

The Universal Caduceus

Christine Payne Towler



The glyph of Mercury and the Wand of Hermes (also called the Hermetic Caduceus) is a polymorphous glyph and as universal a magical symbol as any in the West, because it has a connection to nearly every discipline of Renaissance occultism. Let's see how many disciplines we can find that add meaning to or take meaning from this universal sigil.

Traditionally the astrological planets were paired up to represent classic polarities that interact to express the vibrancy and fertility of our solar system. The Sun and Moon are seen as the Lights of day and night. Venus and Mars embody the classic gender pair, the forces of attraction and assertion whose dance we echo in our cultural male/female relations. Jupiter and Saturn represent the pair that governs our opportunities and our responsibilities, our freedoms and our bindings. This leaves Mercury out of the pairing process, because this planet is seen, much like this metal, to be of intermediate form and energy. Shape-shifty and indeterminate, the polarity of Mercury depends upon what company it's keeping at the moment, and what aspects it's receiving from the others. Even its glyph is "hermaphroditic" (a blend of Hermes and Aphrodite), containing the symbol for Venus within it. Therefore the planet Mercury became the alchemical symbol for the state of androgyny, or as we might describe it in present time, whole-brain functioning.

The Latin Mercury is also the Greek Hermes, the cosmic messenger with winged feet and helmet, who carries the Caduceus. Quoting from Roger Beck's *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology*, let's draw out a few of the rulerships of Hermes/Mercury given by the astrologer Vettius Valens, who was writing between 152-162 C.E.:

"Mercury indicates education, letters, argumentation, logic, brotherhood, interpretations... numbers, calculations, geometry, commerce...community, messaging, service, profit, discoveries... he is the giver of discernment and judgment.... he also governs temple-builders... sculptors, doctors, teachers of grammar, lawyers, orators, philosophers, architects, musicians, diviners, sacrificers... those who use paradox and craftiness in calculations ... those who make their livings from display, vagrancy, and unsettled conditions; those who are experts and inquirers concerning celestial phenomena..." (p. 76)

Anyone familiar with Trump #1 of the Tarot will recognize elements of that energy in this early description of Mercury. From the wandering performer and diviner, to the association with education, letters and numbers, this godform and planet could be taken as the patron deity of the Tarot.

Many Faces of Hermes

Knowing that he is polymorphous by nature, we should not be surprised that many layers of associations have accumulated around this numinous symbol of consciousness. To quote Antoine Faivre from Chapter 1 of his wonderful *The Eternal Hermes; From Greek God to Alchemical Magus*,

" Two of [Hermes' essential] traits stand out from the tangled undergrowth: first, his guiding function, linked to his extreme mobility; second, his mastery of speech and interpretation, warrant of a certain type of knowledge... His route is not the shortest distance between two points: it is a world in itself, made of serpentine paths where chance and the unforeseen might happen. Hermaion means 'fallen fruit' or 'wind-fall'. To profit from windfalls does not exclude the possibility of giving destiny a slight nudge, through tricks and subterfuges. Thus one sometimes finds Hermes unearthing hidden treasures; and it is only a short step from there to making off with them! ... In the same spirit, eclecticism is justified -- and plagiarism too; but 'stealing' is not a good rendering of the Greek kleptein, which suggests rather the idea of a ruse, in the sense of a 'secret action'... And is not hermeneutics all about bringing hidden treasures to light?

"Hermes, unlike Prometheus, steals things only in order to put them back into circulation. Thus one could speak of his function as psychopomp as encompassing the 'circulation' of souls. This function is dual, for Hermes is not content merely to lead souls to the kingdom of the dead; he also goes there to find them and bring them back to the land of the living.... He is the master of knowledge, or rather of a means of attaining to a knowledge that may be gnostic, eclectic, or transdisciplinary -- or all of these at once." (p. 13-14)



When he entered European consciousness, Mercury was the god of the planet by that name. But even in his planetary persona his shape shifting is ceaseless. For one thing, Greek society in Alexandrian Egypt had made the conflation of Hermes/Mercury to Thoth, figuring that the Egyptian god of writing and letters was an earlier form of the same deity. Hermes was in Egypt credited with the authorship of a great number of books under the general title of *Hermetica*. Very few of the named works so attributed have ever been found, but the rumor was itself enough to cement Hermes/Thoth's reputation as the source and master of all learning that could be conveyed to humans.

Meanwhile, a distinct trend in early Christianity occupied itself with rationalizing away the pagan Gods as glorifications of human beings whose deeds and skills were so

impressive that they came down through history as "godlike". Thus Hermes became historicized as a person, and was even given multiple incarnations to demonstrate the immortality of this exalted being. It is through this understanding that we get the image of Thrice-Greatest (thrice-born) Hermes Trismegistis. Add to this list of personas the Arabic Idris, the gnostic Shepherd of Hermas, the alchemical Mercury, and the five different personages defined by Boccaccio; The Planet, the Physician, the Orator, the Trader, and the Thief. This is not to mention the many variant portrayals of Hermes/Mercury found in art and literature. A literalist would have to say that there have been multiple Hermes' moving through the collective consciousness both serially and simultaneously, though of course each version is a spark struck from the same egregor or internal Image. All of these facets of Mercury were available to the Renaissance magus, allowing for a kaleidoscope of qualities and attributes to draw from and emulate.

In one version, taken from the 23rd astrological fragment of Stobaeus (5th century C.E.), Hermes appears in the court of the Lord

"... as a 'soul' [psyche], possessing a bond of sympathy with the mysteries of Heaven; he is sent by god into our lower world in order to teach true knowledge. The Lord commands Hermes to participate in the creation of mankind as steward and administrator. Thus one can see him as the principal actor, after the supreme deity, in the anthropotonic drama. He is a soul that has descended here as the first divine emanation, preceding the second emanation represented by Isis and Osiris, who are also sent to this lower world for the instruction of humanity." (p. 16)

Observant readers will hear in this description a remarkable resemblance to the Hebrew Shekhina, the Christian Logos and the Gnostic Christ/Sophia, which should remind us again of the fundamentally hermaphroditic nature of Mercury in every manifestation. This is the quality that is highlighted by his totem symbol, the Caduceus, which stands in for Mercury as both sigil and sign.

Mercury in the Hebrew Tradition

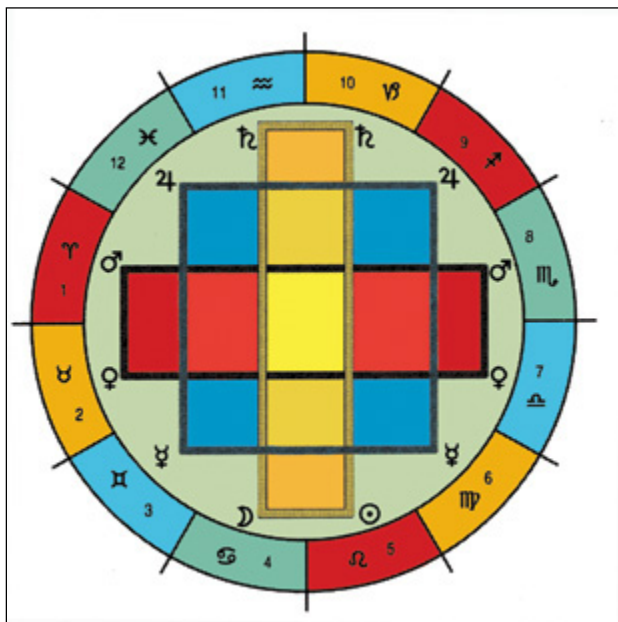
There is so much to say here that it's hard to know where to start! We must remember that the Christian exploration of the Hebrew mysteries started slow in the early centuries of the Christian era, but gained momentum and popularity after the Crusades. By the time of the Renaissance, full-blown contact with Holy Land culture and teachers was available to those who were committed enough to collect books and travel to the areas around the Mediterranean where centers of Hebrew and Arabic learning were established.

For the sake of brevity, let me quote Fred Gettings' excellent *Encyclopedia of the Occult*, from the entry on Hod, which is the sphere on the Cabbala Tree that corresponds with the planet and functions of Mercury. The definition is given four times, remarking on the four ascending worlds of the full Creation:

Hod The name given to the eighth Sephirah of the Sephirothic Tree, the word usually translated as meaning 'splendor' or 'renown'. In the World of Expression

(Assiah), it is ruled by Mercury, who is the tutelary of the art of living in the material realm -- the true spagyric art of the hermetic science. In the World of Formations the Angels of Hod are the Beni-Elohim, the Sons of God, who encourage a unity of mind and soul -- Yetzirah tending to give more attention to the former than the latter. In the realm of Briah, which is the world of Creation, the Sephirah is protected by Raphael, the Mercurial Archangel, a healer of injuries (specifically injuries of the soul, since Briah deals with the soul element in man). In the highest World of Origins, the realm of Atziluth, Hod is linked with the God-aspect Elohim Sabaoth, the feminine divine in every created individual, in which the androgynous nature of Mercury (the esoteric planet of Hod) finds its real completion. (p. 110)

In a previous essay, [Confluence of the Three Great Systems, \(PDF\)](#), I have made the connection between the Wheel of the Zodiac, the Caduceus and the Hebrew Tree



(which is itself an abstraction of the human body with the Planets and Signs overlaid). This makes it easy to see how each symbol illuminates and amplifies the others. None of the ideas combined in these ways were new to the Renaissance Magi. The Sefir Yetzirah, primary astrological textbook of late Antiquity, explained The Signs and Planets of Astrology upon the Tree. The image of the 'melothestic man' (the human body linked to the various signs of the Zodiac) had been introduced in Europe via Arabic astrology in the 12th century. As this synthesis of Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew esotericism spread across Christendom, it provided the West with

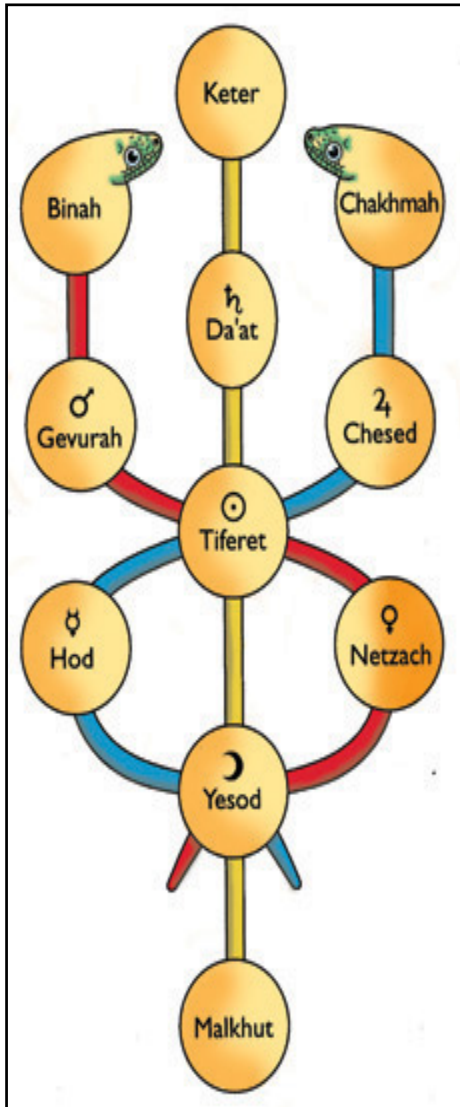
its own version of the Hindu Chakra Tree, a diagram of the occult physiognomy of humanity. Therefore we can rightfully point to the Caduceus, Mercury's symbol, as a concentrated teaching on the ultimate meaning of human intelligence and physical embodiment, which captures in the microcosmos of the individual the full divine scope and powers of the Creation. The Caduceus, like the Tree, is quite simply another layer of the map or x-ray that explains the way humanity is, indeed, 'created in the image of God'.

Caduceus, Androgyny, and the Reconciliation of Opposites

Mercury as a symbol in its own right, the caduceus has a pedigree as long as that of its carrier. As mentioned earlier, the astrological explanation for the shape of Mercury's symbol is a stack-up of the cross of Earth or matter (*hyle*), a solar orb, and a lunar crescent, hence a linking or bridge between the Three Worlds (earthly, astral and Heavenly). Looking at the art of astrology instead of its script, meanwhile, we see the godform of the planet Mercury carrying a winged staff with twining serpents. It does not take much effort to visualize how the astrological glyph for Mercury is a simplified

restatement of the staff in Mercury's hand. Now let's add in the information that's been so condensed in the glyph that it doesn't convey consciously unless we have educated ourselves to know what's there.

Gettings' entry on the Caduceus states, in part:



"A name given to a number of different (though ultimately related) symbolic rods, derived from the Egyptian Mystery centers, consisting of two serpents or basilisks twisted around a rod. It was the white wand carried by Roman heralds suing for peace and the wand of Mercury (herald of the gods, though not always seeking peace). Some occultists claim that the serpents symbolize the healing snakes of the demi-god Aesculapius, and others claim that they refer to the two spiritual energies or healing forces which run up and down the human spine... By classical times it was called the 'wand of Hermes' and through the connection with the Mystery Centers it became a symbol of the power which wakened men from sleep (and hence from death)." (p. 44)

J. E. Circlot, in his wonderful *A Dictionary of Symbols*, further enlarges upon the Caduceus this way:

"A wand with two serpents twined around it, surmounted by two small wings or a winged helmet.... The wand represents power; the two snake's wisdom; the wings diligence; and the helmet is the symbol of lofty thoughts.... The caduceus also signifies the integration of the four elements, the wand corresponding to earth, the wings to air, the serpents to fire and water (by analogy with the undulating movement of waves and flames).... the Mesopotamians considered the intertwining serpents

as a symbol of the god who cures all illness, a meaning which passed into Greek culture and is still preserved in emblems of our day. According to esoteric Buddhism, the wand of the caduceus corresponds to the axis of the world and the serpents refer to the force called Kundalini, which, in Tantrist teaching, sleeps coiled up at the base of the backbone -- a symbol of the evolutive power of pure energy. Schneider maintains that the two S-shapes of the serpents correspond to illness and convalescence. In reality, what defines the essence of the caduceus is the nature and meaning not so much of its individual elements as of the composite whole. The precisely symmetrical and bilateral arrangement, as in the balance of Libra, or in the tri-unity of heraldry (a shield between two supporters), is always expressive of the same idea of active equilibrium, of opposing

forces balancing one another in such a ways as to create a higher, static form. In the caduceus, this balanced duality is twice stated; in the serpents and in the wings, thereby emphasizing that supreme state of strength and self-control (and consequently of health) which can be achieved both on the lower plane of the instincts (symbolized by the serpents) and on the higher level of the spirit (represented by the wings)." (p. 35-36)

There's another hidden symbol in the Mercury Wand, and that's the ouroboros in the form of a lemniscate. Wonder what I'm talking about? Here's a quote from Julius Evola's *The Hermetic Tradition; Symbols & Teachings of the Royal Art*, taken from the first paragraphs of the chapter called " 'One The All', and the Dragon Ouroboros". At this point he is suggesting that what this symbol refers to is not an abstraction or a concept that can be intellectually grasped, but an actual multidimensional experience in consciousness.

" ...Certainly it is not a question, in this case, of a philosophical theory -- a hypothesis reducing everything to a single principle -- but of an actual state brought about by a certain suppression of the law of opposition between I and not-I and between 'inside' and 'outside' (subjective/objective). These dualities, with rare exceptions, dominate the common and most recent perception of reality. The experience of this state is the secret of what the literature calls the 'Materia of the Work' or 'First Matter of the Wise'. Only from this state is it possible to 'extract' and 'shape,' by 'ritual' and 'art' ... everything that the tradition promises, in spiritual as well as operative (i.e., 'magical') terms.

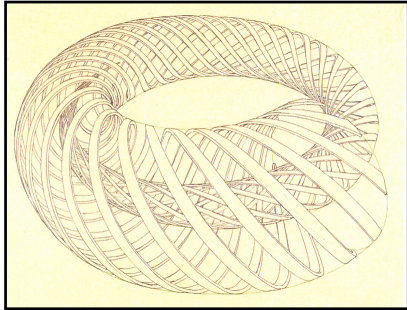
The alchemical ideogram of 'One the All' is ...the circle; a line or movement that encloses within itself and contains in itself both its end and beginning. In hermetism this symbol expresses the universe and, at the same time, the Great Work. In the Chyrspoeia it takes the form of a serpent -- Ouroboros -- biting its own tail, containing within the space of the circle it creates the ['One the All']. In the same palimpsest is found another pantacle formed by two rings, the inner bearing this inscription: 'One is the serpent, which contains the poison, according to the double sign...' while in the outer circle it says: 'One is the all, the source of all and the culmination of all: if the all did not contain the all, it would be nothing.'

"... The closed line... the circle of Ouroboros, also has another meaning: it alludes to the principle of exclusion or 'hermetic' sealing that metaphysically expresses the idea of a unilaterally conceived transcendence being extraneous to this tradition. Here the transcendence is conceived as a mode of being contained in the 'one thing,' which has a 'double sign': it is both itself and the overcoming of itself; it is identity and at the same time poison, that is to say, it has the capacity to alter and dissolve; it is both dominating (male) principle and dominated (female) principle... and hence androgynous."

Note the emphasis on the consciousness-liberating event, brought about by resolving the tension of yoked opposites through accomplishing their fusion at the centerline. This one concept is itself a great Arcanum. And the caduceus always illustrates at least one double helix -- the intertwined energies make two full exchanges

around the rod. How did they know, we wonder?

The Ouroboros has yet another manifestation, with both literal and metaphorical implications. Astrology deals with circles, but due to the eccentricities of the planetary orbits, those circles are never perfect, symmetrical and tidy. In particular, the Moon's



orbit includes wide fluctuations above and below the equator, which is what creates her changing appearance through the cycle. Superimposed against the straight line described by the plane of the ecliptic, the Moon's motion

describes a serpentine path, with a great swing to the north

and a great swing to the south every month. (The North and South Nodes are the places where the Moon crosses the midline.) Connect the ends to adjust the image from a linear to a circular view, and you have the lemniscate -- the sideways figure-8 one routinely sees in the hats of the Magus and Strength cards. Now re-impose the central axis and you have a Caduceus again! In true shape-shifty mode, the lemniscate and the caduceus are in constant motion around the central axis and the crossing-point of the arcs, repeatedly opening and closing in the process of receiving, drawing down, refining, and then re-elevating the energies of soul through the adventures of matter.



These variations on the theme point up a subtle distinction: In the astrological symbol, Mercury's head is crowned with the two horns of a crescent moon rather than another full circle. The head biting the tail of the Orouboros Serpent is not visible in the Mercury glyph, having disappeared into the world 'above'. We see this in the caduceus as well -- the twining serpents will cross at least twice, but the symbol remains open at the top, other than the rod itself piercing up and out. The distinction between one figure and the other is resolved in the *Viridarium chymicum figuris* by Daniel Stolcius de Stolcenberg (1624). Here we see the very moment when opposing forces touch; the rising side of the lemniscate has a lion's head and the descending side has an eagle's head, with the serpentine body encircling the faces of the Sun and the Moon. At the apex of the image, the lion's head yawns open to swallow the eagle's head, thus closing the coil, moving the implication from the polarity of either/or (division by time and space) to the resolution of and/and (One the All, eternity).

Jacob Boehme, (a German protestant mystic whose visionary explications of the inner workings of Creation drew from Paracelsian alchemical ideas, Hermetic imagery and -- some say -- Hebrew Kabbalah), integrated the monad into his work and used it as an explanatory key to his own account of Creation. We see occasional appearances of the monad in subsequent alchemical works, and the Rosicrucian movement was also undoubtedly enriched by the mode of thinking and expression that Dee introduced. Somehow, during the 13-day brainstorm that birthed the monas, Dee captured for the collective hermeneutical imagination another interdisciplinary, between-the-worlds cipher with which to record the distinctive stages of interior transformation through the subtle properties of matter.

There is no doubt about it; the alchemists occupied a privileged historical position, in that they inherited a magical mountain of enriched symbols, literature and mystical vocabulary with which to quantify the results of their investigations. By the mid-1600's, the heyday of the alchemical movement in Europe, the synthesis of disciplines and convergence of imagery is complete, giving birth to such a superabundance of creative visioning that it took until the 20th century psychedelic revolution to equal alchemical art in intensity. Letters from different sacred scripts as well as astrological and elemental signs were deconstructed and reassembled along the lines that Dee mapped out, eventuating a new set of magical hieroglyphs. All the emblematic arts (heraldry, manuscript illustration, the frescos and carvings decorating the churches, *Ars Notoria* and Art of Memory forms, Tarot cards and related image catalogues) were raided and their subjects liberated from their historically dictated frozen poses to flesh out, cartoon-style, the unfolding stages of the Great Work. This wonderful multidimensional conversation fairly leaps off the page, presenting us with some of the densest, obscure and fascinating imagery of the whole magical catalogue.

From the point of view of our overview of the Mercury/Caduceus, one of the most interesting of the later alchemists is Goosen van Vreeswijk, who published in 1674-5. His images are studded with astrological/elemental glyphs and a range of alchemical sigils that are obviously the results of following the trend that Dee anchored with his Mercurial Monas. Here we can see how truly expressive and meaningful these synthetic alchemical glyphs, somewhere between letters, numbers, and signs, can be.

Mercurial Creativity of Consciousness

As we make this admittedly superficial tour through the dense and loaded body of correspondences that constellate around Mercury and the Caduceus, let us note that it takes thousands of words to say what these images convey suggestively in a glance. These explanations are but the tip of the iceberg compared to what is truly there to be seen, but only long study and a flexible habit of mind will penetrate this forest of associations and actually contact the living essence of the Mercury force. It is that very liquidity and inclusiveness of mind that is Mercury's signature, so much so that 'he' cannot even be typecast relative to gender or yin/yang functionality. Mercury's reputation for bringing hidden things to light, awakening the soul from obscurity and oblivion, promises that exposure to these various facets and significances could potentially have the power to illuminate unknown realms of the soul, liberating undefined

numinous spaces that hide behind our defined and quantified "knowns".

It should be clear at this point that the magus or practitioner, Mercury's Caduceus, Adam Kadmon (or Cosmic Man, expressed in emblems such as the Cabbala Tree and the Zodiac) and the Gnostic Pleroma are each metaphysical extensions of the same thing at different levels of being. Each manifests a different order of magnitude within the Mystery of Incarnation, co-existing simultaneously in and as fractals of each other. The ever-changing microcosm of individuated humanity, embedded in elemental Nature, reveals the materialized reflection of every possible interior variation of the collective Psyche (the soul-life of humanity). This force of psyche, also known as Sophia, is Herself eternally shaped and led by irresistible influx from the Inscrutable Father raining down from solar system, stellar, and galactic levels. This is the Mystery of Incarnation. We are all embedded into and nested around each other, and that is the method by which the great Mystery gives every life form its own realm within which to exist.



As all these micro-, meso-, and macrocosmic influences interact in and through us, the alert and attentive human can begin to observe the links and connections by which the Sophianic soul-force and the Heavenly Father radiations penetrate into us and affect our unique, immediate experience. Those with magian proclivities can begin the experiments necessary to sensitize and focus their individual energy-bodies to more accurately register these larger contexts and conversations. Our Gnostic, Kabalistic, Hermetic, Astrological, and Theurgical ancestors have left us a rich 'trail of crumbs' via a generous stream of

inspired writings, images, emblems, symbols and glyphs that light our way along our studies. And then there's the living presence of Nature, the Soul of the World, Who reaches out to us from every direction day and night. Truly, there is no lack of channels by which these realizations might reach us, if we but put ourselves within range of perceiving.

This is not an article that purports to teach the exact how-tos of magic, or to encourage anybody who doesn't have the calling to embark upon this path. But to the student of these arts, it will contain more than enough inspiration to provide a spur for future experiments. One has only to 'step into' and 'try on' these variant forms of the Mercury glyph to discover the attractions and challenges of multidimensional consciousness. Investigation into different uses of the Cabbala Tree (such as can be found in *Qabalah; The Mystical Heritage of the Children of Abraham* by Feldman), the inner dynamics of the I Ching hexagrams, the earliest Druidic Runes, and/or the full set of

astrological and elemental glyphs can also give remarkable results along these same lines.

How does that line from the movie go? "If you build it, they will come."

ArkLetter 27

"Body as Cosmos"

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