium carried the torch of

Alexandrian world culture for a millennium until the final onslaught of the Ottoman Turks from Central Asia in 1453.²

However, by the sixth century, the Arabs were an ascendant power on Byzantium’s eastern flank, where they settled the Middle East and Egypt. Confronted by the ancient and mysterious cultures of Egypt and Chaldea, Arabian culture swiftly assimilated the esoteric sciences of astrology, alchemy, and magic, all based on ideas of correspondences between the divine, celestial, and earthly spheres. The Arabs were also fascinated by the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, and they produced their own Hermetic literature with revelations of theosophy, astrology, and alchemy. The most famous example, the *Emerald Tablet* (sixth to eighth century A.D.), introduced the motto “As above, so below,” which would become well known to the Western world after the fourteenth century.³

Michael Psellus, a Byzantine Platonist of the eleventh century, used the Hermetic and Orphic texts to explain the Scriptures. A notable number of medieval scholars including Theoderic of Chartres, Albertus Magnus, Alain of Lille, William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, Bernard of Treviso, and Hugh of Saint Victor also mentioned Hermes Trismegistus or quoted the *Asclepius*, the only Hermetic treatise known to medieval Europe.⁴ Although condemned by church authorities, astrology, alchemy, and ritual magic were all practiced in medieval Europe.⁵ Meanwhile, scholastic theology was increasingly divorced from natural philosophy. The growing interest in nature

and the sensible world, together with the foundation of the universities and secular study, created an intellectual space within which Platonism and the *Hermetica* could be received in the Latin West.

Geopolitical factors in the Mediterranean world and Near East played a vital part in this process of cultural transfer. As the ascendant Ottoman Turks succeeded the medieval Arab caliphates as the dominant regional power in the Middle East, they increasingly impinged on the old Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire, which had been the major political and cultural force in southeastern Europe and Anatolia since the fall of Rome. As the Turks pressed on westward across the Greek islands and into the Balkans, the territory of Byzantium began to dwindle. The rich repository of Classical, Greek, and Arab learning, formerly the powerhouse of the Byzantine cultural sphere, also began to shift westward through the movement of refugee intellectuals, churchmen, libraries, manuscripts, and other treasures.⁶

This increased contact with the Greek world of the declining Byzantine Empire in the fifteenth century brought with it a significant philosophical shift in the Latin West, which in turn produced a revised outlook on nature and the heavens and, ultimately, a new vision of man, science, and medicine. This shift in philosophy favored Plato over Aristotle, whose works had formed the mainstay of medieval thought and science following their introduction to the Arab world in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

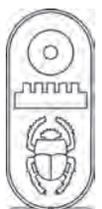
The Importance of Florence

The center of this revival of Platonism was Florence, the flourishing Renaissance city which lay in the Tuscan plain. Coluccio Salutati, chancellor of the republic from 1375 until his death in 1406, had played a major role in establishing humanism as the new cultural fashion, thereby boosting Florence's importance throughout

Italy. More especially, he recognized the importance of original Greek sources for a deeper understanding of Roman authors. In 1396, he persuaded the Florentine government to appoint Manuel Chrysoloras, the leading Byzantine classical scholar, to teach at the local university. The appointment created a nucleus of humanists who were able to pass on their skills to the next generation for the study and translation of ancient Greek literature.⁷

Thanks to Salutati's initiative, there were sufficient numbers of new Italian Hellenists to receive and articulate the next wave of Greek thought and letters that arrived in Florence from the Byzantine world. In 1438-1439, the Council of Ferrara—moved in midsession to Florence—was held to discuss the reunion of the Eastern Church with Rome. Leading figures in the Byzantine delegation were Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355–1452) and John Bessarion of Trebizond (1395–1472), the young patriarch of Nicaea. The elderly Plethon espoused a pagan Platonic philosophy that understood the ancient Greek gods as allegories of divine powers. Bessarion, who later became a cardinal, composed a defense of Plethon and Platonism against the Aristotelian George of Trebizond, who had attacked Plethon's ideas. The ensuing wave of philosophical disputes, together with their translation and discussion among the humanists of Florence, prepared the ground for a major efflorescence of Platonism in the second half of the century.⁸

Wealth and patronage also played an important part in the Platonist revival at Florence. Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), the leading merchant-prince of the Florentine republic, played a vital part in the Platonist revival. Building on the power and prestige of his father, Giovanni de' Medici (1360–1429), who realized an immense fortune through banking and trade, Cosimo effectively became the absolute ruler of Florence, while remaining a private citizen of a republic jealous of its liberty. But



Cosimo demonstrated royal generosity in his patronage of the arts and letters. In addition to his magnificent palace in the city, he built villas at Careggi, Fiesole, and elsewhere. His ecclesiastical foundations were numerous, including the basilica at Fiesole, the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, and a hospice in Jerusalem for pilgrims. In the world of fine art, he was the patron of Donatello, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and Luca della Robbia, whose paintings and sculptures gave full expression to the color and vibrancy of the Renaissance world.⁹

Greek philosophy and learning were especially dear to Cosimo's heart. During the Council of Florence, he frequently entertained Plethon and was deeply impressed by his exposition of Platonist philosophy. Later, after the final collapse of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, many learned Greek refugees from Constantinople found refuge in his palace. Thanks to Cosimo's interest in this Platonist stream of ideas from an exotic and waning world and his capacity for munificent patronage, both Platonism and the *Hermetica* were cultivated and promoted by a gifted circle of young idealists at Florence.¹⁰

Marsilio Ficino and the Hermetic Revival

Many Florentine thinkers had been attracted by Plethon's claims that all Greek philosophies could be harmonized and that a profound knowledge of Plato could become the basis of religious unity, the very subject under debate at the Council of Florence. But others were more receptive to ideas of a new spirituality. These seekers found in Platonism and the *Hermetica* an inspiration which promised far more than ecclesiastical concord. Prominent among these idealists was the young Florentine humanist called Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) who, under Cosimo's auspices, became the chief exponent of this revived Platonism and the high priest of the Hermetic secrets within a new Platonic Academy.¹¹

The son of a physician, Marsilio Ficino first studied philosophy as part of his own medical studies. The curriculum at the university was still dominated by scholasticism, and the young Ficino was repelled by the naturalism of Aristotle. Its dry statement of material facts could not slake his thirst for spiritual mystery, and its implicit denial of the immortality of the human soul struck at the very root of his search for divine inspiration. In Plato's idea of two coexisting worlds—a higher one of Being that is eternal, perfect, and incorruptible, a sharp contrast to the material world—Ficino found precisely what he had sought. The higher world of Ideas or Forms provided archetypal patterns of everything that existed on the lower mundane plane. The human soul originated in the higher world but is trapped in the body in the lower world, and Plato's writings sometimes describe the return or ascent of the soul to its true, perfect home.

The patron found the idealist. By 1456, Marsilio Ficino had begun to study Greek with a view to examining the original sources of Platonic philosophy, and he translated some texts into Latin. By 1462, Cosimo had given Ficino a villa in Careggi and commissioned him to translate a number of



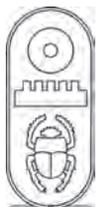


Giovanni di Stephano, floor intarsia showing Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and Marsilio Ficino (1488), west entrance, Siena Cathedral.

Greek manuscripts. But the new spirituality soon recruited Hermeticism alongside Platonism. Just as Ficino was preparing to translate numerous Platonic dialogues for his master, new Greek wonders arrived from the East. In 1460, a monk, Leonardo da Pistoia, arrived in Florence from Macedonia with a Greek manuscript. Cosimo employed many agents to collect exotic and rare manuscripts for him abroad, and this was one such delivery. However, this particular manuscript contained a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Gleaning something of its mystical cosmology, the elderly Cosimo was convinced that the *Hermetica* represented a very ancient source of divine revelation and wisdom. In 1463, Cosimo told Ficino to translate the *Hermetica* before continuing his

translation of Plato. Within a few months, Ficino had made a translation that Cosimo was able to read.¹²

Until as late as 1610, the works collected as the *Hermetica* were believed to date far back beyond their actual composition in the first two centuries A.D. Ficino and his successors regarded Hermes Trismegistus as a contemporary of Moses, and his teachings were seen as a *philosophia perennis*, a perennial philosophy predating yet anticipating Christianity with its roots in pharaonic Egypt. The diffusion of these ideas can readily be illustrated, even in the Church. Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503) had the Borgias apartments in the Vatican adorned with a fresco full of hermetic symbols and astrological signs. In the entrance to Siena



Cathedral, one can still see, in a work on the marble floor dating from 1488, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus as a bearded patriarch.¹³ Renaissance writers also regarded the Hermetic treatises as unique memorials of a *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) in the sense of the divine revelation granted to the oldest sages of mankind and handed down through a great chain of initiates. It was generally agreed that Hermes Trismegistus was a principal among these ancient sages together with Moses, Orpheus, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, and others in varying orders of descent.

After translating the *Hermetica*, Ficino resumed work on Plato, and Cosimo was able to read ten of Plato's dialogues before his death in 1464. Ficino completed his translation of the collected works of Plato, the first into any Western language, in 1469, and in the same year he wrote his famous commentary on Plato's *Symposium*.¹⁴ From 1469 to 1474, he worked on his own chief philosophical work, *Platonic Theology*.¹⁵ In late 1473, he became a Catholic priest, and he later held a number of ecclesiastical benefices, eventually becoming a canon of Florence Cathedral. About the same time he began to collect his letters, which give valuable insights into his life and activities over the next twenty years and include some smaller works of philosophy.¹⁶ After 1484, he devoted himself to his translation and commentary of Plotinus, the leading Neoplatonist of antiquity, which was published in 1492.

Although he lived a contemplative life as a scholar and priest, Ficino had a far-reaching influence on the world of Renaissance thought. Encouraged by Cosimo, he had already founded the new Platonic Academy at his villa in Careggi by 1463. Unlike a formal college, the Academy functioned chiefly as a loose circle of friends inspired by the spiritual ideas of Platonism and the *Hermetica*. Accounts of its activities indicate Ficino's desire to found a lay religious

community with discussions, orations, and private readings of Plato and other texts with younger disciples. Plato's birthday was celebrated with a banquet at which each participant made a philosophical speech. Public lectures on Plato and Plotinus were held in a nearby church. Humanists and other distinguished adherents from Italy and abroad frequented the Academy, and Ficino kept up an extensive correspondence with them.¹⁷

But what was Ficino actually teaching in the Academy? What was so novel and exciting about this newfound spirituality based on the new reception of Platonism and the *Hermetica*? The answers to these questions lie in Ficino's cosmology and the role in it that he assigned to the human soul. His model of the universe was derived from Neoplatonic and medieval sources, essentially a great hierarchy in which each being has its assigned place and degree of perfection. God was at the top of this hierarchy, which descended through the orders of angels, the planets, and the elements to the various species of animals, plants, and minerals.

This cosmology, itself the historical product of ancient and medieval speculation, had long remained essentially static. Within the hierarchy, each degree was merely distinct from the next by some gradation of attributes. Through his Platonic emphasis on the soul as the messenger between the two worlds, Ficino introduced a new dynamic into the traditional cosmology. He revived the Neoplatonic doctrine of the world soul to suggest that all the parts and degrees of the hierarchy were linked and held together by the active forces and affinities of an all-pervading spirit. In his scheme, astrology was intrinsic to a natural system of mutual influences between the planets and the human soul.¹⁸

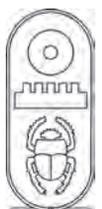
But prime of place was granted to the human soul in Ficino's cosmology. Ficino taught that thought had an influence upon its objects. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates identifies love as an active force that holds all

things together. Ficino attributed the active influence of thought and love to the human soul, which could reach out and embrace all things in the universe. This magical equivalence between each human soul and the world soul thus became the hallmark of Renaissance Neoplatonism. By placing the human soul, like a droplet of divinity, at the center of the universe, Ficino initiated a fundamental spiritual revolution in man's self-regard. Within his dynamic cosmology, the soul thus combined in itself everything, knew everything, and possessed the powers of everything in the universe.

This cosmology was not just a formal intellectual model but rather a map for the travels and ascent of one's own soul. In his emphasis on the inner, contemplative life, Ficino gave a personal and practical slant to his theory of the soul. Through meditation, Ficino believed, the soul exchanged its commerce with the mundane and material things of this outer world for a new contact with the spiritual aspects of the incorporeal and intelligible world of higher planes. Such spiritual knowledge is unobtainable as long as one's soul is enmeshed in ordinary experience and the noisy concerns of this

troubled world. In these lower states of consciousness, the soul is barely awakened. But once the attention is directed inward, the soul begins to ascend the spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos, all the while learning and interacting with higher spiritual entities.

Ficino always presented these mystical exercises and ascent experiences as journeys of the soul toward higher degrees of truth and being, culminating in the direct knowledge and vision of God. This initiatory aspect of Ficino's philosophy certainly helps to explain the intense attraction his ideas held for the Academy audiences. His listeners felt their souls were being invited to join in a cosmic voyage of spiritual exploration, an ascent toward the godhead, and a vision of universal truth. Ficino never doubted that his thought was Christian. For him, Jesus Christ was the exemplar of human spiritual fulfillment. His Christianity was, of course, a more esoteric, elite, spiritualized form of religion than that proffered to the credulous masses by the friars. Ficino saw himself as a physician of the soul, guiding his students on a path that could free them from the dross of this world and open their spirits to the dazzling radiance of divinity.¹⁹



END NOTES

¹Arnold J. Toynbee, *Hellenism: This History of a Civilization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

²A standard work remains authoritative: *Byzantium: An Introduction to East Roman Civilization*, edited by Norman H. Baynes and H. St. L. B. Moss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); see also Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of the New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980).

³Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Phanes Press, 1995), pp. 18-21.

⁴For the transmission and reception of Hermetic and esoteric ideas in the Middle Ages, see Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. xlv-xlvii; Antoine Faivre, "Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements," in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, edited by Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (London: SCM Press, 1993), pp. 26-31, 42-46; Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 53-55.

⁵In his study of medieval European magical traditions, Kieckhefer makes a sharp distinction between the occult sciences (astrology, alchemy, magic) mediated by Arabic and Jewish scholarship and native pagan practices, Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁶Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (London: Methuen, 1961), pp. 294-298.

⁷Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 26-28. For the vital role of Coluccio Salutati and other Renaissance humanists in the revival of Greek learning, see also the older work of Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961). The interaction between humanism, Aristotelian philosophy, and Renaissance Platonism and their preponderance in various thinkers is addressed in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), and *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

⁸John Monfasani, *Byzantine Scholars in Renaissance Italy: Cardinal Bessarion and Other Emigres* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995).

⁹Marcel Brion, *The Medici: A Great Florentine Family* (London: Ferndale, 1980), provides a richly illustrated volume on the Medici contribution to Florentine culture and an introductory history of the dynasty. See also Maurice Rowdon, *Lorenzo the Magnificent* (London: Purnell, 1974).

¹⁰James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), offers a definitive account of the Platonic revival in Florence and elsewhere in Italy.

¹¹A concise account of the life and thought of Ficino, together with an anthology of his works and a research bibliography is provided by Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, Western Esoteric Masters series (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2006). See also Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), Vol. 1, pp. 360-367; M. J. B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); M. J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹²Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 12-17.

¹³Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, p. 40. For the continued vigor of the Hermetic tradition in the Renaissance and early modern period, see Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, p. 56.

¹⁴Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, translated and edited by Sears Jayne (Woodstock, Conn.: Spring Publications, 1999).

¹⁵Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, translated and edited by Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001-2006).

¹⁶Ficino's letters are published in English as *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 6 vols. (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975-1990). See also *Meditations on the Soul: Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1997).

¹⁷Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, p. 60; Arthur Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy in Florence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 41-42; cf. James Hankins, "The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence," *Renaissance Quarterly* 44 (1991): 429-475.

¹⁸Ficino's Neoplatonic cosmology and philosophy of the soul and his reception of Hermetism is summarized in Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 8-21, and in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, pp. 42-48. A detailed account of his reading of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and *Asclepius* is found in F. A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp. 20-38.

¹⁹ Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, pp. 62-66.