

# **A Summary of the Western Magical Tradition**

**by**

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## **Introduction**

The Western magical tradition covers an extreme length of time and a splendid array of subjects. In order to provide an overview of a belief and practice with such breadth and depth it will be necessary to narrow the scope considerably. Regrettably this will leave much unsaid because the sidelines and bylines are just as fascinating as the overall history of magic. One possibility is to leave vast periods of time summarized which skips important intermediate developments. Another way is to strictly define “magic” and strive to keep within those make-believe boundaries. The problem is that in the magical world boundaries are permeable and variable including more at certain times and less at others. Regardless of these shortcomings, this is what we will have to do. The focus will only be upon a few important individuals whose impact upon the magical tradition was defining and substantial. They are so substantial that an understanding of their work will go far in providing understanding of the aims, theories and practices of magic.

The first section tries to understand why magic emerged as a way of relating to and understanding the world. The next section seeks to define magic and delineate what we mean by reference to the magical tradition; and, what kind of world-view lends itself to magical pursuits. The third section considers the views of Iamblichus who lived right before the Christian era. He was a Neoplatonist and a magician whose work typifies the pagan approach to the subject. In the next section we jump about 1000 years to review the great philosopher-magician Marsilio Ficino.

After the outlawing and destruction of the pagan schools and sanctuaries, and with the rise of the power of the Church, the practice of magic went into the dark ages with many things of the Latin West. As you might expect, its reemergence was slow, usually in exceptional individuals and small groups. But it did survive in various forms.

A major renewal in the history of the Western magical tradition occurred at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance in the city of Florence. The work of Marsilio Ficino and his students, friends and patrons impacted European magical thought so strongly that in some ways the waves have yet to reach the shore. We will consider Ficino's work and trace some of the influences that issued from his Florentine Academy. As at the time of Iamblichus, there were several major philosophical and religious traditions converging at that period; so it was similar in Ficino's time. There were many rediscoveries made that set up the same conditions for a renewal of the magical tradition. After Ficino, we will trace his influence to several subsequent magicians.

Magic is derived from nature, from our experience of nature and our understanding of nature. In the next section, we will consider the experience of the world around us from a prehistoric view in order to appreciate how magical formulations developed.

## **The Prehistoric Origins of Magic**

The origins of magic are deeply buried in the remote infancy of the human race. Indeed it may even precede it. Thus it probably lies hidden somewhere within our collective memory; or at least, the cause of its conception in human minds must still be with us today. The people living in those early times were very likely more immersed in the intricacies of nature, more aware of subtle nuances and changes in their environment than we are today. They were probably more familiar with the powers of plants to nourish, to spice, heal, or kill. And also more aware of the variety of powers and attributes of animals for the same and even more complex purposes. Just everyday living made them aware of basic categories of nature: earth and solids, water and liquids, winds and the mysterious breath, and fire and the warmth of living beings. Below the surface of the land and sea were mysterious mighty forces. In the sky were even mightier forces that seemed to have power and influence over all the land and its inhabitants. The sky was their calendar as it told them where they were in the year and what was to come. They knew the plants and animals would behave as the sky directed; its power was awesome. The sun seemed most powerful for no one could even look at it without consequences. When the sun gave of itself the world came to life; when it withdrew, the world began to die. The moon obviously had hidden mysterious powers in relation to the night, ocean tide, females, and time. Five other stars moved actively, were unique and seemed communicative while the rest of the stars moved in unison from some even more remote sphere.

The origins of magic must be found within that matrix. I say that because many of those same elements are found in the mainstream Western magical tradition from the earliest treatises to current theories. It has in many ways been a matter of appreciation and knowledge of the characteristics and powers of natural forces; and, an attempt to communicate with the supernatural intelligences behind them. The core structure of magical work has always been and continues to be based upon the schematic of the four elements, the seven planets, and the fixed stars which includes the powers and intelligences that they either embody or represent.

As we move into the historical period we can see how obviously older practices began to be recorded. Ancient records from various cultures are available but some of the most important came from the ancient Egyptian civilization. Even many of those aspects of magic that may have no direct link with Egypt were nonetheless taught and thought *as if that they had* come from that mysterious land.

It is, then, from ancient Egypt and the surrounding civilizations that we can consider the beginning of the formulation of magic in Western civilization. From this point on magic was systemized, developed and refined continually as it absorbed new information. With the advent of hieroglyphics, the means of recording and conveying this information took giant leaps forward. Down through the history of ancient Egypt we find more and more evidence of magical documents, amulets, spells of all kinds, and the acts of magicians. Of particular note are the concepts of realms in the afterlife, spells to help one access these realms as well as deal with the entities one finds there. We will see many of these notions present in later magical practices

## **Characteristics and Definitions of the Magical Universe**

What do we mean by magic and to what are we referring when we use the phrase: the Western magical tradition? Of course we do not mean the slight of hand techniques or trickery known as legerdemain like Houdini. Under consideration are ceremonial and ritual practices used for specific purposes usually within a spiritual context. Before we go further into the defining process it is helpful to look at the context in which magic finds itself and the assumptions underlying its practice.

Three of the most important structural components of the magical tradition are the ideas of a living vital universe, that there are interconnections or correspondences between all these living parts and that there is a medium that allows access to the magician through his ceremonies and rituals.

The first important concept is the living vital nature of the universe in all its parts and aspects. One scholar of esoteric thought explains:

“The cosmos is complex, plural, hierarchical ... Accordingly, Nature occupies an essential place. Multilayered, rich in potential revelations of every kind, it must be read like a book. The word *magia*, ..., truly calls forth that idea of a Nature, seen, known, and experienced as essentially alive in all its parts, often inhabited and traversed by a light or a hidden fire circulating through it. Thus understood, the “magic” is simultaneously the knowledge of the networks of sympathies or antipathies that link the things of Nature and the concrete operation of these bodies of knowledge.” (Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 11)

The second important concept is the idea of the interconnections and/or correspondences that exist between different areas and levels of the vital world; and is summed up this way:

“Symbolic and real correspondences are said to exist among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen. We find again here the ancient idea of microcosm and macrocosm or, if preferred, the principle of universal interdependence. These correspondences, considered more or less veiled at first sight, are, therefore, intended to be read and deciphered. The entire universe is a huge theater of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded. Everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret.” (Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 10)

The third necessary component is the medium of access available to the ceremonial magician:

“The idea of correspondence presumes already a form of imagination inclined to reveal and use mediations of all kinds, such as rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits. ... It is the imagination that allows the use of these intermediaries, symbols, and images to develop a gnosis, to penetrate the hieroglyphs of Nature, to put the theory of correspondences into active practice and to uncover,

to see, and to know the mediating entities between Nature and the divine world. ... it is a kind of organ of the soul, thanks to which humanity can establish a cognitive and visionary relationship with an intermediary world, ... Understood thus, imagination is the tool for knowledge of self, world, Myth. The eye of fire pierces the bark of appearances to call forth significations, “rappports” to render the invisible visible, ... and to retrieve there a treasure contributing to an enlargement of our prosaic vision.” (Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, pp. 12-13)

These ideas set the stage for the workings of all types of magic, the high and the low, the spiritual and the mundane. We should readily see the possibility of sympathetic magic (seeking to affect one thing by means of an associated thing) and imitative magic under this model.

A further nuance of magical definition necessary for our purpose is that of theurgy. Theurgy comes from the Greek *theourgia* whereas *theos* means god and *ergos* means working, thus translating basically as: god-working. One definition given is: “By theurgy we mean the knowledge of the theory and practice necessary to connect us with gods and spirits, and not only through raising our understanding but also through concrete rites and material objects that set into motion divine influences where and when we want, ....” (*Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, ed. by Faivre & Needleman, “Ancient & Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements”, p. 4)

With the definitions above, we can begin to look at the development of magic and particularly theurgy in the Western world.

## **The Hellenistic Contributions to the Magical Tradition**

While we may see very early formulations of magical development in the ancient land of Egypt, it is in the Greco-Roman period that magic, or theurgy, emerges as a coherent and consistent spirituality. The many religious and philosophical currents that emerged during this time period only seemed to fortify its

development to even higher levels. For at this time we can clearly see the emergence of the recurring schematic of the four elements, the seven “stars” and the fixed sphere.

The philosophical doctrine of the four elements originated with a Greek philosopher Empedocles (5<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) who: “... by accepting four distinct elements, or ‘roots of all things,’ ... is able to explain natural change as a result of the combination, separation, and regrouping of indestructible entities. There remains, of course, something illusory about the kaleidoscopic appearance of change. ... In reality there is only the mixing, unmixing, and remixing of permanent entities.” (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol 2, p. 497.)

Although the seven wandering luminaries were always known, their ordering differed in different cultures. Eventually a set order was formulated which lasted till the Heliocentric paradigm supplanted it but for magical purposes it is still used today. Jim Tester, a scholar in Classics informs us: “... the order called ‘Chaldaean’, which was undoubtedly Greek and astronomical, derived from the planets’ periods of rotation round the ecliptic, and hence their assumed distances from the earth, was moon, Mercury, Venus, sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. It is this order, which becomes standard from the second century B.C. which is used in Greek astrology.” (*A History of Western Astrology* by Jim Tester, pp. 19-19)

Later we see the exact planetary order imposed on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. But during this earlier period the ideas regarding the fixed sphere became standard.

“The twelve from Aries to Pisces seem to have emerged as standard form no earlier than the end of the fifth century B.C., and the first mention of twelve equal signs, as opposed to the constellations (of unequal extent in the heavens), was in 419 B.C. (Tester, p. 14)

By the time Iamblichus, a Syrian Platonist, was born (240 –325 C.E.), many of the currents of earlier thought had taken root in the classical pagan mind. From the wisdom of Egypt to the Neo-Pythagoreans and the Neoplatonist, the concepts of the mathematical

basis of the universe, the immortality of the soul, the mythical theme of the fall and reintegration of the soul, the ordered procession of souls after death, a mediating process through the hierarchical structure of worlds with the planets and stars representing the several spheres were, as shown above, all well established.

In the writings of Iamblichus we have a coherent and complete view of the theory and practice of ceremonial magic. It is actually some of the earliest material available that articulates the place of magical work in spiritual pursuits within a philosophical framework. Iamblichus augmented the Neoplatonic philosophy by inclusion of Pythagorean teachings, Egyptian and pagan religion, as well as the Chaldean Oracles. He turned the Neoplatonic philosophy into the background and *raison d'être* of theurgy.

The *Chaldean Oracles* were important in many philosophical circles. They are a collection of hexameter verses from the late second century C.E. which had enormous influence. There remain only fragments that have been collected from the many authors who quoted them. Regardless, they were considered authoritative revelations and accorded the highest respect.

For Iamblichus, theurgy is the way for the soul to participate in the divine. It is the vehicle for the soul's ascent back to the celestial order and the world soul. By practicing the correct rites the magician could bring the powers within him into alignment with the powers of the cosmos and thus, achieve access to the Demiurge.

It was believed that the Demiurge created the soul with particular harmonic ratios identical with the ratios perceived in the sky. These ratios were contorted by the soul's incarnation but by theurgic rites were set back into alignment. Particular ritual actions set into motion certain powers within the soul that would allow it to reunify with the heavenly powers. This was the way of uniting the microcosm with the macrocosm.

For Iamblichus the goal of theurgy was to awaken the soul to the hidden presence of the divine. When the soul was created, the

Demiurge informed it with harmonic ratios and particular divine symbols. The harmonic ratios were active in all souls. But the symbols remained inactive until by the practice of theurgy the magician could awaken them. Once awakened their presence was felt and known in the soul. These activated powers brought the soul into deeper alignment with the cosmic will thus making the theurgist a vehicle of the gods. As this alignment strengthened and the soul realized its place in the universe, the ideas of fate transformed into the highest destiny.

How did magic achieve this awakening? We can consider planetary rites for example. It had long been thought that the Egyptian priests used the vowels in specific ways in their hymns. Gregory Shaw, in his book on Iamblichus, from which the above material is largely derived, writes that: "Iamblichus believed that the seven vowels were connatural with the seven planetary gods, ... (Shaw, p. 185). Shaw also reports that: "Iamblichus used the term *rhoizos* to describe the sounds emitted by the stars whose intervals served as the bases for theurgical chants and melodies." (Shaw, p. 91) And it is through the use of chanting the names and vowels in the rites that the soul could participate in the "energy" of the gods and ascend to their sphere. Or, seen differently, set up the conditions for the gods to descend into the magician.

### **Marsilio Ficino's Magical Renaissance**

In fifteenth-century Florence, ruled by the great Medici dynasty, there Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) became one of the most influential philosophers of Europe. He began several translations projects under the patronage of Cosimo de Medici: he finished the translations of the *Hymns of Orpheus* and the *Sayings of Zoroaster* by 1462, the *Corpus Hermeticum* by 1463, and 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. His work had an extensive effect. In the introduction to a collection of Ficino's published letters, the editor 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) Cosimo gave Ficino use of his villa at Careggi outside of Florence where he translated and held discussions and taught.

Not only was Marsilio Ficino a philosopher and priest but he was also a magus. As far as we know, he was not taught but learned by his own work. Some of his knowledge must have been easily accessible but some had come through his translation projects. D.P. Walker surmises that:

“Peter of Abano and other mediaeval writers on magic, such as Roger Bacon, Alkindi, Aicenna, and “Picatrix”, are probably important sources for Ficino’s talismans, and would suggest invocations to planets. But far more important are certain Neoplatonic texts: Proclus’ *De Sacrificiis et Magia*, Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis* and *Vita Pythagorae*, Porphyry’s *De Abstinencia*, the *Hermetica*, especially the *Asclepius*. Most of these Ficino translated or paraphrased.” (D.P. Walker, *Spiritual & Demonic Magic*, pp. 36-37)

As is common in magic, Ficino was an astrologer too. One of the main qualities that issues from Ficino’s work is his concern for the health of the soul, an area where he could utilize his astrological counsel. Noel Cobb in his foreword to Thomas Moore’s book on Ficino’s astrological psychology gives us Ficino’s view of soul:

“Psyche, as World Soul, ... is scattered throughout everything; everything manifests soul’s interiority and depth. The planets mirror their metaphors within. They are also persons with characters, physiognomies, styles of speech and action, who form complex relationships among themselves. ... The Gods are embodied, astronomically, in the planets, but psychologically in myths and in the phenomenological texture of the sensible world. Ficino’s psychology is one which would imagine the divinity within each thing, the God in each event.” (Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within*, foreword.)

To understand better the magic of Ficino, it is helpful to use more modern terminology. Planetary rites promote a continual reciprocity with the divine archetypes within the psyche – the planetary counterpart deep in the mind. It is a continual nourishing as the planetary rites promote a continual reciprocity with the divine archetypes within the soul. Speaking of Ficino, Joscelyn Godwin says he: "... sang his Orphic poems in order to set his spirits (spiritus) in motion and thereby open himself up to the influences of the benefic planets, descending by way of the subtle air. In Ficino's belief, such operations of musical magic only worked because man himself is in a natural state of resonance with the higher powers." (Joscelyn Godwin, *Music and the Occult*, pp. 23-24)

We find the same understanding today in current magical thinking which tends to utilize major terminology from the Jungian camp of psychology. One particular magical society whose curriculum is strongly that of planetary magic explains it thus: "The special and profound responsiveness of the psyche to these luminaries is due to the existence in its depths – in the Deep Mind of each individual – of "counterparts" which are reflections, as it were, of the cosmic archetypes of the planets." (Denning & Phillips, *Planetary Magick*, p. xxxiv) From the modern viewpoint, it is not the physical planets per se but their counterparts within us that respond: "The planetary powers of the cosmos are far beyond our intervention, both in magnitude and in their mode of being. But their counterparts in the depths of the psyche, although they are equally "not ours", are within our reach by certain special meditative and ritual methods; and when one of the counterparts is thus stirred by our action, it produces effects of the same character as those which typify its cosmic original." (D&P, *Planetary Magick*, p. xxxiv)

This system of Ficino's was developed by other magicians. In the next century, Giordano Bruno developed it even further. He developed elaborate mnemonic devices to develop the will and imagination in these same directions. "Bruno's magic memory system thus represents the memory of a Magus, one who both knows the reality beyond the multiplicity of appearances through having conformed his imagination to the archetypal images, and also has

powers through this insight. It is the direct descendent of Ficino's Neoplatonic interpretation of the celestial images, but carried to a much more daring extreme." (Francis Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, P. 199)

Ficino's influence was truly great and spread throughout Europe. There is an interesting lineage that one can trace from him that will lead to further great mystics and magicians for generations. To some of these, we will now consider.

### **The Powerful Influence of the Careggi Circle**

Many scholars came to Florence to participate in what was happening there. One of them was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) who 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) was influenced by Pico and was a professor of law (one of the foremost jurists and legal scholars of his day), a humanist, a student of classical philology and philosophy. He was also proficient in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Reuchlin is considered the first non-Jew to write a book on the Kabbalah - *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517).

Also influenced by Pico was Francesco Giorgi (1466 – 1540) who drew together Neoplatonism, Neopythagoreanism, the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, Cabala, angels, planets, harmony and number and the architectural symbolism of Vitruvius into a coherent system. Later his work was known and studied by the English Renaissance magus John Dee.

These men had far reaching influence. One important instance of the extent of this influence is the relationship of Reuchlin to

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 Reuchlin. He later became a monk and was elevated to Abbot, was an avid scholar and eventually collected some 2000 volumes. He knew both Greek and Hebrew (advanced schooling by Reuchlin) and studied Pythagoras, Hermetics, and the Kabbalah. Although his work was not published until 1606, 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. (Trithemius's work also influenced John Dee, the English Renaissance magus. Dee began the composition of his Kabbalistic *Monas Hieroglyphica* in 1564 after a chance discovery of a manuscript copy of Trithemius's steganographical handbook a year before.)

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. (*Cornelius Agrippa*, edited by V. Perrone Compagni, p. 2) It is reported that Agrippa was deeply impressed and very likely a teacher/pupil relationship developed. Agrippa's book *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* is considered the foundational work of all western magic since its publication. He finished a draft of it in 1510 that was circulated among many circles. We know that Agrippa traveled to Italy between 1511 and 1518. There "... 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) In 1531 the finished work was published. The extensive influence this volume has had on the Western magical tradition since its publication cannot be overstated. Some magical societies today still issue parts of it as "secret material"!

It should be clear that the influences streaming from the Florentine academy of Marsilio Ficino have traveled far and wide. There really is very little today of the underlying structure of magic

that is different from what was compiled in that time period. Terminology has changed, updated and is now full of psychological terms not available before. Certain techniques have been refined, maybe, but all in all, this magical tradition remains remarkable solid.

## **Concluding Remarks**

We have found magic rooted deeply in the human experience of nature. This experience includes both our physical world and the psychological world. But its motive for the most part has been a quest for greater knowledge and understanding. We have found that the magician's world-view is not alien, not unreasonable. Actually, it is very much in harmony with the philosophical understandings of the time. There is, no doubt, emphasis upon seeing nature as composed of different kingdoms, hierarchies, and scales of perfection. There is also a strong sense of the interconnectedness of all seemingly discreet parts of the world. But these discreet parts are only manifestations of underlying connections that lead back ultimately to an overall Unity. It is within these intricacies that magic is made possible.

With Iamblichus we saw magic in its higher expression – where it is the ultimate vehicle for humanity to take part in the divine life of the gods. Magic in its aspect of theurgy becomes the epitome of the spiritual quest as it can lead the soul back from whence it descended as well as bringing the gods down to earth as the magician embodies their power. Paradoxically, magic in this sense is of-this-world.

With Marsilio Ficino, we find a magical renaissance in the midst of the Italian Renaissance. The classical world was incorporated into the Christian world that had once rejected it. Kabbalistic teachings from Spain were being explored and incorporated into a more comprehensive corpus of magical endeavor. The influences that spread out from there to all parts of Europe set the foundation of magical work that lasts to this day.

And now, with the explosion of information, the cross cultural currents reminiscent of earlier periods, and the blending of traditions that knew little if anything of each other not so long ago, makes one wonder if conditions are ripe for another new stage of growth in the Western magical tradition.