

Translating Esotericism: Ancient Greek*

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The importance of the ancient Greek language and of ancient Greek ideas to Western culture (however construed) is fundamental. It is right to say that everything Western is influenced by Greek ideas and language; it is very wrong to imply, however, that this influence was ever simple. The fact that in English and the Romance languages we call Greek “Greek” alerts us to this fact immediately: *Græci* was the *Latin* name for the ancient people who called themselves *Hellenes*, and the central area of lands they occupied, *Hellas* in their language, was termed by the Romans *Græcia*, whence the English “Greece.” The influence of Greek culture on the Romans — whose eventual imperial spread encompassed the entire Mediterranean region — is the primary vector through which Greek culture, language, and ideas came to the supreme prominence they continue to enjoy in the Western imaginary, and so the story of Greek influence is very much a story of Græco-Roman influence.

This means that for Western Europe the history of Greek terms is often a history of Roman classicism and of Latin translation. Romans had conquered most of what we think of as “ancient Greece” by the first century BCE, at which point Latin writers had already been translating Greek terms and cultural forms, struggling with Greek scientific and philosophic ideas, and

* Abbreviations of Greek authors and titles are from Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* (1996).

generally “Hellenising” for some time.¹ This complex process resulted in Græco-Roman “Hellenism,” a properly-Roman institution of elite education and culture, encompassing a canon of literature, a formal rhetorical tradition, basic sciences (mathematical, astronomical, medical, and more), and often some engagement with philosophy.² The language of all of this education was Greek, thus requiring at least a basic facility in Greek language as a *sine qua non* of Hellenism even in the farthest-flung provinces of the Roman empire.³ The Romans inherited an already-established proto-Classical canon of Greek authorities from earlier Hellenistic critics, but Græco-Roman intellectuals truly curated the Hellenic cultural legacy, such that the modern discipline of Classics largely deals with a body of texts and culture defined neither by the Greeks of the pre-Roman age, nor by the millennium of Greek-language culture which carried on in East Rome after the fall of the Western Empire, but by (Græco-)Romans of the first few centuries of our era. Our idea of “Greece” is in a sense Roman, and there is no Rome without Greece.

An important development in the history of Greek, or of the idea of Greekness, very relevant to the history of esotericisms, is the refashioning of the term “Hellene” to mean “polytheist” or “follower of traditional

1. Southern Italy, home to increasingly widespread Greek colonies beginning from the eighth century BCE, was known to the Romans as *magna græcia*, “Great Greece.” These Southern neighbours had cultural productions the Romans did not originally have, like theatre, poetry in written form, and, later, scientific literature. The Romans eventually realised that they, too, must have these things, and began both to learn Greek and to attempt these forms in their own Latin language. The process of cultural translation is explicitly visible in the works of Cicero (1st c. BCE), which survive to an unusual degree; Cicero, who studied philosophy in the Greek world, was interested in the project of translating philosophic concepts into the Latin language, and sometimes even presents a Greek term and his proposed Latin equivalent, allowing us glimpses into the nuts-and-bolts process of linguistic and conceptual translation.

2. See on Græco-Roman Hellenism, e.g., Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*; Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium*; Athanassiadi, “Hellenism” is a good introduction to the religious aspects of Hellenism.

3. By no means every educated person in the Western Roman Empire knew much Greek, and, even if they did know the rudiments, in practice would have used the many Latin translations of Greek works for everyday use.

religions” among Christians from about the fourth century CE onwards.⁴ This phenomenon is only the tip of a vast iceberg of cultural negotiations between the increasingly ascendant religion of Christianity with the dominant cultural, scientific, and even theological language of late antiquity: Christians had to decide whether to reject Hellenism (the elite cultural construct alluded to in the previous paragraph, with all its attendant prestige and weight of tradition), to accept parts of it, or simply to attempt to bring it into the Christian fold. The complex negotiations thus engendered are a feature of the whole history of Christianity, but especially of late-antique Christianity, and often comprise an ingredient in esoteric Christianities (e.g. the deeply-esoteric philosophical project of Clement of Alexandria in the second century, who attempts to subsume Hellenistic culture to Christianity wholesale by in effect making Plato and the other sages of the Hellenic tradition into plagiarists of Moses, or, much later, Marsilio Ficino’s attempt to bring Hellenic metaphysical ideas back into the fold of Christianity).

Many modern languages underwent a major wave of Græcification – the adoption of Greek loan-words, or coinages of new words from Greek materials – often occurred in the early-modern period. Taking English as an example, whether these were scientific technical terms (“anatomy,” “biology,” “gyroscope”), poetic coinages (“rhapsody,” “frenzy”), or other coinages (often combining Greek and Latin roots in ways which obey the rules of English rather than of either Greek or Latin like “bicycle,” “homosexual,” etc.), they have served, historically, to lend a certain air of specialised knowledge, or even of inherent validity, to new approaches to sciences. In the life sciences, a kind of combined Greek and Latin terminology rules: when Linnæus attempted to create an authoritative schema for analysing animals and plants, he reached for Greek and Latin roots for his classifications. The names of dinosaurs were,

4. See Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 10; Fowden, “Late Polytheism,” 521; Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 5. By the time of Justinian’s sixth-century legal code, the “Hellenes” were definitionally “polytheists” (*Cod. Just.* I.11.9.1); the Greek-speaking Christian population of Justinian’s empire, by contrast, were now calling themselves “Romans” (*rhōmaioi*) in Greek.

until recently, strictly constructed from Greek roots (e.g., “dinosaur” itself, a Latinisation of the constructed Greek term “*deinosauros*,” “terrible lizard”). The same process of coinage can be seen in the world of the esoteric: newly-minted terms like “theosophy” and “anthroposophy” are examples of relatively-modern attempts at “branding” a new form of esoteric knowledge with a Greek title,⁵ but of course invoke the *gravitas* of ancient Hellenism; the genuinely late-antique term *theourgia*, theurgy or “god-working,” is no less a neologism of its time, at least partially coined to rebrand certain private and often illicit practices of addressive ritual as something higher and more holy than mere “magic.”⁶

With regard to Western esotericism, then, Greek is often the first stop when attempting to trace the lineage of an important term, even if we know the term through a Latin intermediary (and often through a genealogy going roughly Greek - Arabic - Latin - English/modern language of choice), and a term may also be a more modern coining from Greek, invoking the very primacy of Greek as the pre-eminent *lingua franca* of antique (occult) science, spirituality, theology, and so forth. But the Greek language is central on a number of further levels.

In the first place, ancient Greek discussions set the agenda for a number of Western concepts with deep relevance for culture in the large and for esotericism in particular. These concepts sometimes retain, in English, forms

5. *Theosophia* does appear among certain Late Platonist philosophers (e.g. Porph. *Abst.* 4.9; Procl. *Theol. Plat.* 5.35), referring to wisdom about the gods, or practical religious philosophy; it is re-adopted firstly in the context of the thought of Jacob Böhme in the sixteenth century (see Weeks, “Jacob Boehme”) and then by the Theosophical Society and its countless offshoots in the nineteenth and beyond (see Santucci, “Theosophical Society”), through which process it becomes a general term for a whole range of “occult” ways of thinking. Anthroposophy, a seventeenth-century coinage based on the Greek words for “human being” and “wisdom,” thus meaning something like “wisdom about humanity,” was adopted by Rudolph Steiner as the more-or-less official name of the esoteric movement he founded (see Leijenhorst, “Anthroposophy”).

6. While the term “theurgy” will have had resonances in late antiquity with the second-century collection of hexameter verses known as the *Chaldaean Oracles*, the *Oracles* themselves (as far as we can tell) did not define *theourgia*; the term as it has been subsequently understood has its origin largely in Iamblichus’ late-third-century *Response to Porphyry*, also known as *De mysteriis*, and, following Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity*, was the result of Iamblichus’ invention of a ritual tradition.

derived directly from their Greek originals – “philosophy,” “magic,” “demon,” “gnosis,” and even “esoteric” itself are all straight anglicisations of Greek terms, and all of them were transmitted to English through Latin well before Renaissance scholars brought knowledge of Greek back to Western Europe: the ancient Romans had already adapted some of these Greek words into the Latin terms *philosophia*, *magia*, and so forth, while Greek terms like *gnōsis* made their way into the medieval far West as technical terms in Latin heresiological literature. In other cases, Greek ideas deeply inform *concepts* where the words have changed, but still cannot be historicised without going back to Greek discussions in antiquity: the histories of crucial concepts like “soul,” “spirit” and “spirituality,” “ineffability,” “transcendence,” and others begin with Greek discussions, although their English names are based on Latin translations of Greek terms, or simply, as in the case of “soul,” on a native English Germanic root adapted to translate the Græco-Latin conceptual cluster *psyche/anima*.

In the second place, many important primary *sources* for Western esotericism are Greek, or have Greek textual sources at their headwaters, even if these are now lost. The central “occult sciences” astrology and alchemy, although they had roots extending many centuries into the deep history of Egypt and the Near East, underwent crucial formative developments in Greek thought and texts, and these Greek works set the conceptual framework and often the technical vocabulary for these sciences in the West going forward.⁷ As well as the Christian scriptures, many crucial esoteric texts of late second-temple Judaism and early esoteric Christianity were written in Greek or, like the Septuagint “Bible,” were Greek translations which served as vectors of a major spread of ideas which

7. Astrology: see, e.g., summary at Pingree, “Hellenophilia,” 560; Bara, “Astrology II: Antiquity.” Alchemy: see Martelli, *Four Books*, for the Pseudo-Democritus, the earliest-known alchemical writer in the Western tradition. Zosimos of Panopolis, the second great alchemist whose works survive from antiquity, likewise wrote in Greek (see now Mertens, *Zosime de Panopolis*). Both authors set the stage for a tradition which would blossom over some two millennia in many other linguistic and cultural contexts.

would not otherwise have occurred.⁸ As with the Hebrew scriptural canon and its Greek translations, the original language of some important paracanonical works of second-temple Judaism was probably Hebrew or Aramaic, but a Greek translation made the work available to the Greek-speaking Jews in the Roman realm and to the early Christians, with important historical repercussions. We might cite the earliest versions of *1 Enoch* as a paradigm here; we cannot even imagine a Christianity without a reception of this text – the story of the “Watchers” in *1 Enoch* was a primary source for Christian demonology – nor can we imagine many subsequent developments in esoteric Christianities without reference to the important apocalyptic ideas transmitted by *1 Enoch* and its Enochic sister-texts down the centuries of Christian development. Neither this original Christian reception, nor the many translations of *1 Enoch* into multiple languages of Christendom would have been possible if the text had not left its original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Hebrew-Aramaic⁹ form and entered Greek, from which it was translated into a host of languages including Ge’ez, where it survives today as a canonical apocalypse in the Ethiopic Orthodox church, while the Greek survives only in fragments. A whole range of other religious texts of later antiquity which have had a long-lasting effect on later esoteric movements, either directly or indirectly, were originally written in Greek, including the *Hermetica*, the *Chaldaean Oracles*, a great many of the texts generally termed “Gnostic,” and the works of the Platonists, all of which have long and convoluted ramifications for later esoteric thought still echoing today.

8. For Second-Temple Jewish texts, see, e.g., the texts collected at Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (two vols.), for some of which scholars theorise Hebrew or Aramaic *Vorlagen*, in whole or in part, but which overwhelmingly made their way in Roman Second-Temple Jewry in Greek form, and which were translated from Greek into other languages such as Hebrew, Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Armenian, Ge’ez, and so on. For early-Christian paracanonical texts – which really were almost entirely a linguistically Greek phenomenon – see the writings collected at e.g. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vols. 1 & 2.

9. For theories as to the original “Enochian language,” see Isaac in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vols. 1, 6.

It is thus important for students of Western esotericism to keep in mind one result of the intellectual primacy of the Greek language for Western culture generally: we rarely deal with Greek terms in their antique definitions, as reconstructed in *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* and numerous other brave attempts to salvage the pristine, Classical tradition of “the glory that was Greece.” Instead, we are usually faced with an intellectual genealogy bearing the marks of multiple instances of translation, reinterpretation, further reinterpretation, and so forth. Let us look at the Greek word *nous* (νοῦς) as a case-study.

Nous meant to Homer, and to the later, Classical woman in the street, something like “the faculty of intelligence,” “that which thinks.” It takes on in the Platonist tradition, however, a technical meaning of the faculty which deals directly with immaterial Forms; *nous* thus becomes both a faculty of higher knowledge, in that it is direct knowledge of eternal truths, but also one which actually takes place outside of time and space, and can thus be called “transcendental.” *Nous* also becomes, for the majority of Platonists, a divine mind or consciousness responsible for the existence of the *kosmos*. This idea of *nous* as transcendental, eternal, divine consciousness makes its presence felt both in Late Platonism and in late-antique religious thought, such that in Plotinus human beings have noetic bodies,¹⁰ while in the *Hermetica* one can be “baptised in *nous*,” or be “reborn in *nous*,” and thus immortalised.¹¹ Clearly, at this point we have expanded beyond the realm of “that which thinks,” although *nous* continued to mean this to normal ancient people, and the term is translated into Latin already in antiquity by either the term *mens* or *intellectus*, with the rather unusual *intellectus* seemingly serving to indicate the transcendental side of the term, and *mens* its more everyday connotations.¹² But in the Arabic tradition

10. *Enneads* IV.3[27]18.13-15; IV.4[28]5.13-20; VI.2[43]21.52-53.

11. Baptism in *nous*: *C.H.* IV 4; rebirth in an immortal *nous*-body: *C.H.* XIII 3; cf. 14.

12. This would seem to be the purport of Augustine's distinction, drawn at *De civ. Dei* X 23 and elsewhere in the same work, between the two Latin terms when translating Porphyry's use of *nous*. In the earlier Latin works of Apuleius *mens* is adopted throughout as a translation of *nous*, but then defined such that its transcendental character is established (e.g., *de Platone et eius dogmatis*).

nous becomes ‘*aql*, under which form it is transformed by the crucial thought of Ibn-Sīnā into a hybrid Platonist/Aristotelean idea of an emanative series of divine minds *and* a faculty of reasoning through syllogisms by a hylomorphic human being whose mental powers are dependent on a material body, even on the brain.¹³ From Ibn-Sīnā, or rather from Avicenna, the transformed *nous* is re-introduced into Latin where it becomes *intellectus* in a new, high-medieval context.¹⁴ This term, “intellect,” then played out, through the rise of the new science in the seventeenth century, against a backdrop of materialism, and eventually evolved into our familiar term “intellect.” Thus, nowadays when we think of an “intellect” we tend to think of something roughly equivalent to what the ancient, Classical woman in the street meant by *nous* – thinking powers, intelligence – but understanding the term this way will cause problems if we read Philo of Alexandria, the *Hermetica*, Plotinus, Proclus, Ibn-Sīnā, Thomas Aquinas, or Marsilio Ficino, all of whom mean by *nous* or *intellectus* an immaterial, eternal, and transcendent phenomenon of consciousness which bears in some cases little and in some cases no resemblance to “thinking” in the normal sense of the term, and all of whom in some way or another also attribute to this consciousness a divine agency independent of human beings.

Thus, the very primacy of the ancient Greek language for Western thought and for Western esotericism means that *very* long chains of translation and re-interpretation must be taken into account when we look at a given word. Scholars of esotericism will want to know the root meaning of the term *esoterikos/ἑσωτερικός*, and some basics of the term’s history and development leading to our modern understanding of the esoteric and esotericism, but will be less interested in the more mundane development whereby modern Greek postboxes for foreign post are marked *allegraphia exōterikē*, “foreign mail,” while domestic post is “*allegraphia es-oterikē*.”

13. See Sebti, “Avicenna.”

14. On Avicenna’s transmission to the Latinate medieval world, see Goichon, *La philosophie d’Avicenne*.

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