



THE NEW HERMOPOLIS

Text: Nile El Wardani
Photographs: Courtesy of Dr. Mervat Nasser





The New Hermopolis is a cultural village, which is the vision and creation of the social alchemist Dr. Mervat Nasser. Coined by Nasser, social alchemy refers to transmutation of society through the Unity of Being as a fundamental principle that leads one to the desire of helping humanity to evolve into greater perfection. The New Hermopolis aims to capitalize on the unique spiritual and cultural heritage of this ancient city towards the economic, spiritual and cultural revival of a largely neglected and impoverished fragile fragment of Egypt.

Alchemy, which originally comes from the Arabic word “Al Kimiya” (300 BC) literally means “the transmutation” was adopted by the Arabs from the Alexandrians and thence spread to Europe via Spain in 711 AD. Nasser was drawn to this spiritual location, once the ancient city of Hermopolis, located near Tuna El Gebel, Mallawi, El Minia.

A psychiatrist, author and professor who lived and worked in London for three decades, Nasser returned to Al Minia, where her father is buried, and the ancient city of Hermopolis where much of ancient wisdom was born and inspires her.

Approximately 320km from Cairo, the new super highway delivered us in less than four hours to this unique ancient landscape. The New Hermopolis, built by Nasser, is situated amongst newly planted olive groves; young vineyards and stunning domed architectural structures. It is set against a backdrop of breathtaking high desert mountain scenery where silence and peace dominate this desert panorama. Upon our arrival we were greeted by Dr. Nasser and her Saidi staff adorned in crisp white local galabeyas, warm smiles and offering karkade. Here one feels heartfelt hospitality with a serene ambiance.

Open yearly from October to May, this retreat offers short and long-term residency for writers, artists, explorers, individuals, groups and organizations interested in holding artistic and training activities in the cultural space attached to it.

It is the history and philosophy, born in this region that makes the experience and the landscape truly extraordinary. The sum of the knowledge produced in ancient Hermopolis is nothing short of miraculous. As a visitor, I was

transfixed. The sum of this ancient knowledge is contained in the Corpus Hermeticum. It is a collection of manuscripts that were recovered in the city of Alexandria in the first century AD but date to much earlier times. There are seventeen texts in total, written in Greek, Latin and Coptic that represent the intellectual, philosophical and reflective tradition of ancient Egypt which revolves around the unity and harmony of man and the universe.

Hermopolis was known as a seat of wisdom and learning, often associated with Hellenized or Greek Egypt. This was a time that coincided with great philosophical growth. Hellenization was in many ways similar to our current concept of globalization. It was the first attempt in history to bring both East and West together and reconcile old religious thought with emerging theologies. Egypt was seen at that time as the melting pot of people, races and different belief systems.

Much like today, identities were being changed and challenged. Calling for a shift in attitude and life development, the principles of spiritual alchemy emphasize the connection between wisdom, transformation and healing and the universal belief that all people belong to the single family of mankind in a universe containing balance and order.

Hermeticism had an impact on the Gnostic traditions with its emphasis on the higher/spiritual growth of man through knowledge. This found expression in



Above: Interior of the Tomb of Petosiris, Tuna El-Gebel. This tomb is constructed to look like a temple (it looks rather like Dendera Temple). The outside is decorated in typical Late Period style, whilst the outer court is decorated in a Greek style. The Tomb of Petosiris was constructed around the time of the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, and seems to have been decorated like this to curry favour with the new rulers of Egypt.



Above: The Tomb of Petosiris stands near the modern entrance to the catacombs which stretch underground for many kilometers. Dug under the necropolis, thousands of sacred mummies of falcons, baboons and ibises were buried in the catacombs. My 15 y.o. son was astounded to hold in his hands the mummy of a baboon and was struck by the great reverence the ancient Egyptians held for animals. The ibis and baboon were sacred to Thoth, the god who had his cult centre at Hermopolis.

the spiritual forms of religions including Gnostic Christianity, Islamic Sufism and Judaic Kabala, and resonated with much of the thoughts intrinsic in Zoroastrianism and Indian philosophies. All have the Unity of Being as a fundamental principle despite the multitude of expressions. It is possible therefore to conclude that the Corpus Hermeticum is nothing short of a spiritual classic that contained the basic tenets of humanism.

Dr. Mervat Abdel Nasser MD, MPhil, FRCP unearthed this historical, spiritual and cultural heritage in our own Egyptian backyard. Her professional background and multiple interests have created the optimal nexus for the founding The New Hermopolis. A graduate of Cairo Medical School and a fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, London, she holds a Master degree in Philosophy and a Doctorate in Psychiatry from London University. She also a self-taught Egyptologist. A clinical psychiatrist, her research focused on the interface between Mind and Culture.

Taking an early retirement from Kings College London, she returned to Egypt expressly to found the New Hermopolis. As we sat within the sophisticated simplicity of the retreat, Dr. Nasser never ceased to impart wisdom and kindness. She is a giver in ever sense of the world. She fed us from her heart, mind, soul and hand. I learned that the ancient Hermopolis was the capital city of the 15th Nome of Upper Egypt, founded by Amenhotep IV





Above: Arched doorways and vaulted window demonstrate how insulation and ventilation are maximized through the use of stone and the implementation of domes in every structure.

Below: Recycled doors and windows were found in the region and installed accentuating the timelessness and history of this ancient land.

(Akhenaten) during the 18th dynasty. The pharaoh's vision was the creation of a place suited for light and enlightenment. He called it Akhet/aten or the Horizon of the Sun.

Archeologically, the city contains remnants of a temple dedicated to Thoth, known as the temple of Elevated Spirits, which is architecturally similar to the Parthenon in Greece. Alexander the Great and the famous Cleopatra VII, reputed for her love of knowledge and considered a great scholar in her own right, both frequented the Academy at Hermopolis, which had close links with the famed Alexandria library, transmitting and sharing knowledge.

Nearby, in Tuna El-Gebel one can visit the tombs of Petosiris and Isadora, both of which have inspired writers throughout centuries. The site contains very extensive underground catacombs that were reserved for the sacred symbols of Thoth, the Baboon and the Ibis bird. My 15-year-old son was astonished that the ancient Egyptians so revered animals that they would dedicate huge burial chambers for their mummification and burial. The local guide Khaled, a handsome young man with turquoise eyes, stood two meters tall in his crisp white galabeya. He let us hold the mummies of these sacred creatures.

Next to Tuna El Gebel, is Taha Hussain's rest house. A native of El Minia, he is known as the dean of letters and the architect of Egypt's modern enlightenment. It is said that the story of Isadora inspired Hussain's writings particularly Doaa El Karwan that was written at the site.





Historically, the ancient city of Hermopolis has had a worldwide affect, inspiring some of the greatest minds and achievements of the ancient world. It was the intellectual force behind centers such as Baghdad, with its famous House of Wisdom that epitomized Islamic learning and scientific achievement. Hermetic philosophy made its way to Florence, Italy by 1460, when an Egyptian monk brought fourteen Hermetic treatises (purportedly from the Corpus Hermeticum) to the New Platonic Academy that was established by the ruler of Florence at that time, the scholar Cosimo de Medici. He instantly realized that these texts were much older than Plato and Moses and ordered their immediate translation.

Translated by the Greek Scholar Marsillio Ficino, the text had a profound influence on major intellectual figures of the Italian renaissance. As in Alexandria one thousand years earlier, all aspects of human life were open for investigation. With the arrival of printing, Ficino's Hermetica found its way into the rest of Europe, signaling the end of the dark ages.

Hermeticism spread to Germany in the sixteenth century to German philosopher and physician Paracelsus who was declared the legitimate heir of the Egyptian Hermes. The true influence reached its peak with Goethe who was greatly affected. In England, historians argue that Thomas Moor's Utopia was inspired by Hermetic humanism particularly its emphasis on the idea of



Above: Sixteen domed limestone lodges house up to 52 visitors. They were hand built using ancient hand building techniques

Below: Interior of limestone structure lit by natural light.



Above: Local artists perform ancient Egyptian stick dancing while inviting guests to join them.

Below: Dr. Nasser invites local artists to perform at the New Hermopolis encouraging them to learn more about their ancient history and philosophy and engage with visitors from around the world.

religious freedom. The availability of the Hermetic text in Elizabethan England had its impact on major English figures such as Shakespeare, Francis Bacon and the mathematician philosopher John Dee.

Via the Elizabethan court, which was one of enlightened humanism, Hermeticism spread to the New World. Emerson commonly referred to as the prophet of American idealism, realized that the seeds of future thought were to be found in ancient wisdom. Emerson's concept was to find resonance later in Nietzsche's *Freigeist*.

Similar influence was exerted on the American philosopher/physician William James whose philosophy became known as the mind-cure movement. He stated that diversity is the default state of human experience and human satisfaction cannot be achieved unless self managed to live in harmony with its different mosaic parts. The same philosophy was echoed in Jungian thought

whose school of psychoanalysis is referred to as the "alchemy of the soul." It states that the balanced/harmonized soul cannot be achieved except through the union of the conscious and the unconscious chaotic parts of the self.

Hermetic philosophy has influenced many intellectual figures throughout history and has been manifested in the literary work of Umberto Eco, Louis Borges and Fernando Pessoa, and painters such as Max Ernst, Rene Magritte and Rebecca Horn. The philosophy also inspired one of the greatest works for children, the Harry Potter series.

Today's spiritual movements and some self-therapy literature find their roots

in Hermetic philosophy. Worldwide disillusionment, unprecedented human movement and an unparalleled wave towards religious extremism threaten all humanity. Hermeticism offers the possibility of union through diversity. It can therefore be considered as Umberto Eco said, "a reconciliatory third way identifying the various gods of different cultures with one another thus making what we consider foreign a comprehensible expression of what we regard as familiar."

If you are one who seeks to understand and discuss such thoughts and expressions, this is a destination you will want to visit. Surely your spirit and mind will be fed in this unique site while your physical comfort and needs will also be replenished.

The resort consists of 16 lodges that have a capacity for 52 visitors, made of limestone using old techniques of building. The retreat follows





ecological building principles, preserving water, recycling and utilizing solar energy. Each lodge consists of two rooms with vaulted ceilings and is named after one of the philosophers connected with the intellectual heritage of Hermopolis.

There is a large welcoming lounge, reading corners, a library/conference facility and a banquet room accommodating up to 120-seated guests. The courtyard and swimming pool areas are suitable for sunbathing and al fresco dining. Heritage sites in the region offer unique opportunities for cross-cultural sharing, learning, project collaboration and training opportunities with the local youth. Dr. Mervat has founded an NGO. The mission is to provide economic opportunities to underprivileged pockets of Egyptian society and create a space to nurture individual potential, foster self-expression, critical thought and creativity.

The New Hermopolis Project is registered by the Charity Commission, under section 3(7) of the Charities Act 1993, England and Wales (Registration Number/ 1111770) and in Egypt 2009/ Registration Number [7659]. For further information: <http://www.newhermopolis.org>. Ω

