

Agata Sowińska

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Agata Sowińska

University of Silesia, Katowice

The Origins of Hermes Trismegistos and his Philosophy The Theory of Tadeusz Zieliński

Abstract: Although there are many works, in a Latin, Greek, Arabic and a Coptic version, ascribed to Hermes Trismegistos, that show the words of wisdom of this ancient prophet, Hermetism still seems not to be a well-known philosophy. It is even hard to explain, if it was a philosophy or a religion. The author of this article — that is based on a theory of Tadeusz Zieliński — using one of these works in a Latin and a Coptic version, tries to explain a problem of the origins of Trismegistos himself and his knowledge.

Key words: Hermes Trismegistos, philosophical Hermetism, *Nag Hammadi Codex VI, 8 / Asclepius 27*

The origins of Hermes Trismegistos (the Trice-greatest Hermes) and a creation of his philosophy (Hermetism) are not explicit. This very situation is connected with many different opinions about a birth of the theoretical (philosophical) Hermetism.

A theory of Tadeusz Zieliński concerning a beginning and evolution of a Hermetic knowledge is a response to the opinion of Richard Reitzenstein, the forerunner of a Hermetic research, whose theory was based on Egyptian, and later, Iranian sources of philosophical Hermetism. Zieliński, contrary to Reitzeinstein, saw the Egyptian episodes in a different form and in a different time of a Hermetic evolution, referring to the Hermetic written sources: *Asclepius* and seventeen Hermetic tractates.

While talking about the Zieliński's doctrine, we are reaching for the knowledge of "the world-creator — Hermetic trinity". Zieliński showed its creation and metaphysical evolution in three steps:

1. Hermetism of the ancient Arcadia: Zeus — Hermes — Pan (according to Zieliński, Arcadia was a home of a primal Hermes).

2. Hermetism of the Strasbourg cosmogony: Zeus — Hermes — Logos (it has something in common with the Arcadian sources but together with an expressive Greek philosophy).

3. Late Hermetism: Nous the First (God) — Nous the Creator (Craftsman) — Logos (this type of Hermetism is made of two Hermetic pieces: 1 — the Greco-Egyptian and 2 — the Roman one).

This very third step — the Late Hermetism — is the best known one from those three Hermetic steps and is identified with Hermes Trismegistos as his revelation, as the revelation of the ancient prophet and a grandson of Hermes proper. Above all, we are interested in this particular Hermetic step, as a Greco-Egyptian form, because of Zieliński's theory, which was actually against the idea of looking for the Egyptian origins of philosophical Hermetism. In connection with the Hermetic origins, Zieliński asked himself: How did the Arcadian Hermetism come to Egypt (where it generally grew up)? For Zieliński there is only one answer: after Alexander the Great came to Egypt, there must have been an ancient connection between Arcadia and Alexandria — a Greek city in Africa. According to Zieliński, it should have been Cyrene, that was sort of a bridge connecting Arcadia and Alexandria in Africa, and linked the Arcadian Hermetism with the ancient Egyptian and the Jewish culture guiding the primal Arcadian Hermes to Egypt.

Zieliński found a verification of his theory about "Cyrene as a bridge", in dialogue between the Trice-greatest Hermes and Asclepius: *Asclepius sive dialogus Hermetis Trismegisti* / Λόγος Τέλειος. To be precise, he discovered it in this very excerpt that survived in bilingual record — the Coptic (*NHC* VI,8: 70,3—76,1) and the Latin one (*Ascl.* 24—27). The Coptic version was found in a sixth codex of the Nag Hammadi Library, between the Gnostic treatises and two other Hermetic texts (*NHC* VI,6 and *NHC* VI,7), all written in a Coptic language. According to J. Brashler, P. Dirkse and D. Parrott, the researchers of the Gnostic literature, the whole Hermetic treatise *Asclepius* (paragraphs 1—41) was originally written in a Greek language and entitled ὁ λόγος τέλειος. As a complete text, however, it is composed in a Latin version ascribed to Apuleius of Madaura and later to Pseudo-Apuleius. The Coptic version is a translation of a small excerpt (paragraphs 65,15—78,43 in *Nag Hammadi Codex* VI,8 and paragraphs 21—29 in Latin version) of whole treatise. For many reasons the Latin version differs from the Coptic one, the similarity of contexts, however, shows that both — Coptic and Latin version derive from Greek sources, which is proved with three original fragments written in Greek language (VI,8: 73,23—74,2; VI,8: 76,2—76,15;

VI,8: 78,44—78,50)¹ analogous to the Coptic translation and close to the Latin adaptation.

This tractate is in the form of a dialogue between two interlocutors: the disciple — Asclepius and the mystagogue — Trismegistos (there are also two other persons — Tat and Ammon, but generally they don't participate in this discussion). The Coptic fragment, *NHC* VI,8: 65,15—78,43 and its Latin equivalent, *Ascl.* 21—29, can be thematically divided:

1. (*NHC* VI,8: 65,15—65,37, *Ascl.* 21) The mystery of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman.

2. (*NHC* VI,8: 65,37—68,19, *Ascl.* 22) The difference between the pious and the impious, the knowledge and the ignorance.

3. (*NHC* VI,8: 68,20—70,2, *Ascl.* 23) The gods created according to human likenesses.

4. (*NHC* VI,8: 70,3—76,1, *Ascl.* 24—27) The apocalyptic section.

5. (*NHC* VI,8: 76,2—78,43, *Ascl.* 27—29) The death and the immortality. The characteristic of a great daimon, who guards the reasonable and god-fearing man against the evil.

The most important section for us, of all those five, is the fourth one: the Apocalypse (*NHC* VI,8: 70,3—76,1, *Ascl.* 24—27), which is discussed by Zieliński in his work *Religia Cesarstwa Rzymskiego*². It needs to be said that Zieliński didn't know the Coptic version of this apocalyptic text and, as a result of this, his theory needs to be specified and confronted with a new Coptic text.

The Latin excerpt, that Zieliński's theory is based on, and its Coptic equivalent are as follows:

The Coptic version:

Nag Hammadi Codex VI,8: 75,26—76,1

26 ⲘⲚⲀⲘⲈⲘⲤⲐⲮⲐ ⲉⲗⲉ ⲙⲙⲁⲮ ⲛⲟⲓ ⲛ
ⲥⲐⲈⲒⲘ ⲙⲓⲤⲕⲁⲗⲉⲃⲉ ⲁⲮⲱ ⲘⲚⲁⲈ

28 ⲒⲐⲐⲮⲉⲣⲁⲮⲐⲮⲉⲗⲓ ⲐⲓⲟⲩⲡⲐⲟⲗⲒⲘ ⲈⲘⲤⲓ

ⲐⲮⲐⲘⲟⲟⲗⲉ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲕⲬⲙⲉⲃⲉ ⲈⲮⲛⲁⲕⲐ

30 ⲧⲘⲉ Ⲓⲛⲉ ⲛⲘⲁ ⲛⲒⲱⲧⲓⲡⲓⲃⲉ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲡⲧⲬⲉ

The Latin version:

Asclepius 27

Dis <cedent>³ uero

qui terrae dominantur, et conlocabuntur

in ciuitate in summo

initio Aegypti, quae

a parte solis occidentis condetur,

¹ The particular fragments are in the following works of Lactantius and Stobaeus: "1st fragment (cf. 73,23—74,2), dans Lactance, *Les Institutions divines* VII, 18,4; 2^e fragment (cf. 76,2—76,15), dans Stobée, *Anthologie* IV, 52,47; 3^e fragment (aussitôt après 78,43), dans Lactance, *Les Institutions divines* II, 16,6, et Cyrille d'Alexandrie, *Contre Julien* IV, 130E". In: J.-P. Mahé: *Écrits gnostiques. La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi*. Québec 2007, p. 1003.

² T. Zieliński: *Religia Cesarstwa Rzymskiego*. Toruń 1999, p. 389.

³ *Dis <cedent>*, Mahé; *distribuentur*, Dirkse, Parrott.

ΡΩΜΕ ΝΙΜ ΝΑΒΩΚ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΡΟΣ	←	ad guam terra marique festinabit omne mortale ge- nus.
32 ΕΤΙΕ ΝΕΤ̄Ν̄ΝΗΟΥ Ζ̄Ν̄ ΘΑΛΛΑCΣΑ		
ΕΤΙΕ ΝΕΤ̄Ν̄ΝΗΟΥ Ζ̄Ι ΠΙΚΡΟ·	←	— Modo tamen hoc in tem- pore, ubi isti sunt, o Trismegiste?
34 Ω ΠΤΡΙCΜΕΓΙCΤΟC ΝΑΪ †ΝΟΥ		
ΕΥΝΑΚΑΛΥ ΤΩΝ· Ω ΑCΚΛΗΠΙΕ	←	— Conlocati sunt in maxi- ma ciuitate in monte
36 ΖΝ ΤΝΟC Μ̄ΠΟΛΙC ΤΑΪ ΕΤ'ΖΙ ΠΤΟΟΥ		
[ΟC̄]		
[ΝΛΙΒΗ ⁴]		Libyco ⁵ .

A translation of the Coptic version of the Apocalypse:

„And these, who rule the earth will go away, and they will settle themselves in a city that is in a corner of Egypt that will be built toward the sun going down, every man will go there by the sea or by the shore — Trismegistos, where will they live? (Coptic version) / But where are they now? (Latin version) — Asclepius, in the city that is on the Libyan mountain (Coptic version) / — They settled themselves in the great city on the Libyan mountain (Latin version)”.

According to Zieliński's theory, a geographical location of Cyrene and the one place described in the Latin text are coherent. Comparing one version of the text with another, however, it is clear that grammatical points contradict the Zieliński's statement, especially when he refers to the Latin text that suggests two different geographical locations, and in fact the Coptic version shows only one place. We can prove it by explaining the grammatical structure of these two parallel texts. In the Coptic text there is a future tense in all quoted excerpt: „And these, who rule the earth will go away (CΕΝΑCΕΖΤΟΥ), and they will settle themselves (CΕΝΑ-ΤΑΖΟΥ ΕΡΑΤΟΥ) in a city that is in a corner of Egypt that will be built (ΕΥΝΑ-ΚΟΤC̄) toward the sun going down, every man will go (ΝΑΒΩΚ) there by the sea or by the shore — Trismegistos, where will they live (ΕΥΝΑΚΑΛΥ)? [...]”. It means that this particular text is talking about only one city that really exists somewhere in a corner of Egyptian land (ΟΥΠΟΛΙC ΕCΖΙ ΟΥΚΟΟZ ΝΤΕ ΚΗΜΕ) toward the sun going down (ΕΥΝΑΚΟΤC Ζ̄Ν̄ ΝCΑ ΝΖΩΤΠ' ΝΤΕ Π̄ΡΗ) and on the Libyan mountain (ΕΤ'ΖΙ ΠΤΟΟΥ ΝΛΙΒΗ). But the Latin version of this same text gives us the information concerning two different cities, because of two tenses forming the Latin excerpt: future tense, while talking about the city, where *qui terrae dominantur* and *omne mortale genus* will settle themselves and this very fragment

⁴ ΝΛΙΒΝ, Dirkse, Parrott; ΝΛΙΒΥΝ, Mahé. P.-A. Dirkse, D.-M. Parrott: *Asclepius* 21—29, VI,8: 65,15—78,43. In: J.-M. Robinson: *The Coptic Gnostic Library. A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Vol. 3. Brill, Leiden, Boston, Köln 2000, p. 438.

⁵ J.-P. Mahé: *Le Fragment du Discours parfait et les Définitions Hermetiques Arméniennes*. (Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi, 3,7). Québec 1978—1982, pp. 193—195.

seems to be analogous to the Coptic one quoted above; and present tense, in a question about god's location nowadays: "*Modo tamen hoc in tempore, ubi isti sunt* [...]", by which it differs from the Coptic quotation: **Ω ΠΤΡΙΜΕΓΙΣΤΟΣ ΝΑΪ ΤΝΟΥ ΕΥΝΑΚΑΔΥ ΤΩΝ** ("Trismegistos, where will they live?").

All in all, it is extremely hard to verify explicitly the main idea of Zieliński's doctrine, which says that this text shows Cyrene as the only one solution in this case. It is proved by Copenhaver, who gives many other conceptions of the city described in both versions of the apocalyptic section:

Scott identifies the sunset city as Alexandria, Zieliński chooses Cyrene, but Festugière thinks that the writer's apocalyptic hope requires no particular location. Scott believes that the city in question was Arsinoe or Crocodilopolis and that Libyan mountain refers to the elevated land west of the Nile. [...] The Greek word *Libue* could mean either Egypt west of the Nile or the territory of Alexandria. Although, like Festugière, Van Rinsveld admits that Libya need not be any particular place to suit the apocalyptic message, he suggests that in the original ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΕΛΕΙΟΣ, if its setting were Ptolemaic, Alexandria might have been a suitable place for the return of the gods but that in the Christian times of the Latin *Asclepius* Alexandria would not have been thinkable⁶.

As we can see, many disagreements and a different interpretation of the text show a huge interest in the Hermetic subject, in its beginning and meaning. The theory of Tadeusz Zieliński mostly boils down to the statement that the Egyptian influence on the primal Hermetism is not true. Zieliński also tries to ascribe the origin of the earliest Hermetism to Arcadia, where the primal Hermes could have been born. Then, he guides the Hermetism of ancient Arcadia through the Cyrene (but can we agree with that idea in a view of new Coptic version of the apocalyptic text?) and unites it with ancient Egyptian religion by which Zieliński brings about a division of Hermetism into philosophical and popular *Hermetica*, in order to certify finally that there is nothing what can be called "Egyptian" in the Late Hermetism except the figures and names of the Egyptian gods, which means that in the Late Hermetism there is no place for mysterious Egyptian magic (that is a crux of the popular Hermetism) but only for the Greek philosophy, because "the Late Hermetism" paraphrasing the words of Zieliński, "as a sort of system of the religious knowledge, has a Greek soul and Egyptian exterior"⁷.

⁶ B. Copenhaver: *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English translation with Notes and Introduction*. Cambridge 1992, p. 245—246. Cf.: "Les dieux, présentement retirés dans une grande ville du désert de Libye (Memphis, d'après Fowden, The Egyptian, p. 40), reviendront s'installer dans une cité bâtie à l'extrême bord de l'Égypte et fréquentée par des hommes du monde entier, Alexandrie, port international, réputée «près de l'Égypte» (*ad Aegyptum*), et non «en Égypte» (*in Aegypto*)" J.-P. Mahé: *Extrait du «Discours Parfait» D'Hermès Trismégiste à Asclepius (NH VI,8)*. In: *Écrits gnostiques. La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi*. Québec 2007, p. 1002.

⁷ T. Zieliński: *Hermes Trzykroć-Wielki (Hermes Trismegistos)*. Zamość 1921, p. 46.