

# On Images

Porphyry



# Table of Contents

<b><u>On Images</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Porphyry</u> .....	2
<u>Fragment 1</u> .....	3
<u>Fragment 2</u> .....	4
<u>Fragment 3</u> .....	5
<u>Fragment 4</u> .....	7
<u>Fragment 5</u> .....	8
<u>Fragment 6</u> .....	9
<u>Fragment 7</u> .....	10
<u>Fragment 8</u> .....	11
<u>Fragment 10</u> .....	13

# On Images

On Images

## Porphyry

Translated by Edwin Hamilton Gifford

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- [Fragment 1](#)
- [Fragment 2](#)
- [Fragment 3](#)
- [Fragment 4](#)
- [Fragment 5](#)
- [Fragment 6](#)
- [Fragment 7](#)
- [Fragment 8](#)
- [Fragment 10](#)

## On Images

### Fragment 1

I speak to those who lawfully may hear:

Depart all ye profane, and close the doors.

The thoughts of a wise theology, wherein men indicated God and God's powers by images akin to sense, and sketched invisible things in visible forms, I will show to those who have learned to read from the statues as from books the things there written concerning the gods. Nor is it any wonder that the utterly unlearned regard the statues as wood and stone, just as also those who do not understand the written letters look upon the monuments as mere stones, and on the tablets as bits of wood, and on books as woven papyrus.

## Fragment 2

As the deity is of the nature of light, and dwells in an atmosphere of ethereal fire, and is invisible to sense that is busy about mortal life, He through translucent matter, as crystal or Parian marble or even ivory, led men on to the conception of his light, and through material gold to the discernment of the fire, and to his undefiled purity, because gold cannot be defiled.

On the other hand, black marble was used by many to show his invisibility; and they moulded their gods in human form because the deity is rational, and made these beautiful, because in those is pure and perfect beauty; and in varieties of shape and age, of sitting and standing, and drapery; and some of them male, and some female, virgins, and youths, or married, to represent their diversity.

Hence they assigned everything white to the gods of heaven, and the sphere and all things spherical to the cosmos and to the sun and moon in particular, but sometimes also to fortune and to hope: and the circle and things circular to eternity, and to the motion of the heaven, and to the zones and cycles therein; and the segments of circles to the phases of the moon; pyramids and obelisks to the element of fire, and therefore to the gods of Olympus; so again the cone to the sun, and cylinder to the earth, and figures representing parts of the human body to sowing and generation.

On Images  
**Fragment 3**

'Now look at the wisdom of the Greeks, and examine it as follows. The authors of the Orphic hymns supposed Zeus to be the mind of the world, and that he created all things therein, containing the world in himself. Therefore in their theological systems they have handed down their opinions concerning him thus:'

Zeus was the first, Zeus last, the lightning's lord,  
Zeus head, Zeus centre, all things are from Zeus.  
Zeus born a male, Zeus virgin undefiled;  
Zeus the firm base of earth and starry heaven;  
Zeus sovereign, Zeus alone first cause of all:  
One power divine, great ruler of the world,  
One kingly form, encircling all things here,  
Fire, water, earth, and ether, night and day;  
Wisdom, first parent, and delightful Love:  
For in Zeus' mighty body these all lie.  
His head and beauteous face the radiant heaven  
Reveals and round him float in shining waves  
The golden tresses of the twinkling stars.  
On either side bulls' horns of gold are seen,  
Sunrise and sunset, footpaths of the gods.  
His eyes the Sun, the Moon's responsive light;  
His mind immortal ether, sovereign truth,  
Hears and considers all; nor any speech,  
Nor cry, nor noise, nor ominous voice escapes  
The ear of Zeus, great Kronos' mightier son:  
Such his immortal head, and such his thought.  
His radiant body, boundless, undisturbed  
In strength of mighty limbs was formed thus:  
The god's broad-spreading shoulders, breast and back  
Air's wide expanse displays; on either side  
Grow wings, wherewith throughout all space he flies.



## On Images

Earth the all-mother, with her lofty hills,  
His sacred belly forms; the swelling flood  
Of hoarse resounding Ocean girds his waist.  
His feet the deeply rooted ground upholds,  
And dismal Tartarus, and earth's utmost bounds.  
All things he hides, then from his heart again  
In godlike action brings to gladsome light.

Zeus, therefore, is the whole world, animal of animals, and god of gods; but Zeus, that is, inasmuch as he is the mind from which he brings forth all things, and by his thoughts creates them. When the theologians had explained the nature of god in this manner, to make an image such as their description indicated was neither possible, nor, if any one thought of it, could he show the look of life, and intelligence, and forethought by the figure of a sphere.

But they have made the representation of Zeus in human form, because mind was that according to which he wrought, and by generative laws brought all things to completion; and he is seated, as indicating the steadfastness of his power: and his upper parts are bare, because he is manifested in the intellectual and the heavenly parts of the world; but his feet are clothed, because he is invisible in the things that lie hidden below. And he holds his sceptre in his left hand, because most close to that side of the body dwells the heart, the most commanding and intelligent organ: for the creative mind is the sovereign of the world. And in his right hand he holds forth either an eagle, because he is master of the gods who traverse the air, as the eagle is master of the birds that fly aloft—or a victory, because he is himself victorious over all things.

On Images

## Fragment 4

They have made Hera the wife of Zeus, because they called the ethereal and aerial power Hera. For the ether is a very subtle air.

## Fragment 5

And the power of the whole air is Hera, called by a name derived from the air: but the symbol of the sublunar air which is affected by light and darkness is Leto; for she is oblivion caused by the insensibility in sleep, and because souls begotten below the moon are accompanied by forgetfulness of the Divine; and on this account she is also the mother of Apollo and Artemis, who are the sources of light for the night.

## Fragment 6

The ruling principle of the power of earth is called Hestia, of whom a statue representing her as a virgin is usually set up on the hearth; but inasmuch as the power is productive, they symbolize her by the form of a woman with prominent breasts. The name Rhea they gave to the power of rocky and mountainous land, and Demeter to that of level and productive land. Demeter in other respects is the same as Rhea, but differs in the fact that she gives birth to Kore by Zeus, that is, she produces the shoot from the seeds of plants. And on this account her statue is crowned with ears of corn, and poppies are set round her as a symbol of productiveness.

On Images  
**Fragment 7**

But since there was in the seeds cast into the earth a certain power, which the sun in passing round to the lower hemisphere drags down at the time of the winter solstice, Kore is the seminal power, and Pluto the sun passing under the earth, and traversing the unseen world at the time of the winter solstice; and he is said to carry off Kore, who, while hidden beneath the earth, is lamented by her mother Demeter.

The power which produces hard-shelled fruits, and the fruits of plants in general, is named Dionysus. But observe the images of these also. For Kore bears symbols of the production of the plants which grow above the earth in the crops: and Dionysus has horns in common with Kore, and is of female form, indicating the union of male and female forces in the generation of the hard shelled fruits.

But Pluto, the ravisher of Kore, has a helmet as a symbol of the unseen pole, and his shortened sceptre as an emblem of his kingdom of the nether world; and his dog indicates the generation of the fruits in its threefold division—the sowing of the seed, its reception by the earth, its growing up. For he is called a dog, not because souls are his food, but because of the earth's fertility, for which Pluto provides when he carries off Kore.

Attis, too, and Adonis are related to the analogy of fruits. Attis is the symbol of the blossoms which appear early in the spring, and fall off before the complete fertilization; whence they further attributed castration to him, from the fruits not having attained to seminal perfection: but Adonis was the symbol of the cutting of the perfect fruits.

Silenus was the symbol of the wind's motion, which contributes no few benefits to the world. And the flowery and brilliant wreath upon his head is symbolic of the revolution of the heaven, and the hair with which his lower limbs are surrounded is an indication of the density of the air near the earth.

Since there was also a power partaking of the prophetic faculty, the power is called Themis, because of its telling what is appointed and fixed for each person.

In all these ways, then, the power of the earth finds an interpretation and is worshipped: as a virgin and Hestia, she holds the centre; as a mother she nourishes; as Rhea she makes rocks and dwells on mountains; as Demeter, she produces herbage; and as Themis, she utters oracles: while the seminal law which descends into her bosom is figured as Priapus, the influence of which on dry crops is called Kore, and on soft fruits and shellfruits is called Dionysus. For Kore was carried off by Pluto, that is, the sun going; down beneath the earth at seed-time; but Dionysus begins to sprout according to the conditions of the power which, while young, is hidden beneath the earth, yet produces fine fruits, and is an ally of the power in the blossom symbolized by Attis, and of the cutting of the ripened corn symbolized by Adonis.

Also the power of the wind which pervades all things is formed into a figure of Silenus, and the perversion to frenzy into a figure of a Bacchante, as also the impulse which excites to lust is represented by the Satyrs. These, then, are the symbols by which the power of the earth is revealed.

On Images  
**Fragment 8**

The whole power productive of water they called Oceanus, and named its symbolic figure Tethys. But of the whole, the drinking-water produced is called Achelous; and the sea-water Poseidon; while again that which makes the sea, inasmuch as it is productive, is Amphitrite. Of the sweet waters the particular powers are called Nymphs, and those of the sea-waters Nereids.

Again, the power of fire they called Hephaestus, and have made his image in the form of a man, but put on it a blue cap as a symbol of the revolution of the heavens, because the archetypal and purest form of fire is there. But the fire brought down from heaven to earth is less intense, and wants the strengthening and support which is found in matter: wherefore he is lame, as needing matter to support him.

Also they supposed a power of this kind to belong to the sun and called it Apollo, from the pulsation of his beams. There are also nine Muses singing to his lyre, which are the sublunar sphere, and seven spheres of the planets, and one of the fixed stars. And they crowned him with laurel, partly because the plant is full of fire, and therefore hated by daemons; and partly because it crackles in burning, to represent the god's prophetic art.

But inasmuch as the sun wards off the evils of the earth, they called him Heracles (from his clashing against the air) in passing from east to west. And they invented fables of his performing twelve labours, as the symbol of the division of the signs of the zodiac in heaven; and they arrayed him with a club and a lion's skin, the one as an indication of his uneven motion, and the other representative of his strength in "Leo" the sign of the zodiac.

Of the sun's healing power Asclepius is the symbol, and to him they have given the staff as a sign of the support and rest of the sick, and the serpent is wound round it, as significant of his preservation of body and soul: for the animal is most full of spirit, and shuffles off the weakness of the body. It seems also to have a great faculty for healing: for it found the remedy for giving clear sight, and is said in a legend to know a certain plant which restores life.

But the fiery power of his revolving and circling motion, whereby he ripens the crops, is called Dionysus, not in the same sense as the power which produces the juicy fruits, but either from the sun's rotation, or from his completing his orbit in the heaven. And whereas he revolves round the cosmical seasons and is the maker of "times and tides," the sun is on this account called Horus.

Of his power over agriculture, whereon depend the gifts of wealth, the symbol is Pluto. He has, however, equally the power of destroying, on which account they make Sarapis share the temple of Pluto: and the purple tunic they make the symbol of the light that has sunk beneath the earth, and the sceptre broken at the top that of his power below, and the posture of the hand the symbol of his departure into the unseen world.

Cerberus is represented with three heads, because the positions of the sun above the earth are three—rising, midday, and setting.

The moon, conceived according to her brightness, they called Artemis, as it were, "cutting the air." And Artemis, though herself a virgin, presides over childbirth, because the power of the new moon is helpful to parturition.

What Apollo is to the sun, that Athena is to the moon: for the moon is a symbol of wisdom, and so a kind of Athena.

But, again, the moon is Hecate, the symbol of her varying phases and of her power dependent on the phases. Wherefore her power appears in three forms, having as symbol of the new moon the figure in the white robe and golden sandals, and torches lighted: the basket, which she bears when she has mounted high, is the symbol of the cultivation of the crops, which she makes to grow up according to the increase of her light: and again the symbol of the full moon is the goddess of the brazen sandals.

Or even from the branch of olive one might infer her fiery nature, and from the poppy her productiveness, and the multitude of the souls who find an abode in her as in a city, for the poppy is an emblem of a city. She bears a bow, like Artemis, because of the sharpness of the pangs of labour.

And, again, the Fates are referred to her powers, Clotho to the generative, and Lachesis to the nutritive, and Atropos to the inexorable will of the deity.

Also, the power productive of corn-crops, which is Demeter, they associate with her, as producing power in

## On Images

her. The moon is also a supporter of Kore. They set Dionysus also beside her, both on account of their growth of horns, and because of the region of clouds lying beneath the lower world.

The power of Kronos they perceived to be sluggish and slow and cold, and therefore attributed to him the power of time: and they figure him standing, and grey-headed, to indicate that time is growing old.

The Curetes, attending on Chronos, are symbols of the seasons, because time journeys on through seasons.

Of the Hours, some are the Olympian, belonging to the sun, which also open the gates in the air: and others are earthly, belonging to Demeter, and hold a basket, one symbolic of the flowers of spring, and the other of the wheat-ears of summer.

The power of Ares they perceived to be fiery, and represented it as causing war and bloodshed, and capable both of harm and benefit.

The star of Aphrodite they observed as tending to fecundity, being the cause of desire and offspring, and represented it as a woman because of generation, and as beautiful, because it is also the evening star —

"Hesper, the fairest star that shines in heaven." [Homer, Iliad 22:318]

And Eros they set by her because of desire. She veils her breasts and other parts, because their power is the source of generation and nourishment. She comes from the sea, a watery element, and warm, and in constant movement, and foaming because of its commotion, whereby they intimate the seminal power.

Hermes is the representative of reason and speech, which both accomplish and interpret all things. The phallic Hermes represents vigour, but also indicates the generative law that pervades all things.

Further, reason is composite: in the sun it is called Hermes; in the moon Hecate; and that which is in the All Hermopan, for the generative and creative reason extends over all things. Hermanubis also is composite, and as it were half Greek, being found among the Egyptians also. Since speech is also connected with the power of love, Eros represents this power: wherefore Eros is represented as the son of Hermes, but as an infant, because of his sudden impulses of desire.

They made Pan the symbol of the universe, and gave him his horns as symbols of sun and moon, and the fawn skin as emblem of the stars in heaven, or of the variety of the universe.

## Fragment 10

The Demiurge, whom the Egyptians call Cnep, is of human form, but with a skin of dark blue, holding a girdle and a sceptre, and crowned with a royal wing on his head, because reason is hard to discover, and wrapt up in secret, and not conspicuous, and because it is life-giving, and because it is a king, and because it has an intelligent motion: wherefore the characteristic wing is put upon his head.

This god, they say, puts forth from his mouth an egg, from which is born a god who is called by themselves Phtha, but by the Greeks Hephaestus; and the egg they interpret as the world. To this god the sheep is consecrated, because the ancients used to drink milk.

The representation of the world itself they figured thus: the statue is like a man having feet joined together, and clothed from head to foot with a robe of many colours, and has on the head a golden sphere, the first to represent its immobility, the second the many-coloured nature of the stars, and the third because the world is spherical.

The sun they indicate sometimes by a man embarked on a ship, the ship set on a crocodile. And the ship indicates the sun's motion in a liquid element: the crocodile potable water in which the sun travels. The figure of the sun thus signified that his revolution takes place through air that is liquid and sweet.

The power of the earth, both the celestial and terrestrial earth, they called Isis, because of the equality, which is the source of justice: but they call the moon the celestial earth, and the vegetative earth, on which we live, they call the terrestrial.

Demeter has the same meaning among the Greeks as Isis among the Egyptians: and, again, Kore and Dionysus among the Greeks the same as Isis and Osiris among the Egyptians. Isis is that which nourishes and raises up the fruits of the earth; and Osiris among the Egyptians is that which supplies the fructifying power, which they propitiate with lamentations as it disappears into the earth in the sowing, and as it is consumed by us for food.

Osiris is also taken for the river-power of the Nile: when, however, they signify the terrestrial earth, Osiris is taken as the fructifying power; but when the celestial, Osiris is the Nile, which they suppose to come down from heaven: this also they bewail, in order to propitiate the power when failing and becoming exhausted. And the Isis who, in the legends, is wedded to Osiris is the land of Egypt, and therefore she is made equal to him, and conceives, and produces the fruits; and on this account Osiris has been described by tradition as the husband of Isis, and her brother, and her son.

At the city Elephantine there is an image worshipped, which in other respects is fashioned in the likeness of a man and sitting; it is of a blue colour, and has a ram's head, and a diadem bearing the horns of a goat, above which is a quoit-shaped circle. He sits with a vessel of clay beside him, on which he is moulding the figure of a man. And from having the face of a ram and the horns of a goat he indicates the conjunction of sun and moon in the sign of the Ram, while the colour of blue indicates that the moon in that conjunction brings rain.

The second appearance of the moon is held sacred in the city of Apollo: and its symbol is a man with a hawk-like face, subduing with a hunting-spear Typhon in the likeness of a hippopotamus. The image is white in colour, the whiteness representing the illumination of the moon, and the hawk-like face the fact that it derives light and breath from the sun. For the hawk they consecrate to the sun, and make it their symbol of light and breath, because of its swift motion, and its soaring up on high, where the light is. And the hippopotamus represents, the Western sky, because of its swallowing up into itself the stars which traverse it.

In this city Horus is worshipped as a god. But the city of Eileithyia worships the third appearance of the moon: and her statue is fashioned into a flying vulture, whose plumage consists of precious stones. And its likeness to a vulture signifies that the moon is what produces the winds: for they think that the vulture conceives from the wind, and declares that they are all hen birds.

In the mysteries at Eleusis the hierophant is dressed up to represent the demiurge, and the torch-bearer the sun, the priest at the altar the moon, and the sacred herald Hermes.

Moreover a man is admitted by the Egyptians among their objects of worship. For there is a village in Egypt called Anabis, in which a man is worshipped, and sacrifice offered to him, and the victims burned upon his altars:



## On Images

and after a little while he would eat the things that had been prepared for him as for a man.

They did not, however, believe the animals to be gods, but regarded them as likenesses and symbols of gods; and this is shown by the fact that in many places oxen dedicated to the gods are sacrificed at their monthly festivals and in their religious services. For they consecrated oxen to the sun and moon.

The ox called Mnevis which is dedicated to the sun in Heliopolis, is the largest of oxen, very black, chiefly because much sunshine blackens men's bodies. And its tail and all its body are covered with hair that bristles backwards unlike other cattle, just as the sun makes its course in the opposite direction to the heaven. Its testicles are very large, since desire is produced by heat, and the sun is said to fertilize nature.

To the moon they dedicated a bull which they call Apis, which also is more black than others, and bears symbols of sun and moon, because the light of the moon is from the sun. The blackness of his body is an emblem of the sun, and so is the beetle-like mark under his tongue; and the symbol of the moon is the semicircle, and the gibbous figure.

THE END