

International Conference: Biographically Grounded Literature in Late Hellenistic and Early Imperial Times

Bern, 24. – 26. Juni 2024

Zlatko Pleše

Title: The Many Lives/Biographies of Hermes Trismegistos

Abstract: Liminality and connectivity are the key characteristics of Hermes Trismegistos, the original product of a mixed Graeco-Egyptian milieu of late Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. Hermes Trismegistos traverses and unites diverging cultural traditions, weaves connections between different ways of knowing, and crosses the boundaries between the divine and human domains. In this sense, he is a paradigmatic instance of “divine involvement in history,” to cite one of the programmatic statements of the Bern conference. The ambiguous status of Hermes and the interplay between his human and divine characteristics are reflected in various Hermetic treatises. For instance, in a long excerpt from the *Korê Kosmou* preserved in Stobaeus’ anthology, he is simultaneously portrayed as a divine emanation of the supreme god and as “a soul possessing a bond of sympathy with the mysteries of heaven” (SH XXIII.3-4). The Latin *Asclepius*, in turn, presents Hermes Trismegistos as a human teacher of wisdom named after his divine grandfather, Thoth-Hermes of Hermopolis, “who resides in his natal city helping and preserving all mortal people coming from everywhere” (*Ascl.* 37). In another excerpt from Stobaeus, Hermes Thrice Great is one the “divine” royal souls sent down to the world to rule as earthly kings and in due course return to their heavenly abode – “the king of counsel (*boulê*) and the father and instructor (*kathêgêtês*) of all things” (SH XXVI.9).