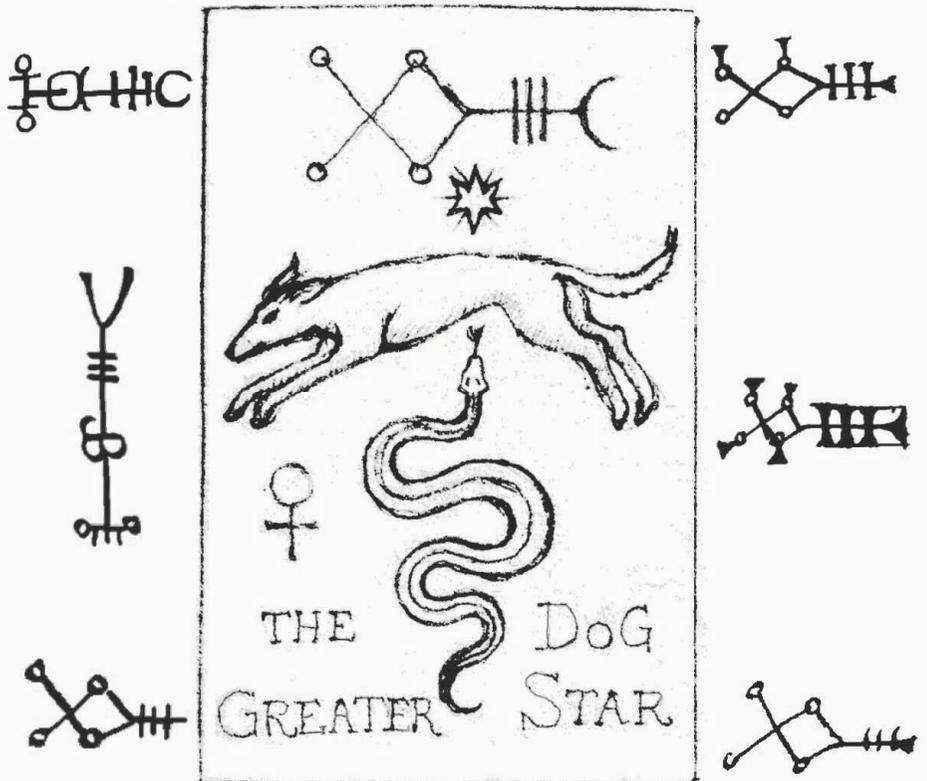


DE QVINDECIM STELLIS

THE COMPREHENSIVE TRANSLATIONS OF
HERMES ON THE FIFTEEN FIXED STARS



TRANSLATED BY

REGULUS HESS

WITH A COMMENTARY BY

CHRISTOPHER WARNOCK



Renaissance Astrology

Translator's Introduction, Notes on Texts and Translations
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sketches by Nigel Jackson

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Translator's Introduction

Of old they tell how Hermes Trismegistus, having received a mighty gift, dispensed it, and handed down to men the book *De Quindecim Stellis*. Says Cyranus: “Hermes Trismegistus, a god known to all men, received from the angels a great gift of God.”¹ This was the gift of wisdom, of which it is written: “All wisdom is from the Lord God, and hath ever been with him, and is before all time.”² Now in the days after the Flood this Hermes reigned long in Egypt, and was the first discoverer and promulgator of every art and science, both the liberal and the mechanical; and he was called Trismegistus, or Thrice-great, by reason of the threefold office—Philosopher, Prophet and King—bestowed on him from on high.³ By another account, however, he received this title through the superlative extent of his knowledge; and he wrote many books,⁴ so that his wisdom might not lie concealed.⁵

The chief of those books were forty-two in number, as Clement of Alexandria records, which Egyptian hierophants bore aloft in sacred procession. These, he says, were the indispensable books of Hermes;⁶ but there were many others. Indeed, Seleucus asserts that there were 20,000 of them, while Manetho reckons 36,525.⁷ Let it be understood, however, that these works were not written by the hand of the legendary Hermes himself, but by men as it were imbued with his thought, as says Iamblichus: “The books which are circulated under the name of Hermes contain Hermetic opinions.” He adds that they were

¹*Cyranides* prologue (in Delatte, p. 13).

²Ecclus. 1:1. All Biblical references are to the Vulgate.

³We draw this account from Robert of Chester's preface to *De compositione alchemiae* (in Manget, vol. 1, p. 509).

⁴Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 1.6, p. 32.

⁵See *Quadripertitus* prologue, below.

⁶*Stromata* 6.4, pp. 323–324.

⁷Both cited by Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 8.1, p. 300.

De Quindecim Stellis

translated from Egyptian into Greek,⁸ though later Hermetic works would be composed in Greek, rather than translated. And however many there were in truth, nearly all of them perished in the succeeding centuries of turmoil, obscurantism and neglect. Yet some survived: among them was *De Quindecim Stellis*.

Beyond what has been said in our traditional sources, nothing is known of the early history of this work but what might be surmised by comparison with other ancient books of magic. Damigeron's *De lapidibus*, for instance, is a compilation of gem-lore purportedly derived from an epistle sent by Evax, King of Arabia, to the Emperor Tiberius.⁹ Its descriptions of certain precious stones, which are sometimes to be engraved with celestial forms or combined with vegetable and animal components, bear striking parallels with material from *De Quindecim Stellis*.¹⁰ Another example is the above-quoted *Cyranides*, a book of talismans and magical experiments which begins with a treatise "on twenty-four stones, twenty-four herbs, twenty-four fishes and twenty-four birds," supposed to have been translated by Cyranus, King of Persia, from an iron stele inscribed by Hermes.¹¹ Internal evidence and external references to the authors suggest that both of these works first appeared, in their current forms, during the time between the first and third centuries AD.¹² One imagines that *De Quindecim Stellis* might have been written in the same period: as is indeed inferred by Arnoldus, a medieval epitomist, who assigns its date to the time of Ptolemy.¹³ What seems certain is that all three of these books were assembled from earlier sources descending out of the crepuscular mists of elder antiquity, and perhaps at last from the hallowed pen of the Thrice-great himself. Let us be done with speculation, however, and consider the recorded facts, which begin with the first flourishing of Islam.

For in the eighth century, at the behest of Caliph Al-Mansur,

⁸Ibid. 6.4, pp. 304–305, quotation amended.

⁹*De lap.* second epistle, pp. 231–232.

¹⁰See our notes on both *Quadripertitus* and *Liber Enoch*, below.

¹¹*Cyranides* prologue (in Delatte, pp. 13–14).

¹²Damigeron's inclusion of the letter to Tiberius (who reigned from 14–37 AD) and Tertullian's mention of Damigeron (in *De anima* 57, p. 76, prior to the former's death c. 220 AD), provide us with an obvious interval for the composition of *De lapidibus*. We do not wish, on the other hand, to become embroiled in the scholars' quest to fix a date for the *Cyranides*, but will say merely that its joint authorship by Harpocration suggests a compilation sometime around the second century (see Fowden 87–88, fn. 57).

¹³See *Tabula XV stellarum* conclusion, below.

the Abbasid court astrologer Al-Naubakht was tasked with selecting an auspicious hour for the founding of Baghdad, an undertaking in which he was assisted by other wise men of note, including the Persian Jew Masha'allah. The chosen time was on July 31, 762, at 2:40 pm,¹⁴ after which the city was soon to become a great center of learning and culture, while the aforementioned Masha'allah would go on till his death in 815 to write numerous treatises on the stars drawn from the riches of Greek learning gathered by the conquering Mohammedans. In his writings he was particularly indebted to the Hermetic books of astrology, one of which—our *De Quindecim Stellis*—he abridged and translated into Arabic, calling it “The Four-part Book of Hermes.”

A few hundred years later, in 1095, Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade, commencing a centuries-long struggle that would have the indirect result of an outpouring of Greek and Arabic writings into Christendom, including many works on astrology and magic. The Cyranides, for example, were rendered from Greek into Latin in the twelfth century; whereas *De Quindecim Stellis* never arrived in Europe in Greek form, but was translated from Masha'allah's Arabic during the thirteenth century,¹⁵ and given the name *Quadripertitus*, literally the “fourfold” book. This is the first and longest recension of *De Quindecim Stellis* to have come down to us. Its title, which it has in common with the Latin name of Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*,¹⁶ signifies its main contents, which are divided into four parts.

The book begins with a prologue containing a series of aphorisms ascribed to Hermes: this portion of the text is fragmentary and disjointed, evidently due to Masha'allah's abridgment. Next is the first part, describing the fifteen stars, which is one of the few surviving ancient accounts of the powers of the fixed stars. The second part enumerates the fifteen stones appointed to the fifteen stars, telling the physical qualities and occult virtues of each. The third part treats similarly of the fifteen herbs, some of which are accorded virtues of their own, while others are merely said to augment the powers of their

¹⁴As recorded by Al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations* 13, pp. 262–263. See discussion in Thabit, *De imaginibus*, Warnock's commentary, pp. 23–24.

¹⁵This estimate is based on the dates of the oldest manuscripts, such as Ashmole 341, which was produced between 1265 and 1277 (see Watson, vol. 1, p. 5), and also the lack of references by authors before 1300. (Our earliest reference is a quotation by Petrus Bonus, who wrote in the 1330's. See fn. 61, below.)

¹⁶Or *Quadripertitum*. While both forms of the name were used interchangeably in the Middle Ages, modern convention has assigned the *-um* to Ptolemy and the *-us* to our present work.

corresponding stones. There are listed together with the herbs certain other mineral, vegetable and animal ingredients, of which almost nothing is said, save that they are “appended for greater efficacy.” Concerning these last, a comparison with other sources reveals that they were, at least in some cases, understood to have specific virtues akin to those of their respective stones and herbs.¹⁷ The fourth part is a list of the fifteen images and characters belonging to the fifteen stars, and “suited” to the foregoing operations. The work concludes with a scholium by Masha’allah on fifteen suffumigations for good and evil.

Unlike many other Latin spell-books, which were circulated in secret and subsequently lost or only partially preserved in a few imperfect manuscripts, *Quadripertitus* seems to have enjoyed some degree of popularity, as attested by its survival in at least thirty copies. In order to see the reason for this, it is necessary to consider the views of medieval Christian philosophy, or Scholasticism, on magic and the stars, which are oddly at variance with those usually accepted among Christians or even so-called Neo-Scholastics today.

Regarding the heavens, it was the prevailing belief that God ruled all material things below through the power of the things above, the sublunary world of the four elements being conjoined to the stars according to the model laid down by Aristotle, thus: “This world necessarily has a certain continuity with the upper motions: consequently all its power and order is derived from them.” To which he adds: “For the originating principle of all motion is the first cause,” that is, God.¹⁸ He states further that there are, subordinate to this first cause, certain spiritual substances “in their nature eternal, and in themselves unmovable, and without magnitude,” responsible for the motion of the heavenly bodies.¹⁹ These substances are in the language of the ancients, “gods,” or in that of Christianity, “angels.” Whence argues St. Thomas Aquinas: “Assuming, therefore, that angels move the heavenly bodies, no wise man can be in doubt that all the natural movements of the inferior bodies are caused by the movements of the heavenly bodies: and this is proved with reason by the philosophers, made evident by experience, and confirmed by the authority of the

¹⁷For instance, mugwort—which is said elsewhere to have power against lassitude, reptiles and savage beasts—is added without comment to the talisman of Alkaid for the benefit of travelers. We have indicated several such examples in our notes.

¹⁸*Meteorologica* 1.2 (in Ross, vol. 3, 339a).

¹⁹*Metaphysica* 12.8 (in Ross, vol. 8, 1073a).

saints.”²⁰ Nor was this view unique to Thomas. On the contrary, a survey of his contemporaries—theologians, poets and philosophers—shows that the existence of celestial influences was as commonly accepted in the Middle Ages as that of electrons or vitamins is today.²¹ It followed that the heavens worked in part by impressing their forms on the things below, as is told in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta secretorum*:

These ethereal bodies are fixed in the heavenly spheres, and the seven governing planets reflect their forms in their own lights, as the eye and polished bodies reflect the forms and images of material objects, and thence they cast down their shadows towards the earth according to the decree of their Painter and Maker. Then everything in the mineral, vegetable or animal kingdom is stamped with those types of which it is capable.²²

These forms descending from the stars thus imparted special powers or virtues to the things receiving those forms, as St. Thomas makes mention: “Natural bodies acquire certain occult virtues resulting from their species through the influence of the heavenly bodies.” And: “The natural virtues of natural bodies result from their substantial forms which they acquire through the influence of the heavenly bodies; wherefore through this same influence they acquire certain active virtues.”²³

Albertus Magnus applies this doctrine to precious stones, saying: “We find in stones virtues which are not those of any element at all, such as dispelling poison, driving away abscesses and attracting or repelling iron. . . It is the common judgment of all wise men that this power is the consequence of the specific form of this or that stone.”²⁴

Thomas makes a similar statement: “The forms of mixtures, namely
²⁰*Responsio ad magistrum Ioannem de Vercellis*, resp. 2–3, p. 328. Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* 3.82, “That Lower Bodies are Ruled by God through Celestial Bodies,” pp. 274–277 of Part I.

²¹See Zambelli, p. xiii, and Lewis, pp. 102–112. We might add that the second work cited here, *The Discarded Image*, is to be recommended in its entirety for those who wish to have a better understanding of the medieval worldview.

²²Arabic Version 10 (in Steele, p. 234).

²³*Summa theologiae* 2-2.96.2, vol. 18, pp. 37–38 (Shapcote’s translation, amended).

²⁴*De mineralibus* 1.1.6, p. 8 (Wyckoff’s translation, in *Book of Minerals*, p. 24, amended).

of inanimate bodies like stones, metals, minerals, in addition to the powers and activities which they share with the elements of which they are composed, have certain other more noble virtues and activities arising from specific forms—for instance, gold gladdens the heart and the sapphire stops bleeding.”²⁵

While the Schoolmen thus endeavored to explain the origin of these operations according to philosophy, the same had been the object of common belief since time immemorial, and had seen a renewed popular acceptance after the eleventh-century publication of Marbodius of Rennes’ *Liber de gemmis*, a poem loosely based on Damigeron’s *De lapidibus*, describing the marvelous properties of sixty precious stones. Later medieval works, such as those of the encyclopedists Bartholomeus Anglicus, Arnoldus Saxo and Thomas Brabantinus, would rehearse such lore again and again, as a matter of common knowledge.

They also documented the virtues of plants, which were mostly for the cure of bodily ills, according to the herbal tradition of Macer Floridus and Pseudo-Apuleius. Sometimes, however, medicine was mixed with magic, as for example Macer relates of Verbena:

If, bearing this herb in hand, thou askest one that be ill, “Pray, brother, how farest thou?” and he responds well, “he shall live;” but if ill, there is no hope for recovery.

Yet, concerning other virtues of the same, the poet expresses doubt:

Not a little do magicians praise this herb, as Pliny attests. They say it resists all diseases, and that any might obtain this who, being annointed, shall desire it, that it has the power to acquire friendships withal, and to expel agues and many suchlike things, as they suppose; which, since nature is potent, one might allow, but to us they seem vain and old-womanish.²⁶

The permissibility of such practices was thus viewed as a matter of private conscience: if the virtue of a thing was deemed natural,

²⁵*De occultis operibus naturae*, p. 27.

²⁶*De viribus herbarum* 58, p. 106.

its use was considered licit. Hence says Thomas, “There is nothing superstitious or unlawful in employing natural things simply for the purpose of causing certain effects such as they are thought to have the natural power of producing.”²⁷ And with plants, as with stones, they received their powers from the power of the heavenly bodies, as Albertus says:

We cannot ascribe these powers to simple properties, for indeed an active or passive property has one or more of these effects from the power of the stars, which are in the species of the plant that brings about the same. Some of these seem to have an effect by means of simple alligation: such as Peony-seeds, which being tied about the neck, are said to be efficacious against epilepsy; or as Cinquefoil which, being tied upon the legs, is said to mitigate weariness; and there are many other such operations.²⁸

He also mentions some strictly magical powers of herbs, albeit cautiously:

But what it behoves to add to this, is that some are likewise seen to have divine effects, for which those who study magic are the more greatly aspersed: as, for example, Betony is said to impart divination; and Verbena, love; and that herb called Meropis, which is said to open closed locks. And there are many such as these, of which it is written in the spell-books of the philosopher Hermes.²⁹

Now in order to deal with these matters more clearly, a distinction was made between what came to be called “natural magic,” which performed wonders through the innate virtues of things and was counted a part of natural science;³⁰ and “necromancy,” which employed

²⁷*Summa theol.* 2-2.96.2, vol. 18, p. 38 (Shapcote’s translation).

²⁸*De vegetabilibus* 5.2.6, p. 158.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰The use of this term seems to have been originated by William of Auvergne, Bishop of Paris. See, for example, his *De universo* 2.3.23, pp. 1059–1061, which describes

images, characters, suffumigations, sacrifices, etc., and was generally frowned upon by theologians. On this latter point, however, a split occurred between those who regarded a certain division of necromancy as lawful, and those who rejected it altogether.

At the head of the first group we find again Albertus, who describes “that part of necromancy which is dependent on astrology” as “good doctrine.”³¹ Says he: “In considering the craft of making gems and metallic images in the likeness of the stars, the first teachers and professors of natural science recommended that the carving be done at duly observed times, when the heavenly force is thought to influence the image most strongly, as for instance when many heavenly powers combine in it. And they worked wonders by means of such images.”³² In the same place he goes on to list the descriptions and virtues of numerous images of the signs, planets and constellations, concluding: “These things cannot be proved by physical principles, but demand a knowledge of astrology and magic and necromancy, which must be considered elsewhere.”³³ In another work he speaks of the saying of Ptolemy, who assigned in his twenty-second aphorism an astrological import even to the putting on of new garments; in the same way, says Albertus, is the like to be found in the operations of images: “Just as the circuit of the [stellar] rays impresses an order of being and continuance upon natural things, so does it imprint the same upon artificial things: whence it follows that the forms of magical images are imprinted according to the semblance of the stars and are found to be effective.”³⁴

Leading the opposition to this, however, was Albertus’ pupil Thomas, who argues that bodies engraved with celestial forms are no more disposed to receive celestial influences than any other bodies of the same species: “for shape is the principle of neither action nor passion.” Instead, he asserts that magicians used them to communicate with certain entities, saying: “The conclusion remains, then, that they may use them only as signs, for there is no third possibility. Now we do not use signs except in regard to other intelligent beings. Therefore, the arts of magic get their efficacy from another intelligent

several operations “according to the art of natural magic”; and 1.1.43, p. 648, where he mentions “that part of natural science, which is called natural magic.”

³¹*Book of Minerals* 2.3.1, p. 127.

³²*Ibid.* 2.3.3, p. 136.

³³2.3.5, pp. 140–145.

³⁴*De fato* 4, pp. 412–413.

being to whom the speech of the magician is addressed.”³⁵ With the same assumption in mind he resorts in his *Summa theologiae* to the suffrage of St. Augustine, who denounced the celestial daemons of the ancients as “demons” in the narrow Christian sense, and concludes on this precarious basis that the use even of what he calls “astronomical images” constitutes a tacit pact with the Devil.³⁶

The Thomistic position seems all the more quaint and inconsistent when we ponder how, in a previously-cited statement, he described the intelligences moving the heavenly bodies as angels. Why, then, should the lesser intelligences descending from those bodies be regarded as devils? However, it is not our business to engage in this debate, but only to show that there was one. And the matter remained an open question through the close of the Middle Ages, as is demonstrated by the following passage:—

It seems to me that astronomical images without characters, not as artificial bodies, but as the effects of the stars (though by human agency), ought not to be condemned. The reason which moves me is that the impression, for example, of the form of a lion in gold, being executed under a like heavenly body, is a corporeal work made subject to the heavens; and the constitution of this image is able to receive the celestial influence: even as the onslaught of war, which is voluntary and consists in our actions, at such a time receives strength from the heavenly bodies. Whence we read of Guido Bonatti of Forli that, having ascertained the hour according to astrology, he made an assault upon the enemy and liberated the fatherland.³⁷

The preceding was written by Cardinal Cajetan, a contemporary of Martin Luther and one of the great defenders of Thomistic thought. Yet he felt free in this matter to oppose the Angelic Doctor, propounding instead the Albertist position of a lawful astrological necromancy. For those who are unfamiliar with the stature of Cajetan among theologians and philosophers, we might note as an aside that the commentary in which this extract appears would later be published with full ecclesiastical approval under the auspices of Pope Leo XIII, alongside the *Summa Theologiae*, as part of the authoritative “Leonine Edition” of the complete works of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Now we have inserted this digression touching on medieval

³⁵*Summa contra gentes*. 3.105.7, pp. 95–6 of Part II.

³⁶*Summa theol.* 2-2.96.2, vol. 18, p. 38.

³⁷*Commentaria Cardinalis Cajetani* in St. Thomas, *Opera omnia, tomus nonus*, p. 333.