

The Magus

by David Porreca

Have you ever wondered where J.R.R. Tolkien got his idea for Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*? Or how he is related to Snape in the *Harry Potter* books? Well, the historical background of these characters is in many ways stranger than their manifestations in modern books and movies.

The figure of the magician, whether he be almost all-powerful and benevolent as Gandalf is, or of a more sinister bent such as Snape, can be traced back to ancient Egypt. To be more precise, it is the Greek and Roman belief in the magical abilities of the ancient Egyptian priests which generated many legends about the power of these individuals. One of these legends involves a peculiar character by the name of Hermes Trismegistus (meaning "The Three-Times Great Hermes" - not to be confused with the Greek god Hermes). We start hearing about him in Greek writings from about 200 BCE. He was thought to be a contemporary of Moses (i.e., very, very old, even to the Greeks and Romans) and one of the first people to receive revelation directly from God. He supposedly carved all of his knowledge down on the walls of the Egyptian temples, which was then transcribed into 36,000 books. According to some early Fathers of the Christian Church, he was also a prophet who predicted the coming of Christ and was an example of a pagan who knew about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even in ancient times, it was known that Hermes was concerned not only with holy things, but also with astrology, alchemy, botany, magic, divination, astrological medicine and other esoteric pursuits, such as how to summon spirits in order to make statues predict the future. In other words, Hermes is the prototype of the Magus, the great magician who harnesses the powers of the gods and who possesses secret knowledge on a wide variety of more or less obscure topics.

Belief in this legend persisted for over almost two thousand years. In the Renaissance, a large number of Greek books from Classical times, including some attributed to Hermes, were re-discovered in Italy. These books had been brought West by Greek refugee scholars from Constantinople, which had fallen to Turkish armies in 1453. An important Italian intellectual of these times, Marsilio Ficino, was busy translating the dialogues of Plato into Latin when his patron, Cosimo de' Medici, ordered him to stop and translate the works of Hermes Trismegistus instead. In other words, the importance of Hermes surpassed the authority of even such a prominent figure as Plato. An image of Hermes Trismegistus even appears in the mosaic floor of the cathedral in Siena, Italy, among a series of Old Testament prophets. Not only that, but he is the very first figure one sees right at the entrance. For a pagan individual to end up in such hallowed company strikes one as odd, especially considering the supposedly intolerant attitudes of those times - the image of Hermes was done in 1488. Anyway, Ficino's translation led to an explosion of interest in anything to do with Hermes, especially his pronouncements on God and the connections between philosophy and the esoteric sciences.

In 1614, a French scholar by the name of Isaac Casaubon realized that the writings which had been attributed to Hermes and venerated so diligently for such a long time were the

product of the Greek world from the first few centuries CE. The legend of the ancient Egyptian magician-sage had been debunked. Hermes Trismegistus faded into obscurity until the late 19th century when people started to become interested in the more obscure figures from Classical antiquity for a variety of reasons. Ultimately, the direct connection between Hermes and divinity, as well as his association with a wide assortment of esoteric arts makes him an ideal model for an assortment of magicians in modern works of fiction. One could almost see him as a template for these characters.

My subsequent articles for Labyrinth will deal with more specific aspects of the legend of Hermes as well as the contents and transmission of the books attributed to him.