

Hermetism and Hieratic Tradition in the *De mysteriis* of Iamblichus

Kyle Fraser

SCHOLARS HAVE LONG RECOGNIZED the importance of the testimony of Iamblichus, along with that of his near contemporary Zosimos of Panopolis, in reconstructing the wider Greco-Egyptian milieu of Hermetism, and its intersections with neighbouring esoteric currents, including alchemy, astrology, magic, and theurgy.¹ In the first section of this paper, I survey Iamblichus' allusions to Hermetic authorities and sources, including some lost Hermetica, and I establish the relevance of the spiritual ethos of Hermetism to the theurgic project of the *De mysteriis*. The literary persona of the prophet Abamon is interpreted in the light of the convention of Hermetic pseudonymity, and the rites and soteriological goals of theurgy are related to visionary and liturgical practices in the extant Hermetic corpus, including the use of the so-called ὀνόματα βάρβαρα. Iamblichus presents an impassioned defence of the ritual power of such barbarous names, insisting that Greek translation of Assyrian and Egyptian invocations deprives them of ritual potency. In the second section of the paper, I relate Iamblichus' discussion of the ὀνόματα βάρβαρα, and his concerns about translation, to *Corpus Hermeticum* 16, examining a hitherto unappreciated lexical parallel. In both sources, the dangers of cultural and linguistic blending are encapsulated in the use of the rich adjective ἐξίτηλος to capture the fading of tradition and the depotentialization of ritual speech.

¹ See Garth Fowden's pioneering study, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge 1986) 116–141.

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Iamblichus and the way of Hermes

In his *De mysteriis*, Iamblichus frames a magisterial defence of the cult practices of Mediterranean and Near Eastern antiquity. Under the unifying concept of theurgy (“divine work”) he subsumes the entire sweep of traditional divinatory and sacrificial technologies, arguing for their theological coherence and even their salvific necessity. The original title of his treatise (renamed in the fifteenth century by its illustrious Renaissance translator, Marsilio Ficino) was *The Reply of the Master Abamon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains*.² Porphyry had directed a series of questions—really, thinly veiled criticisms³—to one “Anebo,” who was either an Egyptian student of Iamblichus or, as seems more likely, a fictive representative of the Iamblichian school with its Egyptianizing emphases.⁴ If the gods are transcendental—as any good Platonist must concede—why, he asked, do theurgists employ sacrifices and invocations, as though unalterable divinities could be persuaded by material offerings or random human vocalizations?

² Ficino’s complete title was *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum*. On this title and Ficino as editor see H. D. Saffrey and A.-Ph. Segonds, *Jamblique, Réponse à Porphyre (De mysteriis)* (Paris 2013) ix–xxi.

³ I am not persuaded by the thesis of C. Addey (*Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods* [Farnham 2014] 135–136) that Porphyry’s letter was a dialogic exercise, more exploratory than polemical, nor by P. Athanassiadi’s image of Porphyry as naïve, hesitant, and deferential to the authority of Iamblichus (“Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination,” *JRS* 83 [1993] 115–130, at 117–119). On Porphyry’s polemical intent see H. D. Saffrey and A.-Ph. Segonds, *Porphyre, Lettre à Anébon l’Égyptien* (Paris 2012) xxxvi–xxxvii; and D. J. O’Meara, “The Image of Egyptian Wisdom in Late Antique Platonism,” in M. Sommer et al. (eds.), *Transzendentes Ägypten: Jenseits, Himmel, Hölle und das Ende in antik-ägyptischen Diskursen* (Paderborn 2024) 259–270, at 262.

⁴ On the figure of Anebo see Saffrey-Segonds, *Porphyre* xxx–xxxii; H. D. Saffrey, “Abamon, pseudonyme de Jamblique,” in R. B. Palmer et al. (eds.), *Philomathes: Studies and Essays in the Humanities in Memory of Philip Merlan* (The Hague 1971) 227–239, at 231–233; Addey, *Divination and Theurgy* 135–136, with n.38.

To Porphyry, the theurgic turn initiated by Iamblichus, with its pronounced focus on cult, seemed an aberration from the contemplative ideals of true Platonism.⁵ In response, Iamblichus, writing in the guise the Egyptian prophet “Abamon,”⁶ suggests that Porphyry’s concerns are premised on a dualistic interpretation of Platonic metaphysics. By arguing from the perspective of an uncompromising transcendence, Porphyry has lost sight of divine immanence and the unbroken continuity of the cosmos. Just as light illumines all things from outside, without loss or rupture, so, Iamblichus insists, the gods are present immaterially in material beings.

Porphyry followed Plotinus in holding that the highest part of the soul, the pure intellect (*nous*), remains grounded in the divine Mind, never descending into fatal embodiment; and so, by withdrawing from the external world of materiality and contingency, the philosopher discovers that he is always already at one with the divine.⁷ For Iamblichus, this pure noeticism might well describe the state of the holy man, who has already transcended fate, but it did not offer a way of salvation for the alienated person, entangled in the bonds of materiality. The Plotinian approach, at least as Porphyry represented it, threatened to reduce philosophy to the methodologies of human intellection: it assumes that we can think our way to union with Divinity. In the final analysis, knowledge is a barrier to the attainment of salvific

⁵ As A. P. Johnson argues (*Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre: The Limits of Hellenism in Late Antiquity* [Cambridge 2013] 105), Porphyry was “a consistent critic of traditional forms of ritual.” He rejected blood sacrifice as polluting and dangerous (e.g. *Abst.* 2.42–47), though conceding the legitimacy of vegetable sacrifices to the celestial deities (*Abst.* 2.32, 37).

⁶ On the possible meanings of the Egyptian names Anebo and Abamon see the interesting (albeit speculative) analysis of Elsa Oréal reported in Saffrey-Segonds, *Porphyre* XXXII–XXXVI.

⁷ On the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended soul as the metaphysical ground of Porphyry’s anti-ritualism see G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park 1995) 11–14 and passim; Saffrey-Segonds, *Jamblique* XLIX–LI.

union, inasmuch as it assumes a distinction between the questing self and its divine object: “Indeed, to speak truthfully, our contact (συναφή) with divinity is not even a form of knowledge (γνώσις). For [knowledge] is, in a certain respect, separated [from its object] by otherness.”⁸ All forms of ratiocination, inasmuch as they are bound by temporality and contrariety, are inadequate to the simplicity of divine essence and activity. Iamblichus describes the salvation of the soul not as a knowledge of the gods, but as a contact or communion (συναφή).⁹ The soul can only be joined (συνηρημένη) to the gods through “pure and irreproachable intellections which it has received from all eternity from the gods.”¹⁰

In other words, the gods must reveal themselves to us, enveloping us in their transformative and liberating energies.¹¹ Against the fantasy of a disembodied intellect with unbroken access to the divine Mind, Iamblichus asserted the reality of a fully embodied soul, which can only attain liberation through the concrete mediation of hieratic tradition—through the correct observance of sacred rites that have been preserved and transmitted without alteration from time immemorial. Only through the ineffable power of sacred icons, which are resonant

⁸ *Myst.* 1.3 [5.21–6.2], though he does speak of an innate knowledge of the gods, which is immediate and non-discursive (ἔμφυτος γνώσις, 1.3 [5.16]; σύμφυτος ... κατανόησις, 1.3 [7.1]). References to Iamblichus cite the book and chapter divisions of Gale, followed in brackets by the pages and lines in the edition of Saffrey-Segonds. I have also consulted the English translation of E. C. Clarke, J. M. Dillon, and J. P. Hershbell, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries* (Atlanta 2003), which follows the edition of É. des Places.

⁹ *Myst.* 1.3 [6.1]. In his treatment of prayer in 5.26 [177.3–11], the term συναφή denotes the first of three degrees of theurgic communion with the gods, culminating in perfect and ineffable union (ἡ ἄρρητος ἕνωσις).

¹⁰ *Myst.* 1.3 [7.6–8], following the French translation of Saffrey-Segonds.

¹¹ *Myst.* 1.3 [6.9–10]: “We are enveloped (περιεχόμεθα) in [divine communion] and filled (πληρούμεθα) by it.” Notice that the dominant metaphors are of touch or commingling.

with the nature of the gods, could the soul be awakened to its latent divinity and reintegrated with its transcendental source.

Iamblichus represents theurgy as an initiated tradition (παράδοσις) descending ultimately from the hieratic cults of the Egyptians, who were “the first to be allotted communion (μετουσίαν) with the gods.”¹² He does not present himself as an innovator, but as a faithful exponent of the “way of Hermes,” referring repeatedly to Hermetic opinions, authors, and texts—some lost, like the writings of the prophet “Bitys,”¹³ and the astrological manual *Salmeschiniaka*, which dealt with the risings and settings of stars and technical details of horoscopic astrology relating to the decans and planetary rulers. Porphyry and Iamblichus discuss this manual in connection with the astral theology of the priest and Stoic philosopher Chaeremon (first century CE), who evidently endorsed its teachings.¹⁴ According to Iamblichus the study of such astral phenomena was preliminary to the deeper mysteries of Hermetism and occupied the lowest rung (ἐν τοῖς ἐσχάτοις) in the Egyptian understanding of causes (τὴν παρ’ Αἰγυπτίοις αἰτιολογίαν).¹⁵ He also draws upon unnamed “theological Hermetica”¹⁶ that related the mythologi-

¹² *Myst.* 7.5 [191.23–24].

¹³ *Myst.* 8.5. Bitys is also referenced by the alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis and he may be identical to “Pity,” the alleged author of a series of necromantic rites in *PGM* 4. On Bitys see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* 150–153.

¹⁴ *Myst.* 8.4; *Epist. ad Aneb.* fr.81 (Saffrey-Segonds, *Porphyre* 75–77). Porphyry states that the decans, horoscopic signs, and “powerful leaders” discussed by Chaeremon were named in the *Salmeschiniaka*. According to Hephæstion of Thebes, the astrological writings associated with “Nechepso” also drew from this manual, which must have been extant by the second century BCE. On the testimonials relating to the *Salmeschiniaka* see G. Adamson, “The Old Gods of Egypt in Lost Hermetica and Early Sethianism,” in A. D. DeConick et al. (eds.), *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions* (Durham 2013) 58–86, at 60–67.

¹⁵ *Myst.* 8.4 [197.7–12]. See O’Meara, in *Transzendentes Ägypten* 263.

¹⁶ As Fowden calls them: *Egyptian Hermes* 137–139. On Iamblichus’ discussion of Egyptian theology in *Myst.* 8.2–3 see also C. H. Bull, *The Tradition of*

cal deities of Egypt to a hierarchy of hyper-cosmic and cosmic deities. At the summit of the hierarchy is the indivisible One (τὸ ἐν ἀμερέζ), from which arises a self-begotten Monad, described as the principle of intellection (νοητάρχης), and identified in one Hermetic account with the deity Kmeph.¹⁷ From this primal Intellect arises the Demiurgic mind, whose various powers and activities (δυνάμεις τε καὶ ἐνεργείας) are veiled mythologically in the names and attributes of the deities Amoun, Ptah, and Osiris.¹⁸

Iamblichus assures Porphyry that the writings circulating under the name of Hermes Trismegistus contain authentic Egyptian doctrine, even though they are expressed in the Greek idiom and employ the terminology of Greek philosophy. The reason for this, he says, is that the Hermetica were translated into Greek by men knowledgeable in philosophy.¹⁹ Iamblichus' references to Hermetic sources are typically vague and specific borrowings are difficult to establish. There was a considerable Hermetic literature in later antiquity,²⁰ of which our Byzantine

Hermes Trismegistus: The Egyptian Priestly Figure as a Teacher of Hellenized Wisdom (Leiden 2018) 131–146, who stresses parallels with *Poimandres* (*Corp.Herm.* 1); Adamson, in *Histories of the Hidden God* 67–77, on parallels with the Sethian *Eugnostos* (NH III, 3 and V, 1); O'Meara, in *Transzendentes Ägypten* 266–267; D. Clark, "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*," *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008) 164–205.

¹⁷ Kmeph appears as "Emeph" in the manuscripts: see Clarke et al., *On the Mysteries* 309 n.407. Iamblichus surveys two Hermetic accounts of the principles in *Myst.* 8.2 and 8.3, respectively. The mythological associations are outlined in the second ordering (τάξις). But the systems seem consistent in their underlying metaphysics, as argued persuasively by Bull, *Tradition of Hermes* 132–133 (with n.162) and assumed by Adamson, in *Histories of the Hidden God* 67–68.

¹⁸ *Myst.* 8.3 [195.14–23].

¹⁹ *Myst.* 8.4 [196.20–26].

²⁰ According to one Seleucus, there were 20,000 Hermetic books, while the priestly scholar Manetho reports 36,525 (*Myst.* 8.1), a figure that may be based on the Sothic cycle (Saffrey-Segonds, *Jamblique* 326 n.2). Even account-

collection preserves only a few exemplars, perhaps those least offensive to Christian sensibilities.²¹ Still, Iamblichus' general presentation of the spiritual ethos of the Hermetic tradition accords well with our extant Hermetic corpus.

In particular, Iamblichus shares with the authors of the *Hermetica* a nostalgia for the old ways of Egypt, for the time-honoured temple cults and their priestly wisdom, which seemed (at least in the eyes of traditionalists) to be fast deteriorating under Roman occupation. Certainly, the Egyptian temples faced significant pressures in the imperial age due to the loss of state funding, and certain fundamentals of traditional priestly knowledge declined, notably the understanding of hieroglyphic script. The abbreviated Demotic script remained in use for religious and literary purposes, but as Frankfurter notes, it was "essentially a scribal conceit," since "by the second century C.E. even the most insular, conservative priesthoods commonly used and conversed in Greek."²² With the development of Old Coptic, beginning in the first century C.E., the Greek script was even deployed in liturgical contexts as a means of standardizing the pronunciation of Demotic words.²³ In the *Corpus Hermeticum*, concerns about the contamination of the Egyptian language (notably in *Corp.Herm.* 16) reflect an indigenous, perhaps even priestly, reaction to these inexorable processes of linguistic blending. These concerns are shared by Iamblichus, as we shall discover.

Iamblichus' claim that the books of Hermes are Greek trans-

ing for exaggeration, or astronomical conceits, the Hermetic literature was massive in scope.

²¹ See B. P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation* (Cambridge 1992) xl–xlv.

²² D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton 1998) 250.

²³ Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* 250–251. On Old-Coptic glosses of Demotic in the London and Leiden magical papyri see J. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites. The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual (100–300 CE)* (Leiden 2005) 26–27 and *passim*.

lations of Egyptian texts is of special interest. He implies that the Hermetic books are translations of the books of Thoth—the Egyptian prototype of Hermes Trismegistus. These books preserved the essential protocols and procedures of Egyptian cult ritual.²⁴ Iamblichus perceives the Hermetic writings as a vital link to this authentic and pure hieratic tradition. In the guise of the προφήτης Abamon,²⁵ he opens his treatise by declaring his pious subordination to Hermes Trismegistus, “the god who presides over rational discourse,” and “the common patron of all priests,” adding that “it is to him that our ancestors in particular dedicated the fruits of their wisdom, attributing all their own writings to Hermes.”²⁶ Thus, we should understand the pseudonym Abamon not merely as a rhetorical conceit, but as the expression of an initiatic ethos that demands the subordination of Iamblichus as prophet to the hieratic authority of Thoth-Hermes. In concealing his own name and authorship, Iamblichus pays reverence to Hermes and the Hermetic tradition, implying that his own work is merely a faithful transmission of its venerable mysteries, another link in the chain of initiatic transmission.

Iamblichus insists that the “way” of Hermes was not a matter of theorizing about the gods—underscoring again his point about the limitations of knowledge—but a theurgic praxis through which the soul ascended to the regions beyond fate:

And [the Egyptians] do not merely theorize about these matters (οὐδ’ ὅλως ψιλῶς θεωροῦσιν), but they recommend that we ascend through sacred theurgy (διὰ τῆς ἱερατικῆς θεωργίας) to the regions that are higher, more universal and superior to fate, towards the god who is the creator, without calling in the aid of matter (μήτε ὕλην προσποιουμένους) or bringing to bear anything other than the observation of the propitious time for action. Hermes has also set

²⁴ On the books of Thoth and their cultic significance see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* 57–68.

²⁵ Abamon is described as προφήτης at *Myst.* 1.1 [2.17].

²⁶ *Myst.* 1.1; transl. in Clarke et al. 5.

out this way (ὁδόν) and the prophet Bitys has given an interpretation of it to King Ammon.²⁷

The visionary experience of an ascent through the heavens, beyond the fatal influence of the planets and stars, towards union with the supreme God, is indeed the central mystery of the initiatic tractates in our Hermetic corpus. Passing in sequence through the seven planetary spheres, the initiate sheds the vices and corrupting influences of the planets, and enters finally into the supra-cosmic realms of the Ogdoad and Ennead where they reunite with the Father and his Powers.²⁸

This mystery is described in *Corp.Herm.* 13 as a rebirth in Mind,²⁹ a total conversion of the soul, whereby it comes to know itself as containing, and thus transcending, the very cosmic powers that formerly held it in bondage.³⁰ The Hermetic initiate

²⁷ *Myst.* 8.4–5 [197.23–198.6]; transl. Clarke et al. 317, slightly modified.

²⁸ I leave to one side the precise relationship of the Ogdoad and Ennead and the related and vexed distinction between the supreme deity and the Hermetic demiurge, on which see the helpful note in Copenhaver, *Hermetica* 104–105. The soul's heavenly ascent is most fully elaborated in the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI, 6. 55,24–61,17; J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès Trismégiste* V [Paris 2019] 73–111). It also features prominently in *Corp.Herm.* 4 and 1.24–26, although in *Corp.Herm.* 1 the ascent is described as a postmortem experience rather than a visionary ritual.

²⁹ “I am no longer what I was—I have been born in Mind, ἐγεννήθην ἐν νῶ, *Corp.Herm.* 13.3 [II 201.16]. References to the Greek of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Latin of the *Asclepius* follow A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste, Corpus Hermeticum I–II* (Paris 1946), cited by tractate and section, followed in brackets by the editors' page and line numbers.

³⁰ The description of initiatic “rebirth” in *Corp.Herm.* 13 does not explicitly reference the soul's ascent through the celestial spheres. J.-P. Mahé argues that rebirth takes place in the Ogdoad and Ennead, and that the soul's heavenly ascent is implied. Despite differences in terminology, “rebirth” and “ascension” refer to the same mystery: see Mahé, *Hermès Trismégiste* V CCIV–CCXVI, and “Accolade ou baiser? Sur un rite hermétique de régénération: ἀσπάζεσθαι en NH VI, 57,26 et 65,4,” in L. Painchaud et al. (eds.), *Coptica – Gnostica – Manichaïca. Mélanges offerts à Wolf-Peter Funk* (Laval 2006) 557–565, at 560–563. In contrast, Bull regards Hermetic rebirth as preliminary to the

prepared for this ascent through a praxis involving visualization and prayer, an internalized theurgy in which the soul served as the receptacle of divine illumination, the “womb” of noetic rebirth.³¹ The material side of theurgic cult—the consecration of physical receptacles and the offering of sacrifices—was not neglected, as evident in the famous ‘god-making’ passage in the Latin *Asclepius*.³² However, material offerings were deemed appropriate only for the cult of ministering daimons and cosmic divinities. As Iamblichus testifies, the Hermetic ascent beyond fatality, “towards the god who is the creator,” did not rely on the aid of matter (μήτε ὕλην προσποιουμένου).³³ The supreme deity was approached only through spiritual modes of sacrifice. Even to offer him incense, Hermes says, is “akin to sacrilege, for he wants nothing who is himself all things or in whom all things are.”³⁴

In his extensive treatment of sacrifice, Iamblichus echoes this Hermetic principle that cult must be adapted to the complexity of the divine hierarchy:

Whenever we offer cult to the gods who rule over soul and nature, it is not inappropriate to offer them natural powers ... But when we endeavour to honour those gods that are in and of themselves singular in form, it is fitting to bestow on them honours that are

more advanced rite of visionary ascent described in *Disc.* 8–9: *Tradition of Hermes* 244–245, 314–315, 372. This debate notwithstanding, *Corp.Herm.* 13.15 does anticipate the soul’s eventual return to the Ogdoad, though without specifying whether it can be experienced through visionary praxis (as in *Disc.* 8–9 and *Corp.Herm.* 4) or only postmortem (as, apparently, in *Corp.Herm.* 1).

³¹ *Corp.Herm.* 13.2 [II 200.17–201.1]: “O child, [the womb] is the wisdom of understanding in silence, and the seed is the true good” (transl. Copenhagen, *Hermetica* 49).

³² *Asclepius* 38. Hermes describes the consecration of temple statues (“earthly gods”), created from materials sympathetically attuned to celestial harmonies.

³³ *Myst.* 8.4 [198.2].

³⁴ *Asclepius* 41 [II 352.12–15] (transl. Copenhagen, *Hermetica* 92).

not bound to matter.³⁵

He is frustratingly silent as to the character of this immaterial cult. It may have involved visualization of geometrical icons of the gods, as Shaw has argued,³⁶ and presumably the chanting of divine names, a practice that “awakened corresponding *sun-thêmata* in the soul,”³⁷ thereby expanding its receptivity to divine illumination.³⁸ Similar practices are illustrated in the *Hermetica*: for instance, the initiate is instructed to become like God by imagining that their mind contains all cosmic powers.³⁹ There are also references to speech offerings (λογικαὶ θυσίαι), hymns of praise and thanksgiving,⁴⁰ sometimes incorporating the ritual utterance of divine names, as notably in the Coptic *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NH VI, 6. 52,1–63,32) where the ascent to the Ogdoad is facilitated by the singing of a hymn that incorporates Greek vocalic incantations and the “barbarous” names ZŌXATHAZŌ and ZŌZAZŌTH.⁴¹

³⁵ *Myst.* 5.19 [168.15–24]. Saffrey and Segonds suppose that the gods who are of singular form or species (μονοειδεῖς) are the planetary deities (*Jamblique* 313); but as these gods *do* rule over nature, the reference must be to their intelligible superiors, who are completely removed from matter (οἱ παντελῶς ἀσώματοι θεοί, *Myst.* 1.19; Saffrey-Segonds 45.15). On the distinction between material and immaterial deities see also *Myst.* 5.14, with the analysis of Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* 135–136.

³⁶ Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* 199–209 and *passim*.

³⁷ Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* 111.

³⁸ He also mentions at 5.20 intermediate forms of theurgy appropriate to deities that mediate between the cosmic and hyper-cosmic realms. The chanting of divine names might have fallen into this liminal category, since speech offerings are less material than animal or vegetable sacrifices, though not altogether internalized.

³⁹ *Corp.Herm.* 11.19–20, 13.11.

⁴⁰ *Corp.Herm.* 1.31, 13.18–19; *Disc.* 8–9 [NHC VI, 6. 57,18–25]; Cf. *Asclepius* 41: “Rather let us worship him by giving thanks, for god finds mortal gratitude to be the best incense” (transl. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* 92). On speech offerings see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* 147–148.

⁴¹ NHC VI, 6. 56,17–22. For a compelling analysis of these barbarous

In his extended treatment of Egyptian theology in Book 7, Iamblichus discusses the theurgic significance of such so-called barbarous names (ὀνόματα βάρβαρα), which he divides into two kinds: the ineffable names (ἄσημα ὀνόματα), which are nonsensical in human terms, and the traditional names or epithets of the gods in foreign languages, chiefly Assyrian⁴² and Egyptian. The use of the first type, the ineffable names, was widespread in late ancient ritual traditions—obscure names like BAINCHÔÔCH or ABLANATHANALBA, sometimes formulated as palindromes, or even as strings of Greek vowels are commonplace in the so-called Greek magical papyri, and they appear also on curse tablets, protective gemstones, and *lamellae*. Some of the ineffable names were, in reality, derivations or corruptions of foreign epithets—for instance, the Egyptian-derived names BAINCHÔÔCH (“spirit of darkness”) and BOLCHOSÊTH (“Baal, who strikes, [that is] Seth”).⁴³ But Iamblichus surely would not approve of the modern scholarly interest in tracing the etymological roots of these words, since their power (on his view) lies precisely in their opacity to human conceptualization. The deployment of such unintelligible names seemed to Porphyry to confirm the irrationality of theurgy: “For you inquire, ‘What is the point of the

names, which identifies close parallels in the magical formulary *P. Leiden* J 395 (*PGM* 13) and on a series of Horus amulets, see C. H. Bull, “Monkey Business: Magical Vowels and Cosmic Levels in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (NHC VI, 6),” *SMSR* 83 (2017) 75–94, at 82–84.

⁴² Presumably “Assyrian” means *Syrian*, in keeping with typical Greek usage: see F. Millar, “Porphyry: Ethnicity, Language, and Alien Wisdom,” in J. Barnes et al. (eds.), *Philosophia Togata II Plato and Aristotle at Rome* (Oxford 1997) 241–262, at 247. More generically it may denote regions of the ‘Upper Near East’: see P. Struck, “Speech Acts and the Stakes of Hellenism in Late Antiquity,” in P. Mirecki et al. (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden 2002) 387–403, at 396.

⁴³ As translated by J. G. Gager in the glossary of *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford 1992) 265–269; see also the glossary with tentative translations in W. M. Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography (1928–1994),” *ANRW* II 18.5 (1995) 3380–3684, at 3576–3603.

meaningless names?’⁴⁴ Iamblichus insists, in response, that although these names are meaningless in human terms, they are significant to the gods (τοῖς μέντοι θεοῖς πάντα σημαντικά ἐστίν) and ineffably united to them (ἀφθέγκτως ... τοῖς θεοῖς συνηνωμένως).⁴⁵ The importance of such names lies not in their conceptual significance, but in their inherent power to elevate the soul towards salvific union—a power that bypasses our capacities of imagination and judgment.⁴⁶

Regarding the second type of barbarous name—the foreign names of the gods—Porphyry wondered why theurgists suppose Egyptian or Assyrian names to be more efficacious than Greek names. Why not just use their Greek equivalents? As Iamblichus reproduces the second part of his question: “But why, of the meaningful names (τῶν σημαντικῶν) do we prefer the barbarian names (τὰ βάρβαρα) to those that are familiar to each and every one of us?”⁴⁷ This formulation raises a problem when compared to Eusebius’ terse rendering of Porphyry’s two-part question: “What is the point of the meaningless names, and of the meaningless names (τῶν ἀσήμων) [why do we prefer] the barbarian names (τὰ βάρβαρα) to those that are familiar to each and every one of us.”⁴⁸ In Eusebius’ version, there is no distinction between meaningless and meaningful names—he refers only to meaningless names. It is arguable whether Iamblichus’ rendering of the question is more or less faithful to Porphyry’s intended meaning. Iamblichus does say that he intends to organize Porphyry’s inquiries “suitably” (προσηκόντως) and he even notes that some of

⁴⁴ Τί γὰρ βούλεται τὰ ἄσημα ὀνόματα, *Myst.* 7.4 [189.9–10]; following the translation of Clarke et al. 297. The question is rhetorical: given their lack of meaning what could the ineffable names possibly accomplish?

⁴⁵ *Myst.* 7.4 [189.13–19].

⁴⁶ They are not meaningful (σημαντικά) according to human imagination: διὰ τῶν φαντασιῶν παρ’ ἀνθρώποις, *Myst.* 7.4 [189.15–16].

⁴⁷ *Myst.* 7.4 [190.10–11]; following the French transl. of Saffrey-Segonds.

⁴⁸ Text: Saffrey-Segonds, *Porphyre* 71–72. The discrepancy between Eusebius (*Praep. Evang.* 5.10.8) and Iamblichus is discussed in their note to fr.77.

them contain contradictions.⁴⁹ It is possible that he has reframed Porphyry's original question to render it—in his mind—more intelligible.

Indeed, if the text transmitted by Eusebius is correct, then Porphyry would immediately be mired in a contradiction. For it turns out that his objection to the theurgic preference for foreign names is motivated by an assumption about semantic equivalence:

“But,” you say, “the listener looks to the meaning (τὰ σημαίνόμενα), so that as long as the concept (ἔννοια) remains the same, it is sufficient, no matter what name is used.”⁵⁰

In other words, he thinks that the Greek names of the gods should be interchangeable with their Assyrian and Egyptian counterparts, since they have the same meaning. Clearly, this observation about semantic equivalence could not apply to *meaningless* names.

In order to make sense of the issues of translation that occupy Iamblichus in *Myst.* 7.5—namely, the question whether “barbarian” names of deities could be substituted by their Greek equivalents—it is crucial to see that we are speaking now not of meaningless names, but the names of specific gods in non-Greek languages. After all, the meaningless names are σημαντικά only to the gods. They have no conceptual signification that can be registered by the human imagination—and so they would be untranslatable by definition. At best, their *sounds* could be represented by Greek characters: that is, they could be transliterated.

Was the theurgic insistence on the use of foreign names, as Porphyry no doubt assumed, just a conceit—a predilection for the exotic? In responding to this question, Iamblichus launches into a sophisticated discussion of ritual language that finds a close parallel in tractate 16 of the *Hermetic Corpus*. In both sources, a distinctively Egyptian understanding of the power of language is evoked in defiance of the universalizing tendencies

⁴⁹ *Myst.* 1.1 [3.1–24].

⁵⁰ *Myst.* 7.5 [190.26–191.2].

of Greek language and conceptuality, and a shared concern about the perils of translation is voiced. This concern is elegantly encapsulated in the Greek term ἐξίτηλος, a hitherto unappreciated lexical parallel between the *De mysteriis* and *Corp.Herm.* 16.

Of fading traditions and the perils of translation

Iamblichus' conviction that the Greek writings attributed to Hermes are authentic translations of the books of Thoth agrees exactly with the self-fashioning of our surviving Hermetica. In tractate 16, Hermes' disciple, Asclepius, exhorts king Ammon to preserve the sacred writings in their pure Egyptian form:

The very quality of the sound (ἀπὸ τὸ τῆς φωνῆς ποιὸν) and the []⁵¹ of the Egyptian names intrinsically contain the energy of the beings they name (ἐνέργειαν τῶν λεγομένων). As far as you are able, O King, you who are capable of all things, preserve the discourse untranslated, lest mysteries of such importance fall into Greek hands; lest the haughty speech (ὑπερήφανος φράσις) of the Greeks, which is both vague and, as it were, ostentatious (κεκαλλωπισμένη), make ineffectual (ἐξίτηλον) what is sacred and well founded: the energetic idiom (ἐνεργητικὴν ... φράσιν) of our names. For the Greeks, O King, have empty speeches, effective only for syllogistic, and that is the character of Greek philosophy, a babble of speech (λόγων ψόφος). For our part, we do not employ speeches but efficacious sounds (φωνάϊς μεσταῖς τῶν ἔργων).⁵²

The Greeks employed the onomatopoeic word “barbarous” to capture the chatter (*bar bar*) of foreign languages like Egyptian. Asclepius cleverly reverses this Hellenocentric assessment. He contrasts the grandiloquence of Greek, its attention to ostentatious style and rhetoric, with the ritual power of Egyptian. Playing on the phonetic similarity of the words φιλοσοφία and ψόφος (‘mere sound’)⁵³ he declares that Greek philosophy is

⁵¹ The noun corresponding to the feminine article at *Corp.Herm.* 16.2.7 is missing in the manuscripts, as is perhaps indicated in *Paris.gr.* 1220 (14th cent.) by the erasure of approximately four letters between Αἰγυπτίων and ὀνομάτων: see Nock-Festugière, *Hermès Trismégiste* I xvii n.2; II 232 n.5 and the ap.crit.

⁵² *Corp.Herm.* 16.2 [II 232.7–17], my translation.

⁵³ On this pun see Copenhaver, *Hermetica* 202.

impotent babble. Egyptian speech, by contrast, is energetic (ἐνεργητικήν). More specifically, the sounds of Egyptian names contain the energy of the very beings they name (ἐνέργειαν τῶν λεγομένων)—a clear reminder of the ideographic dimensions of the hieroglyphic script.⁵⁴ Whereas the alphabetic signs of Greek are conventional, the hieroglyphs are divinely revealed icons, which directly mirror the structure of reality. Thus, their correct intonation generates an audible manifestation of divine energy with transformative power. To translate these energetic names into Greek, Asclepius says, would render them ineffectual (ἐξίτηλον), a word with rich nuances to which we will return below.

In a strange self-referential moment, our Greek Hermetic text declares itself a degraded copy of a pure Egyptian original. Its overblown Greek prose impotently mimics the sacrality and power of the hieroglyphs. The text legitimates itself as a translation of hieroglyphic wisdom, while simultaneously undermining itself by highlighting the inadequacy of its Greek presentation, which can only provide distorted access to its Egyptian source. This internal tension speaks to the cultural liminality of the Greek Hermetica, whose authors were Hellenized Egyptians—possibly priests—trying desperately to preserve the integrity of their ancestral traditions through the alien lens of Greek language and conceptions.⁵⁵ This liminality is also apparent in the text's preoccupation with preserving the *sound* of the Egyptian names. The emphasis is not on the visual iconicity of the hieroglyphs—as one might expect in a traditional priestly context—but their correct vocalization. As Frankfurter observes, this con-

⁵⁴ On the iconicity and ritual power of the hieroglyphs see D. Frankfurter, "The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic," *Helios* 21 (1994) 189–221.

⁵⁵ Fowden sees the concern over translation in *Corp. Herm.* 16 as reflecting "an ethnic Egyptian point of view" (*Egyptian Hermes* 37). Likewise, Frankfurter judges that the text "does reliably report a priestly view of Egyptian language and writing in contrast to Greek" (*Religion in Roman Egypt* 253). See, similarly, J. P. Sørensen, "Ancient Egyptian Religious Thought and the XVIth Hermetic Tractate," in G. Englund (ed.), *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions* (Uppsala 1989) 41–57, at 42.

cern with fixing the liturgical pronunciation of Egyptian words developed in tandem with the evolution of Old Coptic. Roman-era priests took advantage of the phonic accuracy of the Greek vocalic system in order to standardize the enunciation of Demotic words.⁵⁶ Thus, the nativist position articulated in our Hermetic text, with its appeals to the purity of the Egyptian language, already reflects a Hellenized priestly perspective.

This Hermetic assessment of the superiority of Egyptian as a ritual language finds a striking parallel in the arguments of Iamblichus in defence of the theurgic use of barbarous names. Porphyry had ridiculed the theurgic fascination with foreign names, especially Egyptian-sounding names. “For the god invoked presumably would not be of Egyptian birth. Even if he is Egyptian, he certainly does not (οὐ τί γέ) use Egyptian speech, nor any human speech at all.”⁵⁷ Words, Porphyry thinks, are merely conventional signifiers—linguistic fictions. Surely, the gods are oblivious to our petty ethnic and linguistic categories. Iamblichus rejects this representational theory of language:⁵⁸

“But,” you say, “the listener looks to the meaning (τὰ σημαίνοντα), so that as long as the concept (έννοια) remains the same, it is sufficient, no matter what name is used.” But the situation is not as you suppose. For if the names were established by convention, then it would not matter whether some were used instead of others. But if they are joined to the nature of what exists (τῆ φύσει συνήρτηται τῶν ὄντων), then those that are better adapted to it will be more precious to the gods.⁵⁹

Like our Hermetic author, Iamblichus alludes to the iconicity of the Egyptian names, which are “joined to the nature of what exists,” in contrast to the merely conventional character of

⁵⁶ Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* 248–253.

⁵⁷ Saffrey-Segonds, *Porphyre* 72.

⁵⁸ On the Greek philosophical debate as to whether language is natural or conventional see Struck, in *Magic and Ritual* 391–392.

⁵⁹ *Myst.* 7.5 [190.26–191.7]; transl. Clarke et al. 299, with some modifications.

Greek names.⁶⁰ In translating the Egyptian names into the more prolix Greek idiom one loses not only their nuance and precision, but their ritual power:

Moreover, even if one could translate them, they would not retain the same power (δύναμιν). For the barbarian names possess weightiness and great precision, participating in less ambiguity, variability, and multiplicity of expression.⁶¹

Again, the grandiloquence of Greek is contrasted unfavourably with the directness of Egyptian; and echoing our Hermetic author, Iamblichus urges that the traditional invocations should be preserved in their original tongue, lest they be drained of sacrality and efficacy:

And it is necessary that the prayers of the ancients, like sacred places of sanctuary, are preserved ever the same and in the same manner, with no diminishment or embellishment from alien sources. For this is the reason that all these things in place at the present time have become ineffectual (ἔξιτηλα), both the names and the prayers, because they are endlessly altered according to the inventiveness and illegality of the Hellenes.⁶²

Here we encounter an intriguing lexical parallel with the exhortation of Asclepius to king Ammon in *Corp.Herm.* 16. In both texts, the rich adjective ἔξιτηλος (which I render as “ineffectual”) captures the depotentializing of the Egyptian language through Greek translation. In common usage, this adjective describes what *fades* through the long passage of time. Xenophon and Pausanias use the word to describe the fading of colours.⁶³ Pollux includes the word amongst a cluster of comparable terms de-

⁶⁰ On the agreement of Iamblichus with the understanding of the Egyptian language in *Corp.Herm.* 16 see J. Assmann, “La théorie de la ‘parole divine’ (*mdw ntr*) chez Jamblique et dans les sources égyptiennes,” appendix to *Images et rites de la mort dans l’Égypte ancienne. L’apport des liturgies funéraires* (Paris 2000) 107–127, at 108–112.

⁶¹ *Myst.* 7.5 [191.13–18], transl. Clarke et al. 299, slightly modified.

⁶² *Myst.* 7.5 [192.15–22], transl. Clarke et al. 301, slightly modified.

⁶³ Xen. *Oec.* 10.3, Paus. 10.38.9–10.

scriptive of ancient inscriptions on stelae (*Onom.* 5.149–150): the adjective ἐξίτηλα is grouped together with (inter alia) ἀμυδρά and ἀμαυρά (both meaning dim or faint), δύσγνωστα (hard to discern) and ἄγνωστα (unintelligible). In the most literal sense, then, ἐξίτηλος describes what is physically fading in colour or outline. By extension, it also captures what is fading in memory, as in the well-known and oft-quoted opening line of the proem of Herodotus (1.1): “This is the presentation of the history of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, so that the accomplishments of men should not be forgotten in time (τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται).” Both of these complementary meanings of ἐξίτηλος are relevant to the shared concern of our sources that the hieratic tradition of Egypt is fading because of the encroachment of Greek language and culture. They fear (quite understandably) that the hieroglyphic script is falling into obsolescence—fading from the memory of the priesthood, most of whom by the close of the fourth century could no longer decipher the inscriptions on the ancient temples and stelae.

But the term has still more subtle nuances. It can also convey the idea of weakening or dilution. For instance, Athenaeus, citing Phylarchus, refers to the counteracting effect of the scent of quinces (“Cydonian apples”) on the powers (δυνάμεις) of certain poisons. According to one anecdote, a Pharian poison became weak (ἐξίτηλον γενέσθαι) and lost its specific power (ἴδιαν δύναμιν) when it was stored in a vessel redolent of quinces.⁶⁴ Plato uses the term similarly. In the *Critias*, he speaks of the weakening of the divine spark in the souls of the Atlanteans through its admixture with the mortal body and its desires: “the divine portion within them began to fade (ἐξίτηλος ἐγίγνετο) as a result of constantly being diluted by large measures of mortality, and their mortal nature began to predominate.”⁶⁵ In the *Republic*, the degrading effect of an unjust city on the soul of a

⁶⁴ *Deipn.* 81E–F (*FGrHist* 81 F 10).

⁶⁵ *Crit.* 121A8–B1; following the translation in R. Waterfield, *Plato: Timaeus and Critias* (Oxford 2008) 121.

philosopher is likened to the assimilation of a seed that is sown in alien soil: “just as a foreign seed sown in unfamiliar soil usually withers (becomes ἐξίτηλον) and is assimilated into the local flora, so also this (philosophical) type does not retain its own power (τὴν αὐτοῦ δύναμιν) but degenerates into a foreign way of life.”⁶⁶ The recurrent pattern in these examples is the notion of a weakening of power through dilution, admixture, or assimilation.⁶⁷ This extended metaphorical nuance of ἐξίτηλος speaks directly to the more specific concerns of Iamblichus and ‘Asclepius’ about the contamination of Egyptian ritual speech. They fear that the energetic idiom and power of the Egyptian names will be enervated through the processes of translation and cultural assimilation: “Moreover, even if one could translate them, they would not retain the same power (δύναμιν).”⁶⁸

This lexical parallel is precise enough to suggest textual influence: we have reasonable, although certainly not conclusive, grounds to suppose that Iamblichus was familiar with the exhortation of Asclepius to king Ammon in *Corp.Herm.* 16. While the term ἐξίτηλος is not especially rare, our sources use it in precisely the same—rather idiosyncratic—context: a discussion of the ritual power of Egyptian names. And the use of the term conveys the same nuance: Egyptian ritual names become inefficacious when they are translated into the foreign Greek language. They are drained of their inherent power, just as a medicine or poison might lose its specific power (ἴδιαν δύναμιν) through admixture with a counteracting substance, or a seed through its assimilation to a foreign ecosystem. The process of translation disrupts the iconicity of the hieroglyphs and their

⁶⁶ *Resp.* 497B3–7, my translation.

⁶⁷ A final illustrative example: Dioscorides (*Materia medica* 5.6) cautions that second-rate wine, made from the husks of fermented grapes, quickly loses potency (ταχέως γὰρ ἐξίτηλος γίνεταί). Here again the term suggests weakening through dilution. See also *praef.* 6, where Dioscorides notes that proper harvesting of medicines impacts whether they are effective (ἐνεργῆ) or ineffectual (ἐξίτηλα).

⁶⁸ *Myst.* 7.5 [191.13–15].

capacity to tap into the deep structure of reality. Language slips into a merely representational mode, deepening the alienation of the soul, which longs to be reintegrated with its divine source.

In the eyes of Porphyry, what Iamblichus called theurgy was just a loftier name for ‘magic’—the barbarous names of theurgists are the very same devices by which lowly magicians attempt to bind the gods to their will.⁶⁹ Magic, as Porphyry understands it, is essentially coercive and it is premised on bad theology. Like many Greco-Roman elites, he perceives it as a foreign superstition, fundamentally at odds with the sober ideals of the universal Hellenic culture. In this way, as Struck notes, the Hellenic “culture of contemplation” is set against the barbarous culture of ritual action, or, in Porphyry’s polemical terms, *γοητεία*.⁷⁰

Deploying his own cultural stereotypes, Iamblichus represents Porphyry’s disdain for the hieratic traditions of the *barbaroi* as typical Hellenic hubris. To suggest that divine transcendence precludes the efficacious activity of the gods in sacred names and icons is to deprive the cosmos and the embodied soul of divine presence—effectively turning the universe into a desacralized wasteland:

But, above all, this doctrine constitutes the ruination of sacred ritual and theurgical communion of gods with men, by banishing the presence (*παρουσία*) of the higher classes of beings outside the confines of the earth. For it amounts to nothing else but saying that the divine is set apart from the earthly realm, and that it does not mingle with humanity, and that this realm is bereft (*ἔρημος*) of divinity.⁷¹

These words echo the dire prophecy of Hermes in the *Perfect Discourse*, a passage that survives in its Latin translation, in

⁶⁹ On the rhetorical dimensions of ‘magic’, as understood by Porphyry, see Struck, in *Magic and Ritual* 387–392.

⁷⁰ On the impasse between the cultures of contemplation and action see Struck, in *Magic and Ritual* 389–393.

⁷¹ *Myst.* 1.8 [21.10–16], transl. Clarke et al. 35, but following Saffrey-Segonds in rendering “Ὀλως δὲ” as “above all” (*surtout*), rather than “generally” (see *Jamblique* 243 n.2).

Asclepius 24–26, and in a Coptic fragment (NHC VI, 8). Hermes predicts a time when foreigners will occupy Egypt, enacting laws that proscribe the traditional cults: probably an allusion to the Roman prohibition of Egyptian oracular processions and related divinatory practices under the prefect Aemilius Saturninus in 199 CE.⁷² Through this neglect of divine cult, Hermes warns, Egypt will be deserted by the gods: “All of their holy veneration (*sancta veneratio*) will prove vain and will come to nothing. Returning from earth to heaven, divinity will abandon Egypt; the land that was the seat of religion will be widowed by the gods and deprived of their presence (*vidvata numinum praesentia destituetur*).”⁷³ In both sources, the efficacy of the time-honoured cults depends upon the active and benevolent presence of the gods in their sacred icons and holy sites; and, in turn, it is the devoted worship of the gods that sustains that presence,⁷⁴ without which the earth would be reduced to a wasteland.

Conclusion

Just as Iamblichus concealed his identity under the guise of Abamon, the anonymous authors of the *Hermetica* attributed their writings to Hermes or his student Asclepius. Following the lead of Garth Fowden, Christian Bull has made a compelling case for the authenticity of the Egyptian *mis-en-scène* of the Hermetic dialogues, suggesting that the authors may well have been Hellenized Egyptian priests.⁷⁵ Iamblichus too understood himself as a priest—at least in spirit. A Syrian by birth, *Yamliku* (literally, “may he rule”) was descended from the hereditary

⁷² *P.Coll.Youtie* 30 (TM 18193). On the date and background of the Hermetic apocalypse see C. H. Bull, “Prophesying the Demise of Egyptian Religion in Late Antiquity,” *Numen* 68 (2021) 180–203, at 186–187.

⁷³ *Asclepius* 24 [II 327.3–7].

⁷⁴ *παρουσία*: *Myst.* 1.8 [21.12]; *praesentia*: *Asclepius* 24 [II 327.7].

⁷⁵ Bull, *Tradition of Hermes* 12. Frankfurter also argues for a priestly provenance (*Religion in Roman Egypt* 240). Fowden, as Bull observes (11), seems undecided as to the priestly status of the Hermetic authors (see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* 166–168).

priest-kings of Emesa.⁷⁶ His was a royal and priestly name, shared by two Emesene priest-kings (Iamblichus I, d. 31 BCE; Iamblichus II, d. ca. 17 CE).⁷⁷ He could thus regard himself as a priest by birthright, even if not in fact. Whereas Porphyry translated his Phoenician name, Malchos, into Greek, Iamblichus retained his Syrian name, merely rendering it in Greek characters.⁷⁸ Again, whereas Porphyry settled to teach in Rome, Iamblichus formed a spiritual commune in the outskirts of Apamea, on the fringes of the Syrian desert. Porphyry's indifference to ethnicity is consistent with his commitments to the universal culture of Hellenism—the culture of empire.⁷⁹ And this cultural universalism maps directly onto his understanding of metaphysics: his commitment to the Plotinian doctrine of the undescended intellect, which remains always in union with its transcendent source, beyond all spatio-temporal distinctions and cultural entanglements. By contrast, Iamblichus remained convinced that salvation was only possible through the preservation of the distinctive hieratic traditions of antiquity. He embraced his Syrian heritage and his priestly name, perhaps seeking through theurgy to recover his birthright as a technician of the sacred, a protector of the cultic traditions that bind humanity to the gods. Of course, Iamblichus thinks and speaks in Greek, and like the priestly disciples of Hermes, he inhabits a space of cul-

⁷⁶ On his priestly name and Syrian background see P. Athanassiadi, "The Oecumenism of Iamblichus: Latent Knowledge and its Awakening," *JRS* 85 (1995) 244–250, at 245; and Clarke et al., *On the Mysteries* xix–xx.

⁷⁷ On the Emesene dynasty and Iamblichus I and II see R. D. Sullivan, "The Dynasty of Emesa," *ANRW* II.8 (1977) 198–219; W. Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (London 2000) 33–47. Ball notes (34) that a shaikh of the Emesenes bore the name Iamblichus already in the second century BCE before the founding of the dynasty.

⁷⁸ See Struck, in *Magic and Ritual* 397–398. On the name of Porphyry and his Phoenician background see also Millar, in *Philosophia Togata* II 248–249.

⁷⁹ Struck, in *Magic and Ritual* 396, contrasts the universalizing tendencies of Porphyry with Iamblichus' "strong interest in the 'local' over and above the 'imperial' or the 'international'." On the homogenizing universalism of Porphyry see also Johnson, *Religion and Identity* 123.

tural liminality, an inbetweenness, marked by nostalgia for a fading tradition, a nostalgia succinctly encapsulated in the rich—and, ironically, Greek—term ἐξίτηλος.⁸⁰

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University of King's College
Halifax, Nova Scotia
kyle.fraser@ukings.ca

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