

Monkey Business

Magical Vowels and Cosmic Levels in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (NHC VI, 6)*

The three Hermetica that were found in Nag Hammadi Codex VI have contributed to change the course of Hermetic studies. The dominating stance before the discovery, represented by André-Jean Festugière, was that the treatises contained vulgar philosophical platitudes, with no religious community attached, and where the Egyptian elements served as mere décor¹. In the last four decades scholars such as Garth Fowden and Jean-Pierre Mahé have conversely argued that the Hermetica represent a progressing way of Hermes, more concerned with spiritual formation than doctrinal truth, which were practiced by one – or more likely several – groups in Roman Egypt, with actual connections to Late Egyptian religion². In the present contribution, I will focus on two series of vowels that appear together with two *nomina barbara* in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, appearing before and after the visionary ascent of the interlocutors, Hermes and his son, to the Ogdoad and the Ennead. A comparison with the magical papyri will show that these vowels and *nomina barbara*, often considered to be totally senseless, reflect thoughts and practices from both popular Greek philosophy and indigenous Egyptian religious traditions. Finally, some reflections will be offered on the religio-historical relationship of the Nag Hammadi Codices with the magical papyri in their fourth-century manuscript context in Upper Egypt.

* This article has been written under the aegis of the project NEWCONT (New Contexts for Old Texts: Unorthodox Texts and Monastic Manuscript Culture in Fourth- and Fifth-Century Egypt) at the University of Oslo, Faculty of Theology. The project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement no. 283741. It is a revised version of a chapter in C. H. Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom*, PhD diss., The University of Bergen, Bergen 2014, to be published in Brill's book-series Religions in the Graeco-Roman World.

¹ Cfr. esp. A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 4 vols., Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1944-1954.

² G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1986; J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en haute-Égypte*, 2 vols. ("Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi, section «textes», 3 & 7), Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec 1978-1982; Id., *La voie d'immortalité à la lumière des Hermetica de Nag Hammadi et de découvertes plus récentes*, in «Vigiliae Christianae» 45 (1991), pp. 347-375.

It must initially be emphasized that the composition-stage of the *Hermetica*, probably in the second century CE, is contemporary with the continued cult of Thoth, the Egyptian Hermes, who was considered to be the authority behind the Hermetic treatises. The Hermes of the *Hermetica* is largely portrayed as a human who has become deified, though some treatises present this human Hermes as the descendant of a primordial god who is now worshiped in cities like Hermopolis³. Both here and all across Egypt, Thoth was worshipped variously as a human with the head of an ibis, or fully zoomorphic, as either an ibis or a baboon⁴. This cult of the ibis and the baboon involved using live animals as oracles in the temples, and offering their mummified remains to the god after their death. As we know from the Hermopolite papyrus-archive of Theophanes, the cult of Thoth continued in Hermopolis into the fourth century, and thus quite close in time also to the Coptic translations of the *Hermetica*⁵.

The Vowels

The vowels and *nomina barbara* appear in a context where Hermes and his son are seeking admittance to the Ogdoad, the eighth sphere above the fixed stars. The son of Hermes is normally called Tat in the other Hermetic treatises, and I will refer to him as such in the following. In *On the rebirth* (CH XIII), Tat was reborn as constituted of ten divine powers, and Hermes promised him that he would be able to see the Ogdoad if he applied himself. This promise is made good on in the present treatise⁶.

³ *Ascl.* 37-38; SH XXIII (the *Korê kosmou*).

⁴ D. Kessler - A. el Halim Nur el-Din, *Tuna al-Gebel: Millions of Ibises and Other Animals*, in S. Ikram (ed.) *Divine Creatures: Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2005, pp. 120-163.

⁵ C.H. Bull, *Hermes between Pagans and Christians: The Nag Hammadi Hermetica in Context*, in H. Lundhaug - L. Jenott (eds.), *The Nag Hammadi Codices and Late Antique Egypt* ("Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum"), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2017, forthcoming. On Theophanes, cf. J. Matthews, *The Journey of Theophanes: Travel, Business, and Daily Life in the Roman East*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2006, pp. 12-40.

⁶ It should however be pointed out that Mahé interprets CH XIII and *Disc.* 8-9 as two versions of the same ritual of rebirth, and not as two stages on the Way of Hermes. Cf. J.-P. Mahé, *Le sens et la composition du traité hermétique, 'L'Ogdoad et l'Enneade', conservé dans le codex VI de Nag Hammadi*, in «Revue des sciences religieuses» 48 (1974), pp. 54-65; Id., *A Reading of the Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead (Nag Hammadi Codex VI.6)*, in R. van den Broek - W. J. Hanegraff (eds.), *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, State University of New York, New York 1998, pp. 79-86; Id., *Accolade ou baiser? Sur un rite hermétique de régénération, ἀπαύξασθαί en NH VI, 57,26 et 65,4*, in L. Painchaud - P.-H. Poirier (eds.), *Coptica – Gnostica – Manichaica: Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* ("Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi", section «études», 7), Les presses de l'Université Laval, Québec 2006, pp. 557-566: pp. 562-563. I argue that CH XIII and *Disc.* 8-9 represent two distinct stages in C.H. Bull, *Tradition of Hermes*, cit., pp. 176-278. Cf. also C. Colpe - J. Holzhausen, *Das Corpus Hermeticum deutsch*, 2 vols., Frommann Holzboog, Stuttgart 1997, vol. 1, p. 159, vol. 2, p. 509.

Before the ascent, Hermes first makes an invocation, praising God’s creative and ruling power and calling him «the invisible god to whom one speaks in silence», and then utters the first string of vowels framed by the two *nomina barbara* (56, 17-22). After this, Tat receives the vision of the Ogdoad and of the Ennead, which are described enthusiastically, if not quite systematically. At the end of the visionary ascent we find the second string of vowels, this time with no *nomina barbara* (61, 10-15). Note that the vowels are not divided into separate lines in the manuscript, but are given continuously. The stylistic arrangement of the vowels can however be found in the magical papyri⁷, and it is likely that their original arrangement was something like this⁸:



Fig. 1: The two series of vowels, with *nomina barbara*.

Note first that there is some confusion regarding the iotas: the two etas in the first series should be four iotas, and the three iotas in the second series should be four⁹. Curiously we find this same problem with iotas in the magical papyri, which shows us that the original series no doubt had four iotas in both series, as we shall see. The seven vowels are in Greek popular philosophy connected to the seven planets¹⁰, and according to the Pythagorean numerology of Nicomachus of Gerasa, vowels are unspeak-

⁷ Cfr. D. Frankfurter, *The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: the Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek Traditions*, in «Helios» 21 (1994), pp. 189-221: p. 200; A. Camplani, *Scritti ermetici in copto*, Paideia, Brescia 2000, pp. 142, 152; A. van den Kerchove, *La voie d’Hermès: Pratiques rituelles et traités hermétiques* (“Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies”, 77), Brill, Leiden 2012, p. 263.

⁸ NHC VI 56, 17-22; 61, 10-15.

⁹ J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 73, 106. I have not followed Mahé in erasing the sixth omega in the line after the two etas in the first series, nor A. Camplani, *Scritti ermetici*, cit., p. 152, who adds eight omegas to the end of the second series, to get 6+7+8+9 omegas.

¹⁰ The seven ouisiarchs according to L.S. Keizer, *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth: A New Hermetic Initiation Discourse* (“Monograph Series”, 1), Academy of Arts & Humanities, Sea-side (CA) 1974, p. 42. But in the enumeration of the ouisiarchs in *Ascl.* 19, only some are associated with planets. In general on vowels, cfr. F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*,

able and related to the consonants as the soul is related to the body¹¹. The vowels probably follow the traditional planetary order Moon-Mercury-Venus-Sun-Mars-Jupiter-Saturn, with Saturn corresponding to omega¹². Since each vowel is followed by a string of omegas Mahé claimed that the omegas represent the Ogdoad, but we shall see that it is more likely that they represent both Saturn and the fixed stars¹³. This double function of the omega can be elucidated with reference to the treatise of Zosimos of Panopolis¹⁴ on the letter omega. Zosimos frequently refers to Hermes as an authority, though in this passage he refers to Nicotheus, a name that is familiar to us as an author of apocalypses read by the Gnostics in Plotinus' circle¹⁵:

Τὸ ω στοιχεῖον στρογγύλον, τὸ διμερές, τὸ ἀνήκον τῇ ἑβδόμῃ Κρόνου ζώνῃ κατὰ τὴν ἑνσωμον φράσιν, κατὰ γὰρ τὴν ἀσώματον ἄλλο τί ἐστὶν ἀνερωμήνευτον, ὃ μόνος Νικόθεος <ὁ> κεκρωμμένος οἶδεν. Κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἑνσωμον, τὸ λεγόμενον Ὠκεανὸς θεῶν, φησί, πάντων γένεσις καὶ σπορά, καθάπερ φασὶν¹⁶ αἱ μοναρχικαὶ τῆς ἐνσώμου φράσεως.

Round omega is the bipartite letter, the one that in terms of corporeal language belongs to the seventh planetary zone, that of Saturn. For in terms of the incorporeal it is something else altogether, something inexplicable, which only Nicotheus the hidden knows. In corporeal terms omega is said to be Ocean – says he (the poet): “the birth and seed of all the gods” – just as the governing principles of material language state it¹⁷.

B.G. Teubner, Leipzig 1922, pp. 35-39, 82-83; on vowels and planets, cfr. H.G. Gundel, *Weltbild und Astrologie in den griechischen Zauberpapyri*, C.H. Beck, München 1968, pp. 41-43.

¹¹ Nic. Ger., *Harmonikon Enchiridion*, quoted in G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 1995, p. 184.

¹² But cfr. C.-É. Ruelle, *Le chant des sept voyelles grecques*, in «Revue des Études Grecques» 2 (1889), pp. 38-44, 393-395: p. 42, for other schemes.

¹³ J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 106-107, followed by A. Camplani, *Scritti ermetici*, cit., pp. 142-143 fn. 45.

¹⁴ On Zosimos Cfr. R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres: Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur*, B.G. Teubner, Leipzig 1904, pp. 104-105; W. Scott, *Hermetica: the ancient Greek and Latin writings which contain religious or philosophic teachings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, 4 vols., Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924-1936, vol. 4, pp. 112ff.; A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 263-273; G.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (“Nag Hammadi Studies”, 24), Brill, Leiden 1984, pp. 139-143; G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, cit., pp. 120-126; H.M. Jackson, *Zosimos of Panopolis on the Letter Omega*, Scholars Press, Missoula 1978; M. Mertens, *Zosime de Panopolis: Mémoires authentiques* (“Les alchimistes grecs”, 4.1), Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1995; S. Grimes, *Zosimos of Panopolis: Alchemy, Nature, and Religion in Late Antiquity*, Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, Syracuse 2006.

¹⁵ Porph., *Vit. Plot.* 16. Nicotheus is also mentioned in *Setheus*, otherwise known as the Untitled treatise of the Bruce Codex, Cfr. G. G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, cit., p. 139; W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1907, pp. 189-194; H.M. Jackson, *Zosimos of Panopolis*, cit., p. 40 fn. 4; M. Mertens, *Zosime*, cit., pp. 55f. fn. 4.

¹⁶ em. Mertens; ms. φησὶν.

¹⁷ Zos. Pan., *Mém. auth.* 1, 1 Mertens. I have altered the translation of Howard, who saw the entire last part to be a quotation of Nicotheus, in accordance with Mertens.

Howard M. Jackson interpreted “round” and “bipartite” as referring to Ocean, since he surrounds the world and was hermaphroditic according to Egyptian traditions¹⁸. Michèle Mertens has a more prosaic explanation: the adjectives refer simply to the round, twofold shape of the miniscule ω. However, a more likely explanation is that “round” refers to the cycle of Saturn, and that “bipartite” refers to its corporeal and incorporeal aspect.

Two corporeal senses are actually provided by Zosimus. First, as the seventh vowel the omega denotes the seventh planetary cycle of Saturn. Second, it denotes Ocean (Ὠκεανός) as the first letter in that name, and as such is the birth and seed of all gods – likely a Homeric echo¹⁹. In the Pythagorean *Theology of Arithmetic*, which makes use of material from Nicomachus and Iamblichus, Ocean is also connected to the sphere of Saturn²⁰, and in the second century dream-book of Artemidorus Saturn and Ocean are listed, together with Tethys, the titans, and universal nature, as the gods enveloping all others: according to Artemidorus, dreaming about these outer gods is a bad sign for everyone else than philosophers and seers, since «these men extend their thought to the very boundaries of the universe»²¹. The Ocean encircled the entire world in Greek mythology, with all constellations and stars diving into it, and it is therefore a suitable symbol of the outer limit of the Ptolemaic spherical cosmos, girding the fixed stars.

The Omegas as Decans

Zosimus’s identification of omega as both Saturn and Ocean makes some sense of the string of vowels in the *Disc. 8-9*: in the upward ascent the seven vowels represent the traversal of the seven planetary spheres, while the omegas represent not only the sphere of Saturn but also the layer of fixed stars.

¹⁸ H.M. Jackson, *Zosimos of Panopolis*, cit., p. 39 fn. 1.

¹⁹ Cfr. *ibi*, p. 41; Hom., *Il.* 14, 200-201: εἶμι γὰρ ὀψομένη πολυφόρβου πείρατα γαίης, Ὠκεανόν τε θεῶν γένεσιν καὶ μητέρα Τηθών; *ibi*, 245-246: ἂν ποταμοῖο ῥέεθρα Ὠκεανοῦ, ὅς περ γένεσις πάντεσσι τέτυκται. Plato follows this tradition in *Tim.*, 40e when he makes Ocean and Tethys children of Ge and Ouranos, and parents of Kronos, Rhea and the rest of the titans. Cfr. *Theaet.* 152e; *Orph. hymn* 83 to Ocean.

²⁰ Though here Ocean is associated with the number nine, due to the differing Pythagorean planetary sequence: Counter Earth, Earth, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, fixed stars. Cfr. R. Waterfield, *The Theology of Arithmetic*, Phanes, Grand Rapid 1988, p. 90 fn. 17.

²¹ Art., *Oneir.* 3, 34: οἱ δὲ πέριξ τούτων Ὠκεανὸς καὶ Τηθὺς καὶ Κρόνος καὶ Τιτᾶνες καὶ Φύσις ἢ τῶν ὄλων. [...] οἱ δὲ πέριξ τούτων πονηροὶ πᾶσι πλὴν φιλοσόφων <καὶ μάντεων> (cfr. 2, 39) οὗτοι γὰρ καὶ μέχρι <τοῦ> πέρατος τῶν ὄλων τείνουσι τὴν ἐαυτῶν γνώμην. Tr. R.J. White, *Artemidorus: The Interpretation of Dreams*, Noyes Press, New Jersey 1990, p. 126.

In Hermetic cosmology, this outer layer represents the boundary between the Hebdomas and the Ogdoas, which in some texts are identified with the thirty-six Decans, Egyptian astral deities that control ten days each and together encompass the year, along with five intercalary days. In the sixth Hermetic excerpt from the anthology of John of Stobi (SH VI) the Decans are said to be interposed between the Zodiac and the “circle of the all,” separating them²². Although the Decans are not specifically mentioned in *Disc. 8-9*, they are implied in the final invocation of the seven Ousiarchs, the “rulers of essence”²³. These rulers are only otherwise attested in the Hermetic *Perfect Discourse*, where Pantomorphos²⁴ is described as the Ousiarch of the 36 Horoscopoi, who must be identical with the Decans, while two other Oursiarchs, namely Fortuna and Heirmarmene are given the responsibility for the seven planets²⁵.

The number of vowels in our two series indicates that they are indeed meant to symbolize the seven planets and the thirty-six Decans. The simple form of the vowel string, found in the magical papyri, starts with one alpha and increases every succeeding vowel by one, which altogether adds up to 28²⁶. If we add all the vowels in our series, but including only seven omegas at the end, we reach this number. According to PGM XIII, which we will shortly return to, this number reflects that the seven vowels «utter their voices according to the twenty-eight forms of the moon», that is, an approximation of the lunar month²⁷. However, both series of vowels are interspersed with omegas, and there are thirty-six omegas in each series of vowels. In the first series, what seemed to be a redundant extra omega following the iotas is likely a correction made in order to reach the number thirty-six. The author or scribe should have started with one omega before the alpha, in which case by adding together every number up to eight he would have arrived at the number thirty-six. Either the first

²² SH VI, 3: Ὑπὸ δὲ τὸν κύκλον τοῦ σώματος τούτου τετάχθαι τοὺς τριάκοντα ἕξ δεκανοὺς, μέσους τοῦ παντὸς κύκλου <καὶ> τοῦ ζῳδιακοῦ, διορίζοντας ἀμφοτέρους τοὺς κύκλους καὶ ὅσπερ ἐκεῖνον μὲν κουφίζοντας, τὸν <δὲ> ζῳδιακὸν καθορίζοντας.

²³ NHC VI 63, 16-19: †ταρκο ἡπιετνωαφ ἡπειλωαμε ετογααβ ἡπτε ἡν πκαρ ἡν πκαρῆτῆν πμοογ ἡν σααῖ ἡνιογαιρχης.

²⁴ Cfr. W. Scott, *Hermetica*, cit., vol. 3, pp. 120-121.

²⁵ *Ascl. 19: XXXVI, quorum uocabulum est Horoscopi, id est eodem loco semper defixorum siderum, horum οὐσιάρχης uel princeps est, quem Παντόμορφον uel omniformem uocant, qui diuersis speciebus diuersas formas facit. septem sphaerae quae uocantur habent οὐσιάρχας, id est sui principes, quam fortunam dicunt aut Εἰμαρμένην, quibus inmutantur omnia lege naturae stabilitateque firmissima, sempiterna agitatione uariata.* This passage comes shortly before the start of the excerpt NHC VI, 8 = *Ascl. 21-29*.

²⁶ Cfr. J.-P. Mahé, *L'Ogdoade et l'Ennéade*, in J.-P. Mahé - P.-H. Poirier (eds.), *Écrits gnostiques: La bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi*, Gallimard, Paris 2007, pp. 935-971: p. 962, adducing Michael Psellus (*Epistulae* 187).

²⁷ PGM XIII, 777: τῶν ζ' φθόγγων ἐχόντων φωνὰς πρὸς τὰ κη' φῶτα τῆς σελήνης. My translations of PGM are taken from H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation. Including the Demotic spells*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986.

omega was forgotten, or perhaps there was a desire to start with an alpha, in order to go from alpha to omega, possibly the work of a Christian scribe. At any rate, the first omega was removed from the beginning and added to the omegas following the iotas in order to reach the desired sum of thirty-six. Something similar is the case in the second series, where we also find thirty-six omegas, although it is unclear how the final twenty-two omegas were originally divided into lines, for example as 6+7+9, or 6+7+8+1²⁸. I would lean towards the latter option, and in that case the final lone omega has been removed from its original place, after the epsilons. In both series, then, one single omega has been replaced from what would otherwise have been the string of 1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8=36. Lewis Keizer suggested that the strings were willfully distorted so as to confound uninitiated readers²⁹, a suggestion which is plausible yet unprovable. The number thirty-six represents the Decans and also the path of the sun. The seven vowels thus symbolize the seven planets, and their grouping into twenty-eight vowels and thirty-six omegas can thus symbolize the course of the moon and the sun. Naturally this symbolism would be apt for the passage through the heavenly vault into the Ogdoad and Ennead, and the return back down, the two places in the text where our series of vowels occur.

Furthermore, in his discussion of Egyptian symbolism, Plutarch identifies thirty-six with the Pythagorean greater *tetraktys*: «The so-called *tetraktys*, namely thirty-six, was the greatest oath, as is well known, and was called the Cosmos; it was made up by the sum of the first four even and uneven numbers»³⁰. Elsewhere Plutarch adds that the Pythagoreans sang hymns to the number thirty-six³¹. Clement of Alexandria, for his part, informs us that there are thirty-six books of Hermes, making up the totality of Egyptian philosophy, that would be carried in festival processions by Egyptian priests (*Strom.* 6, 4, 35-37). There is thus a ritual context to the number thirty-six, and we will find that our vowels and *nomina barbara* had a ritual use in the magical papyri.

²⁸ A. van den Kerchove, *La voie d'Hermès*, cit., p. 266, opts for the first division, seeing the passage from 7 to 9 as an entry into the Ennead. But then what happened to the Ogdoad?

²⁹ L.S. Keizer, *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth*, cit., p. 11, suggested the extra omega was added in order to make the string unfunctional for those who were uninitiated, followed by A. van den Kerchove, *La voie d'Hermès*, cit., p. 264.

³⁰ (1+3+5+7)+(2+4+6+8)=36. Cfr. Plut., *Is. et Os.* 75: ἡ δὲ καλουμένη τετρακτύς, τὰ ἕξ καὶ τριάκοντα, μέγιστος ἦν ὄρκος, ὡς τεθρύληται, καὶ κόσμος ὀνόμασται, τεσσάρων μὲν ἄρτιων τῶν πρώτων, τεσσάρων δὲ τῶν περισσοῶν εἰς ταῦτὸ συντιθεμένων ἀποτελούμενος. The regular tetractys is the sum of the first four numbers.

³¹ Plut., *An. proc. Tim.* 1027 F: ἡ μὲν οὖν ὑπὸ τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν ὑμνουμένη τετρακτύς, τὰ ἕξ καὶ τριάκοντα, θαυμαστὸν ἔχειν δοκεῖ τὸ συγκεῖσθαι μὲν ἐκ πρώτων ἄρτιων τεσσάρων καὶ πρώτων περισσοῶν τεσσάρων, γίνεσθαι δὲ συζυγία τετάρτη τῶν ἐφεξῆς συντεθειμένων.

The Nomina Barbara

Papyrus Leiden J 395 (PGM XIII) is a single quire papyrus codex now located in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. It contains 32 pages and has been dated to the middle of the fourth century on paleographical grounds³². It belonged to a collection of magical papyri discovered in Thebes in the early 19th century that contains spells in Greek, Old Coptic and Demotic and must consequently have belonged to someone educated in an Egyptian temple³³. The codex is thus close to the Nag Hammadi Codices both chronologically and geographically. It contains three different versions of an initiatory spell meant to make the god or an angel appear to or enter into the ritualist and provide revelations. The spell is entitled variously the *Monas* or the *Eighth Hidden Book of Moses*, and the first two versions also contain the famous *Leiden Kosmopoïia*³⁴. Serge Sauneron has demonstrated that this *Kosmopoïia* is affiliated with the Roman-era cosmogony of the temple at Esna³⁵, and it also bears similarities to the *Poimandres*³⁶. Here we shall however mainly consider its use of magical vowels and *nomina barbara*. In the *Leiden Kosmopoïia* the creator god laughs seven times, and each laugh produces a new divine hypostasis. The fourth hypostasis is Creative Force which governs Procreation, *Genna* and *Spora* in Greek, which we recognize as the epithets of Ocean in the Homeric passage quoted by Zosimus³⁷. These hypostases are also given the *nomina barbara* ΒΑΔΗΤΟΦΩΘ ΖΩΘΑΞΑΘΩΖ³⁸, the latter of which is a close approximation of the *nomina* of *Disc. 8-9*, ΖΩΞΑΘΑΖΩ and ΖΩΖΑΖΩΘ³⁹. Mahé suggested that the Leiden version

³² R.W. Daniel, *Two Greek Magical papyri in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden: a photographic edition of J384 and J395 (=PGM XII and XIII)*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen 1991, pp. x-xi.

³³ Cfr. now R. Gordon, *The Religious Anthropology of Late-Antique 'High' Magical Practice*, in J. Rüpke (ed.), *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 163-186.

³⁴ Cfr. A. Dieterich, *Abraxas: Studien zur Religionsgeschichte*, B.G. Teubner, Leipzig 1891; M. Smith, *The Eighth Book of Moses and How It Grew (P Leid J 395)*, in S.J.D. Cohen (ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh* ("Religions of the Graeco-Roman World", 130), 2 vols., Brill, Leiden 1996: vol. 2, pp. 217-226; Id., *P Leid J 395 (PGM XIII) and Its Creation Legend, ibi*, pp. 227-234; R. Merkelbach, *Abraxas: Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen Inhalts*. Band 3: *Zwei griechisch-ägyptische Weihezereemonien (Die Leidener Welterschöpfung – Die Pschai-Aion-Liturgie)*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Köln 1992.

³⁵ S. Sauneron, *La légende des sept propos de Methyer au temple d'Esna*, in «Bulletin de la Société française d'Égyptologie» 32 (1961), pp. 43-48.

³⁶ C.H. Bull, *Tradition of Hermes*, cit., p. 102.

³⁷ PGM XIII, 175-176: ἐκάχασε τὸ τέταρτον ὁ θεός, καὶ ἐφάνη Γέννα κρατοῦσα σποράν. Compare Zos., *Mém. auth.* 1.1: γένεσις καὶ σπορά. A. Dieterich, *Abraxas*, cit., p. 72, saw Genna as Aphrodite Genetrix, related to the Stoic Panspermia.

³⁸ PGM XIII, 176-177: ἐκλήθη δὲ Βαδητοφωθ Ζωθαξαθωζ.

³⁹ A. van den Kerchove, *La voie d'Hermès*, cit., pp. 265-266, suggests that the connection with Genna means it is a symbol of birth.

was the original one, since it could be seen as an acronym interpreted as Ζωή – θανατός + Ξ + θανατός – Ζωή⁴⁰. However, another variant of the name, overlooked by Mahé and all other commentators on *Disc. 8-9*, makes this interpretation doubtful: inscribed on four magical amulets we read the palindrome ΘΩΖΑΞΑΖΩΘ. On three of these amulets we find the Egyptian god Horus. On one, our palindrome is on the reverse and Horus is on the obverse, nude except for an Egyptian loincloth, with a falcon's head, a sun-disc as a headpiece, holding a wand with a falcon on top and an ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life, flanked by the names [Σ]αβαωθ and [Α]βρασαξ⁴¹. Another gem again has the palindrome on the reverse and on the obverse an ithyphallic Horus holding the falcon-staff, with scarab-body, and a wig and the Egyptian double crown on his head⁴². The third has the palindrome on the obverse as part of a lengthy formula written in a decreasing spiral around a scarab, framed by an ouroboros snake. Horus-the-Child (Harpocrates) is on the reverse, standing on two crocodiles and grasping two snakes, flanked by the goddesses Isis and Nephthys who each holds an ankh. He has a falcon and an adoring cynocephalus on each shoulder, and from his headpiece there extends large wings enveloping him⁴³. The fourth gem has on the obverse a Pantheos with four wings, a bird tail, and three scepters, surrounded by an ouroboros, and on the reverse is our palindrome⁴⁴.

The gems teach us that ΘΩΖΑΞΑΖΩΘ is related especially to Horus, the Egyptian god with solar connotations, of whom the Pantheos-figure seems to be an elaboration⁴⁵. The common inclusion of a scarab, symbolizing the rising sun, and the ouroboros, symbolizing the eternal circuit of the universe, underlines his character as the cosmic god. These observations confirm the thesis of Michela Zago, that the phrase ΖΩΘΑΞΑΘΩΖ in PGM XIII is related not only to *Disc. 8-9*, but also to a spell to gain a

⁴⁰ J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 106-107.

⁴¹ Inv. BM G 1986,0501.99; S. Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum*, 2 vols., British Museum Press, London 2001: vol. 1, p. 90, no. 139. This gem is very similar to one described by C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets: Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1950, p. 130, as lost, although he does not mention that this gem has the name [Σ]αβαωθ in addition to [Α]βρασαξ on the obverse, and he states that the name Αβρασαξ is also on the reverse, which is not the case with the BM gem. Bonner has thus either given a faulty description (and he admits his notes were made in haste), or we have here two separate but very similar gems, of which one is lost.

⁴² Inv. Hamburg Skoluda Collection (inv. M040), and published by S. Michel, *Bunte Steine – Dunkle Bilder. Magische Gemmen*, Biering & Brinkmann, München 2001, p. 36 no. 25.

⁴³ Inv. Walter Art Gallery 42, 872; C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, cit., pp. 294-295 n. 251. Bonner thinks there the head of the goddess Nut is on top of the headpiece, but this is very hard to make out on the photograph provided on the museum's webpage.

⁴⁴ Inv. Mich. 26148; C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, cit., p. 296 fn. 258. The darkness of the green jasper makes the details very hard to make out on a photograph, and I rely mainly on Bonner's description.

⁴⁵ C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, cit., p. 156.

leontocephalic Horus as a parhedros in PGM I, where we find the *nomen* ΖΩΝ ΤΑΖΩΤΑΖΩ⁴⁶. In this spell, a falcon is said to drop a stone to the ritualist, and it should be engraved with the figure of the leontocephalic Helios-Horus, described as an aerial spirit, encircled by an ouroboros.

What does this mean for our understanding of the *nomina* in *Disc.* 8-9? As part of the invocation Hermes asks God: «Give us, through the spirit, that we might see the shape of the image that has no deficiency»⁴⁷. After the invocation and a ritual embrace, he exclaims: «Rejoice over this, for already from them the power which is light has come to us»⁴⁸. Immediately after this Hermes or Tat begins to describe the vision. In other words, the vowels and *nomina* are part of an invocation necessary to bring down a pneumatic spirit of light which will enable them to see the Ogdoad and Ennead. The two *nomina barbara* in the invocation, and their parallels with *nomina* in PGM I and XIII and the gems, make it likely that this power was associated with Horus, the scarab, and the ouroboros, all symbols of the sun and the cosmos. This observation is strengthened by the fact that chanting the vowels is elsewhere in the magical papyri associated with invoking the cosmic god.

The Ritual Practice of Uttering the Vowels

In a formula found in three different papyri, among them PGM XIII, Ocean is again connected with begetting; furthermore he is identified with Agathos Daimon and the seven-lettered name, and explicitly connected to the seven vowels⁴⁹:

ὃ οὐρανὸς κεφαλή, αἰθὴρ δὲ σῶμα, γῆ δὲ πόδες, τὸ δὲ περὶ σ<ἐ> ὄν⁵⁰ ὕδωρ ὁ Ἄγαθὸς Δαίμων. σὺ εἶ ὁ ὠξεανός, ὁ γεννῶν ἀγαθὰ καὶ τροφῶν τὴν οἰκου-

(You) of whom heaven is head, ether body, earth feet, and water around you, the Agathos Daimon. You are the **Ocean**, **begetter** of good things and **feeder** of the

⁴⁶ PGM I, 135; M. Zago, *L'emploi des noms divins dans la Kosmopoia (PGM XIII)*, in C. Bonnet et al. (eds.), *Religioni in contatto nel Mediterraneo Antico: Modalità di diffusione e processi di interferenza*, Fabrizio Serra, Pisa 2008, pp. 205-217; pp. 208-209. A similar name also appears in the *Books of Jeu*, B 26 (64), 5: ΖΩΘΑΖΑΖΑΖ. This name also occurs in an invocation of the “father of all paternity.” Cf. E. Cregheur, *Édition critique, traduction et introduction des deux Livres de Léou (MS Bruce 96)*, avec des notes philologiques et textuelles, PhD diss., Université Laval, Laval 2013, p. 253.

⁴⁷ NHC VI 57, 5: ⲙⲁⲗⲓⲧⲏ ⲛⲁⲛ ⲉⲓⲧⲏ ⲡⲏⲗⲁ ⲉⲧⲣⲉⲛⲛⲁϥ [ⲉⲓⲧⲏⲣⲟⲫⲏ ⲛⲟⲓⲕⲟⲛ ⲧⲁⲓ ⲉⲧⲉ ⲏⲏⲧⲉⲥ ⲟⲩⲧⲁ ⲏⲏⲁϥ.

⁴⁸ NHC VI 57,28-30: ϣⲁⲩⲉ ⲉϫⲏ ⲡⲁⲓ ⲛⲁⲛ ⲓⲁⲣ ⲉⲅⲟⲗ ⲏⲙⲟⲟϥ ⲧⲁϥⲏⲁⲙⲓⲥ ⲉⲧⲟ ⲏⲟϥⲟⲉⲓⲛ ⲏⲏⲏϥ ⲟⲩⲁⲣⲟⲛ.

⁴⁹ A. Dieterich, *Abraxas*, cit., pp. 66-67; A.-J. Festugière, *La révélation*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 288-289, 296-297, 300-303; G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, cit., p. 172.

⁵⁰ R. W. Daniel, *Two Greek Magical papyri*, cit., p. XXVI, proposes to read ms. cov as a misspelling of cev = ce.

μένην, σοῦ δὲ τὸ ἀένναον κωμαστήριον, ἐν ᾧ καθίδρυται σου τὸ ἑπταγράμματον ὄνομα πρὸς τὴν ἁρμονίαν τῶν ζ' φθόγγων ἐχόντων φωνὰς πρὸς τὰ κη' φῶτα τῆς σελήνης.

civilized world. Yours is the **ever-flowing processional way** in which your **seven-lettered name** is established for the harmony of the **seven sounds** which utter their voices according to the **twenty-eight** forms of the moon (PGM XIII, 770-777).

Ocean and the Agathos Daimon are both here epithets of the cosmic god who pervades the universe, from the outer stars to the earth. The present invocation is part of an appendix to the main spell, called «instruction [for recitation] of the heptagram», the heptagram being the seven vowels that are recited several times in the main spell, for example in an invocation of Sarapis: «I hymn your holy power in a musical hymn, ΑΕΕΙΟΥΟΩ. Burn incense, saying ‘ÊIOYÔ IOYÔ OYÔ YÔ Ô A EE ÊÊÊ ΙΙΙΙ ΟΟΟΟ ΥΥΥΥΥΥ ÔÔÔÔÔÔ etc.»⁵¹. This sentence is important, as it demonstrates the musical, hymnic use of the series of vowels⁵². Later, we are presented with more details as to when and how to utter the vowels:

ὑπόδειξις· εἰπὼν εἰς τὸν ἀπηνλιώτην, εἷς τὴν δεξιάν χειρα ἐπὶ τῶν εὐωνύμων καὶ τὴν εὐώνυμον ὁμοίως χειρα ἐπὶ τῶν εὐωνύμων, λέγε· α.
 <ε>ίς τὸ<v> βορρᾶ<v>, τὴν μίαν πύξ προτεινας τῆς δεξιᾶς, λέγε· ε.
 εἶτα εἰς τὸν λίβα, ἀμφοτέρως χειρας προτεινας, λέγε· η.
 <ε>ί<ς> τὸ<v> νότον, ἀμφοτέρως ἔχων ἐπὶ τοῦ στομάχου, λέγε· ι.
 εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἐπικύπτων παραπτόμενος τῶν ἄκρων ποδῶν, λέγε· ο.
 <εἰς> ἀέρα βλέπων, τὴν χειρα ἔχων κατὰ τῆς καρδίας, λέγε· υ.
 εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν βλέπων, ἀμφοτέρως τὰς χειρας ἔχων ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, λέγε· ω

The instruction: Speaking to the east, stretching out your right hand to the left and your left hand likewise to the left, say ‘A.’

To the north, putting forward only your right fist, say ‘E.’

Then to the west, extending both hands in front [of you], say ‘Ê.’

To the south, [holding] both on your stomach, say ‘I.’

To the earth, bending over, touching the ends of your toes, say ‘O.’

Looking into the air, having your hand on your heart, say ‘Y.’

Looking towards heaven, having both hands on your head, say ‘Ô.’ (PGM XIII, 823-835)

The ritualist is instructed how to comport himself bodily: he should face each of the cardinal points in turn, then bend down towards the earth, and finally look up into the air and the heavens. The rite should be performed at sunrise, midday or sunset. The hymns of CH XIII and *Ascl.* 41

⁵¹ PGM XIII, 626f.

⁵² Cfr. C.-É. Ruelle, *Le chant gnostico-magique des sept voyelles grecques*, in J. Combarieu (ed.), *Congrès d'histoire de la musique: Documents, mémoires et vœux*, Fischbacher, Paris 1901, pp. 15-27; and É. Poirée, *Chant des sept voyelles: analyse musicale, ibi*, pp. 28-38.

are both supposed to be sung at sunset, the hymnist facing southward, but Hermes also referred to other hymns sung at sunrise facing east⁵³. An accompanying diagram, which follows directly after, provides a visual aid to the ritual instructions (PGM XIII, 836-841)⁵⁴:

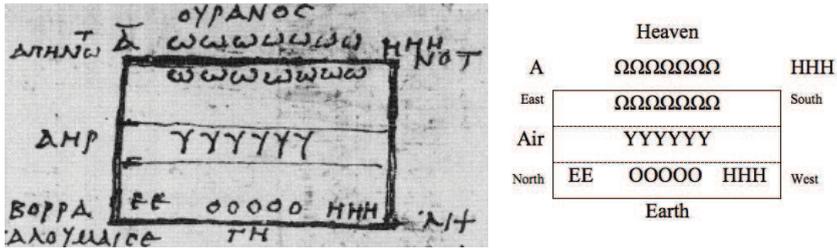


Fig. 2: The diagram of the vowels, cardinal directions, and cosmic levels. Photo from R.W. Daniel, *Two Greek Magical papyri*, cit., p. 69.

Fig. 3: The diagram translated.

Here we can see that the ritualist should start in the top left corner, facing east, and going counterclockwise towards the south, with the number of vowels increasing by increments of one. As with the vowels of *Disc. 8-9*, there is some confusion between iotas and etas, but luckily since the instructions inform us that one should say the iota towards the south, we can be sure that the three etas in the top right corner should be four iotas. This gives us cause also to emend the etas into iotas in the first vowel-series of *Disc. 8-9*, as mentioned. After each of the four corners representing the cardinal points have been covered, the diagram goes from the earth upwards, through the air, and reaches the top where there are two separate lines of omegas, both numbering seven. This duplication of omegas again probably represents Saturn, the outermost planet, and Ocean who envelops the cosmos. Perhaps the rectangle is meant to represent this border, in which case the alpha and etas on the top corners should have been placed within the rectangle, however there was little room here due to the seven omegas. The three divisions within the rectangle then possibly represent the earth, the air, and the planetary ether⁵⁵. Thus, even though the seven vowels represent the seven planets, they are uttered ritually toward the four cardinal directions, and then earth, air and

⁵³ CH XIII, 16.

⁵⁴ Cfr. P. Cox Miller, *In Praise of Nonsense*, in A.H. Armstrong (ed.), *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, Crossroad, New York 1986, pp. 481-505: pp. 498-499.

⁵⁵ We find the division of the cosmos into four – earth, air, ether, heaven – in SH XXIV and xxv, Cfr. C.H. Bull, *Tradition of Hermes*, cit., pp. 83-85.

heaven. We notice that there are seven omegas on top of the rectangle, not eight, so it is improbable that they represent the eighth sphere, the “Ogdoas,” which is said to be a sacred great name elsewhere in the papyrus.

The vowels in *Disc. 8-9* thus represent the entirety of the cosmos, from earth to the outer layer of stars where one finds the thirty-six Decans. This lends credence to a suggestion of Alberto Camplani: when the orants in *Disc. 8-9* ask to receive the spirit to see, quoted above, they also ask that God should receive the imprint (τύπος) of the fullness (πλήρωμα) by means of the hymn of praise (σμογ)⁵⁶. Camplani suggested that the imprint of the fullness might be the vowels, which could function as a sort of mystic token to gain access to the Ogdoad and Ennead⁵⁷. However, it seems that Camplani follows Mahé in seeing the *plêrôma* as referring to the supracelestial realms of the Ogdoad and the Ennead, a usage of the term which is not attested in Hermetic sources⁵⁸: here the term *plêrôma* refers to the fullness of the cosmos, not the immaterial supra-cosmic realm⁵⁹. The request also has a parallel in the hymn to the cosmic god in CH XIII, 18: «Receive through me the all by means of logos»⁶⁰. In the magical papyri, *typos* can mean the shape in which vowels and *nomina* are written (PGM V, 306; VII, 658), and thus likely refers to the original triangular shape of the vowels. The imprint of the fullness therefore likely refers to the vowels and *nomina barbara*, which together symbolize the cosmic god, the One who is All⁶¹.

Vowels as a Baboonic Divine Language

This cosmic god is evocatively praised in the hymn to Ocean-Agathodaimon, quoted above, whose seven-lettered name is established in the ever-flowing processional way for the harmony of the seven sounds. The seven-lettered name is Abrasax⁶², which we have also found on one

⁵⁶ NHC VI 57, 8-10: ⲛⲣⲭⲓ ⲛⲓⲣⲧⲩⲡⲓⲞⲥ ⲛⲓⲡⲓⲗⲣⲟⲩⲙⲁ ⲛⲧⲟⲟⲩⲛ̅ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲉⲓⲧⲏ ⲡⲓⲤⲘⲟⲩ.

⁵⁷ A. Camplani, *Scritti ermetici*, cit., p. 144 fn. 48. Camplani also gives the alternate suggestion that the pleroma may respond to the group of orants, including the children of Hermes, «come avviene nello gnosticismo, in cui la chiesa è immagine della sfera pleromatica.» This is not only “Gnostic” however, Cfr. *Eph.1*, 23: ἥτις (sc. the Church) ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ, τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν πάσιν πληρουμένου. Cfr. R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, cit., p. 25 fn. 1.

⁵⁸ J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. 1, cit., p. 109, referring to CH I, 26, but there is no mention of pleroma in this passage. So also R. van den Broek, *Religious Practices in the Hermetic ‘Lodge’*: *New Light from Nag Hammadi*, in R. van den Broek et al. (eds.), *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, In de Pelikaan, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 77-95: p. 83.

⁵⁹ CH IX, 7; XII, 15-16; XVI, 3; Cfr. C.H. Bull, *Tradition of Hermes*, cit., pp. 261-262.

⁶⁰ CH XIII, 18: δι’ ἐμοῦ δέξαι τὸ πᾶν λόγῳ.

⁶¹ CH V, 9-10; XI, 6, 11, 22; XIII, 17; XVI, 3; *Ascl.* 1, 20.

⁶² This is confirmed by PGM VIII, 46f.: «the second name with the number 7, corresponding

of our gems: the numerical value of this name is 365, and it is thus eminently suited for the name established on «the ever-flowing processional way», which is traversed by the sun in the course of just about 365 days. Abrasax is also well suited to be identified with Ocean, since both deities are anguipedes⁶³. It should also be pointed out that the shape of the two serpentine legs of Abrasax are often shaped like a miniscule omega.

PGM XIII furthermore states that the name is in the baboonic language, «in baboonic, Abrasax»⁶⁴, which indicates that it is somehow beyond the capacity of humans to utter: in PGM XIII Abrasax is the god «whose name is hidden and unspeakable, it cannot be uttered by a human mouth»⁶⁵, a phrase that has a close parallel in a text attributed to Hermes by Lactantius. The ineffability of God is also common in the Hermetica⁶⁶. The language of baboons is connected with Abrasax also elsewhere in PGM XIII: «Now he who appears on the boat rising together with you is a clever baboon; he greets you in his own language, saying “You are the number of [the days of] the year, Abrasax”»⁶⁷. Baboonic is thus explicitly connected with the god in baboon shape on the boat in which the Egyptian sun-god traverses heaven, namely Thoth. Patricia Cox Miller reminds us that Plato attributed to this god not only the discovery of language, but in particular the vowels: «He it was who originally discerned the existence, in that unlimited variety, of the vowels – not “vowel” in the singular but “vowels” in the plural – and then of other things which though they could not be called articulate sounds, yet were noises of a kind»⁶⁸. This is con-

to those who rule the world, with the exact number 365, corresponding to the days of the year. Truly: ABRASAX.» In this case the name applies to Hermes.

⁶³ Cfr. C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, cit., pp. 123-139: Abrasax has the head of a cock, which is a solar symbol, and two serpents for feet, which are chthonic in nature, and this fits well with the combined astral-tellurian nature of Ocean: It envelops the earth and receives the stars.

⁶⁴ PGM XIII, 84: κυνοκεφαλιστί· Ἄβρασαξ.

⁶⁵ PGM XIII, 763-764: οὗ ἔστιν τὸ κρυπτόν ὄνομα καὶ ἄρρητον, ἐν ἀνθρώπου στόματι λαληθῆναι οὐ δύναται. On vowels and baboonic, Cfr. T. Hopfner, *Griechisch-ägyptischen Offenbarungszauber*, 2 vols., Haessel, Leipzig 1921: vol. 1, pp. 200-202 (§§778-80); D. Frankfurter, *Magic of Writing*, cit., pp. 204-205.

⁶⁶ Lact., *Div. inst.* 4, 7, 2: οὗ τὸ ὄνομα οὐ δύναται ἀνθρωπίνῳ στόματι λαληθῆναι. Cfr. Lact., *Div. inst.* 4.9.3, where the name is also said to be unspeakable and holy. Cfr. M. Zago, *Le pneuma eloquent: Un parallèle entre le Papyrus Mimaut et NHC VI,6*, in M.A. Amir-Moezzi et al. (eds.), *Pensée grecque et sagesse d'orient: Hommages à Michel Tardieu*, Brepols, Turnhout 2009, pp. 715-734: p. 732. Cfr. CH V, 10-11; *Ascl.* 20.

⁶⁷ PGM XIII, 153-6: ἔστιν δὲ ὁ ἐπὶ τῆς βάρεως φανείς συνανατέλλων κυνοκεφαλοκέρδων. ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ ἀσπάζεται σε λέγων· σὺ εἶ ὁ ἀριθμὸς τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ· Ἄβρασαξ.

⁶⁸ Plat., *Phileb.* b-c: Ἐπειδὴ φωνὴν ἄπειρον κατενόησεν εἴτε τις θεὸς εἴτε καὶ θεῖος ἄνθρωπος – ὡς λόγος ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ Θεῦθ τινα τοῦτον γενέσθαι λέγων, ὃς πρῶτος τὰ φωνήεντα ἐν τῷ ἀπειρῷ κατενόησεν οὐχ ἐν ὄντα ἀλλὰ πλεῖον, καὶ πάλιν ἕτερα φωνῆς μὲν οὐ, φθόγγου δὲ μετέχοντά τινος. Tr. R. Hackforth, *Plato's Examination of Pleasure: A Translation of the Philebus, with Introduction and Commentary*, University Press, Cambridge

firmed by Egyptian sources, where the language of baboons is connected to the language of the gods⁶⁹. In the first century CE Demotic *Book of Thoth*, it is said of the god: «The signs revealed their form. He called to them and they answered to him. He knew the form of speech of the baboons and the ibises»⁷⁰. Scholars of acoustics have demonstrated that the grunts of baboons sound considerably like human vowels⁷¹, and the vowels are explicitly identified as “baboonic” in a spell for direct vision of god in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris, also part of the Thebes-cache: «Enter, appear to me, lord because I call upon you as the three baboons call upon you, who speak your holy name in a symbolic fashion, A EE ÊÊÊ IIII OOOOO YYYYYY ÔÔÔÔÔÔÔ (speak as a baboon)»⁷². The Egyptian script did not have vowels, and one of the chief attractions of the Greek language for magicians was its utility for ensuring the correct pronunciations of magical names, as is witnessed by Old Coptic glosses in Demotic manuscripts⁷³. The old Egyptian idea of a divine language of baboons could therefore furnish an apt mythological rationale for the appropriation of the Greek vowels⁷⁴.

The divine nature attributed to the grunts of baboons probably has to do with the fact that baboons often scream during sunrise, and therefore were considered to be heralds of the sun. As such, they are often depicted in Egyptian art in groups of eight, in poses of worship to the

1945. Cfr. P. Cox Miller, *In Praise of Nonsense*, cit., p. 496. Cfr. also Ir., *Adv. haer.* 1.8.6, where Marcus Magus allegedly ascribed vowels to the syzygies Man and Church, mutes to Father and Truth, and semivowels to Word and Life.

⁶⁹ H. Te Velde, *Some Remarks on the Mysterious Language of Baboons*, in J.H. Kamstra et al. (eds.), *Funerary Symbols and Religion*, J.H. Kok, Kampen 1988, pp. 129-137. The connection also to letters is clear from PGM XIII, 315-6, where a hieratic papyrus should be written with myrrh ink and baboon’s blood, the latter of which is actually a secret code for blood of a spotted gecko according to PGM XII, 415.

⁷⁰ R.L. Jasnow - K.-T. Zauzich, *The Book of Thoth: A Demotic Discourse on Knowledge and Pendant to the Classical Hermetica*, 2 vols., Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 453 (B02 10/7-8). Cfr. *ibi*, p. 44: «A baboon gave to me a spear of sixty cubits. He says to me: It is their *wz.t ht.*» The latter term is apparently a boat-part.

⁷¹ M.J. Owren et al., *The acoustic features of vowel-like grunt calls in chacma baboons (Papio cyncephalus ursinus): Implications for production processes and functions*, in «Journal of the Acoustical Society of America» 101 (1997), pp. 2951-2963. Cfr. W.C. McDermott, *The Ape in Antiquity*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1938, p. 48.

⁷² PGM IV, 1002-1006: εἴσελθε, φάνηθί μοι, κύριε, ὅτι ἐπικαλοῦμαι, ὡς ἐπικαλοῦνταιί σε οἱ τρεῖς κυνοκέφαλοι, οἵτινες συμβολικῶς σχήματι ὀνομάζουσίν σου τὸ ἅγιον ὄνομα α ε ε η η ι ι ι ι ο ο ο ο ο ο υ υ υ υ υ υ ω ω ω ω ω ω (λέγε ὡς κυνοκέφαλος). Cfr. also PGM V, 27: “(say the e(epsilon) as a baboon” (τὸ ε΄ κυνοκεφαλιστί).

⁷³ J. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual (100-300 CE)* (“Religions in the Graeco-Roman World”, 153), Brill, Leiden 2005, pp. 27 fn. 8, 64-69.

⁷⁴ Cfr. J. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites*, cit., p. 289, who considers vowels and voces magicae to be international imports into Egyptian magic. J.F. Quack, *La magie au temple*, in Y. Koenig (ed.), *La magie en Égypte*, Musée du Louvre, Paris 2002, pp. 41-68: p. 58, refers to an unpublished Demotic spell to obtain a revelation which contains *nomina barbara*.

rising sun. One of the ideas regarding the afterlife was that the blessed deceased should join the baboons in perpetual worship of the sun⁷⁵. The baboon was also an ideal for priests, and a common statuary motif is a scribal priest sitting crouched over a scroll, under the auspices of Thoth as a baboon. Indeed, Horapollon wrote in his late handbook of hieroglyphs that the baboon signifies priests and letters⁷⁶. A work attributed to Demetrius of Phaleron called *On Style*, probably from late Hellenistic or early Imperial times, attributes the singing of vowels to Egyptian priests: «In Egypt the priests, when singing hymns in praise of the gods, employ the seven vowels, which they utter in due succession; and the sound of these letters is so euphonious that men listen to it in preference to flute and lyre»⁷⁷. There is thus a conceptual connection between vowels, baboons, and Egyptian mythology in the magical papyri that reflects the use and ownership of the Thebes-papyri by Egyptian priests. That this is the implied Sitz im Leben also of *Disc. 8-9* is clear from the epilogue, in which Hermes commands Tat to write down the treatise on stelae to be placed in his temple in Diospolis in Upper Egypt. To be sure, this is a literary trope also found in the magical papyri, but it may also reflect the self-image of the author of *Disc. 8-9* as a member of the priestly class and bearer of the tradition of Hermes Trismegistus⁷⁸.

Such a self-image is also reflected in the *Definitions of Asclepius to King Ammon* (CH XVI), in the famous disparagement of the Greek language in favor of Egyptian which may have something to do with magical vowels and *nomina barbara*: «The *logos* that is expressed in our ancestral language keeps the *nous* of the *logoi* clear. For even the very quality of the *phônê* and the <...> of the Egyptian names keep in themselves the energy of what is said»⁷⁹. The first sentence here has to do with semantics: Egyptian is the perfect language with direct signification, an idea also

⁷⁵ J. Podemann Sørensen, *The Secret Hymn in Hermetic Texts*, in C.H. Bull et al. (eds.), *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices* ("Nag Hammadi and Manichaeism Studies", 76), Brill, Leiden 2012, pp. 465-486: pp. 478-479.

⁷⁶ Hor., *Hier.* 1, 14, who also relate the tale that there is a breed of baboons who write in temples. Cfr. Ael., *Nat. an.* 6, 10.

⁷⁷ [Demetr.], *Eloc.* 71: Ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ δὲ καὶ τοὺς θεοὺς ὑμνοῦσι διὰ τῶν ἐπτὰ φωνηέντων οἱ ἱερεῖς, ἐφεξῆς ἠχοῦντες αὐτά, καὶ ἀντὶ αὐλοῦ καὶ ἀντὶ κιθάρας τῶν γοασμάτων τούτων ὁ ἦχος ἀκούεται ὑπ' εὐφωνίας, ὥστε ὁ ἐξαιρῶν τὴν σύγκρουσιν οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ μέλος ἀτεχνῶς ἐξαιρεῖ τοῦ λόγου καὶ μουσάν. Text and tr. W. Rhys Roberts, *Demetrius On Style: The Greek Text of Demetrius De elocutione*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1902, pp. 104-105; 64 on date. The text is quoted by G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, cit., p. 119, who does not see the link with baboons. Cfr. C.-É. Ruelle, *Le chant des sept voyelles grecques*, cit., p. 38.

⁷⁸ I have argued this at length in C.H. Bull, *Tradition of Hermes*, cit.

⁷⁹ CH XVI, 2: ὁ δὲ λόγος τῆ πατρῴᾳ διαλέκτῳ ἐρημνεύομενος ἔχει σαφῆ τὸν τῶν λόγων νοῦν. καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸ τὸ τῆς φωνῆς ποιὸν καὶ ἡ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων ... ὀνομάτων ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἔχει τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῶν λεγόμενων.

utilized by Plotinus⁸⁰. The second sentence has to do with the inherent efficacy of the language. Unlike Greek, Egyptian language does not only point towards the signified, but possesses the power of the signified in the very act of utterance. Interesting here is also the fact that Asclepius seems to differentiate between sounds and names, which could correspond respectively to *voces magicae* and *nomina barbara*. That the “quality of the sound” does not refer simply to logos is clear from the subsequent elaboration of Asclepius: «We do not use (only) words, but sounds full of efficacy»⁸¹. The differentiation between *logos* and *phônê* may reflect the conception of a divine inarticulate speech, and it can further be pointed out that *phônê* has musical connotations, appropriate for a hymn used to lend power to a ritual of ascent⁸².

Conclusion

The series of vowels in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* and the magical papyri seem to be connected with the Egyptian notion of the mysterious language of baboons. The Egyptologist Jørgen Podemann Sørensen points out that: «The heavenly baboons and sometimes the divinities (*b3.w*) of Pe and Nekhen serve as angelic choirs worshipping the Sun-god. They carry on the worship of the hymn to its addressee, the Sun-god»⁸³. In *Disc.8-9*, Hermes and his son take part in this cosmic hymn of vowels in the course of their ascent, but their final goal is to break on through to the other side of the heavenly vault and take part in the silent hymnody of the Ogdoad and the Ennead. Thus the vowels are a sort of intermediary between discursive language and the silence that reigns in the Ogdoad and the Ennead. This is a reversal of creation in the *Poimandres*, where the initial silence of the eternal light is broken by a cry emitted from dark nature, as she breaks free and descends, and this cry is answered by a word emitted from the light that descends and shapes matter so that it becomes a cosmos (CH I, 4-5). Whereas creation is a process from the unity of silence to the plurality of words, the ascent reverses this process, and the visionary leaves behind words and reaches the silent hymnody by means of vowels⁸⁴.

⁸⁰ Plot., *Enn.* v, 8, 6 [31].

⁸¹ CH XVI, 2: ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ λόγοις χρῴμεθα. ἀλλὰ φωναῖς μεσταῖς τῶν ἔργων.

⁸² Cfr. M. Broze, *La réinterprétation du modèle hiéroglyphique chez les philosophes de langue grecque*, in L. Morra - C. Bazzanella (eds.), *Philosophers and Hieroglyphs*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Turin 2003, pp. 35-49; on musical *phônê*, cfr. I. Papadopoulou-Belmechdi - Z.D. Papadopoulou, *Culte et musique: Le cas des Déliades*, in F. Labrique (ed.), *Religions Méditerranéennes et orientales de l'antiquité*, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Paris 2009, pp. 155-176: p. 174.

⁸³ J. Podemann Sørensen, *The Secret Hymn*, cit., p. 478.

⁸⁴ The insufficiency of words is seen in how the vision of the Ogdoad and Ennead cannot

The vowels and magical names clearly point in the direction of ritual performance, namely the singing of hymns, and they were meant to convey the visionary through the seven planetary spheres and the Decans separating the material world from the Ogdoad. Furthermore, the parallels with the Leiden *Kosmopoïia* make it likely that the notion of a baboonic heavenly choir may also underlie the vowels in our text, especially in view of the fact that Thoth, the Egyptian counterpart of Hermes Trismegistus, was commonly portrayed as a baboon, in contemporary magical papyri as well as Egyptian temple and tomb decorations.

Postscript: The Monastic Context of Disc. 8-9

The religio-historical background of *Disc. 8-9* and the Thebes-papyri was likely the same, both deriving from Late Antique Egyptian priests. Yet *Disc. 8-9* was translated into Coptic and most likely circulated among monks, as Hugo Lundhaug and Lance Jenott have recently demonstrated the monastic provenance for the Nag Hammadi Codices⁸⁵. Too little attention has thus far been given to the fact that we have two manuscript collections from roughly the same period, and in close proximity at the bend of the Nile⁸⁶, yet with very different religious affiliations⁸⁷. The Hermetic *Prayer of Thanksgiving* is found in both corpora⁸⁸, but its usage in PGM, to secure oracular responses from the sun-god, could have been considered dubious by the monastic readers of NHC VI. And yet there were overlapping religious practices. Monks were using and producing spells utilizing old Egyptian traditions, and some monks were likely converts who had been educated in Egyptian temples⁸⁹. As just one example among many, a fourth century spell from Oxyrhynchus, meant to protect Aria – «a handmaid of the living god» – from illness, invokes both the

be wholly expressed: «How can I express this to you?» (57, 33: αϥ τε οε ε†ναχοοc νακ); «How can I express the all?» (58, 3-4: αϥ τε ο[ε ε†ναϣαχε ε†γγηρϥ); «What shall I say?» (59, 25 οϥ πε†ναχοοϥ). Compare T. Bak Halvgaard, *Linguistic Manifestations in the Trimorphic Protennaio and the Thunder: Perfect Mind: Analysed against the Background of Platonic and Stoic Dialectics* (“Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies”, 91), Brill, Leiden 2016.

⁸⁵ H. Lundhaug - L. Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (“Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum”, 97), Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015.

⁸⁶ According to the geospatial tool ORBIS (<<http://orbis.stanford.edu>>), travel from Thebes to Ptolemais Hermious would only take 3,9 days down the Nile, and the distance to the Nag Hammadi area is considerably shorter (probably around two days of travel).

⁸⁷ I address the issue in C.H. Bull, *Hermes between Pagans and Christians*, cit.

⁸⁸ The Papyrus Mimaout (PGM III) likely but not certainly belongs to the Thebes-group.

⁸⁹ M. Meyer - R. Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco 1994, pp. 260-261; D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998, pp. 257-264; Id., *Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt*, in «Journal of Early Christian Studies» 11 (2003), pp. 339-385.

father, son, mother, holy spirit, Jesus Christ, and Abrasax, and frames these names with the seven vowels⁹⁰. In PGM, it is common to exhort the ritualist to practice asceticism before revelatory spells, and acquiring visions and heavenly ascents were a common concern for both monks and pagan Egyptian priests⁹¹. Texts dealing with visions and ascent are of course also amply attested in the Nag Hammadi treatises, and the monastic preoccupation with this topic may explain the inclusion of *Disc. 8-9* in the codex. Perhaps some of the monks who read it would even have had a background in an Egyptian temple, and could thus understand the relationship of the vowels to the mysterious language of baboons, and their numerological connection to the heavenly spheres⁹².

ABSTRACT

The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth contains a dialogue between Hermes Trismegistus and his son, in which they obtain visions of the Ogdoad and the Ennead – the eighth and ninth spheres above the seven planetary spheres. Framing the description of these visions are two sets of a series of vowels, one of them accompanied by two nomina barbara. A comparison with Zosimus of Panopolis and the magical papyri shows that the seven vowels symbolize the seven planetary spheres, while the omegas simultaneously represent Saturn and the 36 Decans, Egyptian astral deities separating the cosmos from the Ogdoad. – These parallels demonstrate that the same group was behind the production of the magical papyri in question and the Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth, namely Egyptian priests.

Il Discorso sull'Ogdoade e l'Enneade contiene un dialogo tra Ermete Trismegisto e suo figlio, nel corso del quale i due ottengono visioni dell'Ogdoade e dell'Enneade - ottava e nona sfera sopra le sette sfere planetarie. La descrizione di queste visioni è inquadrata da due insiemi di serie di vocali, uno dei quali è accompagnato da due nomina barbara. Un confronto con Zosimo di Panopoli e i papiri magici permette di dimo-

⁹⁰ M. Meyer - R. Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, cit., p. 39, cfr. also p. 49.

⁹¹ Cfr. S. Rubenson, "As Already Translated to the Kingdom While Still in the Body": *The Transformation of the Ascetic in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, in T. Karlsen Seim - J. Økland (eds.), *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* ("Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages", 1), De Gruyter, Berlin 2009, pp. 271-289.

⁹² The Bruce codex, produced in a monastic setting probably near Thebes at the end of the fourth or first half of the fifth century (E. Cregheur, *Édition critique, traduction et introduction des deux Livres de Iéou*, cit., pp. 160-166) contains the *Books of Jeu* which has a reference to the mystery of seven vowels (B19 (57), 33; B20 (58), 4-7; B21 (59), 3; B22 (60), 18; B24 (62), 29; B27 (65), 25; B33 (71), 1) and to the nomen ζαϑεζαζαϑε ϑαζαζαζαϑε (B27 (65), 30-31).

strare che le sette vocali simbolizzano le sette sfere planetarie, mentre gli "omega" rappresentano simultaneamente Saturno e i trentasei decani, divinità astrali egizie che separano il cosmo dall'Ogdoade. Questi paralleli dimostrano che uno stesso gruppo era dietro la produzione sia dei papiri magici in questione sia del Discorso sull'Ogdoade e l'Enneade, e cioè i sacerdoti egiziani.

KEYWORDS

Hermetism, Magical papyri, Vowels, Thoth, Egyptian religion

Ermetismo, papiri magici, vocali, Thoth, religione egizia

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