

# Albertus Magnus and Hermes Trismegistus

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Keeping with my theme of looking at Hermes Trismegistus and the impact of his writings on later times (See *Labyrinth* Issues 82 and 83), I propose to look at the influence of Hermetic writings on the great Dominican scholar, bishop of Cologne and teacher of Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200-1280).

His stature as an outstanding philosopher of his time is universally acknowledged. As with all great thinkers, questions regarding where they got their ideas from are always of interest to scholars of intellectual history. The constant attention he devoted to Aristotle and his Arabic commentators (Averroes in particular) demonstrates their importance to his worldview; yet he differs little in this respect from other philosophers and theologians of his day. One aspect, however, of his use of authorities does set him apart from his contemporaries: his frequent citation of the mythical author Hermes Trismegistus.

Albertus made extensive use of Hermetic books, especially after discovering the *Asclepius* around 1250. Albertus' familiarity with the *Asclepius* was far greater than that of any of his contemporaries except Thomas of York (d. ca. 1260), who will be the subject of a future contribution to *Labyrinth*. Not only does Albert quote from this text more often than any other Hermetic work, he does so more often than most other authors' citations of the Hermetic corpus as a whole. He had first-hand knowledge of Hermetic writings, although he did also sometimes draw on other sources, such as Augustine, for some of his information on Hermes. It is unlikely that he thought that all of these books were written by the same author. For example, he criticizes the attribution to Hermes of the *Book of 24 Philosophers*, a compilation of definitions of God, in the following two passages:

I do not know who this Trismegistus was, and I believe that the Book [of XXIV philosophers] is a fake, for everything which Trismegistus is said to have said I have found in a certain book by master Alan [of Lille].

They say that Trismegistus Mercurius said (which nevertheless is not to be found in his book): 'The monad begets the monad and reflects itself in its own ardour.' ... In response to this argument, it should be said that the statement of Trismegistus is a fake. Albertus also viewed Hermes as an expert in magical and scientific matters, although he sometimes expressed a healthy skepticism regarding certain claims made in Hermetic books. For example, in his book *On Animals*, Albertus describes what a basilisk is - an animal with a rooster's body and the tail of a snake - and adds: 'I do not think this is true, but it was said by Hermes and taken up by many on account of his authority'. Albertus also believed Hermes to be an ancient philosopher and precursor of the Stoic and perhaps also Aristotelian schools. More often than not, Hermes is praised and used to support Albertus' point of view, and he was cited alongside a series of eminent ancient and more recent thinkers. Albertus examined his Hermetic sources carefully on a case-by-case basis, with no specific intellectual agenda in mind. There is a series of interrelated topics for which Hermes provided Albertus with inspiration and authoritative support. These topics include the flow of forms from the First Principle down to the material world; the concept of fate; the idea of man as a central figure in the hierarchy of

being, standing half way between God and the world; and the structure and nature of the human intellect. Certain key passages from the *Asclepius* were instrumental in Albertus' development of these themes: the etymology of the Latin word *possessio*, the idea of man as nexus between God and the world, and Hermes' explanation of *heimarmene* (i.e., fate) are three prominent examples. In spite of his extensive use of Hermes, Albertus always displays a critical approach, never accepting his words without subjecting them to proper scrutiny. This applies both to Hermetic ideas as well as to the texts themselves, as Albertus' treatment of the *Book of 24 philosophers* and of Hermes' statements about basilisks illustrate. He tends to use Hermes most frequently in philosophical and scientific works, while his criticisms are more frequent in his theological tracts. This is understandable, as Hermes remained, in spite of his great antiquity and status, a pagan author who could be of little help in understanding Christian mysteries such as the Trinity.