

ERIKA GIELEN

The Synopsis of Joseph Racendytes: like a two-faced Egyptian Hermes?

Abstract: In the introduction of his *Synopsis Variarum Disciplinarum*, the late-Byzantine monk and scholar Joseph Racendytes compares his work with a two-faced statue of the god Hermes, “as represented by the Egyptians” with a young and old face. The present article tries to find out the origin of this rather obscure and unexpected statement, by taking into account literary, archaeological and socio-cultural evidence.

In the late 13th, early 14th century, the cultural – and political – scene in Constantinople was dominated by illustrious figures like Nicephorus Choumnus, Theodorus Metochites and Nicephorus Gregoras. Among them was also the monk and philosopher Joseph Racendytes (ca. 1260–1330 AD), who devoted the last years of his life to writing a vast “*Synopsis Variarum Disciplinarum*”, discussing all the topics dealt with in higher education, from rhetoric and logic to ethics and theology.¹

In the introduction, which contains some autobiographical information on the author and in which the actual purpose of the *Synopsis* is set out, Joseph states the following about his work:

Μιμήσεται δ’ αὐτή (i.e. βίβλος) τὴν παρ’ Αἰγυπτίοις τοῦ Ἑρμοῦ διπρόσωπον εἰκόνα, νεανικὰ μὲν καὶ γενναῖα ἀπανταχοῦ κεκτημένη τὰ θεωρήματα, πρεσβύτατα δέ γε καὶ χρόνω καὶ τιμῇ καὶ ἔξει φέρουσα τὰ νοήματα.²

Joseph’s *Synopsis* does indeed contain ideas and quotations taken from early sources (πρεσβύτατα), like Cyril of Alexandria (4th–5th c. AD) and Maximus the Confessor (6th–7th c. AD), as well as from more recent authors (νεανικά), like Nicephorus Blemmydes (13th c. AD) and George Pachymeres (13th–14th c. AD), the latter of whom died even only ca. twenty years before Joseph.³ Yet, where did our author get the comparison with an *Egyptian two-faced Hermes* from, with *one face being young and the other old*?

In Greek mythology, the god Hermes is connected to Egypt as being the liberator of Io, the Argive princess who was loved by Zeus, but, due to Hera’s jealousy, had to flee to Egypt. Moreover, the Greeks who settled in Egypt equated the local, Egyptian god Thoth with ‘their’ Hermes, probably especially because of their similar function as divine mediator and their relation with the deceased: whereas Hermes was also venerated as ψυχαγωγός, leading the souls of the dead to the under world,

¹ On Joseph the Philosopher, see especially M. TREU, *Der Philosoph Joseph*. *BZ* 8 (1899) 1–64; *PLP* 9078. For more information on the peculiar structure and aim of Joseph’s *Synopsis*, see F. TINNEFELD, *Zu Begriff und Konzepten des Enzyklopädismus in Byzanz*, in: *Artes im Mittelalter*, hrsg. von U. Schaefer. Berlin 1999, 143–150 (especially 148–150); E. GIELEN, *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam. Joseph Rhakendytès’ Synopsis of Byzantine Learning*, in: *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, eds. J. König – G. Woolf. Cambridge 2013, 259–276.

² TREU, *Philosoph* 37, l. 32–38, l. 3.

³ For the sources of several parts of Joseph’s *Synopsis*, see G. VITELLI, *Indice de’ codici greci Riccardiani, Magliabechiani e Marucelliani*. *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 2 (1894) 490–493; N. TERZAGHI, *Sulla composizione dell’Enciclopedia del filosofo Giuseppe*. *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 10 (1902) 121–132 (reprinted in N. TERZAGHI, *Studia graeca et latina [1902–1956]* I. Torino 1963, 588–599); R. CRISCUOLO, *Note sull’Enciclopedia del filosofo Giuseppe*. *Byz* 44 (1974) 255–281; E. GIELEN, *A New Source of the Synopsis of Joseph Rhakendytès*. *REB* 69 (2011) 265–270.

Thoth was said to assist the souls at the ‘judgement of the dead’.⁴ Because of this equation, the most important place where Thoth was worshipped, Khemenu or Khmun in Middle Egypt, was renamed Hermopolis Magna.⁵

One of the epithets of Thoth was the twice-great⁶ – which, perhaps, might explain the two faces of the Egyptian Hermes we read about in Joseph? However, Hermes, the Greek counterpart of Thoth, does not seem to have adopted this honorary title, but in the Graeco-Roman period, Hermes-Thoth was only addressed as Hermes Trismegistus, ‘trice greatest’.⁷ Moreover, there seems to be no evidence, as far as we know, of Thoth being represented with two faces.⁸ His most common iconographic forms were, on the other hand, a squatting *κυνοκέφαλος* baboon and an anthropomorphic body with an Ibis-head on top.

There are, however, Greek and Roman examples of two-faced herms. In most cases, it does not concern a sculpture with at both sides a face of Hermes, but it is often a conjunction of Hermes with another deity, like Apollo, Dionysus or Hercules.⁹ According to Henning Wrede¹⁰, especially in Roman imperial times, a special predilection was shown for combinations emphasizing the contrast between young and old. In these cases, the young Hermes was distinguished from the older (bearded) god by his boyish, beardless chin – which fits in well with the old and young Hermes’ face in Joseph. There is, however, no evidence that such two-faced pillars were most popular especially in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.

⁴ According to Derchain-Urtel, another aspect which might have facilitated the identification of Thoth with Hermes, was their *habileté* and penchant for tricks and cunning schemes. See M.-T. DERCHAIN-URTEL, *Thot à travers ses épithètes dans les scènes d’offrandes des temples d’époque gréco-romaine (Rites égyptiens 3)*. Bruxelles 1981, 136–146. For Thoth as one stealing the offerings of another god (resembling the cattle raid by Hermes), see also S. SCHOTT, *Thot, le dieu qui vole des offrandes et qui trouble le cours du temps*, in: *Comptes-rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*. Paris 1970, 547–556.

⁵ On Thoth, see A. RUSCH, Thoth. *RE VI A1*, 351–388; P. BOYLAN, Thoth, the Hermes of Egypt. A Study of Some Aspects of Theological Thought in Ancient Egypt. Chicago 1922 [reprint 1979]; C.J. BLEEKER, Hathor and Thot. Leiden 1973, 106–197; G. HART, A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses. London 1986, 214–218; D. KURTH, Thot, in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 6. Wiesbaden 1986, 497–523; Dhwtj, in: *Lexikon der ägyptische Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, ed. C. Leitz VII (*Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 116). Leuven 2002, 639–644. On Hermes, see, e.g., A. J. VAN WINDEKENS, Réflexions sur la nature et l’origine du dieu Hermès. *Rheinisches Museum* 104 (1961) 289–301; H. HERTER, Hermes. Ursprung und Wesen eines griechischen Gottes. *Rheinisches Museum* 119 (1976) 193–241.

⁶ See, e.g., BOYLAN, Thoth 182. Thoth was even called five-times great; see R. K. RITNER, Hermes Pentamegistos. *Göttinger Miszellen* 49 (1981) 73–75.

⁷ On Hermes Trismegistus, see, e.g., W. KROLL, Hermes Trismegistus. *RE VIII*, 792–823; G. FOWDEN, The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind. Princeton, N.J. 1993; The Way of Hermes. New Translation of the Corpus Hermeticum and The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius, transl. C. Salaman – J.-P. Mahé *et alii*. London 2000; F. EBELING, Das Geheimnis des Hermes Trismegistos. Geschichte des Hermetismus von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit. München 2005. On the Egyptian origin of Hermes’ epithet *τρισμαγιστος*, see J. QUAEGBEUR, Thot-Hermès, le dieu le plus grand! In: *Hommages à François Dumas*, 2. Montpellier 1986, 525–544, where we also find an overview of previous studies on this Egyptian origin.

⁸ I came across one Egyptian example of a two-faced human figure, a mummy actually, of which both faces are bearded and have a lock of hair that symbolizes youth. Since the figure also wears a crescent moon on his head, E.A.W. Budge was of the opinion that it is a special representation of Thoth, also being moon-god. Since others remain silent about this kind of representation in relation to Thoth and I myself am not specialized in Egyptology, I am unable to pronounce upon this matter, although, of course, it would go very well with Joseph’s statement about the Egyptian Hermes. See J.-F. CHAMPOLLION, *Pan-théon égyptien*. Collection des personages mythologiques de l’Ancienne Égypte. Paris 1823 [reprint 1992], tav. H 14; E.A.W. BUDGE, *The Gods of the Egyptians or Studies in Egyptian Mythology*, I. London 1904, 411–412; R.V. LANZONE, *Dizionario di mitologia egizia*, I. Torino 1881–1884 (reprint Amsterdam 1974), 89 and tav. XXXVI 3.

⁹ See P. PARIS, *Hermæ, Hermulæ*, in: *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, III/1. Paris 1900 (reprint Graz 1963), 130–134; G. SIEBERT, *Hermes*, in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, V/1. Zürich – München 1990, 285–387; E. SIMON – G. BAUCHHENS, *Mercurius*, in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, VI/1. Zürich–München 1992, 500–554; M. HARARI, *Mercurius*, in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Suppl. 1. Düsseldorf 2009, 277–281.

¹⁰ H. WREDE, *Die antike Herme (Trierer Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 1)*. Mainz 1985 (see especially 19–20, 52–54).

As for the literary sources, whereas several late-antique and medieval encyclopedias, like Hesychius' Lexicon, the Etymologicum Magnum and the Suda¹¹, do contain a lemma entitled Ἑρμῆς τρικέφαλος, there is no trace of double-faced Hermes. Or, the Suda explains Θωύθ (or Θώθ) with ὁ Ἑρμῆς, but without any additional mention of two faces.¹²

There actually are some references in other sorts of ancient literature to a διπρόσωπος Ἑρμῆς, but they are short and scare. Leonidas of Tarentum (*AP* 9, 316) (3rd c. AD), e.g., gives the following description of a two-faced herm along the road, of which, apparently, the two different, yet connected faces are always quarrelling:

ἽΩ τάνδε στείχοντες ἀταρπιτόν, αἶτε ποτ' ἀγροῦς
δαμόθεν αἶτ' ἀπ' ἀγρῶν νεῖσθε ποτ' ἀκρόπολιν,
ἄμμες ὄρων φύλακες δισσοὶ θεοί, ὧν ὁ μὲν Ἑρμῆς,
οἶον ὀρῆς μ', οὗτος δ' ἄτερος Ἡρακλέης·
ἄμφω μὲν θνατοῖς εὐάκοοι, ἀλλὰ ποθ' οὗτος,
αἶτ' ὠμάς παραθῆς ἀχράδας, ἐγκέκαφεν·
ναὶ μὰν ὡσαύτως τοὺς βότρυας, αἶτε πέλονται
ῶριμοι αἶτε χύδαν ὄμφακες, εὐτρέπικεν.
μισέω τὰν μετοχὰν οὐδ' ἥδομαι· ἀλλ' ὁ φέρων τι,
ἀμφίς, μὴ κοινᾷ τοῖς δυσι παρτιθέτω
καὶ λεγέτω· Τὴν τοῦθ', Ἡράκλεες, ἄλλοτε Τοῦτο
Ἑρμῆ καὶ λύοι τὰν ἔριν ἀμφοτέρων.

Or, in Lucianus' Juppiter Tragoedus¹³, a herm is described, of which both faces are – as opposed to those of Joseph's Hermes – completely identical, thus leaving the passers-by totally confused:

ἄρ' ἐκείνου (*i.e.* χρησμός) ὄν τῷ Λυδῷ ὁ Πύθιος ἔχρησεν, ὃς ἀκριβῶς ἀμφοῖς ἦν καὶ διπρόσωπος,
οἰοί εἰσι τῶν Ἑρμῶν ἔνιοι, διττοὶ καὶ ἀμφοτέρωθεν ὅμοιοι πρὸς ὀπότερον ἂν αὐτῶν μέρος
ἐπιστραφῆς;

The image of a two-faced Hermes (to clarify a statement) was, long before Joseph, adopted by other Christian writers. In one of his poems, Gregory of Nazianzus tries to persuade a friend named Nemesius to be converted to the Christian faith.¹⁴ He explains that, just like statues of Hermes have two faces, the Holy Scriptures have a double meaning, at two different levels:

¹¹ Hesychius, Lexicon, s.v. Ἑρμῆς τρικέφαλος (II 196 LATTE): Ἀριστοφάνης ἐν Τριφάλῃ. Τοῦτο ἔφη παίζων κωμικῶς, παρόσον τετρακέφαλος Ἑρμῆς ἐν τῇ τριόδῳ τῇ ἐν Κεραμεικῷ ἴδρυτο. Etymologicum Magnum, s.v. τρικέφαλος (766 GAISFORD): Ὁ Ἑρμῆς λέγεται, ὡσπερ διδάσκων τὰς ὁδοὺς καὶ ἔχων ὑπογραφὴν, ποῖ μὲν αὐτὴ φέρει ἢ ὁδός, ποῖ δὲ αὐτὴ ἴσως δὲ πρὸς ἐκάστην ὁδὸν κεφαλὴν εἶχεν. Ἔστι δὲ ὁ ἀναθεὶς τὸν τρικέφαλον Ἑρμῆν Προκλείδης; Suda, s.v. τρικέφαλος (IV 590 ADLER): ὁ Ἑρμῆς, ὡσπερ διδάσκων τὰς ὁδοὺς καὶ ἔχων ὑπογραφὴν, ποῖ μὲν αὐτὴ φέρει ἢ ὁδός, ποῖ δὲ ἐκείνη ἴσως δὲ πρὸς ἐκάστην ὁδὸν κεφαλὴν εἶχεν. Ἔστι δὲ ὁ ἀναθεὶς τὸν τρικέφαλον Ἑρμῆν, ὡς Φιλόχορος φησι, Προκλείδης Ἰπάρχου ἐραστής. Ἰσαῖος ἐν τῷ περὶ Εὐκλείδου· μικρὸν δ' ἄνω τοῦ Τρικεφάλου, παρὰ τὴν Ἑστίαν ὁδόν. Τὸ πλήρες ἐστὶ τοῦ τρικεφάλου Ἑρμοῦ.

¹² Suda, s.v. Θωύθ (II 725 ADLER).

¹³ Lucianus, Juppiter Tragoedus 43, 6–9.

¹⁴ Gregorius Nazianzenus, Carmina II 2,7. PG 37, coll. 1551–1577, l. 4. See also K. DEMOEN, Pagan and Biblical Exempla in Gregory Nazianzen. A Study in Rhetoric and Hermeneutics (*Corpus Christianorum. Lingua Patrum* 2). Turnhout 1996, 220–221.

[...] σεμνότερος, πιτυτοῖσιν ὀρώμενος, ἀμφιπρόσωπος,
 Ἑρμᾶς δίγλυφος, οἷα πρόσω τὸ μὲν, ἄλλο δ' ὄπισθεν,
 ἄθρει κἀνθάδε μοι λόγον ἄτροπον, ὥσπερ οἷω·
 ἔστι καὶ ἡμετέροισι διπλοῦς λόγος, ἔνδοθι σεπτοῦ
 πνεύματος, ὃς δ' ἄρ' ὑπερθε, χαράγματος ἡγαθέοιο
 ἄμφω, ὁ μὲν παύροισιν, ὁ δὲ πλεόνεσσι θεητός.

Yet, in none of these cases the two-faced Hermes is associated with Thoth or Egypt, and with, explicitly, a young and old face. Is this, then, some awkward invention of Joseph, to show off his extensive knowledge? Certainly not.

I found just one passage containing the very same information as in Joseph's introduction, i.e. in which – as opposed to the other fragments on a double-faced Hermes – all the different elements are present: Hermes, Egypt, two-faced, young and old: in his fourth μελέτη, entitled Στρατηγὸς πυρπολήσας τὰς ναῦς ὡς ἔξω χρείας δοξάσας, καὶ διὰ ταῦτα νικήσας, κρίνεται δημοσίων ἀδικημάτων. Μελετῶμεν τὸν φεύγοντα, George Pachymeres lets a general, brought to trial, conduct his own defence, describing his army's touchy situation before battle:

Τί τὸ ἐντεῦθεν; παραλαμβάνω τοὺς στρατιώτας ἐγώ, ταῦτὸν δ' εἰπεῖν καὶ τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράγματα. Ἐξέρχομαι, παρατάττομαι. Βλέπω τοὺς πολεμίους διχόθεν βάλλοντας, κὰν ἐπεχείρουν τῷ ναυμαχεῖν, γῆθεν δηοῦντας τὰ κύκλω, κὰν ἐπὶ γῆς ἤθελον μένειν καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἔξω πεζομαχεῖν, οὐδὲν ὃ μὴ ἀπολλύντας τῶν κατὰ θάλατταν. Διπρόσωπον ἂν τις εἶπε τὴν μάχην ἐκείνην, καὶ διπρὸσώπων ἀνδρῶν, ὁποῖον τὸν Ἑρμῆν Αἰγύπτιοι πλάττουσι, χρήζουσιν, πλὴν ὅσον οὐ διπλὴν ἐχόντων ἰδέαν γέροντος ἅμα καὶ νέου, ἀλλ' ἀμφοῖν γερόντων καὶ νέων τόσων. Ἐδει γὰρ οὐ θατέρᾳ τῇ μάχῃ, τῇ μὲν ἀνδρείας, τῇ δὲ συνέσεως, ἀλλ' ἀμφοτέραις ἀμφοῖν. Τότε γοῦν βουλῆς ἔδει θεόθεν ἡμῖν, πῶς ἂν διάθωμαι τὰ κατὰ τὸν διπλοῦν ἐκεῖνον πόλεμον.¹⁵

Did Joseph take his information from Pachymeres? Of course, one cannot know for sure, yet it is very reasonable. Pachymeres was still alive, when Joseph, looking to continue and perfect his higher studies, arrived in Constantinople. Undoubtedly, Pachymeres' work was still circulating and may have attracted the attention of Joseph – not in the least because Joseph seems to have used Pachymeres' Compendium for his own Synopsis. Moreover, the image of the two-faced Egyptian Hermes is found in one of Pachymeres' so-called meletai. These were some sort of rhetorical exercises, that were already amply used for education in the classical and Hellenistic world. Especially in imitation of the famous orators of the second sophistic, Byzantine *literati* adapted this genre to their own educational needs.¹⁶ Pachymeres was the most prolific Byzantine “meletai-writer”, and it is very plausible that his texts were read and reread as rhetorical examples, also by Joseph.

As expounded by Gaul, the *παιδευμένοι* of the early Palaeologan period formed an elite sub-formation, characterized by a shared world view, cultural identity and *habitus*.¹⁷ They used a specific “pseudo-attische Soziolekt”, inspired by the second sophistic, in order to clearly distinguish themselves from the uneducated masses and allegedly barbarian foreigners.¹⁸ They were keen for dis-

¹⁵ Georgius Pachymeres, *Declamationes* 4, I (ed. J. FR. BOISSONADE, G. Pachymeris *Declamationes XIII quarum XII ineditae. Hieroclis et Philagii grammaticorum Φιλόγελως longe maximam partem ineditus*. Paris 1848 [reprint Amsterdam 1966], 145–156).

¹⁶ See N. GAUL, *Thomas Magistros und die spätbyzantinische Sophistik. Studien zum Humanismus urbaner Eliten in der frühen Palaiologenzeit (Mainzer Veröffentlichungen zur Byzantinistik 10)*. Wiesbaden 2011, 129–130, 170–172.

¹⁷ GAUL, *Thomas Magistros* 276: “Paideia (σοφία, λόγος) erscheint hier als Inbegriff eines miteinander geteilten Weltbildes, einer gemeinsamen Identität, eines gemeinsamen Habitus“.

¹⁸ GAUL, *Thomas Magistros, passim*, but especially 125–128.

playing their high level of παιδεία, for example by presenting and reading aloud their newest literary, rhetorical and scientific compositions in so-called θέατρα, regular gatherings of influential scholars and politicians.¹⁹ It was here that new ideas, fancy imagery etc. were shared and discussed. Taking these socio-cultural particularities into account, if Pachymeres' meletè was not Joseph's direct or primary source, the fact that Pachymeres as well as Joseph, both pervaded by this ideal of exclusive παιδεία, used the same antiquarian image in two completely different kinds of texts, is at least an indication that such opinion on the Egyptian Hermes – whether truthful or not – was circulating in, or may have been even common knowledge among those highest cultural 'gatherings' in 14th-century Constantinople. Anyway, Joseph's immediate readers would have probably understood his intriguing imagery right away.

¹⁹ On θέατρα, see I. P. MEDVEDEV, The So Called θέατρα as a Form of Communication of the Byzantine Intellectuals in the 14th and 15th Centuries, in: *E epikoinonia sto Byzantio*, ed. N. G. Moschonas. Athens 1993, 227–235 (he disregards the political meaning of θέατρα); P. MARCINIAK, Byzantine Theatron. A Place of Performance, in: *Rhetorische Kultur in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, ed. M. Grünbart (*Millennium-Studien zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr.* 13). Berlin–New York 2007, 277–285; I. TOTH, Rhetorical Theatron in Late Byzantium: the Example of Palaiologan Imperial Orations, in: *Rhetorische Kultur* 429–448; GAUL, Thomas Magistros 17–53. Matschke and Tinnefeld also point at the important role the exchange of manuscripts and epistolography played in the interchange of ideas and in the creation and maintenance of this intellectual elite group, see K.-P. MATSCHKE – F. TINNEFELD, *Die Gesellschaft im späten Byzanz. Gruppen, Strukturen und Lebensformen*. Köln–Weimar–Wien 2001, 247–251.

