

INTRODUCTION

***PRISCA SAPIENTIA:* BETWEEN HISTORY, THEOLOGY, AND NATURAL PHILOSOPHY**

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Intellectual traditions tell a story about themselves. The story told by the Renaissance concept of *prisca sapientia* is at once powerful and laden with profound implications for early modern Christianity, natural philosophy, and humans' place in the cosmos. Scattered through the writings of the most revered pagan sages of the ancient East lay fragments of a primordial divine revelation, as old or perhaps even older than the Bible, preserved across millennia and eventually recovered in the 15th century. It was the knowledge of the Persian Zoroaster, the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, of Orpheus, and the Sibyls—pagan authorities who came to be seen as divinely inspired prophets of Christianity. In Renaissance Italy, possessing ancient wisdom meant standing in an unbroken line reaching back to the origins of things, holding divine truth.

The claim that this was, at least in part, story—a narrative identity fashioned from heterogeneous and late antique materials, legitimized through the authority of the Church Fathers—makes the historical fact of its (re-)construction even more significant. For those who transmitted this narrative, it was indistinguishable from history. It was a genuine attempt to recover what they believed to be a sacred truth. The Truth. It is precisely this blurring of history and story, of historical facts and self-fashioning, that makes ancient wisdom so fascinating and important for the history of ideas.

Prisca sapientia, prisca theologia, philosophia perennis, pia philosophia. Wisdom, theology, and philosophy. Ancient, pious and perennial. The terminology already signals the slippery and ambiguous nature of the concept. Despite the slightly different framing, these cognate expressions designate a single alluring idea: the shared belief in a divine, uncorrupted truth, the recovery of which carried profound meaning for the religious world of the time.

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That conviction drew on the authority of purportedly inspired writings, such as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Chaldean Oracles*, the *Orphic Hymns*, the *Sibylline Oracles*. The tradition was never purely textual, however. The modern divide between philosophical and technical Hermetica—that is, separating cosmological and theoretical reflections from magic, astrology or alchemy—rarely held in practice. The theoretical frequently presupposes ritual, and the technical is saturated with speculative thought. For Marsilio Ficino, who was a priest, a philosopher, and a physician at once, the ancient sages were healers of body and soul, astrologers, and masters of magic and theurgy, understood as legitimate practitioners in accordance with the Christian religion.

The relationship between Christianity and pagan antiquity runs as an internal tension through the entire history of ancient wisdom. The Church Fathers had prepared the terrain. On one side, figures like Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea, who incorporated pagan wisdom into a broader scheme of salvation, read Zoroaster and Hermes as inspired precursors of Christian truth. On the other were those who, with Tertullian, denied any common ground between Athens and Jerusalem. Renaissance thinkers followed both trajectories and strived to reconcile the tension between them. Parallel lineages of primordial prophets circulated in Jewish and Islamic thought (though this special issue focuses only on the Christian side of the *prisca* discourse).

Scholarship has approached ancient wisdom under different lenses. The foundational studies of Paul Oskar Kristeller on Ficino and the Hermetic tradition in the 1930s, continued by Eugenio Garin and Paolo Rossi in the 1950s, established the rigorous historical and philosophical groundwork on which subsequent research has built. Frances Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) brought these questions to international resonance, especially through the provocative idea of a Hermetic influence on the rise of early modern science. Though this thesis has since been substantially qualified, her role in redirecting scholarly attention to this material remains undeniable. The academic study of esotericism has offered the most sustained account of how ancient wisdom—as part of a wider esoteric discourse—was marginalized by Enlightenment historiography. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Martin Mulso, Kocku von Stuckrad, Moshe Idel, and others have since brought new perspectives to the field, situating ancient wisdom within broader dynamics of religious identity and cross-confessional exchange.

At the heart of this special issue lies the ERC Starting Grant project VERITRACE. “Traces de la Vérité”: The Reappropriation of Ancient Knowledge in Early Modern Natural Philosophy, led by Prof. Dr. Cornelis J. Schilt, employs large-scale computational methods across a corpus of more than 400,000 early modern printed texts in six languages, combining distant and close reading to trace how the four core ancient wisdom corpora listed above circulated in early modern natural philosophical discourse. The project also aims to scrutinize the historiographical narratives that have shaped our understanding of it. This issue is not a VERITRACE special: it contains contributions by project members and guest authors alike, resulting in a fruitful collaboration and exchanges of ideas.

The issue opens with Cornelis J. Schilt's historiographical reassessment of the Casaubon demolition thesis. It exposes the fragile foundations of this narrative, and the

arguments historians have offered to explain why interest in Hermes Trismegistus persisted anyway, while introducing the data-driven approach of VERITRACE as a reliable alternative. Jeffrey C. Wolf then details the project's computational pipeline—from data acquisition and text preprocessing to latent semantic analysis—through a case study on the 1650 English translation of *The Divine Pymander*, thereby revealing patterns of reception not detected by close reading alone.

Eszter Kovács and Demetrios Paraschos combine this digital approach with classical philology in a lexical study of fire-related vocabulary in the *Chaldean Oracles* and its reception in seventeenth-century English philosophical texts. Their method combines classical philological analysis with corpus queries to map the patterns and the surprising gaps through which a specific ancient symbolic vocabulary was absorbed and transformed.

The remaining three articles turn to historical interpretation. Jean-Paul de Lucca examines how Tommaso Campanella mobilized ancient wisdom—especially Hermetic and Sibylline sources—to underpin arguments for natural religion and universal reformation in the *Articuli prophetales* and the *Atheismus triumphatus*. Nicolò Cantoni and Demetrios Paraschos trace Ficino's precarious attempt to emulate the priestly authority of pagan sages through theurgy. They examine how the Florentine priest balanced personal fascination for pagan and Jewish wisdom with Christian legitimacy. Meanwhile, the paper investigates a possible influence of Eastern Orthodox theology on an intellectual journey fraught with the risk of heresy. Steven Matthews and Cornelis J. Schilt argue that the ideas Ficino advanced in *De Christiana Religione* and his *Corpus Hermeticum* translation, routinely attributed to pagan Hermetic influence, were substantially indebted to early Christian and Byzantine theology, including the doctrine of *theosis*—a finding that calls for a significant reassessment of the idea of a pagan Renaissance.

Together, these six contributions approach ancient wisdom from complementary angles, questioning inherited narratives and testing established methods. *Prisca sapientia* was never a single, unified concept: it was riddled with internal tensions between story and history, paganism and Christianity, philosophy and practice, religion and science. This special issue hopes to reflect that complexity and to offer new scholarly insights into a tradition that remains central to any serious understanding of the early modern world.