

**The Influence of the
Florentine Academy of Marcilio Ficino
upon the Rosicrucian Tradition**

A paper presented by

Thomas D. Worrel

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The Masonic Expression of the Rosicrucian Spirit

Our particular society of organized masonic Rosicrucianism being formulated in England in 1866 is only a small part of a larger, deeper and wider tradition. The underground spring, so to speak, of the *Societas Rosicruciana* and the inspiration of its founding directly stems from the publication of two remarkable documents published in Germany in the years 1614-15. Remarkable because of the reaction they stimulated not only in Germany but eventually throughout Europe. It seems that their publication and distribution ignited an outpouring of philosophical, religious, and even scientific discourse. Obviously I am referring to the Rosicrucian manifestoes; the *Fama* and the *Confessio*. These manifestoes began what has been commonly referred to as the Rosicrucian tradition.

How do we define what is meant by the term Rosicrucian tradition? The historian Frances Yates gives us a good working model: "Rosicrucian in this purely historical sense represents a phase in the history of European culture which is intermediate between the Renaissance and the so-called scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. It is a phase in which the Renaissance Hermetic-Cabalist tradition has received the influx of another Hermetic tradition, that of alchemy." (Frances Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, p. xi)

This paper concerns itself with that Renaissance Hermetic-Cabalist tradition that later had such an impact on those mysterious founding brethren of the Rosicrucian

Fraternity. It is now clear that the formulation of this Hermetic-Cabalist philosophy can be found in the work of the Florentine Academy in the middle to late 15th century. Not only is this earlier tradition the mother of the later Rosicrucian tradition, it is also the fountain of Wisdom from which we, as a Rosicrucian society, seek to drink.

The Particular Aim of the *Societas Rosicruciana*

We read in our own documents under the heading *The Aim of the S.R.I.C.F.* is "...to facilitate the study of the system of Philosophy founded upon the Kabbalah and the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus, which was inculcated by the original Fratres Rosae Crucis, A.D. 1450; ...". (page 5) This particular paragraph seems to be extracted from a paper given to the S.R.I.A. by the third Supreme Magus, William Wynn Wescott, in 1913. This is a very interesting statement for a few reasons. Our society is considered to be Christian yet no mention is made of any such study. The Kabbalah is obviously Jewish. The doctrines of Hermes are decidedly pagan and philosophically Neoplatonic, with, some would argue, Gnostic overtones. And finally, the date mentioned of 1450 as the date the original *Fratres Rosae Crucis* inculcated this particular system of philosophy is mysterious. To what exactly is this date referring?

An intriguing question and the search for its answer lead to this paper. The foundational documents - the manifestoes commonly referred to as the *Fama* and the *Confessio* - were anonymously published much later in 1614 and 1615. The earliest mention of them is 1611 when handwritten manuscripts arrived by messenger from Tübingen at the castle of the Calvinist alchemist Prince Augustus von Anhalt in north-east Germany. So this date of 1450 is some 161 years earlier. Does this date refer to a possible earlier society? Possibly a group not even using the

name? Prior to the manifestoes there is no mention of any society carrying this name. Could this be a possible Kabbalistic letter/number puzzle? Or does it refer to some other type of event not specific to Rosicrucianism?

The date really does not fit anything that I can find strictly regarding the Rosicrucian movement. In the mythic portrayal of the central character "Our Father and Brother C.R." the *Confessio* says he was born in 1378. He lived for 106 years(1484) and his tomb was discovered 120 years later in 1604.

Another curious aspect of this statement of our society's aims is in the form of an omission. In the original Westcott paper he actually says: "... the original Fratres Rosae Crucis **of Germany**..."; it is the Germany that is now left out. Complicating my research into this is the lack of access to any archives of the S.R.I.A. It is not clear to me that this is actually Wescott's own words. In his paper "The Rosicrucians, Past and Present" presented to the S.R.I.A. in 1913 the exact paragraph is written as part of his paper while the later 1916 paper "Data of the History of the Rosicrucians" this statement of the aims is in the form of a quote.

I now feel that the date is just a mistake and the omission is just that. Anyone who is familiar with the life and work of William Wescott knows to take much of his writings with a grain of salt. His accuracy with dates, the reporting of events and the logic of his conclusions in many cases left one thankful that as a medical doctor he dissected the dead rather than operated on the living. So I am left wondering if this statement of our society's aims is not from some previous document, possibly the original founding manifesto.

But for the purposes of this paper, the paragraph's origin is not particularly important. I am still curious about the date 1450. Some say it is the date of the founding of the

Fraternity but internal evidence of the manifestoes would put that much earlier (around 1405). Wescott says that it is the date of the building of the Vault - the central symbol of the Fraternity (*Data of the History of the Rosicrucians*, Wescott). But the building of the Vault occurred, I assume, at the death of the central figure who was 106 when he died in 1484. Another possibility is that Westcott has a more esoteric notion in mind - that the Vault is considered built at the age of 72 (1378 + 72 = 1450). For a consideration of this number see the appendix for this number is prominent in our rituals.

Coincidentally around the year 1450 there was a related group of scholars gathering, not in Germany, but in Florence on the Italian peninsula. This circle of the most learned in Europe centered upon the Platonist Marcilio Ficino and was backed by the power of the great Medici family dynasty. This circle of scholars was set up to be dedicated to and in memory of the great Plato and his school of philosophy.

The Academy of Plato

In the Grove of Academeca, a mile northwest of Athens, Plato formulated his Academy in 387 BC. While seemingly informal at first, by most accounts it developed into a religious guild. It was a center of learning for several centuries. But as Christianity spread and became more powerful, the pagan centers suffered. The "conversion" of Constantine who became Emperor in 324 seemed to sound the beginning of the end for pagan learning. He did not act against the non-Christians for the Academy at Athens and the Museum at Alexandria were still esteemed centers of pagan wisdom and philosophy. He also had many adherents to Mithra within his own army. Still, after his known conversion many flocked to the new religion for whatever reason. By 450 the pagan temples were being destroyed. No

non-Christian could hold public office. The Academy was closed by Emperor Justinian in 529 CE, some 916 years after its inception.

The Imperial Church

As Christianity spread and the faithful organized and took on public offices it became stronger and stronger. Eventually it spread throughout the entire Roman Empire that Constantine was consolidating. My purpose here is not to recount the history of the Church but to point out its growth to being a vast power and then the number of setbacks it encountered.

For many reasons, a Great Schism eventually divided the Roman Church from the Byzantine Church in 1054. One of the attempts to resolve the conflict lead to other events that would have far reaching reverberations.

The Unexpected Fruit of the Council of Florence

In late 1437 there was arranged the General Council of the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. It began in Ferrara but was soon transferred to Florence in 1439 under the sponsorship of Cosimo de' Medici, possibly the richest man in the world. In attendance was the Pope and his entourage as well as the Patriarch and Emperor from the East. The point of the meetings was to reunite the Church - actually the Eastern emperor needed military help against the Turks knocking on his door. One of the men who came in the delegation of the Eastern Church was George Gemistos (aka Plethon, 1355-1452). Even though Gemistos was a pagan philosopher, he had his own Platonic academy at Mistra in Greece, and was well known as a great thinker and teacher whom the Emperor wanted to represent the

Byzantine cause.

Cosimo attended many of his lectures and became so impressed with his wisdom that it inspired him to establish the *Accademia Platonica* in Florence some years later.

Marcilio Ficino and the Florentine Academy

The Platonic Academy of Florence was not founded until several years later around 1450, at least by some accounts. The idea of it being raised in the mind of Cosimo de Medici under the influence of Plethon, he had selected Marsilio Ficino to head it but at the time he was just a boy of six. Some historians set the date later - as the time Cosimo provided Ficino with the villa at Careggi for its center in 1462. Yet we know that Ficino was already translating texts for Cosimo much earlier and in one of Ficino's letters he mentions that he had deep discussions about Plato with Cosimo for over 12 years - Cosimo died in 1464.

The villa at Careggi on the outskirts of Florence became the headquarters of Ficino's work. He was busy translating all of Plato into Latin. But the following event came about which changed everything:

"In the year 1460 a monk brought a Greek manuscript to Florence. The monk, Leonardo of Pistoia, as one of the agents that the city's ruler, Cosimo de' Medici, had sent to scour Europe's monasteries for forgotten writings of the ancients, and what he now brought his patron was a codex containing fourteen treatises attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, an ancient Egyptian sage." (*The Way of Hermes*, p. 9)

Cosimo immediately had Ficino stop his work on Plato and begin to translate the documents which we now refer to as the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

The Importance of the *Corpus Hermeticum*

Hermetism represents a group of writings probably dated between A.D. 100 and 300 - written in and around the progressive city of Alexandria. Although attributed to Hermes, they are written by many authors and exhibit a mixture of Greek philosophy, mostly Platonic, astrological teachings and general sympathies between heaven and earth. These writings include the collection of treatises referred to as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, one known as *Asclepius* and a few smaller pieces. These works show a philosophical and religious tradition that leads to regenerative experiences and ecstatic states of consciousness wherein Truth is encountered firsthand. There are similarities with Gnosticism in many respects but the glaring difference lies in the more world-affirming attitude of Hermes.

Everyone thought at the time that these documents were written by a great sage Hermes Trismegistus (or Thrice Greatest: greatest king, greatest philosopher, greatest priest). He was thought to have lived at the time of Moses. Therefore, these documents represented the oldest, and thus purest, philosophical wisdom.

With this re-discovery and all the other work being done, the Florentine Academy became known as a great center of learning and research.

Influences Pouring Forth from the Careggi Circle

Many scholars came to Florence to participate in what was happening there. Some of the people and accomplishments include:

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) He finished the translations of

the *Hymns of Orpheus* and the *Sayings of Zoroaster* by 1462. He finished Plato by 1469. He became a priest in 1473. And between 1484 and 1492 he had translated and commented upon Plotinus (the *Enneads*), Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus. In the introduction to his published letters, the writer says that: "Ficino's Academy awoke Europe to the deep significance of the Platonic tradition." and that "It was Ficino more than anyone else who took from Plato, Plotinus, and the Hermetic writings the concept that part of the individual soul was immortal and divine, a concept that was all-important to the Renaissance." (*The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Vol 1, p. 23)

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) is considered the first non-Jewish Renaissance kabbalist. He was a student and friend of Ficino. It was Pico who from studying the Kabbalah which had made its way to Italy from Spain (the Jews were under persecution way before their expulsion in 1492), began the process of merging the Hermetic and neo-Platonic philosophy to the Scriptures. He is thought of as the first Christian Kabbalist and it was he who developed the Pentagrammaton (dropping the letter Shin into the Tetragrammaton).

Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522)- a professor of law and known "as one of the foremost jurists and legal scholars of his day. He was also a humanist, an enlightened thinker and , ... an impassioned student of classical philology and philosophy." He was also completely proficient in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Is considered the first non-Jew to write a book on the Kabbalah. Wrote *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517).

These men had far reaching influence. One very important instance is the relationship of Reuchlin to one Johannes Trithemius.

Trithemius (1462 - 1516) was a Christian Monk of the Benedictine Order. Leaving home at an early age he traveled

and came into association with the foremost German humanists of his day, including Johann Reuchlin. On a trip back home he got caught up in a blizzard and held up in a Benedictine Monastery at Sponheim. He stayed, became a novice and by 21 was elevated to Abbot. Trithemius was an avid scholar and eventually collected some 2000 volumes. He was learned both in Greek and Hebrew (advanced schooling by Reuchlin) and studied Pythagoras, Hermetics, and the Kabbalah. His work was not published until 1606 but it was long known and read in manuscript form. His was the main Renaissance manual of practical Kabbalah or angel-conjuring. His angels were divided into different functions: such as "district angels" who ruled over parts of the earth and "time" angels who ruled over the hours of day and night. Above them were the 7 great Planetary angels.

But, his work was not only concerned with a type of angelic telepathy. It was also concerned with learning things about the spiritual worlds. It was in learning to use the chain linking earth to heaven and to the higher chain linking the celestial world through the angels to the divine Name.

In 1509, Trithemius was visited by Cornelius Agrippa (1486 - 1535). Agrippa had already been influenced by Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico* from a course he took at Dole. It is also thought Agrippa was a member of some type of secret society. (Cornelius Agrippa, edited by V. Perrone Compagni, p. 2) It is reported that Agrippa was deeply impressed and it is very likely a teacher/pupil relationship developed.

Agrippa's book *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* is by far considered the foundational work of all western magic since its publication. He finished an early draft of it in 1510 which was widely circulated but it was not published (with enhancements, revisions, and double in size) in its entirety until 1533.

We also know that Agrippa traveled to Italy between 1511

and 1518. There "...he came into contact with Agostino Ricci and , perhaps, Paolo Ricci; he acquired a deeper knowledge of Ficino's commentaries and the writings of Giovanni Pico; he sharpened his acquaintance with Kabbalistic texts;... ." (Agrippa, ed. V. Perrone Compagni, p. 4)

It also seems that Paracelsus crossed paths with Trithemius. He makes reference to the "Abbot of Sponheim" and some even think Paracelsus was also a disciple, but if not, there is no doubt he was extremely influenced by him.

One more thing to mention here: by his own acknowledgment John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's astrologer, began the composition of his Cabalistically inspired *Monas Hieroglyphica* in 1564 after a chance discovery of a manuscript copy of Trithemius's steganographical handbook a year before. Dee was on one of his diplomatic assignments.

Trithemius was the originator of the secret script used in the so-called "Cipher Manuscripts" that provided the skeleton of the rituals used later in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded by three members of the S.R.I.A.

It is in our alchemical lecture of the third degree of *Practicus* that the name Trithemius is named (along with others including Ramond Lully).

Some historians think that the Rosicrucian manifestos were influenced directly from the Paracelsian theories and John Dee's work.

The Rosicrucian Tradition

Now we can proceed to the appearance of the Rosicrucian manifestos.

Let us quickly get a fix on what has happened to the

European world. Not only had the Great Schism happened between the Eastern Church and the Roman Church but the Western Schism as well. The Great Western Schism of the Church happened in 1378 (which by the way is the year the founder of the Fraternity of the Rose and Cross was born). The Reformation had begun with Luther (whose coat of arms was a rose with a cross in the center of a heart. A coat of arms not too different from Johann Andrae, one of the suspected authors of the manifestos. (SEE COAT OF ARMS IN APPENDIX) There was religious upheaval in the world but the extreme power of the Church had been broken.

Paracelsus had pioneered a new and more powerful way to approach medicine. And Copernicus had started a revolution in the way we think about our place in the universe. A new land, the Americas, had been discovered.

And fresh fever was falling from the skies: Earlier a new star appeared in the constellation of *Cassiopeia* (the Queen) in 1572. To some this new star formed a cross with 3 other stars. This was startling. In 1602 a new star appeared in *Cygnus* (the Swan) causing more wonder. But in 1604 the great conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter (along with Mars) happened in Sagittarius that marked the commencement of great conjunctions in the "fiery trigon" (Sag, Leo, and Aries). And maybe more remarkable, a new star appeared right above it in *Serpentario* (aka *Ophiuchus*, the serpent-holder - Asclepius the Healer). This heralded a New Age and a new beginning to many sky watchers. And to the authors of the manifestos, it was the time to begin a new Reformation; a new medicine, and a new cosmology; it was time for opening the Vault of "our Father and Brother C.R."

We can conclude this section with an understanding of how the hermetic-cabalist movement began at the Florentine Academy influenced the later formulation of the tradition we now call Rosicrucian. The possibilities lie in the probable transmission of certain key religious ideas. The ideas of a universe proceeding from an all encompassing One through

a process of emanations, thus a hierarchical structure to the cosmos with intermediaries between heaven and earth, a special unconscious *gnosis* hidden within us that can be awakened, a planned gradual revelation through rites, an inner genius or angelic presence, symbolic passwords, signs, and modes of recognition that allow us access to ascent, and the symbolism of the rose as representing the highest unfoldment of mankind as the mystical Christ whose symbol is the cross.

Appendix

Shem ha-Mephorash or Seventy-two lettered Divine Name

A question that may arise in your mind might be how do the works of such men as Pico, Reuchlin, Trithemius, Agrippa, and Dee relate to our Society now. These historical figures, especially the last three, are particularly known for their research in ceremonially invoking the influences of angelic beings.

The answer to that is not very far afield. The initial indications can be found in our First Order document under the title "Explanation of the Jewel" which states the following: "The Jewel of the Society consists of a cross, the arms of equal length, on a curved shield having the form of a lozenge or rhombus. The arms of the Cross exhibit four times 18, that is 72 lines, having reference to the 72 rounds of the Ladder of Jacob; ..." (p. 5) Additionally, further indications that our Society has special and specific concerns can be seen explicitly in the prayer at the opening of the Zelator grade: "... Sanctify our desires and purify our thoughts, so that we may become worthy to commune with the Holy Ones whom Thou hast created; ..." (p. 9)

We also find right from the start in the number lecture to the Zelator mention of the Shem -ha-Mephorash under

the explanation of the number twelve. It says: "No. 12 alludes to the 12 Apostles of the Messiah, and to the 12 signs of the Zodiac, expressing the cosmogony of Nature, spiritually and materially. The square of 12 - namely 144 - was once the limit of each Rosicrucian circle, and reminds us of the 72 attributes of God, which form the names of the 72 angels who occupy the 72 degrees of the ladder of Jacob, which is mystically said to reach from earth to heaven. (p. 26)

Confirmation of this special interest can be found later in the lecture of the Adeptus Minor degree in the College of Adepts. In the discussion of the Jewel of the Second Order - the Adept grades - it explains: "The Adept Grades have their own jewel, which is a triangular plate of gold, an equilateral and equiangular triangle, suspended by a golden chain ... Upon its face is engraved the Tetractys ..." (p. 13) The commentary goes on to explain aspects of the tetractys and that the ten dots were replaced at one time by the four letters of the Divine Name: IHVH. (Please see at end of appendix) It also explains that these letters arranged such equal in numerical value to 72. Our lecture explains it thus: "The total is seventy-two, the number of steps of the Ladder of Jacob which reached from earth to heaven; upon each step, ...was an Angel bearing one of the names of God. The names are derived from the words and letters of the 19, 20, and 21st verses of the 14th chapter of the book of *Exodus*, ... The Seventy-two lettered Divine Name was called the Shem ha-mephorash." (p. 14)

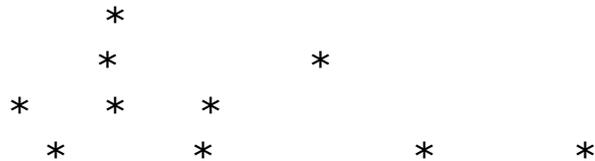
Biblical verses from which Shem ha-Mephorash derived

"19. And the angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud moved from before them and stood behind them:
20. And it came between the army of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was cloudy and dark all the night, but

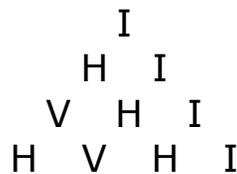
it gave light all the night to the children of Israel, so that they could not draw near one the another all the night. 21. And Moses lifted up his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." (*Exodus* 14:19-21)

The Tetractys and the Shem ha-Mephorash

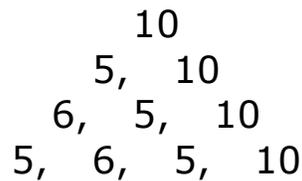
The Pythagorean Tetractys:



Substituting Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton:



The numerical values are...



10 + 10 + 10 + 10 + 5 + 5 + 5 + 6 + 6 + 5 = 72

Thus is the numerical value for the Shem ha-Mephorash.

The Significant Dates

In Chapter VI of the *Confessio* it is stated: "We could here relate and declare what all the time from the year 1378 (when our Christian Father was born) till now hath happened, what alterations in the world he hath seen these one hundred and six years of his life ..."

The year 1378 is the year of the Great Western Schism of the Roman Church. What did this event signal or begin?

Also an issue that occupies many discussions around the encampments of Freemasons is if the Rosicrucians had any direct connection with the Masonic fraternity. A fascinating coincidence, and it must be admitted, one against astronomical probabilities of occurring is the connection of this date - 1378 - with the summation of the names of the three Grand Masters of Freemasonry. It goes like this (Paul F. Case is credited here but I do not know if he is the first to make this discovery.):

King Solomon (using its Hebrew spelling with number equivalents) = 465

Hiram, King of Tyre = 640

Hiram Abiff = 273

$465 + 640 + 273 = 1378$

Unbelievable coincidence? 1378 is also the "theosophical" extension of the number 52. (e.g. $1+2+3+4+ \dots +52 = 1378$) The full spelling of the Four-lettered Name of God in the Bible (otherwise known as the Tetragrammaton), IHVH, as yod-heh-vav-heh equals 52. This would signify a full expression of the Tetragrammaton.

There are many other number puzzles within the documents showing deeper connections but that is not within our purview here.