HAPPILY EVER AFTER?
TRACING THE ELUSIVE HERMES TRISMEGISTUS THROUGH FACT AND FICTION

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Abstract. In 1614, eminent scholar Isaac Casaubon refuted the antiquity and authenticity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and by consequence its author, Hermes Trismegistus. From that moment on, the Hermetic writings with their supposedly pre-Christian revelations would only be studied by a handful of people on the fringe–or so the story goes. In truth, there is very little to back up either the Casaubon demolition-thesis, first promoted by Frances Yates, or the arguments provided by historians to explain the continued interest in Hermes's writings and the associated ancient wisdom tradition. This paper exposes the shaky foundations of both the demolition thesis and the continuation arguments and shows how our modern appreciation of choice scholarship can hamper our evaluation of the past. As a promising methodology to circumvent our modern biases, the data-driven digital humanities approach promoted by the ERC-StG project VERITRACE is introduced, the early results of which can be witnessed in subsequent papers included in this special issue. Here, several hundred thousand early modern volumes are mined for traces of four corpora: the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Chaldean Oracles*, the *Sibylline Oracles*, and the *Orphic Hymns*, and for its discussion of the *prisca sapientia* discourse they exemplify.

Keywords: Hermes Trismegistus, *prisca sapientia*, Isaac Casaubon, Ralph Cudworth, Frances Yates, digital humanities, Church Fathers, Isaac Newton

Introduction

There is a pervasive myth about the death of Hermes Trismegistus, propagated since time immemorial; or rather, since 1614. In July of that year, the eminent philologist, classical scholar and Protestant theologian, Isaac Casaubon, breathed his last, but not before publishing his *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI*. Each of its 773 pages–not including the forty-six-page dedication to King James–was devoted to the demolition of Cardinal Caesar Baronius's 12-volume *Annales Ecclesiastici*. Published between 1588 and 1607, the *Annales Ecclesiastici* were the Vatican's response to the *Centuriae Magdeburgenses*, the Lutheran attempt to vindicate the Reformation and demonstrate how the Lutheran Church was the direct continuation of ancient Christianity, instead of the antichristian Roman Catholic Church. Obviously, Rome held

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slightly different opinions on the matter, and hence Baronius set himself the task to demonstrate the Catholic Church's antecedents and direct papal lineage from St Peter.

Casaubon's attack focussed on every aspect of Baronius's scholarship, from his interpretation of Scripture and the Church Fathers to the evidence he marshalled in support of his claims from non-Christian sources. These included ancient historians and supposedly equally ancient non-Scriptural sources such as the *Sibylline Oracles* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, works allegedly presaging concepts such as the Trinity long before these were revealed to the Church. The Hermetic books were said to have been composed by the elusive Hermes Trismegistus, a contemporary of Moses or maybe even of the patriarchs, and enjoyed immense popularity. After the first Latin translation by Marsilio Ficino appeared in print in 1471, by the early seventeenth century a plethora of editions and translations in the vernacular had been published. Hermes's authority was invoked in a variety of disciplines and disputes, mostly theological, but at times historical and even natural-philosophical, with Nicolaus Copernicus referring to 'Trimegistus' as an authority in his *De Revolutionibus*.[1] As Anthony Grafton has demonstrated, Casaubon used his extensive Greek philological knowledge and understanding to prove that these Hermetic writings could not have been composed before the third century AD, and possibly much later.[2] This implied that they did not contain prophetic revelations of doctrine, but merely reiterated these, and should instead be considered Christian frauds. Martin Mulsow and others have shown that Casaubon was not the first to question the antiquity of the Hermetic corpus and its author.[3] Yet Casaubon's properly scholarly debunking was the final nail in Hermes's coffin–a true demolition of Hermes's antecedents and indeed the reliability of the corpus that bore his name.

Or was it? As the brief survey with which I will continue below shows, Hermes was far from death. Historians have come up with all sorts of explanations as to why interest in Hermes continued throughout the seventeenth century, seemingly unwilling to entertain the simple idea that the Casaubon demolition-thesis might be wrong. For all we know, it might be right–but no serious, rigorous research has been done to test the hypothesis. Following a discussion of the various explanations given for Hermes's apparent defiance of inevitable death, this article exposes some of the presentist assumptions behind both these explanations, and the original demolition-thesis. It suggests a different way forward, a data-driven approach, which allows for statistically meaningful statements about how Hermes sailed the currents of the seventeenth century, and with him the associated idea of *prisca sapientia*.

Hermes Trismegistus: alive and kicking

In 1651 a work was published in Leiden that until at least the mid-19th century would remain the authoritative account of South-Indian Hinduism: the *Open-Deure tot het Verborgen Heydendom* ('The Open-Door to the Hidden World of the Gentiles'). Authored by Calvinist minister and missionary Abraham Rogerius in the 1640s, the work was published posthumously in 1651 by his widow, Emmerentia Pools.[4] The annotations to the volume, added by the Leiden lawyer and politician Arnoldus Wittens at the request of the publisher, François Hackius, included various references to Hermes Trismegistus and the eponymous corpus, in between authorities from classical antiquity

such as Thales, Pythagoras, Cicero, Plutarch, Anaxagoras, Aristotle, and Plato, and passages from Scripture.[5] Moreover, Wittens clearly demonstrated immunity to Casaubon's redating of Hermes and his reappraisal of the *Corpus Hermeticum* as Christian frauds. In a passage discussing certain of Plato's ideas about God, he suggests that Plato "supposedly took these [ideas] from Hermes Trismegistus (or perhaps from Moses); who long before said that God was One…" thus ascribing great antiquity to Hermes and his writings.[6] In the Preface, dated 26 December 1650, Wittens also implicitly ascribed a pagan origin to the Hermetic writings, when he discussed the intended apologetic function of his annotations:

> *Cyprian, Tertullian, Hieronymus, Augustine, Lactantius, Arnobius*, and all the Fathers… wrote against the Pagans; so too the Apostle *Paul* himself, when he disputed against the Pagan Philosophers in *Athens* at the *Areopagus*. None of these have ever tried to first and principally refute them with passages from Scripture; knowing very well that these would not result in faith with those whose religion they wished to see expunged and extirpated; instead, they brought forward the *Oracles* and sayings of *Apollo, Trismegistus, Orpheus,* the *Sibyls*, and others, to confer and combine these with the H. Scripture, to convince them thus of the truth, which they had learned unwittingly…[7]

Lest we think that Wittens might not have known about the dispute, we are very fortunate that there are still some extant copies of the catalogue drawn up for the sale of his library in 1667. Although I did not spot a copy of Casaubon's *Exercitationes*, included we find Julius Caesar Boulenger's *Diatribae, ad Isaaci Casauboni Exercitationes Adversus Illustrissimum Cardinalem Baronium* (Leiden 1617), the title of which leaves nothing to the imagination; also Athanasius Kircher's *Obeliscus Pamphilius* of 1650, and Gerardus Vossius' *De Idolatria* (Amsterdam 1642); from this is it clear that Wittens must have been fully aware of Casaubon's exercises, yet chose to happily ignore them.[8]

The Rogerius-Wittens volume proved no exception. At around the same time French and German translations of the *Open-Deure* appeared, in turn happily omitting Wittens's annotations, a certain Gilles de Launay promoted not just Gassendist matter theory, but also still cited Hermes as an authority.[9] Cambridge scholar Ralph Cudworth, to whom we will return below, in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* of 1678, devoted ample space to prove Casaubon wrong in his general dismissal of the Hermetic corpus, invoking the Church Fathers as his witnesses. By then another Cambridge scholar had already been deeply involved in alchemical research, in which he considered Hermes Trismegistus the most trusted of all, precisely because of his antiquity.[10] From about the mid-1680s onward, Isaac Newton was more than a little inspired by the idea of a *prisca sapientia*, which he soon developed into a full-blown *prisca scientia*.[11] The ancients, in particular the Egyptians, had more than just wisdom; they possessed factual knowledge of the cosmos, including of heliocentrism, universal gravity, and even the inverse-square law. Newton never directly published these ideas, although he discussed his research with others, including the Scottish mathematician David Gregory, from 1691 Savillian Professor of Astronomy at Oxford. Indeed, when in 1702 Gregory published his

Astronomiae Physicae & Geometricae Elementa, he incorporated Newton's *prisca scientia* ideas in the preface. Quoting from the 1715 English translation, Gregory wrote that

> it is evident [the ancients] were perswaded that Gravity was not an affection of Terrestrial Bodies only, but of the Celestial also, that all Bodies gravitate towards one another; and that the Planets are retain'd in their Orbits by the force of Gravity, and lastly, that the Gravity of the Planets towards the Sun are reciprocally as the Squares of their Distances from it.[12]

As such, Newton saw himself as adding nothing new to existing knowledge, but merely connecting with what was already out there, be it obscured. As Gregory put it in a memorandum he wrote in May 1694, when he visited Newton in his rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge, that Newton

> [would] spread himself in exhibiting the agreement of this philosophy with that of the Ancients and principally with that of Thales. The philosophy of Epicurus and Lucretius is true and old, but was wrongly interpreted by the ancients as atheism… It is clear from the names of the planets by Thoth (the Egyptian Mercury) – he gave them, in fact, the names of his predecessors whom he wished to be accepted as gods – that he was a believer in the Copernican system.[13]

With Thoth or Mercury the same as Hermes Trismegistus, here we find nearly a century after Casaubon two of the greatest scholars of their time expressing full belief in the antiquity of the Triple-Wise, and in the reliability of his writings.

If we are to believe the Casaubon-demolition narrative, the above-mentioned figures, and with them many others, must be considered outliers, aberrations, followers of a tradition long since discarded, with very little evidence to substantiate its outlandish claims to great antiquity and true knowledge. Yet it is equally possible to marshal these and other, lesser known figures, to seriously question the claim that Casaubon's work destroyed Hermes's reputation. It will be clear to the reader that I am not in favour of the demolition-thesis–the word 'myth' in the first line of the essay is an obvious give-away. I do not argue that there is no truth in the narrative that Hermes's reputation received some serious damage. But clearly, Hermes did not have just a long *afterlife*, as Grafton and Mulsow argue, arguments I will discuss below, but had a long *life*, which continued after 1614. What that life entailed exactly, is still unclear. Research so far has been confined to case studies, many of which are quite elaborate and teach us how Hermes and the tradition of which he formed part, which in its various iterations can be labelled *prisca sapientia, prisca theologia, philosophia perennis*, and similar, lived on in the lives of notable individuals and groups. That tradition included other works of purported ancient wisdom, most notably the *Chaldean Oracles* ascribed to the equally elusive Zoroaster, the *Orphic Hymns*, and the *Sibylline Oracles*, and the various works related to the life and work of Pythagoras such as Iamblichus's *Pythagorean Lives*. But first, let us examine how modern historians have discussed Hermes 'afterlife'.

El Ingenioso Hidalgo

Dame Frances Yates must forever be praised for bringing to the forefront a topic much neglected by historians of the day, neglect usually based on prejudice. She rightly saw that topics in her days still considered outlandish and 'esoteric' at times had been important in the development of scientific thought and practice. The dominant historiographical narrative regarding Hermes Trismegistus, promoted in the 1960s by Yates and reiterated in one form or another to this day, is that Casaubon's exposition caused irreparable damage to Hermes's reputation. As she put it so eloquently,

> the dating by Isaac Casaubon in 1614 of the Hermetic writings as not the work of a very ancient Egyptian priest but written in post-Christian times, is a watershed separating the Renaissance world from the modern world. It shattered at one blow the build-up of Renaissance Neoplatonism with its basis in the *prisci theologi* of whom Hermes Trismegistus was the chief. It shattered the whole position of the Renaissance Magus and Renaissance magic with its Hermetic-Cabalist foundation, based on the ancient 'Egyptian' philosophy and Cabalism. It shattered even the non-magical Christian Hermetic movement of the sixteenth century. It shattered the position of an extremist Hermetist, such as Giordano Bruno had been, whose whole platform of a return to a better 'Egyptian' pre-Judaic and pre-Christian philosophy and magical religion was exploded by the discovery that the writings of the holy ancient Egyptian must be dated, not only long after Moses but also long after Christ. It shattered, too, the basis of all attempts to build a natural theology on Hermetism, such as that to which Campanella had pinned his hopes. Casaubon's bomb-shell did not immediately take effect and there were many who ignored it, or refused to believe it, and clung obstinately to the old obsessions.[14]

However, as many historians today realize, Yates's work suffered from gross exaggeration. Even if her basic premises were right, words like 'watershed', 'shattered', and 'bomb-shell' are strong, visceral words, that need to be backed up by equally strong evidence. Needless to say, Yates provided no such evidence. On the contrary, her work at times promoted wholly unsubstantiated myths, eloquently put but easily discarded. Yates's Isaac Newton was such a key figure in the 'Rosicrucian Enlightenment' that she dedicated an entire chapter to his supposedly deep interest in Rosicrucian alchemy.[15] Yet in the very same chapter, she verbatim quoted Newton's negative assessment of the movement as a whole: "This was the history of that imposture." This in turn is followed by a line of reasoning in which she concludes that because of Newton's interest in Michael Maier's alchemical work through the works of Elias Ashmole and inspired by John Dee "[i]t would thus not be historically fantastic to entertain as a hypothesis basis for future study, the possibility that a 'Rosicrucian' element, in some revised or changed form no doubt, might enter into Newton's interest in alchemy."[16] Needless to say, I consider the argument rather unconvincing, again for lack of a crucial element: evidence. Similarly, Yates's basic premise concerning Casaubon's–supposed–debunking of

Hermes's antique credentials and how it destroyed his reputation post-1614, seems to rest on very little support. This does not mean that Yates's hypothesis is necessarily wrong, but that more, and a different type of research is needed to provide solid evidence for or against it. However, existing literature primarily contains uncritical acceptance of Yates's 'bomb-shell' hypothesis.

Instead, scores of arguments have been marshalled to explain how after Casaubon's supposed demolition job, interest in Hermes's writings continued. If, say, a decade after the "definitive and irrefutable… scholarly arguments" found in the *Exercitationes*, Hermes and the associated idea of a *prisca sapientia* still had its followers, this must be because of "religious conviction", as Wouter Hanegraaff claims.[17] Quoting from Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Hanegraaff states that the ancient wisdom narrative managed to survive because "the 'sentiments and values' associated with a given system of thought are usually given preference over rational considerations, and people tend to favor arguments that support their beliefs."[18] To be fair, Hanegraaff recognizes that there were some who attempted to refute Casaubon's philological arguments, but that these were rather the exception, providing Ralph Cudworth as one such exception. Alas, Cudworth's rejection of Casaubon was ultimately not based on philological arguments–which he in fact *accepted*–but rather on the authority of the Church Fathers, as I will discuss below.

Indeed, the idea that Casaubon's erudite scholarly arguments destroyed Hermes's credibility seems based on the idea that they *must* have done so, simply *because* they were erudite and scholarly. But history cares little about our modern evaluation. On the contrary, historiography so often suffers exactly because of these a-historical judgments, and not even the greatest scholars among us are immune to it. Anthony Grafton's admiration for the work of Scaliger, Casaubon, and Petavius, to name but three of the 'greats', on more than one occasion made him deride the 'lesser gods' that followed in their footsteps. Dutch luminary Gerardus Vossius is portrayed in stark contrast to his son Isaac, with Grafton cataloguing the latter under the "lunatic fringe" because he allegedly had "no powers of judgement whatsoever."[19] What this assessment is based on, is not entirely clear. Here is the passage in full:

> [Isaac Vossius] argued that the *Corpus* - and everything else from the Sibyllines to the pseudepigraphical works that circulated under the names of the patriarchs - was a divinely-inspired prophecy of Christ's coming. Yet even he did not try to dislodge the Corpus from the general chronological niche that Casaubon had carved for it: "All these books [Vossius wrote] were, in my view, written towards the end of Daniel's weeks by Jews everywhere in the world, whom God led to reveal Christ's advent to the Gentiles. Therefore they published an enormous number of works, partly under the names of their patriarchs and prophets, ... partly under the names of those who enjoyed great reputations with the Gentiles, such as Hystaspes, Mercurius Trismegistus, Zoroaster, the Sibyls, Orpheus, Phocylides and many others." Even Casaubon could not have composed a more appropriate list of companions for Hermes.[20]

Obviously, Grafton's argument is mostly ridicule, and not necessarily of Vossius's judgment. It also seems incorrect: Vossius's dating of the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and similar works to "the end of Daniel's weeks" set a *terminus ante quem* that definitely did *not* fit the "general chronological niche that Casaubon had carved for it" as Grafton states: for Christian scholars, including Vossius, the period designated as "the end of Daniel's weeks" referred to the birth of Christ, which is also clear from the surrounding discussion.[21] Moreover, as Grafton correctly states, for Vossius these words were a "divinely inspired prophecy": they still predicted the future coming of the Messiah. In fact, as Vossius pointed out, on more than one occasion did we find in Scripture prophecies about Christ's coming given to non-Israelite people, citing the examples of the prophet Balaam hired by King Balak of Moab to curse the people of Israel upon their entering the promised land, traditionally set in around 1446 BCE–a curse that turned into a blessing–and that of the Magi that set out from the East to find the newborn Christ.[22]

Thus, it should not come as a surprise that "[p]lenty of literate men ignored [Casaubon's] arguments; plenty found them far too new and upsetting to be acceptable," followed by a clear example of how one such literate person rejected Casaubon's entire enterprise.[23] Indeed, history does not care that, again in Grafton's words, "[t]he record suggests that Casaubon found no opponent worthy of him."[24] Yet Grafton is adamant: "[M]oderately strenuous research has not turned up a sustained and cogent counter argument. To that extent, Hermes's career did reach its not inglorious end when Casaubon brought him down."[25] As much as I admire Grafton's scholarship, this is simply an anachronistic, a-historic, and problematic value judgement, evaluating Casaubon's philological arguments against our modern standards. Casaubon did not 'find' a 'worthy opponent' after 1614, as he was very dead by then. Any notion of the 'worthiness' of his 'opponents' is imposed by the author, inspired by his evaluation of what comprises 'good' scholarship. It is one thing to recognize in the likes of Scaliger and Casaubon the originators of modern philology and text-critical scholarship, and indeed to appreciate the quality of their work; but this should never inform our attempts to evaluate their impact at the time. With Scaliger, Casaubon, and other authors, the historian's task is to unearth and understand the impact of their writings at the time, on their contemporaries, regardless of our modern assessment of the quality of these writings. In the case at hand, we should focus on the factual reception of Casaubon's work by analysing the arguments used by his supporters and his detractors alike and take those arguments seriously. Not because they mattered today, but because they mattered then.

There are other, pervasive distractors that hamper our historical understanding. Many historians' self-declared 'enlightenment' stands in shrill contrast with their often obscurantist treatment of the past. For example, in what is otherwise an excellent collection of essays mainly detailing a 1570s precursor debate to the Casaubon episode, centred around François Béroalde de Verville, in which serious questions arose regarding the authenticity of the Hermetic corpus, Martin Mulsow tries to find an explanation for the apparent continued interest in Hermes after Casaubon. Having discussed the "quick victory of the 'Antihermetiker' in the years between Beroalde and

Casaubon"–although the reader is hard-pressed to find what this supposed victory entailed–Mulsow provides four explanations for Hermes's long afterlife:

> *Es kann nicht genügen, allein auf Ignoranz und blinde Ablehnung zu verweisen. Es sind mindestens vier Faktoren, vier Differenzierungen, die für die Hermes-Rezeption im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert maßgeblich gewesen sind: die Verschiedenheit von alchemischem und philosophischem Hermetismus, die Differenz von Eliten- und Volkskultur, der Underschied von Datierungs- und Authentizitätsfragen sowie die Kompensationsfunktion spiritualistisch-ganzheitlicher Weltbilder.*[26]

It is highly unclear whether any of these explanations–or rather, factors that supposedly influenced Hermes's long 'afterlife'–hold true on close scrutiny. For the first and second combined, Mulsow relies mainly on the work of Thomas Leinkauf, who states that the *Corpus Hermeticum* and works such as the Hermetic *Tabula Smaragdina* were read in different 'milieus': the first was read for its *"Initiation in das Wesen des Geistes, und, erst vermittelt hierdurch, in das der Welt"*, whereas the Emerald Table and its associated alchemical culture were about *"materiale und praktische Ebene des hermetischen Diskurses…"*[27] However, neither Mulsow, nor Leinkauf provide much evidence for their conjecture. Instead, the short discussion supposedly meant to explicate or elaborate on these explanatory factors primarily contains examples to the contrary, such as Athanasius Kircher's comprehensive discussion of all writings Hermetic and Ralph Cudworth's dismissal of Casaubon's critique. Indeed, Kircher actively defended the authenticity of the Hermetic writings in his *Obeliscus Pamphilius* of 1650, one of the works that graced the shelves of Arnoldus Wittens.[28] Regarding Cudworth, too, the discussion is muddy, to say the least. Quoting Jan Assmann, Mulsow asserts that *"Für Cudworth ging es nicht um eine Frag der Datiering, sondern der Authentizität"*, which is also the third explanatory factor listed above.[29] This appears to me a false dichotomy, as one cannot easily separate authenticity from dating, unless the argument is meant to say that regardless of Hermes's dates, Cudworth still ascribed the writings to Hermes, which is not what Cudworth argued.

Instead, if we replace the word 'authentic' with 'authoritative', we come much closer to Ralph Cudworth's argument. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, for Cudworth the Hermetic corpus was authoritative because of its validation by the Church Fathers, an aspect mostly ignored by Mulsow and the other authors included in the volume.[30] However, apart from this omission, Mulsow provides a rather incomplete version of Cudworth's argument, or even a false portrayal thereof, as illustrated by the following passage:

> *Auch when zugestanden wurde, daß die Texte des Corpus Hermeticum aus spätantiker Zeit stammen, so war doch immerhin noch offen, in welchem Maße möglicherweise "echte" Vorstellungen und Zeugnisse in die späten Schriften eingeflossen waren. Vor allem der Cambridger Philosoph Ralph Cudworth hat sich für eine Rehabilitierung von Hermes in diesem Sinne eingesetzt.*[31]

Whether Cudworth intended to 'rehabilitate' Hermes in one way or the other is doubtful–he primarily demonstrated how the theological arguments contained in the Hermetic writings are congruent with those found in clearly pre-Christian writings and how they agree with the ancient, 'true' theology–but it also suggests that our historiographical research has shown that Hermes was in *need* of rehabilitation. Yet no such research is presented; the damage done by Casaubon to Hermes's credibility is still being assumed, not proven. Moreover, in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Cudworth argued explicitly *for* a pre-Christian authenticity and dating of the Hermetic writings, based on the authority of the Church Fathers, notably Clemens Alexandrinus's *Stromata*:

> But it does not at all follow that because some of these Hermaick or Trismegistick Books now extant, were counterfeit… that therefore all of them must needs be such, and not only so, but those also that are mentioned in the Writings of ancient Fathers which are now lost. Wherefore the Learned Casaubon seems not to have reckoned or concluded well, when from the detection of Forgery in Two or Three of those Trismegistick Books at most, he pronounces of them all universally, that they were nothing but Christian Cheats and Impostures.[32]

Finally, what Mulsow means by *"die Kompensationsfunction spiritualistisch-ganzheitlicher Weltbilder"* remains unclear, as he provides no further explanation. If there is something that needs to be compensated for, it would be how easily we as modern historians can be misled by modern categories, and how difficult it is to assess the past through the eyes of the past. But we have to try, nevertheless.

Back to the basics

One way of assessing the past through the eyes of the present is to go back to the drawing board, back to the originals, back to the actual voices of the past. In our case, this involves the period from Marsilio Ficino's first Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* or '*Divine Poemander*' of 1471, to the early eighteenth century. Of course, these voices come in many varieties: from private manuscripts to printed books, from correspondence to book and manuscript collections, and from pamphlets to sermons and other forms of textual dissemination. If we really want to understand the influence of Hermes Trismegistus, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the associated ancient wisdom tradition, we need to remove our twenty-first century glasses and replace them with contemporary ones. This sounds easy enough, but as the above exercise has shown, it is far from that. For one, our modern ideas about right and wrong, about sophisticated and shoddy scholarship, and about what counts as a convincing argument, so easily obscure what was actually at stake on in the period under scrutiny. Secondly, there are so many aspects our twenty-first century glasses do not register, and that we would miss if we put on our faux-contemporary ones. Seventeenth-century scholars dreamt Scripture. Most would be able to correctly cite from various translations, by heart, without hesitation, providing the exact reference. This is very different from modern

scholars, in particular the generations that grew up in a secular world; yet some of us still have this faculty. Not so much though with the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or associated wisdom writings like the *Chaldean* or *Zoroastrian Oracles*, the *Orphic Hymns*, or the *Sibylline Oracle*s, all of which were instrumental in the formulation of the idea of a *prisca sapientia*, or *philosophia perennis*, as Agostino Steuco formulated it in his eponymous 1540 treatise. Most of us, the present author included, would not recognize a Chaldean oracle or passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum* if it stared us in the face.

As historians living in the twenty-first century, we may be hampered by our limited understanding of the past, and limited knowledge of the relevant textual materials. We are, however, greatly blessed by being able to use tools and techniques for research that Scaliger, Casaubon, Newton et al., could only have dreamt of. Digital humanities can provide us with what is possible the best approximation of seventeenth-century glasses. These technologies allow us to search for traces of ancient wisdom writings in digitized sources, and not just in one or two, or a few dozen. They allow us to mine corpora of several hundreds of thousands of texts, searching for phrases, snippets, verbatim or in paraphrase, with or without attribution, in various languages. They allow us to find a-typical uses of common terms, and trace the source of these usages. They allow us to map onto each other the hundred-plus different editions that were published of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, *Chaldean Oracles*, and the like, creating taxonomies that help trace who borrowed from whom, what source text a particular author drew from, what edition or translation was likely used.

These techniques also allow us to measure, to a certain extent, the influence of perceived watershed moments like Casaubon 1614. By tracing with what sentiment Hermes Trismegistus was being discussed in printed literature of the time, it will allow us to make meaningful statements about his popularity, about how authors perceived his antiquity and authority. If, indeed, Casaubon's demolition job was successful, one would expect a sheer drop in affirmative citations to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or references to the name and writings of Trismegistus in general. But in order to make these statements meaningful, that is, statistically significant, our sample of works studied needs to be large enough, and representative. Fortunately, today we have access to large, digitized collections, that satisfy all conditions, in particular when we combine several of these.

This, then, is what the ERC-funded project 'Traces de la Verité: The Reappropriation of Ancient Wisdom in Early Modern Natural Philosophy' aka VERITRACE, sets out to do.[33] As is clear from the title, it focuses on the early modern period, defined within the scope of the project as between 1540, when Steuco's *De Perenni Philosophia* was printed, and 1728, when Newton's *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdom Amended* came out, which still contained allusions to the *prisca sapientia* tradition. As one of its main methods, the project seeks to 'map' all relevant editions of four main ancient wisdom corpora–the *Corpus Hermeticum* (including the *Asclepius*), the *Chaldean Oracles*, the *Sibylline Oracles*, and the *Orphic Hymns*–against a sizeable sample of all printed books published in six major European languages: Latin, Italian, French, German, English, and Dutch between these termini. Starting with Ficino's 1471 *Divine Poemander,* by 1540, close to a hundred relevant editions, translations, and major secondary works were published, enough to be mapped against the full body of materials printed from

then on. To this smaller Close Reading Corpus, new works are added as we move along the timeline–1541, 1542, 1543, and so on, all the way to 1728. By the time Isaac Newton died, more and more overt scepticism was displayed against the use of mythology for the study of history in general–pace Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* of 1725–and indeed the number of new editions of the associated works dwindled. Neither of these termini are set in stone–if the data points at interesting events happening around 1540, or around 1728, the project will explore these in context and extend the relevant terminus. The key word here is *data*. VERITRACE's Distant Reading Corpus data set consists of over 440,000 works printed between 1540 and 1728, drawn from three major digitized collections: *Gallica* (Bibliothèque nationale de France), *Early English Books Online* (EEBO), and the *Digitale Sammlungen* of the Bavarian State Library. With the total number of works and editions for the period 1551-1750 somewhere in the order of 1.2 million, our sample is both large enough and statistically representative.[34]

The project addresses three interrelated objectives. The first consists of a full taxonomy of all editions and translations in the six relevant languages of the four corpora involved. In particular Karl H. Dannenfeldt and James Hankins provided stellar archival work to this extent, the first as part of the Herculean *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* (1960-) edited by Paul O. Kristeller, which continues to this day, with Hankins now one of its chief editors.[35] Today, we are able to build on the work Dannenfeldt et al., which out of necessity contains inaccuracies and remains incomplete. In particular when it comes to translations in the vernacular, there are ample lacunae to be filled. This works then feeds into the second main objective, to literally find the traces of these editions and translations as they are contained in the Distant Reading Corpus, and thus trace by whom they were cited, in what context, and to what purpose. Even the well-trained classicist's eye will not be able to spot all citations from, say, Plato, in any given corpus, in particular when paraphrased or translated; let alone when that corpus contains hundreds of thousands of works. The ancient wisdom corpora involved in VERITRACE are even harder to trace for their relative obscurity. Hermes, Zoroaster, and their kin are today known and studied in detail by only a fraction of scholars–but this is where computational techniques shine. The third, related objective details the sentiment involved in these written traces. Together with the second objective, so-called Sentiment Analysis allows us to detect not just whether a particular phrase from our Close Reading Corpus is used, but also how the phrase is invoked: whether positive or negative, whether in earnest or jest. Likewise, all three objectives combined will shine a light on the real life and afterlife of Hermes Trismegistus et alia. What exactly was the influence of Marsilio Ficino's efforts? How frequently were passages of for example the *Chaldean Oracles* included in particular discussions? And do we indeed see a breakdown in the popularity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* as an authoritative source after 1614? Because it might very well be that despite the unsatisfactory evidence provided by those defending the Casaubon demolition-thesis, its supporters are right after all.

In order to address these objectives, VERITRACE follows a rather straightforward methodology, in essence developing a bespoke early-modern plagiarism and sentiment detector. As simple as that may sound, it is far from trivial. Even just the merger of the three datasets involved, each with their own metadata-standards, linguistic origin, and development history, turned out to be far from problematic–but by the time

of revising this essay the largest hurdles have been overcome. Using state-of-the-art tools and techniques for machine learning, automated translation, and with the curated help of a series of Large Language Models, we are currently at the stage where we can fully focus on tracing the evolution of the ancient wisdom discourse as it emerged from the Italian Renaissance.

The project's primary focus is on the influence of the ancient wisdom tradition on the formation of new knowledge, primarily natural philosophical. With so many of these sages–from Copernicus to Kepler and from Bacon to Newton–expressing some form of adherence to the idea of knowledge not being newly created, but instead rediscovered, it is about time we start asking questions about the tradition's real influence. One will be hard-pressed to find a primer on the scientific movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that includes the likes of Zoroaster or, indeed, Hermes Trismegistus. Partially because we cannot think of these ancient sages as having had any meaning in the age of modern science, partially because we simply do not recognize the traces they left.

In this special issue, the reader will find some of the first-fruits of Team VERITRACE's research–with the emphasis on 'Team'. VERITRACE's research hinges on strong, interdisciplinary collaboration, both within the project team and without, and the following essays are the products of joint research between computational humanists, historians of science and religion, linguistics, classicists, and philosophers. Together, they represent the best of classical, archival scholarship, and modern computer science, demonstrating their complementarity.

References

[1] *"…Trimegistus visibilium Deum…"* Copernicus, N., *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (Nuremberg, 1543), fol. 9[v]. That Copernicus's use of Ficino was not just ornamental, as was once argued by Edward Rosen, is shown in great detail in Knox, D., "Ficino and Copernicus", in Allen, M. J. B., Rees, V. (ed.), *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy* (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 2002), 399-418. Cf. Rosen, E., "Was Copernicus a Hermetist?", in Stuewer, R. E. (ed.), *Historical and Philosophical Perspectives of Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), 163-171.

[2] Casaubon, I., *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI…* (London, 1614), 70-87; Grafton, A., "Protestant versus Prophet: Isaac Casaubon on Hermes Trismegistus", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 46 (1983): 78-93.

[3] Mulsow, M., (ed.), *Das Ende des Hermetismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); Faivre, A., "Hermes Trismegistus III: Modernity", in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. W. J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 483-486.

[4] Rogerius, A., *De Open-Deure tot het Verborgen Heydendom ofte Waarachtigh Vertoogh van het Leven ende Zeden, mitsgaders de Religie, ende Gods-dienst der Bramines, op de Cust Chormandel, ende de Landen Daaromtrent…* (Leiden: Françoys Hackes, 1651). A revised edition ('Open-Deure-B') was printed the same year, with an updated preface and added dedication; see Schilt, C. J., "'Spectatissimo, eruditione & pietate, insigno Viro': Abraham Rogerius, the Open-Deure, and the identity of A. W. JC[tus]", *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 10/2 (2023): 259-277.

[5] Rogerius, A., (1651), 106, where we also find mention of the 'Chaldeans' (i.e., the *Chaldean Oracles*), the Sibyls, and Orpheus; see also 146-147. See Schilt, C. J., (2023), 272-276, for the identification of the annotator A. W. JC^{tus} with Arnoldus Wittens.

[6] "Dit schijnt [Plato] van *Hermete Trismegisto* (ofte misschien oock wel van *Mose*) ontleent te hebben; dewelcke al lang te voren gheseyt hadde, dat Godt *Een* was…" Rogerius, A., (1651), 13.

[7] "*Cypriani, Tertulliani, Hieronymi, Augnustini, Lactianti, Arnobii*, ende alle de Out-vaderen de welcke oyt teghen de Heydencn gheschreven hebben; oock des Apostels *Pauli* selfs, soo wanneer hy te Athcncn in Areopago teghen de Heydensche Philosophen disputeerde. Dese alle en hebben noyt ghetracht om haer voor eerst ende principalijck met Schriftuurr-plaetsen te wederlegghen, wel wetende dat die ghene, welckers Religie sij wenschten verdelght ende uyt-gheroeyt te zijn, bij haer gheen geloof en souden meriteren, maer daer toe alleenlijck te voorschijn ghebracht de *Oraculen* ende spreucken van *Apollo*, *Trismegistus*, *Orpheus*, de *Sybillen*, ende andere, de selve met de H. Schrift confererende ende t'samen-voegende, om haer alsoo van de waerheyt, die sy onwetende gheleert hadden, te overtuygen…" Rogerius, A., sig. *5^{r} (same in both versions of the *Open-Deure*).

[8] *Catalogus Insignium & Rariorum in omni Facultate Librorum, Amplissimi Viri D. Arnoldi Wittens, J.C.* … (Leiden: Petrus Leffen, 1667), sigs. B^{r}, B2^{r}, C1^{v}.

[9] Lennon, T. M., *The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi, 1655-1715* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 13.

[10] Keynes Ms. 13, fol. 1^{r} *et passim*, Kings College Cambridge, Cambridge.

[11] The literature is vast, but see e.g. Schmidt, C., "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 505-532; Schmidt-Biggeman, W., *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004). For Newton's adherence to the ancient wisdom tradition, see Force, J. E., "Newton, the 'Ancients' and the 'Moderns'", in *Newton and Religion*, ed. J. E. Force, R. H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Springer, 1999), 237-258, esp. 253-56; Haycock, D. B., "'The long-lost truth': Sir Isaac Newton and the Newtonian pursuit of ancient knowledge", *Stud. Hist. Phil. Sci.* 35 (2004): 605-623, esp. 615; Iliffe, R., "'Is He Like Other Men?' The Meaning of the Principia Mathematica, and the Author as Idol", in *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History*, ed. G. MacLean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 159-76, esp. 167; Iliffe, R., *Priest of Nature: The Religious Worlds of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 210-212; Schilt, C. J., "Isaac Newton and the Knowledge of the Ancients", *Journal of Dialectics of Nature* 47/5 (2025): 1-10. Note that Thomas Leinkauf, in his "'Prisca Scientia' versus 'Prisca Sapientia'. Zwei Modelle des Umgangs mit der Tradition am Beispiel des Rückgriffs auf die Vorsokratik im Kontext der frühneuzeitlichen Debatte und der Ausbildung des Kontinuitätsmodell der 'Prisca Sapientia' bzw. 'Philosophia Perennis'", *Mediterranea* 2 (2017): 121-143, distinguishes between a *prisca scientia* – "a reservoir of scattered teachings and sentences available to re-use [*sic*] philosophical projects" with "no strong claim for a continuity of a tradition" – and a *prisca sapientia*, in which "the Ancients were able to provide an 'original' teaching which represents the norm of a sort of 'saving knowledge' embracing life as a whole" (122). I find this distinction artificial and unnecessarily confusing, nor does it

correspond to the various terms, uses and traditions that were around at the time; I prefer to use the simple and original meanings: '*sapientia'* for 'wisdom' and '*scientia'* for 'knowledge'.

[12] Gregory, D., *The Elements of Astronomy, Physical and Geometrical*, 2 vols. (London, 1715), vol. 1, xi-xii.

[13] Turnbull, H. W. et al., (eds), *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959-1977), vol. 3, 338.

[14] Yates, F., *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 398.

[15] Yates, F., *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 193-205.

[16] Yates, F., (1972), 200. The line occurs in Newton's copy of Eugenius Philalethes [pseud. of Thomas Vaughan], *The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity of R:C: commonly, of the Rosie Cross*… (London, 1652). See also Harrison, J., *The Library of Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 142.

[17] Hanegraaff, W. J., *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 75.

[18] Hanegraaff, W. J., (2012), 75-76; the reference is to Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 97.

[19] Grafton, A., (1983), 89.

[20] Grafton, A., (1983), 89. It is very telling that in the Latin from which Grafton translates, and which he gives in full in the footnotes, the ellipses contain the names of Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Elia, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, the inclusion of which in the English would have turned the sarcasm of the final line of the quote a tad sour.

[21] For a discussion of Daniel's weeks see e.g. Schilt, C. J., *Isaac Newton and the Study of Chronology: Prophecy, History, and Method* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 51, and the references there.

[22] Vossius, I., *De Sibyllinis aliisque quae Christi natalem praecessere oraculis* (Oxford, 1680), 40-41.

[23] Grafton, A., (1983), 91.

[24] Grafton, A., (1983), 91.

[25] Grafton, A., (1983), 91.

[26] Mulsow, M., "Epilog: Das schnelle und das langsame Ende des Hermetismus", in Mulsow, M., ed., (2002), 305-310, quoted from 305; see Grafton, A., (1983), 78.

[27] Mulsow, M., (2002), 306; Leinkauf, T., "Interpretation und Analogie. Rationale Strukturen im Hermetismus der Frühen Neuzeit", in *Antike Weisheit und kulturelle Praxis. Hermetismus in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. A.-C. Trepp, H. Lehmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 41-61, quoted from 45.

[28] Kircher, A., *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (Rome, 1650), 35-44; see also Stolzenberg, D., "The Egyptian Crucible of Truth & Superstition: Athanasius Kircher & the Hieroglyphic Doctrine", in Trepp, A.-C., Lehmann, H., (ed.), (2001), 145-164.

[29] Mulsow, M., (2002), 308; Assmann, J., "'Hen kai pan': Ralph Cudworth und die Rehabilitierung der hermetischen Tradition", in *Aufklärung und Esoterik*, ed. M. Neugebauer-Wölk (Hamburg: Meiner, 1999), 38-52, quoting from 45.

[30] The exceptions are Cesare Vasoli, when discussing "die sehr einflußreichen patristischen *auctoritates*" in his "Der Mythos der 'Prisci Theologi' als 'Ideologie' der 'Renovatio'", in Mulsow, M., (ed.), (2002), 17-60, quoted from 23, and Nancy G. Siraisi in "Hermes Among the Physicians", in Mulsow, M., (ed.), (2002), 189-212. For the continued authority ascribed to the Church Fathers in the early modern period, see the various contributions in volume 2 of Backus, I., *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2 vols. (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2001).

[31] Mulsow, M., (2002), 308.

[32] Cudworth, R., *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), 319.

[33] ERC-2022-StG, VERITRACE, 101076836. See https://veritrace.eu for a detailed description of the project.

[34] According to Buringh, E., van Zanden, J. L., "Charting the 'Rise of the West': Manuscripts and Printed Books in Europe, A Long-Term Perspective from the Sixth through Eighteenth Centuries", *Journal of Economic History* 69 (2) (2009): 409-445, page numbers to the OA preprint found here (accessed 23.07.2024): https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=e2d27ff15e4bf635829316f6d934e80e696ef3d7, the total number of printed books in Europe (in all languages) for the period 1551-1751 was roughly 1 billion (1551-1600: 138,427 copies; 1601-1651: 200,906; 1651-1700: 331,035; 1701-1751: 355,073, all *1000; but these tally copies, not titles; p. 43). By their own estimate, the authors use a very conservative average print run increasing from 700 copies at around the year 1500 unto 1,000 at around 1800 (p. 10); if we divide their half-centuries by respectively 775, 825, 875, and 925, for the average print run during the period–and for want of a better metric assuming a linear increase–we arrive at rounded figures of 179, 244, 378, and 384 thousand different titles per semi-decade, for a total of 1,185,000 titles published between 1551 and 1750. However, it is not entirely clear whether such conservativism regard average print runs is warranted. Michael H. Harris, in his *History of the Libraries in the Western World* (Metuchen, NJ, and London: Scarecrow Press, 1984), on p. 121, uses an *average* of 1,000 for the 16th century already; and Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, in their *L'Apparition du Livre* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1958), based on an extensive survey of known print runs, suggest an average of between 1,000 and 1,500 for even just the early 16th century (p. 330), a figure that remained stable for the remainder of the 16th and the 17th century (pp. 331-334). Multiplying the Febvre and Martin average print run of 1,250 with 1,185,000 titles then gives a total book production figure of close to 1,5 billion.

[35] See in particular Dannenfeldt, K. H., "Hermetica Philosophica", in Kristeller, P. O. (ed.), *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1960), vol. 1, 137-156; and Dannenfeldt, K. H. 'Oracula Chaldaica', in Kristeller, P. O. (ed.), *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1960), vol. 1, 157-164; Hankins, J., Palmer, A., *The Recovery of Ancient Philosophy in the Renaissance: A Brief Guide* (Florence: Olschki, 2008). See also Dannenfeldt, K. H., 'The Pseudo-Zoroasterian Oracles in the Renaissance', *Studies in the Renaissance* 4 (1957): 8-30; Athanassakis, A., Wolkow, B. M., (trans. and ed.), *The Orphic Hymns* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).