



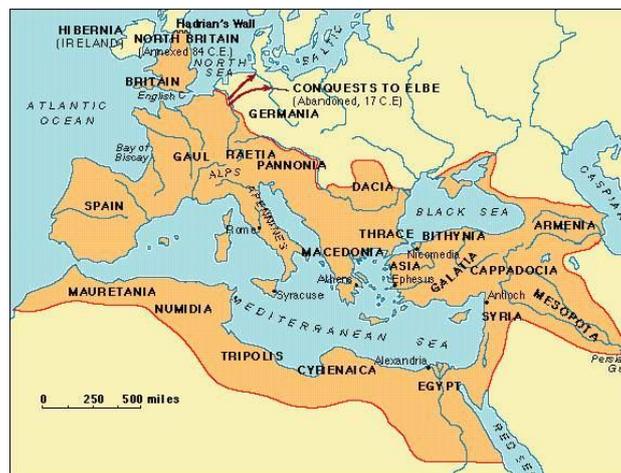
## 16. The Neoplatonics

In 337 B.C. Philip the II, King of Macedonia, seized the whole Greece, taking it away from the Persian hegemony. Macedonia was a small kingdom located north of Greece, considered by the Hellenes as a barbarian country. The great military and administrative ability of its ruling dynasty led Macedonia to become a colossal Empire. Alexander the Great<sup>1</sup>, son of Philip the II, defeated the Persians and the Egyptians arriving to conquer all the territories from Greece, to the Nile and the Indus rivers. When Alexander died he was only thirty-three years old and his Empire immediately fell apart.



**Alexander the Great**

Alexander's Generals, having proclaimed themselves Kings, divided the Empire in several realms. Despite its ephemeral duration, Alexander's Empire had great cultural significance. Indeed, the union of so many different peoples, traditions and religions broke the limits of the particularistic and exclusivist mentality of the Greeks, giving rise to a more universal civilization known as "Hellenism". The direct heir of Hellenistic civilization was the Roman Empire that in three centuries conquered almost all the kingdoms in which the Alexander's Empire had been divided. It is precisely under the Roman universalistic domain that in Alexandria of Egypt, city founded by Alexander, the Pythagorean-Platonic school called "Neoplatonism" was established. Rome, the imperial capital, became the second centre of the Neoplatonic Mysteries.



**The Roman Empire main cities**

In the Neoplatonic attitude there were two innovations: the first was that these philosophers brought to light the knowledge that the previous Pythagoreans had jealously hidden from the profane people, making less rigorous the

<sup>1</sup> Alexander had been initiated by Aristotle.



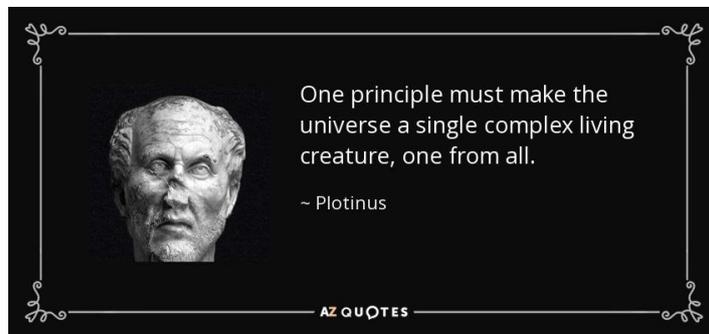


boundary between esoterism and exoterism. The second one was that they incorporated into Pythagorean-Platonic Mysteric tradition many elements from other initiations, such as the Egyptian, the Chaldean<sup>2</sup>, and the Jewish ones.



### Alexandria of Egypt

The founder of Neoplatonism was Plotinus (204-270 A.D.). He descended from an ancient Egyptian priestly caste family and, besides being initiated into the Isiac Mysteries<sup>3</sup>, he also got the initiation from the Pythagorean-Platonic Mysteries. He taught that man is like a shapeless stone block. Initiation leads to sculpt and remove all the superfluous parts until the hidden statue is displayed. It is a work of purification which finally releases its own individual nature from the wastes. This is just a first step of the initiatory path. In fact, the statue which one has cleansed is only a form.



### Plotinus

The One (τό ἓν, read *tò Hen*), the Divine Metaphysical Principle, is beyond the form, and in order to know that *tò Hen* is our real nature, one must overcome any limitation and dualism. Therefore, individuality must be completely eliminated. Doing so, all the appearance of separation are removed and then "there is nothing that distinguishes, there is no longer the duality, but only the One."<sup>4</sup> In everyday life man does not realize that in reality he is the "superior man" (sskr. *Puruṣa*) and he only identifies himself with the "secondary man" (sskr. *manuṣya*) who cares about the needs of the body, which feels and thinks according to sensory perceptions. The

<sup>2</sup> The Chaldeans were a priestly caste dating back to the ancient tradition of the Sumerians (4000 BC), population perhaps proceeding from India. There is the evidence of many contacts between Sumer and the Indo-Sarasvatī civilization. The Chaldeans remained the priestly caste even after the disappearance of Sumerian civilization, performing priestly functions also at the most recent Semitic Assyrian Babylonian civilizations. They were very famous for their vast and deep metaphysical and cosmological knowledge. Their great fame is at the origin of the name of the Celts, of the Culdees Irish Christians monks and of the land of Caledonia.

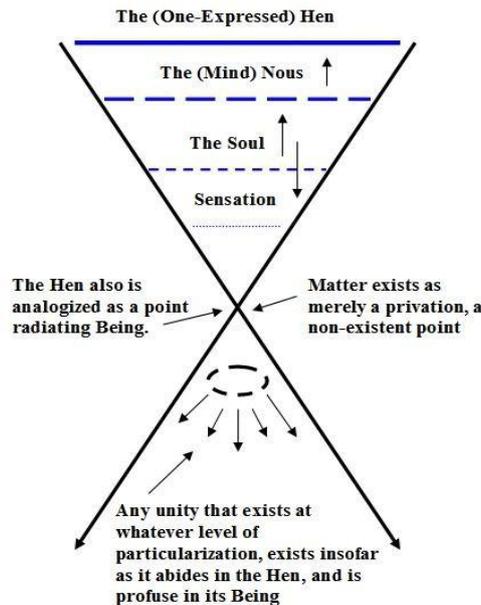
<sup>3</sup> Those Mysteries were initiation rites dedicated to the Egyptian Mother Goddess Isis. Of them we will be covered in a later chapter

<sup>4</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.7.34.





One is always present, but we are absent to ourselves because we turn our attention to elsewhere. One must acknowledge that all this existence that appears to be constantly in becoming, this All (Πᾶν, read *Pan*), is in reality the Unchangeable without multiplicity (ἄ-πόλλων, read *A-pollon*, the God Apollo's name; sskr. *a-bahutā*). To achieve this, we need to expand our consciousness and focus our attention only on the "superior man". The method (μέθοδος, read *mēthodos*, sskr. *prakriyā*) used by Plotinus consisted in abandoning the vision of external objects, turning the attention to the inner self in order to obtain the vision of the One, τὸ Ἦν. When he was young, Plotinus had tried to go to India to tap into the wisdom of the Brāhmaṇas, but a war in Persia stopped him. However, he certainly could meet some Brāhmaṇas of the small Indian communities located in Egypt, where he was born and in Italy, where he died.



**Diagram of Reality according to Plotinus**

Undoubtedly the founder of the school has been intellectually the highest among the Neoplatonics. Plotinus's successors, though all quite noteworthy, show less interest in metaphysics and more attention to the empirical world. Specially Porphyrius (233-305 A.D.), Iamblichus (250~330 A.D.) and Proclus (412-485 A.D.) claimed that the humanity of the Iron Age (i.e. *kali yuga*) was so decayed, that the Plotinus's method had become ineffective. They gave more importance to the ritual aspects of the method; as they considered the rituals of the previous Pythagorean tradition to be insufficient, they borrowed other rituals from the ancient Chaldean and Egyptian Mysteries. Particularly they were influenced by the Theurgy taught by the Greek-Chaldean philosopher Julian the Theurgist (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.).

Theurgy, whose meaning is "the action of the Gods", was an art designed to call down the real presence of a ritually evoked Deity. For example, when the master enjoined the adoration of a particular form of God (sskr. *iṣṭadevatā*) to the disciple, in a cavity inside the idol, a peculiar insect, a plant, a precious stone, and other symbols sacred to that God were hidden. Then the master ritually evoked the God's real presence in the statue (sskr. *prāṇapraṭiṣṭhā*). At the end, the idol was ready for the initiatory worship. The same Theurgy could be performed on the disciple himself so the disciple was possessed by a God and became able to produce oracles. This ritually obtained phenomenon was very similar to the spontaneous possession of Socrates by his "demon".

In the Pythagoreanism, philosophy was considered as a pre-initiatory or exoteric preparation to Sophia, the esoteric knowledge. Similarly, for the Neoplatonics, philosophy had to lead to Theurgy. The purpose of Theurgy was to obtain an intellect (νοῦς, read *nus*; sskr. *buddhi*) able to join the divine intellectual sphere (sskr. *adhidaivika jagat*) and, in this way, to know the things of that world, and harmonize the mundane actions with it. They maintained that this was their union with the One. Even if these Neoplatonics reached a lower level if compared to Plotinus, for us they had the merit of making manifest many esoteric teachings of Orpheus, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and especially of Plato, which were hitherto inaccessible.





They also commented several parts of the Homer and Hesiod's Poems, explaining in details the meaning of the symbols enclosed in the verses. In this way, those Poems revealed their deepest meanings, hidden beyond their mere literary appearance.



A Theurgist Purifying his hands before the ritual

However, the continued use of Theurgic rituals often led them to the quest of powers (sskr. *siddhi*) and the production of magic phenomena. However, from a doctrinal point of view, the assumption of symbols, rituals and beliefs from non-Greek traditions and religions fatally led them to a syncretistic tendency. This inclination produced a new way of thinking, independent from Neoplatonism, but often adopted by some Neoplatonics: the Gnosticism.

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