

MITHRAISM AND ALCHEMY

By David Livingstone

The alchemical process, according to Zosimus of Panopolis, the foremost of the Hellenistic alchemists, and who lived at the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century AD, “is the Mithraic Mystery, the incommunicable Mystery.”¹ However, alchemical teachings could have no known association with Persian Zoroastrianism. Therefore, what does this quote tell us about the nature of Mithraism, and its connection to alchemy?

Although it contradicts the opinions of modern scholarship, Mithraism in Roman times was a cult regarded as preserving the wisdom of the “Magi”, having been founded originally by Zoroaster, as early as before the Trojan War. This opinion was to some extent promoted by Franz Cumont, who basically single-handedly founded the study of Mithraism, though today scholars of the subject have essentially rejected his thesis. As scholars maintain, there is very little evidence to maintain that Mithraism derived from Persian Zoroastrianism, but this was not the basis of Cumont's theory.

Rather, Cumont had maintained that the early strata of the cult's doctrines may have been formulated by a group of “heretical” Magi, which he refers to as Magussaeans, who inhabited Asia Minor, and which were by them imparted to the Greeks. In this cult of theirs we find teachings strikingly different from mainstream Zoroastrianism. Rather, these reflected a combination of Zurvanite Zoroastrianism and “Chaldean” or Babylonian astrology and magic. It was this creed, when brought to the Greeks of Asia Minor, with the advancing Persian armies in the sixth century BC, that contributed to the emergence of Greek “philosophy” and the Orphic cult of Dionysus. In the Hellenistic Age, it was the continuing presence of numerous Magian influences at the city of Alexandria in Egypt, with the inclusion of Greek philosophy, that contributed to the outgrowth of Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism.

Although these Magi were regarded as the great founders of the art, the adepts of alchemy in Hellenistic times preferred to follow Hermes, thought to have been a great ancient Egyptian sage. Zoroaster, explained Zosimus, agreed with Hermes that men could raise themselves above Fate, but he took the way of magic, while Hermes, on the other hand, took the way of philosophy. Essentially, as Jack Lindsay described, in *The Origins of Alchemy In Graeco-Roman Egypt*:

It would seem then in the third and second centuries BC at Alexandria there went on a considerable fusion of Greek and Iranian thought. This fusion was expressed by bringing together the two great figures of Zoroaster the Persian and Hermes-*Thoth* the Egyptian in a large new corpus of magical recipes and ideas, above all in an endless series of pantheist correspondences between men, animals, plants, stones, stars and planets.ⁱⁱ

In this period, numerous works were compiled and erroneously credited to Zoroaster, as well as to his most famous pupil Osthanes, the “Prince of the Magi”, and his purported patron, Hystaspes. The reputed founder of early alchemy was thought to have been Osthanes, to whom several works on the nature of plants and minerals and their astrological properties were ascribed. Osthanes was said to have accompanied Xerxes on his campaign against Greece as his chief magus, and Pliny the Elder, believed, that he was the person most responsible for the introduction of magic into Greece. Osthanes, mentioned Pliny, was the first person to write a book on magic “and nurtured the seeds, as it were, of this monstrous art, spreading the disease to all corners of the world on his way. However, some very thorough researchers place another Zoroaster, who came from Proconnesus, somewhat before Osthanes’ time. One thing is certain. Osthanes was chiefly responsible for stirring up among the Greeks not merely an appetite but a mad obsession for this art.” (Pliny, *Natural History*, XXX: 8)

It is said that after the Persian emperor's defeat at Salamis, Osthanes remained behind in Greece to become the teacher of the philosopher Democritus, an Ionian philosopher, born in 460 BC. The reputed author of seventy-two works, Democritus had apparently also visited Babylon to study the science of the “Chaldeans”, of which he is to have written on the subject. He summed up the results of his investigations in a Chaldean Treatise, another tractate was entitled *On the Sacred Writings of Those in Babylon*, and as a result of his visit to Persia, he wrote *Mageia*.

One of the first alchemical works written was by a certain Bolos of Mendes, in the second century BC, but falsely attributed to Democritus. One of the texts accredited to him, the *Leyden Papyrus*, consists mostly of recipes, but in one passage, Democritus describes an incident of divine revelation from his former master Osthanes, in which he acquired his alchemical knowledge.

It was long thought that it had been among the Magi that the various metals were connected with their astrological properties, but it was Zosimus who connected their cult with alchemy itself. To Zosimus, the mystic’s aim was to free the soul from the evil confines of matter and return it to God. To obtain the perfection of gold, he had only to free the essence of the noble metal from the base materials that imprisoned it. The goal of the alchemist, he explained, was the pursuit of a

“stone which isn’t a stone, this precious thing which has no value, this polymorphous thing, which has no form, this unknown thing which is known to all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In Hermeticism, as described in the Poimandres, typical to Hellenistic mysticism, the soul must ascend through the seven planets, and into the eighth sphere, where it may unite with God. According to the Poimandres, man must first undergo a spiritual death and resurrection, followed by an ascent through the spheres of the seven planets, leaving behind him in each of them part of his being, the part which the original man had received from the stars. Finally, he will be reduced to just himself, and can enter the eighth sphere, to join the powers assembled there, with whom he comes before the Father and enters God.

Thus, we are able to discern the meaning of the explanation of the theology of Mithraism, as it was provided by Celsus, Roman writer of the second century AD:

These truths are obscurely represented by the teaching of the Persians and by the mystery of Mithras which is of Persian origin. For in the latter there is a symbol of the two orbits in heaven, the one being that of the fixed stars and the other that assigned to the planets, and of the soul's passage through these. The symbol is this. There is a ladder with the seven gates and at its top an eighth gate. The first of the gates is of lead, the second of tin, the third of bronze, the fourth of iron, the fifth of an alloy, the sixth of silver, and the seventh of gold. They associate the first with Kronos (Saturn), taking lead to refer to the slowness of the star; the second with Aphrodite (Venus), comparing her with the brightness and softness of tin; the third Zeus (Jupiter), as the gate that has a bronze base which is firm; the fourth with Hermes (Mercury), for both iron and Hermes are reliable for all works and make money and are hard-working; the fifth with Ares (Mars), the gate which as a result of the mixture is uneven and varied in quality; the sixth with the Moon as the silver gate; and the seventh with the Sun as the golden gate, these metals resembling their color.” Origen. *Against Celsus*, (*Contra Celsum*), 6.22)

Therefore, essentially, the alchemists employed the language of chemical procedures as allegory. Transmuting lead into gold implied the purification of the soul. This process was represented by the transmutation of lead, the bases form, and the subsequent removal of its impurities until gold was achieved, also represented astrologically as ascending through the six planets, culminating in a vision of the Sun, symbolized by gold.

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ⁱ Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy*, p 324.

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