Hermeticism in Denmark

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The myths of ancient Egypt as the cradle of magic and alchemy and the thrice great Hermes probably held little attraction in Denmark prior to the Renaissance and the publication of the various texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* by Marsilio Ficino in fifteenth-century Florence. The influence of this revived Hermeticism, however, took almost a century to reach the by then Lutheran Denmark. The fathers of the Danish Reformation of 1536 were not unaware of Florentine Platonism given that Christiern Pedersen (ca. 1480–1554), a prolific translator of many of Luther’s works into Danish, was the owner of a copy of Ficino’s *De christiana religione*. Hermeticism held no influence on the Danish Lutheran Church, and it was not perceived as a theological threat in the years following the Reformation. This allowed for Hermetic influences to seep into natural philosophy, first and foremost in the late sixteenth century, when alternatives to the joint forces of Aristotelian philosophy and Lutheran orthodoxy were being sought after by certain members of the learned world. In this respect Hermeticism in early modern Denmark was fused with Paracelsianism, and as in Europe generally the phrase Hermetic medicine was used as a substitute for Paracelsian medicine. This also caused Hermeticism to be an integrated and widely accepted part of alchemy and iatrochemistry.

However, Hermeticism, in the strict sense of the word, would have had strong bearing on theology and out of fear of repudiation it caused would-be propagators of Hermeticism to tread carefully. To edit and publish Hermetic writings such as *Poimander* or *Asclepius* would have been unlikely to go down well with the censorship at the University of Copenhagen at the time. Also the relative scarcity of academics and well-educated laymen would have ruled out the publication of Hermetic texts. Too few people were potential readers and buyers for a Danish printer to risk it financially. This was not a situation unique to Hermetic texts but also affected, say, works of Aristotle. Yet Hermetic writings, whether texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself or by authors commenting on them, were not illegal to either read or possess and they were easily available in libraries and book collections of noblemen or members of the learned republic, who had bought these volumes on their student travels abroad.
The Tycho Brahe Circle

In the 1570s Hermeticism influenced the intellectual outlook of the astronomer Tycho Brahe, royal physician Peter Severinus (Peder Sørensen), and professor of medicine at the University of Copenhagen Johannes Pratensis (Hans Philipsen). The three of them were friends, and surviving letters show how they shared a zest for esoteric knowledge while trying to ward off interest from those uninitiated and unworthy of the divine knowledge they believed they possessed.

Severinus made his name in European medicine with his *Idea medicinae* (1571) which can be described as an epitome of moderate Paracelsian medicine and cosmology. Severinus was well aware of Paracelsus’ debt to the writings of Hermes, and both in the *Idea* and the short publication *Epistola scripta Theophrasto Paracelso* (ca. 1572), Severinus wrote of Paracelsus’ own reverence for Hermes and how the Paracelsian ideas corresponded with theories found in the Hermetic texts. Severinus died in 1602, but without having published anything for the last thirty years of his life. By his own somewhat blurred account because he feared criticism, or perhaps even reprisals. He also appears to have distanced himself from more overt Hermeticism, leaving, with the untimely death of Pratensis in 1576, Tycho Brahe as the by far most influential representative of Hermeticism in late sixteenth-century Denmark.

As an independent and affluent nobleman, Tycho did little to hide his reverence for the Hermetic tradition. In a public lecture at the University of Copenhagen he attributed the invention of the mathematical sciences to the ancient Egyptians, and elsewhere in his writings Hermes Trismegistus was praised as the author of the *Tabula Smaragdina* (The Emerald Tablet). His own castle Uraniborg was adorned by two sculptured emblems at its entrance. They were Hermetic allegories of the interdependence between the earth and the skies in the shape of chemistry, or alchemy, personified with the statement: *Despiciendo, suspicio* (By looking down, I see up) and astronomy stating: *Susciendo, despicio* (By looking up, I see down). This was a reference to a famous phrase from The Emerald Tablet (“as above, so below”), but at the same time an expression of Tycho’s philosophy of life and science, viz. that the earth and the heavens were interconnected in a cosmic analogy and therefore neither of them could be studied in isolation. Furthermore, traditional Aristotelian cosmology claimed the spheres above the moon to be perfect and unalterable. But as a result of his astronomical observations Tycho realised this to be incorrect. Rather, judging from the appearance of the supernova in 1572 and on the basis of his observations of comets, Tycho deemed Hermetic and Paracelsian cosmology to be best in accordance with reality. The Hermetic vision of Tycho was