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Lucius Annaeus Cornutus' Ethnographic Investigations Into Mythology*

Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to show that the hermeneutical activity of Lucius Annaeus Cornutus is best characterized as "ethnographic" rather than merely "allegorical" or "etymological". Without denying the presence of both these dimensions in the philosopher's exegeses, the paper suggests that Cornutus' analyses aimed first and foremost to excavate the ancient world picture that the philosopher believed to underlie the theology transmitted by Homer and Hesiod. Thus, the philosopher regarded conventional mythology and traditional religion as sources of information about the primeval accounts of the cosmos: his analyses of various etymologies discovered not merely the origin of the word in question but also the origin of the ancient cosmological conceptions. Consequently, interpreting myths was for Cornutus tantamount to gaining profound insights into the pristine theology that was skillfully developed by the wise men of antiquity and poorly transmitted by the poets. Cornutus' hermeneutics built on the assumption that interpreting mythology provided the interpreter with a better understanding of not only the ancient world but also the present one.

Etymological analyses of the gods' names and epithets belong undoubtedly to one of the most interesting and, at the same time, controversial developments within Stoic philosophy. While the purpose of these investigations was to extract the ancient world view that according to the Stoics underlay the theology transmitted by the poets, such analyses formed an integral part of the Stoic physics. By viewing traditional mythology as a prefiguration of their own cosmological doctrines, the Stoics came to treat conventional myths as important sources of information on the primordial beliefs about the gods and the cosmos. Thus, examining a given etymology would provide the philosophers not only with information about the origin of the word in question (in this regard their analyses were frequently

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naïve and fantastic), but also with information about the genesis of the pristine world picture that was mirrored in the particular etymologies.

Whilst such ethnographic interests can already be found in some of the extant testimonies on the hermeneutical activity of the early Stoics,[1] the present paper will focus exclusively on the hermeneutics of Lucius Annaeus Cornutus. This Stoic philosopher, who lived in the first century of our era, wrote a very interesting work, whose title ΕΠΙΔΡΟΜΗ ΤΩΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΗΝ ΕΛΛΕΝΙΚΗΝ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑΝ ΠΑΡΑΔΕΔΟΜΕΝΩΝ is customarily translated into English as *Compendium of (the Traditions of) Greek Theology.*[2]

Cornutus' work provides us with a unique insight into the *ethnographic* nature of Stoic *etymologizing*. At the outset, however, it needs to be emphasized that characterizing Cornutus' etymological interpretations as "ethnographic" is a certain simplification.[3] It goes without saying that when interpreting ancient thinkers, one should refrain from imposing contemporary categories and concepts on their intellectual work. Although at first sight such "reconstructions" might seem quite "natural", they, nevertheless, inevitably distort the objects of interpretation. Thus, we need to emphasize that employing the term "ethnography"

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[1] It needs to be emphasized that there is a heated controversy as to how Stoic approach to mythology ought to be classified. For scholars who have some reservations regarding the allegorical dimension of Stoic hermeneutics see especially A.A. Long, *Stoic Readings of Homer*, [in:] A.A. Long (ed.), *Stoic Studies*, New York 1996, pp. 58–84; *cf.* also P. Steinmetz, 'Allegorische Deutung und allegorische Dichtung in der alten Stoa', *Rheinische Museum für Philologie* 129 (1986), pp. 18–30 and D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*, Berkeley 1992, pp. 23–38. While the majority of scholars are inclined (rightly, in my opinion) to characterize the Stoics' hermeneutics as in one way or another "allegorical", it would be virtually impossible to enumerate all the relevant studies. See, however, the following works: J. Tate, 'Cornutus and the Poets', *Classical Quarterly* 23 (1929), pp. 41–45; F. Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère et la pensèe grecque*, Paris 1956, pp. 137–154; J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Paris 1976, pp. 125–167; J. Whitman, *Allegory. The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, Cambridge 1987, pp. 31–47; G. Most, *Cornutus and Stoic Allegoresis: A Preliminary Report*, [in:] W. Haase (hrsg.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Bd. II 36.3, Berlin–New York 1989, pp. 2014–2065; C. Blönnigen, *Der griechische Ursprung der jüdisch-hellenistischen Allegorese und ihre Rezeption in der alexandrischen Patristik*, Frankfurt am Main 1992, pp. 22–42; L. Brisson, *Introduction la philosophie du mythe*, vol. 1:*Sauver les mythes*, Paris 1996, pp. 61–72; G.R. Boys-Stones, *The Stoics' Two Types of Allegory*, [in:] G.R. Boys-Stones (ed.),*Metaphor, Allegory and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions*, Oxford 2003, pp. 189–216 and P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts*, Princeton 2004, pp. 111–151. I have argued that 1) the Stoics' hermeneutical activity comprises an allegorical as well as ethnological dimension and 2) that Cornutus' exegetical activity continues the hermeneutical efforts of the early Stoics in: M. Domaradzki, 'From Etymology to Ethnology. On the Development of Stoic Allegorism', *Archiwum historii filozofii i myśli społecznej* 56 (2011), pp. 81–100.

[2] In the present paper, the text is cited after: C. Lang, *Cornuti theologiae Graece compendium*, Leipzig 1881.

[3] For the sake of our considerations, Cornutus' hermeneutical activity could also be described as "ethnological" or 'anthropological'. Long is clearly right when he classifies Cornutus as an "ethnographer" and "cultural anthropologist", A.A. Long, *Stoic Readings…*, p. 73. The view put forward in this paper is nicely expressed by the scholar's following diagnosis: "the Stoics treated early Greek poetry as ethnographical material and not as literature", A.A. Long, *Stoic Readings…*, p. 82. I cannot, however, agree with Long's denial of the allegorical dimension of Stoic hermeneutics. *Cf. infra* note 34.

with reference to Cornutus' hermeneutics is, in fact, tantamount to cramming the thinker into modern and, thereby, alien framework.[4] Notwithstanding this, such a simplification appears to be justified by the fact that an uncontroversial classification of Cornutus' hermeneutical activity is far from easy. As will be argued below, Cornutus aims to etymologically "excavate" the primeval world picture that has been preserved in the gods' names and epithets. That is why his approach invites the label of "ethnography".

The present considerations will be structured in the following way: firstly, I will briefly examine the possibility of Aristotle's influence on Stoic ethnography; then, I will move on to discussing the relation between the Stoics' theory of language and their recourse to etymology as a basic interpretative tool; finally, I will show in what sense Cornutus' investigations can be characterized as "ethnographic". An assessment of Cornutus' cultural relevance will conclude my considerations. The purpose of this paper will be to show that Cornutus' etymological analyses serve the purpose of eliciting the profound ancient wisdom that lies beneath the veneer of the naïve and primitive language of mythology: through his etymologizing, Cornutus wants to demonstrate that anthropomorphic and often fatuous myths *allegorically* express a valuable cosmology that frequently anticipates the physical and theological views of the Stoics.

1. Aristotle and the emergence of Stoic ethnography

When trying to make sense of Stoic hermeneutics, Aristotle's account of the cyclical recurrences of human civilizations is a good place to begin.[5] According to this account "one must acknowledge that not once, not twice, but countless times the same beliefs come to us" (οὐ γὰρ ἅπαξ οὐδὲ δὶς ἀλλ᾽ ἀπειράκις δεῖ νομίζειν τὰς αὐτὰς ἀφικνεῖσθαι δόξας εἰς ἡμᾶς).[6] This shows the Stagirite to have believed

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[4] Especially in light of the fact Cornutus modestly stresses (76.6–7) that he merely confines himself to "recapitulating" (ἐπιτετμημένως) the views of "the older philosophers" (τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις φιλοσόφοις).

[5] Although the influence of Aristotle on the development of Stoic allegoresis has been frequently discussed, the scholars are far from reaching any consensus as to where exactly the influence should be located. For example, Wehrli finds the traces of Aristotle's influence already in Chrysippus, *cf.* F. Wehrli, *Zur Geschichte der allegorischen Deutung Homers im Altertum*, Borna–Leipzig 1928, pp. 56–57. Tate, on the other hand, suggests that the Stagirite's influence is limited to Cornutus only, *cf.* J. Tate, *Cornutus...*, pp. 43–44. Lastly, Struck expresses his doubts as to the importance of Aristotle's civilization theory for the formation of any Stoic's approach to mythology, *cf.* P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol...*, p. 150 n. 19. While clearly Aristotle's influence on Stoic ethnography "darf [...] nicht überschätzt werden" (F. Wehrli, *Zur Geschichte...*, p. 57), total skepticism in this regard does not appear to me particularly attractive. A well-balanced discussion of this issue is to be found in: J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie...*, pp. 121–124; L. Brisson, *Introduction...*, pp. 58–60 and G.R. Boys-Stones, *The Stoics' Two Types...*, pp. 191–192. I wholeheartedly agree with the following opinion: "A l'inverse de Platon, Aristote ne voit donc pas dans le mythe d'Homère et d'Hésiode une fiction purement arbitraire et dépourvue de toute portée didactique; [...] le mythe est pour lui l'expression allégorique d'un enseignement *rationnel*, qualité sur laquelle il insiste", J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie...*, pp. 123–124. In a very similar vein, Brisson emphasizes: "A la différence de Platon, Aristote n'adopte pas à l'égard du mythe une attitude de rupture radicale", L. Brisson, *Introduction...*, p. 59.

[6] Aristotle, *De caelo*, 270b 19–20. This view is also expressed in the *Meteorology* (339b 27–30), where the same beliefs "return cyclically" (ἀνακυκλεῖν) many times and in the *Politics* (1329b 25–27), where various things are repeatedly "discovered" (εὑρῆσθαι).

that knowledge is gradually and cumulatively obtained at various stages of the development of human civilization. While certain views appear cyclically (i.e., they are repeatedly discovered), the cyclicality points to an important affinity between philosophy and mythology: for Aristotle, myth should be taken as a valuable prefiguration of philosophical knowledge.[7]

From the Stagirite's perspective, then, the process of gaining knowledge can, at least to some extent, be regarded as a rediscovery and reworking of ideas that were articulated in the days of old. The idea of cyclically recurring views builds on the assumption that at the earliest stages of human civilization there lived certain wise men who acquired fairly reliable knowledge of the world and its mechanisms. This conviction is most clearly expressed in the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle declares that: "whilst in all probability every art and philosophy has repeatedly reached its peak ability, upon which it perished again, the [particular] beliefs have been preserved to the present day as remnants of those" (κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς πολλάκις εὑρημένης εἰς τὸ δυνατὸν ἑκάστης καὶ τέχνης καὶ φιλοσοφίας καὶ πάλιν φθειρομένων καὶ ταύτας τὰς δόξας ἐκείνων οἷον λείψανα περισεσῶσθαι μέχρι τοῦ νῦν).[8] Let us note that the particular beliefs can resurface in different periods of time, since they are contained in the society's mythology that has been transmitted by the poets. Hence, the ancient wisdom can be reconstructed by examining myths that conceal profound truths and precious intuitions articulated by men of antiquity.

Cornutus bases his investigations on a very similar assumption: in the symbolic and enigmatic works of the poets the profound wisdom of the ancients[9] has been handed down[10] to posterity. Thus, with regard to Hesiod's genealogy, Cornutus makes the following comment: "some parts of it were taken by him from the ancients, whereas other parts were added by him in a more mythical way; and in this way most of the ancient theology was corrupted" (τὰ μέν τινα [...] παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαιοτέρων αὐτοῦ παρειληφότος, τὰ δὲ μυθικώτερον ἀφ᾽ αὑτοῦ προσθέντος, ᾧ τρόπῳ καὶ πλεῖστα τῆς παλαιᾶς θεολογίας διεφθάρη).[11] Cornutus diagnoses here that Hesiod distorted the original theology and that his distortions must have resulted from his inability to fathom the depths of the ancients' physics and cosmology. While Cornutus believes that his task consists precisely in excavating this profound wisdom, the philosopher also assumes that at least to some extent philosophical accounts of reality can be regarded as "rationalized translations" of ancient myths. Naturally, the translations are always more accurate as they are gradually distilled from the various irrational and anthropomorphic concepts that were unnecessarily added by the poets. Yet, there is a direct link between philosophy and mythology so that ultimately the former is but a refinement of the latter.

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[7] This is spectacularly attested by the philosopher's famous remark (*Metaphysica*, 982b 18) that there is a certain intellectual affinity between a "lover of myth" (φιλόμυθος) and a "lover of wisdom" (φιλόσοφος), i.e., a philosopher.

[8] Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, 1074b 10–13.

[9] While οἱ ἀρχαῖοι are mentioned already at the very beginning of the work (2.18), their authority is continually cited throughout the whole book.

[10] Cornutus' favorite verb is παραδίδωμι, appearing already in the very title of work.

[11] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 31.14–17.

From Aristotle's perspective, too, philosophical knowledge originates from mythology. The Stagirite observes, then, that the ancients handed down to posterity a valuable tradition "in the form of a myth" (ἐν μύθου σχήματι), stressing also the fact that a great deal of this tradition had to be given its mythical form only "to persuade the many and to be useful for the laws and for the general good" (πρὸς τὴν πειθὼ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρῆσιν).[12] While according to Aristotle the precious and valuable intuitions articulated by men of antiquity were *purposefully* camouflaged in the various mythical formulations, Cornutus believes them to have become *inadvertently* contaminated by the poets who transmitted them. That is why Cornutus stresses the necessity of approaching myths in the right way. On the one hand, the philosopher admonishes that one should not "conflate the myths" (συγχεῖν τοὺς μύθους), "transfer the names from one [myth] to another" (ἐξ ἑτέρου τὰ ὀνόματα ἐφ᾽ ἕτερον μεταφέρειν) or rashly "consider [them] irrational" (ἀλόγως τίθεσθαι).[13] One the other hand, Cornutus emphasizes that "something has been added to the genealogies that have been handed down [to us] by those who failed to understand what [the myths] hint at enigmatically" (τι προσεπλάσθη ταῖς παραδεδομέναις κατ᾽ αὐτοὺς γενεαλογίαις ὑπὸ τῶν μὴ συνιέντων ἃ αἰνίττονται).[14] This passage shows that for Cornutus (as for Aristotle) there is an important continuity between the mythical and philosophical description of the world. The continuity is, nevertheless, frequently obscured by the various contaminations that come from the poets.

Cornutus firmly believes that he can extract the "ancient theology" (παλαιὰ θεολογία) from the distorted transmission of the poets. In this context, one should pay particular attention to Cornutus' diagnosis that the poets' contaminations are due to their incapacity to comprehend the symbols and enigmas that have been used for conveying the ancient wisdom. The original αἰνίττονται suggests that the ancient mythmakers *spoke enigmatically* in the sense that they *hinted at* something that needs to be appropriately interpreted. Cornutus uses the word, as he seems to be deeply convinced that *speaking through enigmas* is characteristic of everyone who possesses profound knowledge and thorough understanding of things that can actually only be expressed in such symbols and riddles. That is why in the final part of his work the philosopher asserts that "the ancients were no common men but able to understand the nature of the world and inclined to philosophize about it through symbols and enigmas" (οὐχ οἱ τυχόντες ἐγένοντο οἱ παλαιοί, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνιέναι τὴν τοῦ κόσμου φύσιν ἱκανοὶ καὶ πρὸς τὸ διὰ συμβόλων καὶ αἰνιγμάτων φιλοσοφῆσαι περὶ αὐτῆς εὐεπίφοροι).[15]

This reveals what Cornutus perceives as his task: to properly interpret the "symbols" and "enigmas" that obfuscate the ancient theology. It is worth noting that Cornutus does not interpret the (evidently fallible) poets in accord with their presumed intentions. This is understandable in light of the fact that (according to his view) the poets do not fully understand what they actually convey. Thus,

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[12] Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, 1074a 38–1074b 5.
[13] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 27.19–28.2
[14] *Ibidem*, 27.20–28.1.
[15] *Ibidem*, 76.2–5.

the philosopher believes that the ancient wisdom can be recovered not *owing to* but rather *in spite of* the poets. That is why Cornutus' tool for unravelling this wisdom is etymology: as using language is automatic and unconscious, etymological analyses are the best way to excavate the world picture that underlies the particular vocabulary.

2. Etymology as an interpretative tool

Cornutus employs etymology to explore the relation between the form of the word and its meaning (which results from the underlying world view). For example, the philosopher derives the name "Prometheus" from "the foresight of the world's soul" (ἡ προμήθεια τῆς ἐν τοῖς ὅλοις ψυχῆς) that is also equated with "the providence" (ἡ πρόνοια).[16] Analyses of this sort show that for Cornutus the gods' names and epithets are not contingent and arbitrary. When seeking to uncover the ancient theology, Cornutus embraces the Stoics' view of language according to which the relation between the names and their referents is *natural* and not purely conventional.[17] This view is of paramount importance for understanding Cornutus' ethnography, for it provides a *direct* link between studying the words of a language and studying the world picture preserved in the vocabulary of that language. Let us, therefore, briefly examine this.

When referring the Stoics' view on the origin of names, Origen reports the philosophers to have maintained that "the first sounds imitate the things of which the names are said" (μιμουμένων τῶν πρώτων φωνῶν τὰ πράγματα, καθ᾽ ὧν τὰ ὀνόματα), upon which he explains that this view entails recourse to etymology.[18] Cornutus continues the early Stoics' etymological investigations into why words have the form they do.[19] The philosopher believes that language provides us with

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[16] *Ibidem*, 32.1–3.

[17] That is why Stoic use of such terms as "symbol" or "allegory" must not be equated with modern understanding of these concepts. In this respect see M. Domaradzki, 'Symbol i alegoria w filozoficznej egzegezie stoików', *Filo-Sofija* 13–14 (2011), pp. 719–736. In what follows, I draw on some of the findings presented there. The close connection between the Stoics' view of language and the philosophers' hermeneutics has been thoroughly discussed by C. Blönnigen, *Der griechische Ursprung. . .*, pp. 23–27; D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers. . .*, pp. 28–35 and P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol. . .*, pp. 123–141.

[18] Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, I 24 (= *SVF* II 146 [J. von Arnim (ed.), *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. I–III, Stuttgart 1968]).

[19] Buffière was clearly right in characterizing such etymology as "moyen d'exégèse", F. Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère. . .*, p. 60. While Cornutus speaks (2.4) of "analyzing the origin" (ἐτυμολογοῦσι) of a given god's name, the value of etymological exegeses is thoroughly discussed in Plato's *Cratylus*, which is commonly regarded as "[t]he first work that deals with etymology, and uses it systematically", H. Peraki-Kyriakidou, 'Aspects of Ancient Etymologizing', *Classical Quarterly* 52 (2002), p. 478. Two points need to be stressed here. First of all, in antiquity, etymology was considered to be a reliable source of information about the cosmos and its mechanisms. Thus, in connection with Plato's etymological analyses Sedley aptly diagnoses that "*no one* in antiquity ever thought Plato was joking", D. Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, Cambridge 2003, p. 37. Naturally, it remains highly debatable whether and, if so, to what extent Plato himself was inclined to take seriously such etymological analyses. Yet, even if one refuses to agree with Sedley that the *Cratylus* be read as "a serious exploration of etymology and its lessons" (*ibidem*, p. 172), it cannot be disputed that such a characterization fits perfectly the Stoics. This is closely connected with another matter than needs to be noted here. Cornutus shares with Plato

the best insight into the way in which the users of a given language understood the world, since the names of things reflect how those things were comprehended. Hence, when putting forward his (often fantastic) etymologies, Cornutus aims to show that etymological investigations provide us with an access to the ancients' world picture (i.e., the profound wisdom of their theology), for establishing the relevant etymological connections makes it, subsequently, possible to link language with various cultural practices, rituals, rites.

To understand the specificity of the Stoics' (and Cornutus') approach we need to briefly consider Augustine's *De dialectica*, since this testimony offers the clearest exposition of Stoic original use of etymology[20]. According to the testimony, the Stoics were convinced that it is possible to explain the origin of every single word.[21] Augustine relates further that in their etymological investigations the Stoics would look for a point where "the thing corresponds with the sound of the word in some similarity" (*res cum sono verbi aliqua similitudine concinat*), beginning, thereby, with such onomatopoeias as "clanging" (*tinnitus*), "neighing" (*hinnitus*), "bleating" (*balatus*) etc.[22] Naturally, the Stoics were aware of the fact that the richness of natural languages does not exhaust itself in onomatopoeias. When explaining that "these words sound like the things themselves which are signified by these words" (*haec verba ita sonare, ut ipsae res quae his verbis significantur*), Augustine reports the Stoics to have realized that "there are things that do not sound [in any particular way]" (*sunt res quae non sonant*), upon which they posited "the similarity of touch to apply to them" (*in his similitudinem tactus valere*).[23]

While the notion of similarity of "touch" refers to the *direct* effect of things on our senses, the Stoics took the effect to be *reflected* in the particular words. Augustine expands upon this idea, stressing that according to the Stoics' position the things "smoothly or roughly touch the sense, as the smoothness or roughness of the letters touches the hearing" (*leniter vel aspere sensum tangunt, lenitas vel asperitas litterarum ut tangit auditum*).[24] Hence, when explaining that for the Stoics "the things themselves affect us in the same way as the words are experienced" (*res ipsae afficiunt, ut verba sentiuntur*), Augustine illustrates this argument with the example of "honey" (*mel*), which itself affects the taste "pleasantly" (*suaviter*), as it "smoothly touches the hearing with its name" (*leniter nomine tangit auditum*).[25] In conclusion, Augustine makes it clear that the Stoics regarded these cases as "the cradle of words" (*cunabula verborum*), arguing that if "perception

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the belief that etymological investigations have a didactic as well as pedagogical value, *cf.* in this respect H. Peraki-Kyriakidou, *Aspects. . .*, p. 481. As Cornutus embraces the view of etymology that emerges from Plato's *Cratylus*, he repeats some of Plato's etymologies. *Cf. infra* notes 39 and 42.

[20] See especially C. Blönnigen, *Der griechische Ursprung . . .*, pp. 24–27 and P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol. . .*, pp. 125–126. In what follows, I use the text from B.D. Jackson, *Augustine. De Dialectica*, Dordrecht 1975, albeit I frequently modify the translation.

[21] Augustine, *De dialectica*, VI 9: *Stoici autumant,* [. . .] *nullum esse verbum, cuius non certa explicari origo possit.*

[22] *Ibidem*, VI 10.

[23] *Ibidem.*

[24] *Ibidem.*

[25] *Ibidem.*

of things concords with perception of sounds" (*sensus rerum cum sonorum sensu concordarent*), then "the license of naming must proceed from this point to the similarity of things themselves to each other" (*[h]inc ad ipsarum inter se rerum similitudinem processisse licentiam nominandi*).[26]

The Stoics' assumption about the isomorphism between language and external reality entails that for the philosophers the world and words are in complete harmony: names reproduce reality, upon which there is a *natural* bond between words and their referents. The idea that words mimic the world is most clearly expressed in the Stoic assumption that sense perceptions translate *directly* to the names of things. While words are, thus, formed in conformity with how their referents are perceived, one could summarize the Stoics' position by saying that words express the world, because the world imprints itself in words.

Cornutus embraces the Stoics' theory of language: the philosopher also believes that the names were formed in accord with the above discussed isomorphism between language and external reality. Consequently, Cornutus, too, believes that investigating the origin of the words is tantamount to investigating their underlying perceptions. At this point it needs to be noted that the Stoics' position makes etymology a natural tool for examining not only the underlying perceptions, but also the underlying conceptions.

We know that the Stoics believed the meanings of words (and the corresponding concepts) to be related to one another. Augustine makes it clear that the afore-analyzed "similarity of things and sounds" (*similitudo rerum et sonorum*), was not the only motivation for the origin of the words that the Stoics identified. He relates that the philosophers distinguished also between "the similarity of things themselves" (*similitudo rerum ipsarum*), "contiguity" (*vicinitas*), and "opposition" (*contrarium*).[27] A parallel testimony is provided by Diogenes Laertius, who apart from "experience" (περίπτωσις), mentions such concept-forming mechanisms as "similarity" (ὁμοιότης), "analogy" (ἀναλογία), "transposition" (μετάθεσις), "composition" (σύνθεσις), "opposition" (ἐναντίωσις) "transition" (μετάβασις) and – lastly – "privation" (στέρησις).[28]

As the Stoics accounted for the emergence of words (and the corresponding concepts) in terms of such mechanisms, it is hardly surprising that they should play an important role in Cornutus' etymological exegeses. Indeed, David Dawson has shown that Cornutus "draws on some of the modes of concept formation that Diogenes outlines".[29] The scholar cited the example of Ares, whose name Cornutus derives from the conceptions of "seizing" (αἱρεῖν), "killing" (ἀναιρεῖν) and "bane" (ἀρή), referring in his etymological interpretation to the mechanism of "opposition" (ἐναντίωσις).[30] Plenty of other examples could be given. Consider for instance

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[26] *Ibidem.*
[27] *Ibidem*, VI 11.
[28] Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, VII 52–53 (= *SVF* II 87).
[29] D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers...*, p. 29.
[30] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 40.19–41.3. D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers...*, p. 29. Although Dawson does not mention it, this etymology can be found in Chrysippus. Plutarch reports the philosopher to have derived the name Ares from the verb ἀναιρεῖν so that the god could stand for our aggressive instincts (*Amatorius*, 757b = *SVF* II 1094). *Cf.* also J. Pépin, *Mythe et*

Cornutus' analysis of Hermes. Having established a connection between Hermes' being called a "patron of public assemblies" (ἀγοραῖος) and his being a "guardian of those who speak in public" (ἐπίσκοπος [. . .] τῶν ἀγορευόντων), Cornutus diagnoses that "this was extended from the market onto those who buy or sell anything" (ἀπὸ τῆς ἀγορᾶς διατείνει καὶ εἰς τοὺς ἀγοράζοντάς τι ἢ πιπράσκοντας), since "everything should be done with reason" (πάντα μετὰ λόγου ποιεῖν δέοντος), upon which Hermes became a "custodian of merchandise" (τῶν ἐμποριῶν ἐπιστάτης) and was named "Commerce" (ἐμπολαῖος).[31]

While the associative character of such analyses is clear, it is worth stressing here that Cornutus' etymological analyses continue the Stoics' project of discovering the fundamental concepts that are reflected in the particular etymologies. It is precisely the assumption that words imitate the world that makes this approach possible: just as words mirror the various qualities of their referents, so do the gods' names and epithets reflect the ancient conceptions of the cosmos. The above cited interpretations (including the derivation of Prometheus from προμήθεια) show that for the Stoics there is nothing contingent about our language: analyzing words, names and epithets invariably reveals that the relation between *signifiants* and *signifiés* is not arbitrary. That is precisely why Cornutus assumes that investigating language of a given community provides valuable insights into how the vocabulary of that community reflects its archaic world picture.

3. Ethnographic dimension of Cornutus' etymological analyses

While Cornutus decodes the names and epithets of the gods so as to arrive at their underlying primeval world view, his hermeneutical activity frequently transmogrifies into an allegorical interpretation, since the ancient wisdom that is discovered in the course of his analyses often transpires to anticipate the cosmological views of the Stoics. For example, if Hesiod asserts that "at first (πρώτιστα) Chaos came into being",[32] then Cornutus suggests the passage be understood in such a way that "once fire was everything and will become [that] again in the [recurring] world cycle" (ἦν δέ ποτε [. . .] πῦρ τὸ πᾶν καὶ γενήσεται πάλιν ἐν περιόδῳ).[33] Thus, it is difficult to agree with those scholars who altogether deny the allegorical dimension of Cornutus' exegeses.[34] It seems best to say that Cornutus' approach to

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allégorie..., pp. 129. A parallel explanation of Ares' name is given by Heraclitus the Allegorist (31.1), whereas somewhat different interpretations appear in Plato (*Cratylus*, 407d) and Lydus (*De mensibus* IV 34). Buffière offers an exhaustive discussion of the various etymological and allegorical interpretations of Ares that were put forward in antiquity, F. Buffière, *Les Mythes d'Homère. . .*, pp. 297–301.

[31] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 25.2–7. The epithet ἐμπολαῖος appears for example in Aristophanes (*Plutus*, 1155). In what follows, I make use of some of the findings presented in: M. Domaradzki, *From Etymology. . .*, pp. 95–99.

[32] Hesiodus, *Theogonia*, 116.

[33] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 28.10–12.

[34] The view that the Stoics' hermeneutics should not be characterized as allegoresis has been most forcefully put forward by A.A. Long, *Stoic Readings. . .*, pp. 59–60 and 71–82. With regard to Cornutus, Long stresses for example that the philosopher never refers to allegory and that, consequently, he is "an etymologist, not an allegorist" (p. 71). A similar opinion is expressed by Blönnigen, who likewise observes that Cornutus "bewusst keine eigene Allegorese betreibt", C. Blönnigen, *Der griechische Ursprung. . .*, p. 37. Still, in the passage cited above, Cornutus

mythology combines etymology, allegoresis and ethnography. In what follows, the uniqueness of this hermeneutics will be illustrated with Cornutus' interpretations of Rhea and Hermes.

When proceeding to reconstruct the genealogy of Rhea, Cornutus notes first that the Greek goddess seems to be "the same" (αὕτη) as the Syrian Atargatis.[35] Subsequently, he explains that the goddess is also called "the Phrygian" on account of how she is worshipped among the Phrygians, suggesting that there is a relation between the Galli practice of self-castration and "the Greeks' myth of the castration of Ouranos" (παρὰ τοῖς Ἕλλησι περὶ τῆς τοῦ Οὐρανοῦ ἐκτομῆς μεμύθευται).[36] What is noteworthy about these observations is that when searching for the ancient wisdom, Cornutus, on the one hand, does not confine himself to Greek mythology only and, on the other, posits the existence of various correlations between certain ancient beliefs and specific cult practices. Cornutus' interest in religious syncretism and his attentiveness to the cultural background of religious beliefs seem, thus, to justify characterizing his analyses as ethnographic: the philosopher makes references to numerous popular convictions and beliefs held by the ancient Greeks, Magi (i.e., Persians), Phrygians, Egyptians, Celts, Libyans and others,[37] for he believes that comparing *different* worldviews facilitates reconstructing the world picture of the ancient Greeks.[38]

Cornutus' approach seems to be fairly holistic: the philosopher assumes that the object of his investigations (the ancient wisdom preserved in the vocabulary of traditional theology) can best be understood if it is placed within the widest cultural context possible. While Cornutus views culture as a network of interrelated concepts and beliefs, his holistic approach manifests itself clearly in his interpretations: when reconstructing the genealogy of a particular deity, Cornutus makes references not only to language but also uses the "discovered" etymological connections to establish further links between language and various folk beliefs, mythical formulations, rituals, rites etc. He combines, thereby, etymology with ethnography, on the one hand, and etymology with allegoresis, on the other.

Etymological interpretation always provides a point of departure. Thus, Rhea's name is associated with a "flow" (ῥύσις), upon which Cornutus cites the belief that the goddess is "the cause of rainstorms" (τῶν ὄμβρων αἰτία).[39] As rainstorms are

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does read the famous Stoic idea (*cf.* *SVF* I 98, 497, II 528, 596–632) into Hesiod's theogony and this interpretation seems to be a classical example of allegoresis. For a critical assessment of Long's position see: P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* ..., p. 113 and T. Tieleman, *Galen and Chrysippus On the Soul: Argument and Refutation in the De Placitis, Books II and III*, Leiden 1996, pp. 221–223.

[35] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 6.11–12.

[36] *Ibidem*, 6.16–19. *Cf.* also Lucianus, *De syria dea*, 15 and Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II 611–617.

[37] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 26.7–11.

[38] Boys-Stones aptly observes (*ad loc.*) that in Cornutus one can find "a proper science of comparative mythology", G.R. Boys-Stones, *The Stoics' Two Types...*, p. 202. See also D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers...*, p. 38. *Cf. supra* note 3.

[39] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 5.10–11. It is worth noting that in the *Cratylus*, Socrates associates (402a 4–b 4) the name "Rhea" with the "flow" or "current" (ῥοή) of a river and with the "streams" (ῥεύματα).

typically accompanied by thunder and lighting, the philosopher elucidates that
Rhea was pictured as "delighted by drums, cymbals, horns and torch processions"
(τυμπάνοις καὶ κυμβάλοις καὶ κεραυλίαις καὶ λαμπαδηφορίαις χαίρουσαν),[40] for "these
rains clatter down from above" (ἄνωθεν οἱ ὄμβροι καταράττουσι).[41] Various pop-
ular beliefs about the goddess enable Cornutus to establish a correlation between
the sounds of the cult instruments and the noises of a storm, on the one hand, and
between the flashes of thunder and lighting and the glow of a torch, on the other.

The same approach is used in the case of Hermes. Cornutus derives the
god's name from "contriving tales" (ἐρεῖν μήσασθαι), which he, then, equates with
"speaking" (λέγειν),[42] suggesting that the god can owe his name to the fact that
he is our "fortress" (ἔρυμα) and "stronghold" (ὀχύρωμα).[43] Irrespective of how
fantastic Cornutus' analyses might seem, the philosopher's goal is to establish
a connection between speech and language, on the one hand, and reason, on the
other. That is why Cornutus identifies Hermes with reason (λόγος) that "the
gods have sent to us from Heaven" (ἀπέστειλαν πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ οἱ θεοί),
making, thus, "man the only rational animal on the earth" (μόνον τὸν ἀνθρώπων
τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς ζῴων λογικόν).[44] Subsequently, Cornutus proceeds to show that the
view of rationality that underlies the god's name is reflected in various cultural
practices. For example, Cornutus suggests that the practice of heaping up stones
beside Herms could be motivated by the desire "to symbolize that the uttered
word consists of small parts" (πρὸς σύμβολον τοῦ ἐκ μικρῶν μερῶν συνεστάναι τὸν
προφορικὸν λόγον).[45]

In a similar way, various other epithets of Hermes are connected with Stoic
view of rationality. As we have noted, Hermes is a "patron of public assem-
blies" (ἀγοραῖος), a "guardian of those who speak in public" (ἐπίσκοπος [. . .]
τῶν ἀγορευόντων), and – lastly – a "custodian of merchandise" (τῶν ἐμποριῶν
ἐπιστάτης), for "all these things need to be done with reason" (πάντα μετὰ λόγου
ποιεῖν δέοντος).[46] Likewise, Hermes is called "herald" (κῆρυξ),[47] because "through
a loud voice he presents to the listeners the things signified according to the lo-
gos" (διὰ φωνῆς γεγωνοῦ παριστᾷ τὰ κατὰ τὸν λόγον σημαινόμενα ταῖς ἀκοαῖς),[48]
"messenger" (ἄγγελος),[49] because "we learn the will of the gods from the con-

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[40] *Cf.* also Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II 618–619 and Ovidius, *Fasti*, IV 181–186.

[41] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 5.12–16.

[42] This etymology is also to be found in Plato's *Cratylus*. Having suggested that the name
Hermes has to do with "speech" (λόγος)" and signifies that the god is an "interpreter" (ἑρμηνεύς),
Socrates posits (407e 5–408b 2) a connection between such words as εἴρειν, ἐμήσατο, λέγειν and
μηχανήσασθαι so as to derive the name Εἰρέμης from the fact that the god "contrived speaking
and speech" (τὸ λέγειν τε καὶ τὸν λόγον μησάμενον) as well as "tales" (τὸ εἴρειν ἐμήσατο). *Cf.* also
M. Domaradzki, *From Etymology. . .* , p. 96.

[43] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 20.21–23.

[44] *Ibidem*, 20.18–21.

[45] *Ibidem*, 24.11–25.2. When referring to προφορικὸς λόγος, Cornutus alludes to the Stoics'
account of language and rhetoric, *cf.* e.g. *SVF* II 223.

[46] Cornutus, *Compendium,* 25.2–7. *Cf. supra* note 31.

[47] *Cf.* e.g. *Hymni Homerici*, IV 331.

[48] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 21.20–22.1.

[49] *Cf.* e.g. *Hymni Homerici*, IV 3.

cepts which have been bestowed upon us according to the *logos*" (τὸ βούλημα
τῶν θεῶν γινώσκομεν ἐκ τῶν ἐνδεδομένων ἡμῖν κατὰ τὸν λόγον ἐννοιῶν)[50] and – fi-
nally – a "leader" (διάκτορος)[51] either since he is "piercing" (διάτορος) and "clear"
(τρανός), or since "he leads our thoughts into the souls of our fellow men" (διάγειν
τὰ νοήματα ἡμῶν εἰς τὰς τῶν πλησίον ψυχάς), which is also why "they sacrifice the
tongues to him" (τὰς γλώττας αὐτῷ καθιεροῦσιν).[52]

These analyses show how Cornutus combines etymology and ethnography: on
the one hand, the philosopher tries to show that the ancient thinkers must have
perceived reason as piercing and clear (if it were to effectively fulfill its communica-
tive functions), and on the other, he supports his considerations with a particular
ritual practice. In order to justify his interpretation, Cornutus posits a connection
between Hermes' names and images. To give yet another example, the philosopher
explains that the god is sculpted "in a square shape" (τετράγωνος τῷ σχήματι),
since the god is "steadfast" (ἑδραῖος) and "secure" (ἀσφαλής).[53] Thus, Cornutus
suggests that the motive behind presenting Hermes in a quadrangle shape was
that the ancient thinkers conceptualized reason as stable, solid and infallible.

Cornutus' analyses of Rhea and Hermes show that the philosopher proceeds
from a simple (if arbitrary) etymological analysis and then moves on to more
complex interpretations that build on extensive cultural knowledge. His approach
is, therefore, holistic inasmuch as the ancient vision of the world (that Cornutus
retrieves) is placed within as broad a cultural context as possible: the philosopher
buttresses his considerations with references not only to the language of the ancient
community, but also to its rites, rituals, images, etc. In other words, Cornutus
believes that it is possible to extract the archaic conception of a deity by examining
how its etymology is connected with some cultural practice(s). In the case of Rhea,
it is the use of drums, cymbals, horns and torches that is supposed to imitate the
image of the goddess. In the case of Hermes, Cornutus cites such cultural practices
as sacrificing the tongues to the god, heaping up stones beside Herms and sculpting
the god in a square shape. In both cases (as in other analyses), Cornutus attempts
to reconstruct the whole conceptual framework that he takes to motivate the name
and conception of a particular deity by examining the specific cultural context.

Cornutus' holistic approach comprises also allegoresis. The purpose of his
various allegorical interpretations is, naturally, to show that the ancient worldview
in one way or another anticipates Stoic philosophy. Thus, traditional mythology
transpires often to be an allegorical prefiguration of the wisdom proclaimed by the
Stoics. Here, we should note that whilst Cornutus' interpretation of Hermes only
alludes to the Stoic idea of προφορικὸς λόγος, the philosopher's interpretation of
Rhea makes an explicit and elaborate reference to the Stoics' physics. As a matter
of fact, Cornutus turns this traditional myth into a full-fledged narrative that
proves to allegorically express Stoic cosmology.

Cornutus' interpretation of Rhea builds on the connection between Kronos,
who "swallows" (καταπίνειν) his children with Rhea and "time" (χρόνος), whose

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[50] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 22.1–22.3.
[51] *Cf.* e.g. *Hymni Homerici*, IV 392.
[52] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 21.1–4.
[53] *Ibidem*, 23.11–13.

similarity consists in that all things that come into being in time are "consumed" (δαπανᾶται) by it.[54] While according to traditional accounts[55] Rhea prevented Kronos from devouring Zeus by feeding him with a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, Cornutus suggests that "the swallowing be grasped differently" (ἄλλως εἴληπται ἡ κατάποσις), since in reality "the myth was composed about the generation of the world" (συντέτακται γὰρ ὁ μῦθος περὶ τῆς τοῦ κόσμου γενέσεως).[56] In Cornutus' allegorical interpretation, the world could only emerge when "the nature governing it" (ἡ διοικοῦσα αὐτὸν φύσις), i.e., Zeus, "matured and prevailed" (ἀνετράφη [. . .] καὶ ἀπεκράτησεν), whereas "this stone" (λίθος οὗτος), i.e., the earth, "was swallowed" (καταποθείς), i.e., "fixed firmly" (ἐγκατεστηρίχθη) as a "foundation" (θεμέλιος) for all things that come into being.[57] Hence, the myth that has Zeus banish Kronos from his kingdom and hurl him down to Tartarus is interpreted by Cornutus as an enigmatic hint[58] at "the ordering of the world's becoming" (ἡ τῆς τῶν ὅλων γενέσεως τάξις).[59]

Cornutus' allegoresis is based on the supposed etymological connection between the god's name (Κρόνος) and his "accomplishing" (κραίνειν), i.e., restricting "the flow of the matter surrounding the earth" (ῥύσιν τοῦ περιέχοντος ἐπὶ τὴν γήν).[60] Whilst Kronos is, therefore, associated by Cornutus with the force that "makes the exhalations finer" (λεπτοτέρας ποιήσασα τὰς ἀναθυμιάσεις), Zeus is interpreted by the Stoic as "the nature of the world" (κόσμου φύσις) that is responsible for "curbing the excessive rush of the change, putting it in bonds, and, thus, giving a longer life to the world itself" (τὸ λίαν φερόμενον τῆς μεταβολῆς ἐπέσχε καὶ ἐπέδησε μακροτέραν διεξαγωγὴν δοὺς αὐτῷ τῷ κόσμῳ).[61]

Evidently, then, Cornutus' allegorical interpretation of the myth about Ouranos' castration builds on the Stoics' physics. Kronos is interpreted as an *allegory* of the force that rarifies the matter and restricts its flow round the earth. Zeus, on the other hand, is identified with the force responsible for controlling the process initiated by Kronos, and, thereby, bringing the ultimate cosmic balance between all these cosmogonic transformations. Hence, Zeus' dethroning of Kronos signifies (allegorically) that chaos has been replaced with order.

The above discussed interpretations of Rhea and Hermes show that Cornutus is inclined to treat conventional mythology and traditional religion as products of a society at a given stage of development. For him, myths preserve the world picture of the ancients: their beliefs, convictions, values etc. Although Cornutus believes

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[54] *Ibidem*, 6.20–7.5. *Cf.* Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II 64.

[55] Hesiodus, *Theogonia*, 485–491. See also Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II 638–639.

[56] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 7.10–12.

[57] *Ibidem*, 7.12–17. Struck stresses (*ad loc.*) the similarity between this interpretation and the Orphic cosmogony presented in the Derveni Papyrus, P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol. . .*, p. 147, n. 15. For a discussion of Cornutus' allegoresis see also J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie...*, pp. 157–158.

[58] Let us recall that the original αἰνίττονται suggests that the ancient mythmakers revealed their profound wisdom through riddles and enigmas that were not properly understood by the poets who transmitted the myths.

[59] Cornutus, *Compendium*, 7.20–22.

[60] *Ibidem*, 7.22–8.2.

[61] *Ibidem*, 8.2–6.

that the poets sadly distorted this ancient wisdom, his ethnographic allegoresis of traditional mythology is designed to steer clear of the charges of blasphemy or atheism. As a matter of fact, the philosopher concludes his work with a clear admonition that young men be introduced to "piety" (τὸ εὐσεβεῖν) and not to "superstition" (τὸ δεισιδαιμονεῖν).[62] Thus, Cornutus puts it in no uncertain terms that his etymological and allegorical interpretations of mythology do not entail repudiating myths *in toto*. Nonetheless, the philosopher unequivocally recommends that the valuable and worthless be distinguished in every religion: Cornutus differentiates between authentic piety and crude superstition, as his hermeneutics aims to contrast genuine religiousness with ignorance, obscurantism, and shallow ritualism.

For Cornutus, as for all Greek thinkers, philosophy was not an academic discipline but rather a way of living and a way of dealing with everyday problems. In this regard, interpreting myths had for Cornutus a moral and ethical dimension: his exegeses were supposed to show the educational and didactic value of various ancient myths. In accord with Stoic philosophy, Cornutus assumed that when appropriately interpreted mythology could become an integral part of philosophical *paideia*.[63] When assuming that the particular myths preserve the wisdom of the ancients, Cornutus refused to treat mythology as a set of dark superstitions and ludicrous fables, for he was firmly convinced about the fundamental pedagogical role that myths play in every society.

4. Conclusions

As far as their specific content is concerned, Cornutus' analyses are today of purely *historical* value. However, the very idea that underlies his approach seems to deserve a more favorable assessment. Irrespective of how fantastic and naïve Cornutus' analyses might seem, his aim was to unravel the ancient ways of thinking about the world. When compared to Freud's psychoanalysis or Levi-Strauss' structuralism, Cornutus' analyses become less extravagant and bizarre, for whilst all these approaches aimed to show a certain continuity between the various forms of primordial thinking, the "evidence" was invariably provided by (more or less strained) interpretations of various ancient myths, rituals etc.

For Cornutus, etymological and allegorical interpretations of the gods' names and epithets made it possible to obtain insights into the archaic views that underlay the vocabulary of Homer and Hesiod. Accordingly, interpreting myths was supposed to provide the interpreter with a better understanding of the ancient as well as the present world. Bearing in mind the fact that Cornutus' etymological analyses were often completely fantastic and arbitrary, we should note that he belonged to the most influential philosophical school in the entire Hellenistic period. As for the development of ancient hermeneutics, we should, therefore, stress

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[62] *Ibidem*, 76.12–13. The same idea has been expressed by Balbus, who also clearly differentiates between *superstitio* and *religio*, *cf.* Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II 71–72.

[63] I discuss this ethical and existential dimension of Stoic hermeneutics in: M. Domaradzki, 'Theological Etymologizing in the Early Stoa', *Kernos. Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* 25 (2012), pp. 143–147.

that Cornutus' work shows Stoicism to have contributed significantly to this area through etymological, allegorical and ethnographic interpretations of mythology.

Cornutus' analyses herald a new era in the development of ancient hermeneutics: Neoplatonism will likewise refuse to be content with the letter only. With that, a new ideal of a sage emerges: the one who realizes that knowledge requires a special exegetical effort, for beneath the literal veneer of various myths, images and practices, one can find profound wisdom expressed by the ancients in diverse symbols and enigmas. To reach this wisdom, one needs to have recourse to etymological and/or allegorical interpretation. A person capable of doing this properly deserves to be regarded as a sage.