

# Occult knowledge and sacred geometry

## *A new interpretation of a portrait of Rubens and his son from the Hermitage Museum*

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### Abstract

This paper explores the diversity and complexity of Rubens's humanist interests and illustrates his appropriation of learned and esoteric knowledge, by discussing the anonymous painting in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in which Rubens is portrayed together with his son Albert. This portrait also depicts a sculpture from Rubens's collection, that of *Hecate Triformis*, who in antiquity was considered to be a goddess of the underworld. By focusing on the books, manuscripts, Gnostic gems, and the Hecate statue from the artist's collections, this paper will provide a new iconographic analysis of the Hermitage painting.

*Keywords:* Peter Paul Rubens, Albert Rubens, Hecate Triformis, Abraxas, natural philosophy

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### *A new interpretation of a portrait of Rubens and his son from the Hermitage Museum\**

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The double portrait from the Hermitage shows Rubens seated in an armchair beside a table with his eldest son Albert standing on his right (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> With his left hand he leans on the volute of the handrail, while holding a half folded sheet of paper on which a drawing can be seen between the thumb and forefinger of the right hand. In a niche behind the artist is a statue of *Hecate Triformis*, a piece of ancient sculpture that is known to have belonged to Rubens.<sup>2</sup> Hecate is crowned by an antique oil lamp. Below, on the table, we can see a copper vase with a very elaborate baroque mount in the shape of a Gorgon's head and an 'all'antica' lion's foot stand. All these elements have been interpreted by previous researchers as a reflection of Rubens's role as a humanist and antiquarian. Frédéric Bastet thus suggested that Rubens could have identified the three

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1 Anonymous artist, *Rubens and his son Albert*, 133.5×112.2 cm, St Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. GE 7728.

2 *Hecate*, after a Greek original by Alkamenes, ca. 420 B.C. Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, inv. no. 1818 (1745): Pb 136; F.L. Bastet and H. Brunsting, *Corpus signorum classicorum musei antiquarii Lugduno-Batavi*, Zutphen 1982, no. 59. This statue was in the possession of various collectors prior to its acquisition by the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. It belonged to Peter Paul Rubens until 1626, when it was sold to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1592-1628); it was registered in the 1635 inventory of the Buckingham collection. After the dispersion of the Duke's collection, it was acquired by Reinier van der Wolff in Antwerp around 1649-1650; at the end of the seventeenth century the Hecate statue entered the collection of Nicolaes Chevalier in Utrecht (as 'The Three Graces'); subsequently it was acquired by Gerard van Papenbroek (1673-1743) and from the Papenbroek bequest the statue arrived in the University of Leiden in 1743. On the provenance of the Hecate statue see, J.M. Muller, *Rubens. The artist as collector*, Princeton 1989, p. 152, plate 132; F.L. Bastet, 'Oudheden uit Rubens' verzameling te Leiden', in: *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 235 (1980), p. 76; F. Oudendorp, *Brevis veterum monumentorum ab amplissimo viro Gerardo Papenbroekie Academiae Lugduno-Batavae legatorum descriptio*, Leiden 1746, p. 75-76, no. 48.



*Fig. 1 Anonymous artist, Rubens and his son Albert, 133.5×112.2 cm, St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. GE 7728, photograph © The State Hermitage Museum, photo by Vladimir Terebenin.*

female caryatids forming the statue of Hecate as the Three Graces and he interpreted the visible lines of the drawing as an architectural design.<sup>3</sup> This led him to conclude that the portrait should be understood as a ‘situation pédagogique’ with Rubens teaching

<sup>3</sup> According to Bastet, ‘Oudheden uit Rubens’ verzameling’, the drawing might possibly refer to Rubens’s semicircular gallery for the display of his collection of antiquities.

his son.<sup>4</sup> The latest publications on this painting also refer to the presence of father and son expressing the idea of education, and the presence of antique objects and books as a metaphor of a shared love of the ancient world.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier scholars showed little interest in the dark sky and the burning oil lamp on the column of the statue. The glow of the flame, the torches held by the women and the vase with the Gorgon's head suggest an association with Hecate's description in literary sources as a nocturnal divinity and a goddess of the underworld.<sup>6</sup> The presence of Hecate might indicate that Rubens and those around him were familiar with the complex and varied meanings that the ancients bestowed upon her: Rubens would have learned such things from his study of Greek and Roman texts. An analysis of the iconography should help inform us of the degree to which the portrait of Rubens and his son Albert embodies the artist's ideas on and knowledge of the antique.

The essay is divided into three parts. The first paragraph illustrates the many unanswered questions concerning authorship and dating of the picture. The second surveys Rubens's knowledge of archaeological subjects, focusing on his correspondence with distinguished scholars as well as on the artist's books and gems, in an attempt to understand Rubens's own view of Hecate and the meaning the statue invests in the portrait of father and son. This argument leads to the third part of the article which proposes a new iconographical interpretation and dating of the Hermitage painting, also suggesting its relationship with Van Dyck's portrait of Isabella Brant.

### *Attribution and dating*

This work is one of two identical versions of a portrait in which Rubens is pictured with his eldest son, Albert, who would later become a lawyer, secretary of the Privy Council in Brussels and author of a series of archaeological works. The second version is exhibited in the Rubens House in Antwerp, and is on long-term loan from the Art Collection of the University of Göttingen.<sup>7</sup> Both works are painted on canvas and have almost identical dimensions, but the superior brushwork of the Hermitage version suggests that this is the prototype and the painting in Göttingen a replica. In both cases there are uncertainties concerning authorship. It is also not clear for whom the

4 Bastet, 'Oudheden uit Rubens' verzameling', p. 76.

5 On this picture and the second version, see F. Healy, 'Portrait of Rubens and his son Albert before a statue of Hecate Triformis', in: K.L. Belkin and F. Healy (eds.), *A house of art. Rubens as collector*, Antwerp 2004, p. 241–243, no. 57; N. Gritsaj, 'Rubens and his atelier', in: *Rubens, Van Dyck & Jordaens. Flemish painters from the Hermitage*, Amsterdam 2011–2012, p. 58–59, no. 17.

6 W.H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Leipzig 1890. Hecate, Artemis and Kore were called *Deae Triviae*, because of the goddesses's association with crossroads.

7 Anonymous artist, *Rubens and his son Albert*, 134×115 cm, Göttingen, Kunstsammlung der Universität Göttingen.

paintings were made or why there are two versions. In all likelihood, they remained in the family or belonged to Rubens's social circle.

The Hermitage version is not mentioned in the 'Specification', the inventory of Rubens's paintings and sculptures included in the sale after his death.<sup>8</sup> The intimate character of the picture showing father and son together with two objects of Rubens's collection let us suppose that this private work was intended for the painter's house and his immediate family. After all, in his will Rubens stipulated that the portraits of himself and his wives were not to be sold, but given to the children.<sup>9</sup> The picture has a distinguished provenance. In the eighteenth century it was purchased by Count Alexander Stroganov, art advisor to Catherine the Great, probably during his stay in Paris between 1771 and 1779. The painting belonged to the Stroganov family until it was transferred to the Hermitage Museum in 1932.

Although this picture is one of the most intimate portraits in which the artist appears together with his beloved son, it is not a self-portrait, but a work by the hand of one of his pupils. Its attribution remains an unanswered question. It was first mentioned in 1793, when in the catalogue of the Stroganov collection it was considered to be a work by Rubens. Subsequently, Max Rooses suggested it could be a copy of a lost self-portrait by Rubens, made by one of his pupils.<sup>10</sup> Later authors have attributed the work to both Van Dyck,<sup>11</sup> and Jan Cossiers.<sup>12</sup> In more recent catalogues it appears as a work by an anonymous Flemish artist. In any case, it can be assumed with certainty that the author must have had a close relationship with his master, not only because he had access to the wide range of material sources available in Rubens's atelier, but he was also well versed in Rubens's iconography, probably sharing the same intellectual background.

The picture was executed using existing material, namely Rubens's self-portrait in the Rubens House (fig. 2). Vlieghe suggests that Rubens's self-portrait, with its informal character and neutral background, may have been some kind of prototype that the painter made with the intention of using it in more sophisticated and detailed compositions at a later stage. Indeed, this work served as the model for two group portraits with Rubens's second wife Helena Fourment, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, which

8 See Müller, *Rubens. The artist as collector* (n. 2), p. 148, no. 6.

9 For Rubens's will see P. Génard, 'Het laatste testament van P.P. Rubens', in: *Rubens-Bulletin* 4 (1896), p. 139. This stipulation is repeated in the 1645 inventory of Rubens's estate: P. Génard, 'De nalatenschap van P.P. Rubens. Staetmasse ende reke ninge van alle ende jegelycke de goeden, ruerende ende onruerende, competerende den sterffhuyse van wylen heer Pietro Paulo Rubens', in: *Antwerpsch Archivenblad* 2 (1865), p. 93-94: 'Aengaende de contrefeytsels van desselfs heer afflyvigens huysvrouwen ende van hem selven daerop corresponderende, alsoo hy by synen voors. Testamente begeert ende geordonneert heeft, dat die sullen volgen aen henne respectie kinderen' (Concerning the portraits of the wives of the deceased and the corresponding self-portraits, he desired and ordered in the present testament that they should go to his children).

10 M. Rooses, *Rubens, Leben und Werke*, Stuttgart, Berlin, Leipzig 1905, p. 309.

11 S.J. Jaremitsch, *Gosudarstwenny Ermitage* 3, Leningrad 1949, p. 3; the same in N. Gritsai, *Antonis van Dyck*, Bornemouth, St. Petersburg 1996, p. 8, fig. 2.

12 D. Jaffé, *Rubens' self-portrait in focus*, Canberra 1988, p. 27.



Fig. 2 Peter Paul Rubens, Self-portrait, c. 1622–1630, inv. no. RH.S.180, Rubenshuis, Antwerp, photo by Michel Wuyts and Louis De Peuter.

must date from after their wedding in 1630. On these grounds, Vlieghe dates the portrait around 1630 after Rubens's return to Antwerp from his diplomatic missions to Madrid and London between August 1628 and March 1630. The same year also figures on a print by Willem Panneels reproducing Rubens's informal self-portrait.<sup>13</sup> Even more interesting is the existence of a drawing now in the Albertina in Vienna where the same feature of the artist appears once again.<sup>14</sup> This drawing is now dated after 1628 and it is attributed to an anonymous Flemish artist.<sup>15</sup> Formerly, it

<sup>13</sup> H. Vlieghe, *Portraits of identified sitters painted in Antwerp*, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard 19, 2, London 1987, p. 157–159, no. 136. On the Rubenshuis self-portrait, see B. van Beneden, 'Self-portrait c. 1623–1630', in: *Rubens in private. The master portrays his family*, Antwerp 2015, p. 138–139, no. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous Flemish artist, *Portrait of Peter Paul Rubens*, black and red chalk, 280×195 mm, Vienna, Albertina, Grafische Sammlung, inv. no. 8202.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. Glück and F.M. Haberditzl, *Die Handzeichnungen von Peter Paul Rubens*, Berlin 1928. Here, the drawing is already attributed to an anonymous artist and dated around 1630; under the drawing we read the following inscription: 'Ds Petrus Paulus Rubens Pictor Excellens'. See also Vlieghe, *Portraits of identified sitters painted in Antwerp*, p. 153–157, no. 136.

was considered to be a work by Van Dyck and a model for the portrait in the Hermitage.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the case the informal approach of this picture is confirmed by the fact that it only appears in portraits with other family members where he presents himself as a husband and a father. In the Hermitage portrait, together with the Hecate statue, the copper vase with the Gorgon's head is also known to have belonged to Rubens's collection. In 1635 he donated the vase to his friend, the French scholar Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc, who at that time was showing a particular interest in the weights and measures of ancient vases made of bronze and precious stone. In April 1636 Peiresc received 'the bronze *cyathus* of Mr Rubens decorated with the head of Medusa (*Gorgoneion*)',<sup>17</sup> and in his letter of 16 August 1636 Rubens mentioned the reproduction of a cast of his vase. It might be possible that the anonymous artist worked from the original, in Rubens's possession until 1635, but it is also possible that he made use of a cast. This is also the case for the Hecate statue, which was in Rubens's collection until 1626 when it was sold together with a large part of his collection of antiquities to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (fig. 3).<sup>18</sup> When originals were not at hand, Rubens and his pupils had to use



**16** H.G. Evers, *Rubens und sein Werk. Neue Forschungen*, Brussel 1943, p. 330, 335; fig. 358. The drawing is described 'unter der Wiener Zeichnung eine Skizze von Van Dyck, oder doch ein leichter Entwurf von Rubens selbst verborgen liegt, den dieser im Augenblick eines freundlichen Gesprächs hingeworfen hätte, ist nicht zu entscheiden.'

**17** Peiresc's letter of April 1636 with the description of Rubens's vase is kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. Fr. 9532, fol. 185r.

**18** Bastet, 'Oudheden uit Rubens' verzameling' (n. 2).

Fig. 3 Hecate, c. 420 B.C., Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, inv. no. 1818 (1745): Pb 136.

casts made of sulphur, plaster or wax, often coloured to resemble as closely as possible the original stone which the artist wanted to reproduce. Nevertheless this does not constitute sufficient evidence to date the Hermitage painting. Based on Albert's age the portrait has previously been dated around 1622.<sup>19</sup> Albert's apparent age led Belkin to date the Rubenshuis self-portrait to around 1622–1623 also considering the fact that Rubens looks younger than the fifty-four he would have been in 1630.<sup>20</sup> However, portraits – especially self-portraits and those of children – do not offer a reliable guide to the sitter's age. Therefore, the age of the child should not be considered a conclusive and incontestable argument here to establish the dating. Possibly the artist only had a portrait of Albert at this age to rely on or wanted to show him at this age for a specific reason. We have several portraits of Albert in childhood drawn by his father, but none of these show a boy of this particular age and in the same pose.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, it does not seem that the anonymous artist was directly inspired by Rubens's portrait of *Albert and Nicolaas* of c. 1626–1627, now in the Liechtenstein Palace, where Albert appears to be about twelve. Possibly the source of this portrait is an earlier drawing or portrait study of Albert, as has already been suggested.<sup>22</sup> Considering the somewhat melancholic tone of the composition and the presence of Hecate, goddess of the underworld, this picture might be linked to death – and in particular to the death of Isabella Brant, Rubens's first wife and mother of Albert. In this case it might have been made after Isabella's death in 1626. Moreover, the anonymous artist seems to have been directly inspired by Rubens's self-portrait and the drawing in the Albertina, both dated between 1628 and 1630, which rule out an earlier date.

### *Rubens, Albert and Peiresc on tripods, gems and other antiquities*

The previous paragraph has demonstrated that the Hermitage portrait, although not painted by the master himself, certainly reflects his interest in classical archaeology and literature. This interest connected him to a network of learned men for whom correspondence about classical art and culture was a fundamental part of their humanistic and intellectual activity. Drawings, books, engraved gems, amulets and other antiquities were exchanged and discussed in their letters in a scholarly manner, providing material for a 'most curious discourse'.<sup>23</sup> Rubens's letters are very often filled with

**19** Albert Rubens was born on the 5th June 1614. He looks to be about eight years old in both the Hermitage painting and its copy in Göttingen.

**20** Belkin and Healy, *A house of art* (n. 5), p. 236–237, no. 55.

**21** Two studies from life of Albert Rubens were drawn by his father when the child was about four years old. They show him in profile and were integrated by Rubens in a number of his compositions. On this subject, see A.M. Logan and M.C. Plomp, *Peter Paul Rubens. The drawings*, New Haven 2005, no. cats. 78–79.

**22** Belkin and Healy, *A house of art*, p. 241, no. 57.

**23** 'Un discorzo molto curioso', Peiresc to Pignoria, 25 July 1618. Carp. Bibl. Inguimb, ms. 1875 fol. 352v.

references to an encyclopedic body of ancient texts. Likewise, the contents of his remarkable library,<sup>24</sup> as well as the study of the artist's method of juxtaposing selected texts and images in his works have consistently shown Rubens's impressive knowledge of the antique.<sup>25</sup> The artist's erudition and mastery of the classical literary tradition was already acknowledged by his contemporaries; in one of his letters, Rubens's friend, the French humanist Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc, writes enthusiastically about his learned correspondent: 'In matters of antiquity he possesses the most universal and remarkable knowledge that I have ever encountered.'<sup>26</sup> Even more interesting in the present context is the fact that Rubens's son, too, took part in the antiquarian discourses. From a very young age, Albert devoted himself to the study of Greek, Latin, antiquities and numismatics and he soon gained the reputation of being a distinguished classical scholar. He became the author of several archaeological treatises on imperial coinage and ancient clothing.<sup>27</sup> After the death of his father in 1640, Albert inherited the library and half of the gem collection, which he later completed with the other half bought from his younger brother Nicolaas.<sup>28</sup> Albert, with his wide-ranging interests in subjects from antiquity, contributed to the circulation of knowledge not only through his dissertations but also through his elaborate annotations on drawings and letters by his father. In a letter written to Peiresc on August 1630, a very proud Rubens announces to his friend that his son has added several passages from ancient authors in support of his opinion concerning the function of the tripod.<sup>29</sup> The letters exchanged between

**24** On Rubens's library see E. McGrath, *Rubens. Subjects from history*, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard 13, 1, London 1997, p. 55-67; P. Arents et al., *De bibliotheek van Pieter Pauwel Rubens*, Antwerp 2001; Belkin and Healy, *A house of art*.

**25** On the relationship between art and theory in Rubens's works, see R.W. Lee, 'Ut Pictura Poesis. The humanistic theory of painting', in: *The Art Bulletin* 22 (1940), p. 197-269; M. Winner, *Peter Paul Rubens. Kritischer Katalog der Zeichnungen*, Berlin 1977, p. 33, no. 5; M. Jaffé, *Van Dyck's Antwerp sketchbook*, London 1966; J.M. Muller, 'Rubens's theory and practice of the imitation of art', in: *The Art Bulletin* 64 (1982), p. 229-247; P.P. Rubens, *Théorie de la figure humaine*, ed. N. Laneyrie-Dagen, Paris 2003; D. Jaffé and A. Bradley, 'Rubens's "Pocketbook". An introduction to the creative process', in: D. Jaffé et al. (eds.), *Rubens. A master in the making*, London 2005, p. 21-27.

**26** 'In materia dell'antiquita principalmente, egli ha una notizia la piu universale et la piu esquisita ch'io viddi mai.' Cf. M. Rooses and C. Ruelens, *Correspondance et documents epistolaires concernant sa vie et ses oeuvres*, 1887-1909, vol. II, p. 336.

**27** A. Rubens, *De Re Vestitaria Veterum*, Antwerp 1655.

**28** Génard, 'Het Laatste Testament van P.P. Rubens' (n. 9), p. 11: 'Aan Albert gaf hij als "prelefaat de boecken ende bibliotecque en aen den selven Albert mitsgaders aen joncker Nicolaes Rubens, tsaemen elcke voor de helft alle de agaeten ende medallien, wtgenomen de vasen van agate, jaspis ende andere costelijcke gesteenten, met conditie dat sylieden de voors agaeten ende medaillen nyet en sullen mogen vercoopen dan tsaemen ende met gemeynen consente, op conditie oock van tselve syn testament int minste pointe nyet te mogen bestrijden oft te contravenieren op pene van affheninge derselver prelefaeten.'"

**29** Rooses and Ruelens, *Correspondance et documents*, vol. v, p. 309-312. Peiresc's original letters to Rubens, of November and December 1629, and the copy of his essay which accompanied them have not survived. See also M. van der Meulen, 'A note on Rubens's letter on tripods', in: *Burlington Magazine* 119 (1977), p. 646-651. Albert's note is preserved in Paris, BnF ms fr. 9530, fol. 289r.

Rubens and Peiresc on antique tripods, between 1629 and 1630,<sup>30</sup> give proof of Albert's knowledge of antique subjects from a very young age, knowledge obtained from his scholarly training in texts. The shared interest of these scholars in antique tripods was a consequence of their efforts to understand the hidden mysteries of the pagan religion and their connections with magic and theurgy of the first centuries of the Christian era. This correspondence is particularly relevant in the present context because it gives us information about aspects of the tripod for which there are unequivocal parallels in Hecate. These antique objects were very popular collector's items in the seventeenth century. The reason for the great interest in both Hecate and the tripod was inspired by their form, the triform being viewed as a fundamental aspect of religious beliefs and a prefiguration of the Holy Trinity.<sup>31</sup> Except for their common Trinitarian aspects, their connection with the number three and the triangular figure made them sacred objects tied to oracular divination practices.<sup>32</sup> In his *Dissertatio* devoted to the Delphic Tripod, Peiresc explains that the priestess of Apollo sat on the three-footed base of the tripod for the convenience of catching the prophetic exhalations when delivering her oracles.<sup>33</sup> He focuses his attention upon the 'equilateral triangle inscribed in a circle' on the tripod's base, through which, according to Peiresc, the priestess could receive the demonic spirit from the chasm beneath (fig. 4).<sup>34</sup> He believed that 'the ancients made use of this figure as a symbol of their most arcane philosophy', and that they understood by it 'an infinity of other things which include the principles of primitive philosophy and the most profound mysteries of their paganism.'<sup>35</sup> According to Plato, Pythagoras and other ancient philosophers, the triangular figure symbolizes the perfec-

**30** On this subject see A. Ossa Richardson, 'Nicholas Peiresc and the Delphic Tripod in the Republic of Letters', in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 74 (2011), p. 263-279.

**31** Cf. C. Dempsey, 'The classical perception of nature in Poussin's earlier works', in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966), p. 219-249, esp. 230 and n. 40, on the Renaissance perception of Trinitarian aspects in the Delphic Tripod. For Hecate, see E. Wind, *Pagan mysteries in the Renaissance*, New York, London 1968, p. 248-253.

**32** P.P. Rubens: 'et che il Tripode significasse ogni sorte d'oraculo e misterio sacro'; Rooses and Ruelens, *Correspondance et documents*, vol. v, p. 311.

**33** N.-C. Fabri de Peiresc, 'Dissertatio de tripode', in: *Continuation des Memoires de litterature et d'histoire*, 11 vols., ed. P.-N. Desmolets et al., Paris 1726-1732, p. 10, 261-262. Peiresc's autograph draft of his dissertation, labelled '1630. Tripod d'Apollo' and 'Le tripod', is preserved in Paris, BnF ms fr. 9530, fol. 266r-273v.

**34** The piece of paper that Rubens holds in his hand, shows a partially visible equilateral triangle inscribed in a circle which recalls the figure on the tripod's base described by Peiresc as 'Trigonum mysticum'. Peiresc's description is found in Paris, BnF ms fr. 9530, fol. 303r-303v. For a further discussion on this topic see, T. Esposito, *Peter Paul Rubens and the distribution of secret knowledge in Antwerp and Italy*, PhD dissertation (forthcoming).

**35** Peiresc, 'Dissertatio de tripode': 'Que si on vouloit rapporter à toutes ces figures là, ce que Platon, Pythagore & autres anciens Philosophes ont voulu s'imaginer pour les principes de la nature et pour le rapport qu'elles pouvoient avoir avec les attributz que l'on donnoit aux principales déitez de leur temps, il s'y trouveroit de merveilleux mysteres [...]. Car tout ce qu'ilz disoient, tant de l'unité & rotundité du monde (pour estre la figure du Créateur) & de sa circonférence que de ce grand triangle aequilatéral qui coprenoit les trois élémentz du feu, de l'air, & de l'eau [...].'

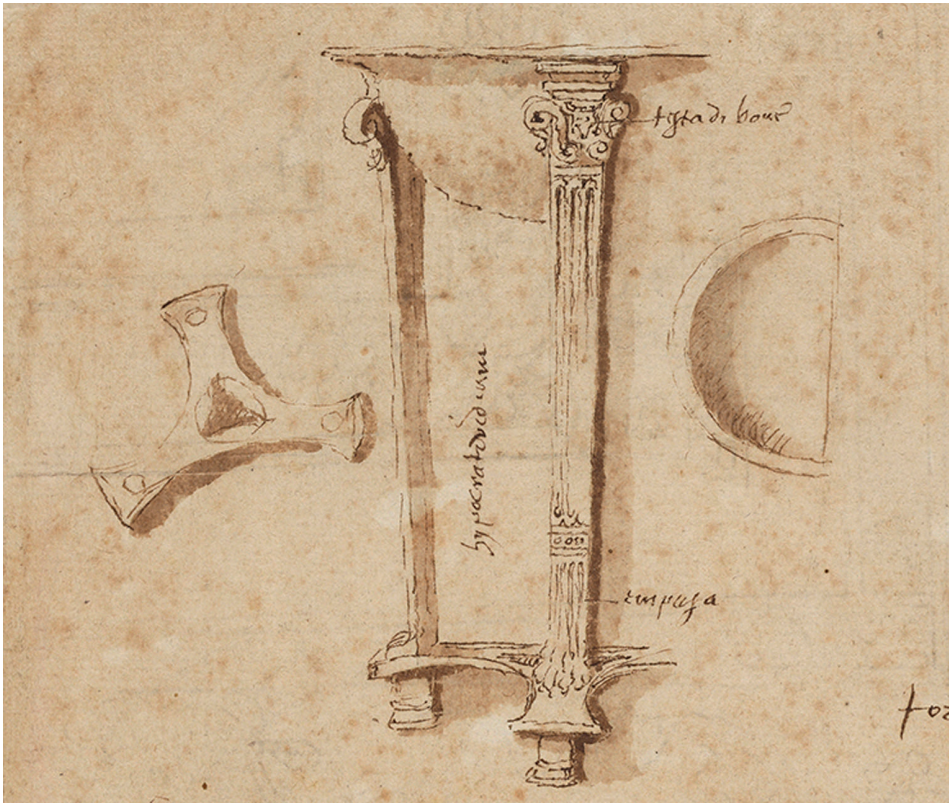


Fig. 4 Nicolas Poussin, 'Studies of Antiquities', in: The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection, 26.8×19.7 cm; the recto of this sheet shows Peirec's tripod with drawings of the bowl (right) and the base (left), c. 1645.

tion of the Cosmos and of its Creator.<sup>36</sup> The number three, according to Aristotle in his first book on the Heavens, is all-encompassing – the beginning, middle and end – and of all numbers the most perfect.<sup>37</sup> 'Beginning and end' is also a divine epithet of Hecate found in many magical texts dedicated to her. In this context she acquires a cosmic significance and is therefore also described as 'key-bearing mistress of the entire Cosmos'.<sup>38</sup> A similar description is assigned to God as we can read in Plato's *Laws*: 'God [...] holds the beginning, the middle and the end of all things which exist', a statement quoted by several early Christian authors.<sup>39</sup> This notion of God was surely known

<sup>36</sup> P. Gorman, *Pythagoras. A life*, London 1979, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *De Caelo*, I. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, vol. 4, p. 2836–2837. See also D.E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, prophecy and magic in early Christianity. Collected essays*, Tübingen 2006, p. 355. Also of significance is the religious description of God as the *arche kai telos*, the beginning and end of all things or that of Christ in the book of Revelation 21:6; 22:13.

<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 4.715E. This notion of God is also found in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.25.5; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2.22; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.15.

to Rubens, who would have seen in this sacred number a prefiguration of the Holy Trinity: the number three transcends all things, just as God is both One and Three.<sup>40</sup> The artist's *Theoretical Notebook*,<sup>41</sup> compiled during his stay in Italy from 1600 till 1608, gives clear evidence of Rubens's interest in natural philosophy, Cabala, notions from Paracelsian alchemy and Pythagorean number mysticism.<sup>42</sup>

It is also possible that Rubens and Peiresc exchanged their knowledge on the iconography of Hecate since from Peiresc's files and letters we know that also the French scholar possessed a statue of *Hecate Triformis* in his cabinet of antiquities (fig. 5). In the inventory of 1766 this sculpture is described as 'Groupe de trois femmes, debouc, dos à dos, tenans chacune une Patere etayant un chien couché à leur pied.'<sup>43</sup> The three caryatids forming Peiresc's statue hold in their left hand a flaming torch, while offering with the right hand a 'patera', the flat vessel used to pour libations during funerary rituals. There are dogs standing at their feet. This animal was consecrated to Hecate because of the goddess's association with crossroads and doorways. The Italian sixteenth-century mythographer Piero Valeriano argues that the dog can designate the prophet (oracle), and therefore it is frequently found as a guardian of images and temples of the gods.<sup>44</sup> Rubens's and Peiresc's familiarity with contemporary mythological treatises lets us think that the two scholars were aware of Hecate's connection with the power of prophecy, while the 'patera' held by the women underline the goddess's relation with the underworld.<sup>45</sup> Images of Hecate can also be seen on Gnostic gems, better known as *Abraxas*, which we very often find in seventeenth-century collections. These *Abraxas* or Gnostic amulets picture Graeco-Egyptian divinities and magical incantations relating to the Gnostic heretical

40 P.P. Rubens, *Quare figuræ humanæ elementa tria constituentur* (Why the human figure consist of three elements). Rubens quotes Virgil, *Ecloques* 8, 73-75: 'Highly praised, it [the number three] received great recognition, not only among philosophers but poets as well. Therefore they invoked this number, according to Pythagorean doctrine and as a hidden law of Nature, when making offerings to the gods. So Virgil attests when he sings: "Three threads here I first tie round you, marked with three different hues, and three times round this altar I draw your image. In an uneven number heaven delights."'

41 A. Balis, 'Rubens und Inventio. Der Beitrag seines *theoretischen Studienbuches*', in: U. Heinen and A. Thielemann (eds.), *Rubens Passioni. Kultur der Leidenschaften im Barock*, Göttingen 2001, p. 11-40; T. Meganck, 'Rubens on the human figure. Theory, practice and metaphysics', in: J. Vander Auwera et al. (eds.), *Rubens. A genius at work. Rubens works at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium reconsidered*, Brussels 2007, p. 52-64; A. Balis, *The Theoretical Notebook*, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard 25 (forthcoming).

42 On number mysticism and the tripod see also Chr.A. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus, sive de theologiae mysticae Graecorum causis*, Königsberg 1829, p. 386-387.

43 A drawing of Peiresc's Hecate as *Artemis Triformis* is to be found in *Antiquitez du Cabinet de Peiresc, dessinées par Poussin, Rubens et autres*, 1766. Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, Cabinet des Estampes, Ms. Aa 54, fol. 114.

44 P. Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica, seu De Sacris Aegyptiorum [...]*, London 1594, 5.44-45, 47. Valeriano quotes Pausanias and several biblical authorities such as Saint Gregory the Great, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, who had written about dogs and prophecy.

45 Rubens acquired Valeriano's treatise in 1615. See Arents et al., *De Bibliotheek van Pieter Pauwel Rubens* (n. 24), E23.

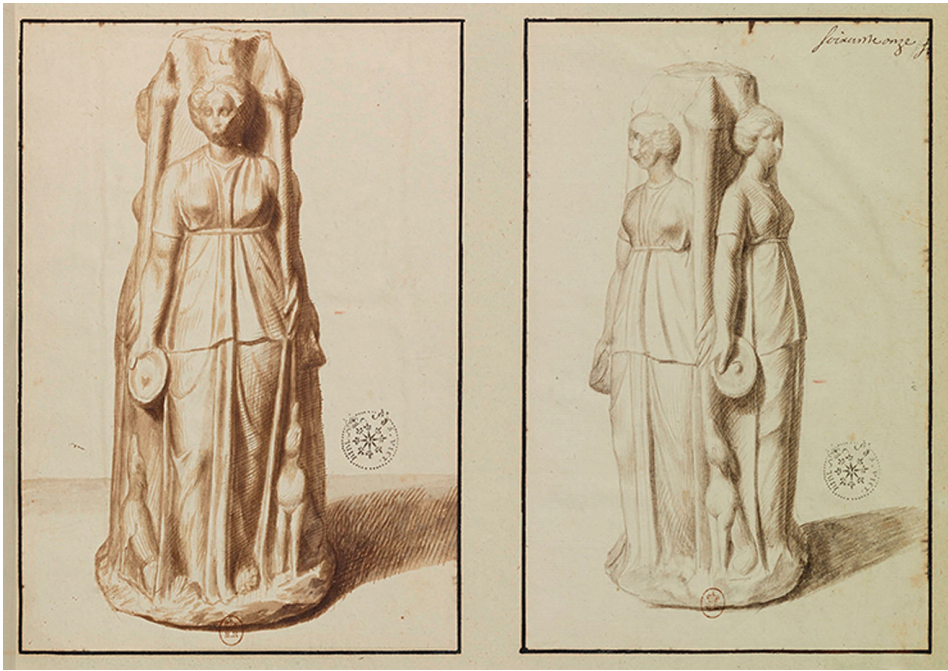


Fig. 5 Peiresc's Hecate as Artemis Triformis, Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, Cabinet des Estampes, Ms. Aa 54, fol. 114.

philosophy popular in the second and third centuries A.D.<sup>46</sup> These bizarre gems particularly attracted the curiosity of several seventeenth-century scholars, among them Peiresc and Peter Paul Rubens. Both were introduced to the study of these objects during their visits to the aristocratic collections in Venice, Padua and Rome and their intense correspondence with Italian antiquarians and gem experts such as Lelio Pasqualini, Lorenzo Pignoria, Natalizio Benedetti, Fulvio Orsini, Cassiano dal Pozzo and Paolo Gualdo testifies to this shared interest in the past and the rise of the antiquarian method in the European landscape.<sup>47</sup> These learned men possessed large collections of ancient amulets, coins and other objects. Their broad knowledge of iconology and the antiquarian method of comparison allowed them to work out the correct meaning of the symbols and inscriptions, and the ways in which these

<sup>46</sup> At this time these magical gems were believed to have been produced by heretical Christian sects and were usually termed Basilidian (after the second-century heretic Basileides) or Gnostic; as such they attracted the attention of Christian historians. Cf. J. Spier, 'Early Christian gems and their rediscovery', in: C.M. Brown, *Engraved gems. Survivals and revivals*, Washington 1997, p. 32-43.

<sup>47</sup> On Rubens's and Peiresc's relationship and exchanges with Italian antiquarians, see D. Jaffé, 'The Barberini circle. Some exchanges between Peiresc, Rubens, and their contemporaries', in: *Journal of the History of Collections* 1 (1989), p. 119-147; Idem, 'Aspects of gem collecting in the early seventeenth century. Nicolas Claude de Peiresc and Lelio Pasqualini', in: *The Burlington Magazine* 135 (1993), p. 103-120; Idem, 'Reproducing and reading gems in Rubens' circle', in: Brown, *Engraved gems*, p. 181-193.

gems were used in the ancient world.<sup>48</sup> Rubens turns out to have been a connoisseur of these most curious gems and his fascination led him to collect them avidly.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Peiresc was a passionate collector of the genre; by 1633 he possessed two hundred magical amulets and intaglii.<sup>50</sup> Among the *intagli antiqui*, a green jasper from Peiresc's collection shows the Anguiped, a monstrous figure with the legs of a serpent and the head of a cockerel on the obverse;<sup>51</sup> while on the reverse an image of Hecate standing on a corpse is depicted.<sup>52</sup> Peiresc seems to identify this gem with the magical-Gnostic amulets, and in his surviving description of the graven image the scholar compares the animal-headed, serpent-footed and IAO-inscribed anguiped to the monstrous infant Erichthonius.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, the three female figures forming Hecate are standing back to back around a column and they each wear a 'kalathos' (cista) on their head, which, according to Peiresc, resembles that of the Egyptian god of the underworld Serapis. The three-faced, six-armed Hecate is standing on a corpse, which again confirms her association with the realm of the dead. Images of Hecate appear very frequently together with the anguiped on Gnostic gems; sometimes she is even represented as her female counterpart with serpents for legs.<sup>54</sup>

48 Cf. P.N. Miller, 'The antiquary's art of comparison. Peiresc and *Abraxas*', in: R. Häfner (ed.), *Philologie und Erkenntnis. Beiträge zu Begriff und Problem frühneuzeitlicher 'Philologie'*, Tübingen 2001, p. 57-94; Idem, 'Taking paganism seriously. Anthropology and antiquarianism in early seventeenth-century histories of religion', in: *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2001), p. 183-209.

49 Rubens's gem collection was inherited by his son Albert. See n. 26. Several magical amulets belonging to Albert Rubens's collection were accurately described by the Flemish scholar Jean l'Heureux, also known as Macarius (1551?-1614), in the earliest published work on the topic. This book was posthumously published by J. Chifflet, *Abraxas seu Apistopistus*, Antwerp 1657.

50 Peiresc to Saumaise, 14 November 1633, in *Peiresc Lettres a Claude Saumaise* 33.

51 Peiresc, Bibliothèque Nationale Paris, ms. Fr. 9530, fol. 256 (without drawing). Published by A. Mastrocinque, *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum 1. Bollettino di Numismatica. Monografie* 8, 21, Rome 2003, p. 353, n. 311: 'figura velut Eryctonii serpentinis pedibus capite galli gallinacei, loricata, dextrâ flagellum sinistrâ scutum ferens in quo IAO pro Jehovah.'

52 Idem, 'figura muliebris stans in columnae modum triceps cum triplici fastigio capitibus imposito ad cistas Sarapidos speciem. Sex habens brachia quorum duo superiora faces ferunt, duo superiora flagellos et duo intermedia gladios ferre videntur. Ante cuius pedes iacet alia figura humana nuda prostrata.'

53 These Gnostic amulets were marked by the inscription IAO, which is the Divine name of God among the Jews. The Gnostics used Hebrew names of God on their stones. Cf. Peiresc to Rubens, 7 June 1627, ms. N.a.f. 5172, fol. 141v: 'Et io ho visto fra gli intagli di que' Basilidiani & gnostici una figura d'un Giove con il fulmino in mano la barba promissa & ale grandissime con inscriptione IAO sotto le cui nome confondevano il Jehova de gli Hebraei.' For the relationship between Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, see G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah mysticism and Talmudic tradition*, New York 1965; see also J.C. Reeves, *Jewish lore in Manichaeic cosmogony. Studies in the Book of Giants traditions*, Cincinnati 1992.

54 A. De Ridder, *Collection de Clercq. Catalogue. VII: Les bijoux et les pierres gravées*, Paris 1911, n. 3470; Hecate as an anguiped: *SGG* 1, 308. Several classical texts attest to Hecate's association with serpents. The copper vase with the Gorgon's head in the portrait of Rubens and son is related to Hecate. Both textual and material evidence show us that there are many connections between the Gorgon and the moon goddess, such as triplicity and associations with the underworld and lunar manifestations. We very often find examples of Gnostic gems in which Hecate is associated with the image of the Gorgon,

Seventeenth-century scholars correctly associated these amulets and their symbols with Gnostic doctrines. The interest in this kind of gems was a consequence of the antiquarians's fascination with the pagan background of early Christianity.<sup>55</sup>

Religious syncretism and mystery cults appealed very much to Rubens's son, Albert. Also Peiresc's description of the baskets carried by the Hecate figures on their heads as 'cistae', and the link between the goddess and the anguiped, which he compares to Erichthonius, fits in well with Albert's dissertation on a coin of Augustus, *De Re Vestitaria Veterum*.<sup>56</sup> Albert identifies the motif on the coin as a *cista mystica*, a ritual object flanked by intertwined snakes. These baskets containing sacred offerings were carried by maidens on their heads during ancient Greek mystery cults, including the one commemorating the birth of Erichthonius, a theme treated by Rubens in his paintings and by Albert in his treatise.<sup>57</sup> In his learned commentary on the meaning of this sacred object, Albert relates the intertwined serpents flanking the basket to fertility symbols and, supported by some ancient authorities, he concludes that the 'cista' contained mysteries pertaining to generation.<sup>58</sup> As Aneta Georgievska-Shine has clearly revealed in her impressive article, Rubens was deeply fascinated by the hidden nature of things and the secrets pertaining to generation.<sup>59</sup> He produced several works where the association of darkness with fertility is present and where black figures are evocative of fecundity and the origin of life. Elizabeth McGrath noticed the presence of black figures who attended Rubens's celebration of the Great Mother, relating them to the dark side of Nature, which is responsible for life itself.<sup>60</sup>

sometimes with *voces magicae*. On this topic see A.M. Nagy, 'Gemmee magicae selectae. Sept notes sur l'interprétation des gemmes magiques', in: *Atti dell'incontro di studio. Gemme Gnostiche e cultura ellenistica*, Verona 1999, p. 153-179; see also M. Simone, *Die magischen Gemmen. Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln auf geschnittenen Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit*, Berlin 2004, p. 268 s.v. 18.1.b.

**55** In the first centuries of our era, Gnosticism was characterized by a strong syncretic component: Babylonian astrological doctrines, elements of Jewish mystical tradition (Cabala), Christian eschatology, Greek mythology, and Platonic and Pythagorean terms and notions can be found in it. This ancient religion tinged with magic and oriental influences attached great importance to the knowledge of God, the so-called *gnosis*. It made men aware of their divine origin and guaranteed salvation through knowledge. R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism e Cristianesimo primitivo*, Bologna 1970. See also J.C. Reeves, *Jewish lore in Manichaeic Cosmogony*.

**56** A. Rubens, *De Re Vestitaria Veterum* (n. 27), p. 259-277.

**57** P.P. Rubens, *The Finding of Erichthonius*, c. 1616, Vaduz, Sammlungen des Fürsten von und zu Liechtenstein. This painting has been accurately studied by A. Georgievska-Shine, 'From Ovid's Cecrops to Rubens's City of God in *The Finding of Erichthonius*', in: *The Art Bulletin* 86 (2004), p. 58-74.

**58** In his discussion of the symbol, Albert Rubens refers to the engraving after his father with the subject of a child opening a basket with a snake; afterwards he quotes Clement of Alexandria, who had proposed that the mystical baskets were used to reveal sacred things and enunciate secrets. Cf. Georgievska-Shine, 'From Ovid's Cecrops to Rubens's City of God', p. 62, n. 36 and 37.

**59** Georgievska-Shine, 'From Ovid's Cecrops to Rubens's City of God', n. 76.

**60** E. McGrath, 'Garlanding the Great Mother. Rubens, Jan Breughel and the celebration of Nature's fertility', in: K. Van der Stighelen (ed.), *Munuscula amicorum. Contributions on Rubens and his colleagues in honour of Hans Vlieghe*, Turnhout 2006, p. 103-122. In particular, the picture known as *Nature adorned* (Glasgow, Museum and Art Gallery) shows three women adorning the statue of Artemis of Ephesus,

### *Hecate Triformis and the notion of 'cosmic womb' in the Chaldean Oracles*

The artist's engagement with these mysteries of Nature is visible in his many paintings devoted to the celebration of Nature's fruitfulness and her procreative powers. The theme of Nature's fertility is particularly important when dealing with Hecate. As we have seen, the goddess is essentially a chthonic deity, but she is also responsible for fertility. This association is even clearer in the literary corpus that most consistently portrays the goddess, the fragmentary collection of verses commonly called the 'Chaldean Oracles'. These verses are contained in Neoplatonic texts on theurgy, prophecy and demons by Porphyry, Proclus, Psellus, Iamblichus, and in the complete work of Marsilio Ficino; all books that Rubens had acquired for his library in 1632.<sup>61</sup> According to the Chaldean Oracles, Hecate is the 'womb of Nature,' which is fertilized by the fiery lightning bolts of Father Zeus, and by which she gives birth to the natural world. The metaphysical system of the Chaldean Oracles begins with an absolutely transcendent deity called *Father*, whose intellect or reason contemplates the heavenly realm and crafts and governs the material realm through the Demiurge, also called the *Son* or *Logos*. By means of the Son, the Father has become the principle of creation. The Oracles further placed Hecate between the heavenly and the material realm; in this capacity she separates the intellectual fire of the Father and the material fire from which the cosmos is created, and mediates all divine influence upon the earthly realm.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, in the Chaldean corpus Hecate is described as the 'Mother of All' and 'Beginning and End' of all things which exist. Especially Christian cabalists and the Italian natural philosophers used these arguments to deduce the generative process from unity (the One) to the principle of multiplicity and diversity by proving that God has a triune structure.<sup>63</sup> Similarly Rubens asserts in his *Theoretical Notebook*: 'the number three transcends all things, just as God is both One and Three. The triune nature of God reveals that God is the harmony of all things.'<sup>64</sup>

the Great Mother or Mother of All. Black heads also appear in Rubens's *Four Rivers* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).

**61** Iamblichus *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum*. Proclus *In Platonicum Alcibiadem de anima atque daemone*. Idem *de sacrificio et magia*. Porphyrius *de divinis atque daemonibus*. Psellus *de daemonibus*. Mercurii Trismegisti *Pimander*. (Omnia Latine Marsilio Ficino interprete) *Ejusdem Asclepius*. (Lucio Apuleio interprete), Lyon 1607. See Arents, *De Bibliotheek van Pieter Pauwel Rubens* (n. 24), p. 91.

**62** This explains Hecate's association with liminal places, doorways, crossroads, gates and her role as intermediary between men and the gods and between men and the realm of the dead.

**63** References to the Chaldean theology are found in the work of the Christian cabalist Francesco Zorzi or Francesco Giorgi Veneto (1466–1540), *De Harmonia mundi totius Cantica tria*, Venice 1525; *L'harmonie du monde, divisée en trois cantiques*, transl. Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, Paris 1578. Several references to the Chaldeans also appear in Francesco Patrizi's *Nova de Universis Philosophia*, Ferrara 1591. Cf. C. Leijenhorst, 'Francesco Patrizi's hermetic philosophy', in: R. van den Broek and W.J. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Gnosis and Hermeticism from antiquity to modern times*, New York 1998, p. 125–146.

**64** Rubens, *Johnson MS*, fol. 3v: 'Tris Numerus super omnia / Ter Deus Vnus. / Deus Harmonia rerum omnium, Circulus includens omnia, Extra quem nihil est.' Rubens's *Theoretical Notebook* was largely lost in a fire that destroyed the studio of the famous *ébéniste* André-Charles Boulle (1642–1732). In the seventeenth century various partial copies of it had been made: two later seventeenth-century copies,

In the corpus of Chaldean Oracles, Hecate was identified with the Platonic world-soul.<sup>65</sup> The Neoplatonists portrayed her as a cosmic divinity, allotting to her such duties as ensouling the visible world, as mediator between men and gods, delivering secret knowledge to the theurgist. There is also an oracular function associated with the cosmic power of the triple goddess.<sup>66</sup> The oracular function of Hecate was activated through the practice of the animation of statues.<sup>67</sup> In his *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the Platonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) confirms that the matter of statues attracts only cosmic divinities, in Ficino's words 'a life or something vital from the world-soul and the souls of the spheres and of the stars [...]'.<sup>68</sup> Ficino surely recalled the influential passages of the Hermetic *Asclepius*, one of the books Rubens purchased in 1632, in which Hermes says that although God is the creator of the inferior gods, man is the maker of the gods in the temples, animated statues, which are inspired with the breath of life (*spiritus, pneuma*): statues possess knowledge, which may heal and predict the future.<sup>69</sup> In Platonic doctrine Hecate assumes the role of *fatum*, who rules over man's destiny. She is considered to be, in the words of Cicero, 'a sort of "providence", knowing the things that fall within its province, governing especially the heavenly bodies, and then those things on earth that concern mankind'.<sup>70</sup>

Rubens would have known about these theological speculations through the cultivation of his friendship with the Neostoic philosopher Justus Lipsius as well as from his older brother Philip. In his treatise on natural philosophy, the *Physiologia Stoicorum* (1604), Lipsius expounds the notions of God as world-soul and of God as *fatum* and providence.<sup>71</sup> Here, the philosopher refers to the Chaldean theology affirming that

the *Johnson Ms.* (London, Courtauld Institute Galleries), the *Chatsworth Ms.* (Chatsworth, Collection of Duke of Devonshire) published by Michael Jaffé as *Van Dyck's Antwerp sketchbook* in 1966, the *De Ganay Ms.* (present location unknown) and, finally, *Borges Ms.* (Madrid, Collection of Juan Borges).

65 Cf. Porphyrius, *De philosophia ex oraculis*, apud Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* v, 12, 1–2.

66 In the Chaldean Oracles, the goddess is considered to be a *daemon* formulating oracles and predictions. For Hecate's oracular function, see S. Perea Yebenes, 'Un capítulo de la teúrgia antigua. Los oráculos de Hecate y la cuestión de las "estatuas parlantes"', in: *MHNH* 5 (2005), p. 189–240. On the animation of magic statues see E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the irrational*, Berkeley 1951, p. 351–359.

67 On the animation of statues in Chaldean theurgy, see S.I. Johnston, *Hekate Soteira. A study of Hekate's roles in the Chaldean Oracles and related literature*, Atlanta 1990.

68 On the Neoplatonic sources of Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*, see B. Copenhaver, 'Iamblichus, Synesius and the Chaldaean Oracles in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres*. Hermetic magic or Neoplatonic magic?', in: *Supplementum Festivum. Studies in honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, Binghamton 1987, p. 441–455.

69 Hermes speaks therein of '[...] animated statues, endowed with *sense* and *spirit*; statues foreseeing the future and predicting events by the drawing of lots, by prophetic inspiration, by dreams, and many other ways; statues which inflict diseases and heal them, dispensing sorrow and joy according to men's deserts.' *Asclepius*, transl. B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, Cambridge 1989, p. 81.

70 Cicero, *Academica* 1, 7, 29.

71 We find Lipsius's notion of God as fate and providence already in the first book of *De Constantia*, where he shows his appreciation for a passage in Seneca's *De beneficiis* 4. 7–8. Cf. Lipsius, *De Constantia* 1.18: 'Nec Seneca noster deum fato subiicit sed genere quodam sermonis, deum deo. Nam qui inter eos (sc. Stoicos) proxime verum accessere, fatum alias providentiam ipsam appellabant, alias deum.'

the idea of this cosmic and divine power ensouling the visible world derived from the Chaldeans, famous for their astronomy and astrology.<sup>72</sup> Drawing on the *Corpus Hermeticum* and other Neoplatonic sources, Lipsius shows that God is identified with the fiery breath of the world, the *spiritus* or *animus* pervading the whole nature.<sup>73</sup> For Lipsius God is both transcendent and immanent in the universe, God as world-soul crafts and governs the material realm and is also responsible for divine providence.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, Hecate embodies Lipsius's notion of God as world-soul, an omnipotent force, possessing foreknowledge and being paradoxically the cause of good and evil, life and death. According to the Chaldeans, Hecate receives and carries in her 'womb' the fiery substance coming from the heavens (or Father), and this can explain the presence of the burning oil lamp on the column of the statue.<sup>75</sup> Hecate's foreknowledge, her role as mistress of life and death and 'Mother of All' led me to suggest that the portrait of Rubens and his son Albert was executed as a pendant to the portrait of Isabella Brant.

### *The portrait of Isabella Brant as pendant*

It is possible that Van Dyck's portrait of Isabella Brant, Rubens's first wife and mother of Albert, may have originated in very similar circumstances as the portrait of Rubens and his son (fig. 6a and 6b).<sup>76</sup> This magnificent work has sometimes been considered its pendant.<sup>77</sup> Neither painting is mentioned in the 'Specification', but in all likelihood they were given to the children.<sup>78</sup> In the second half of the eighteenth century they

72 J. Lipsius, *Physiologiae Stoicorum Libri Tres, L. Annaeo Senecae, aliisque scriptoribus illustrandis*, Antwerp 1604; cf. J. Lagrèe, *Juste Lipse et la restauration du stoïcisme. Etude et traduction des traités stoïciens De la Constance, Manuel de philosophie stoïcienne, Physique des stoïciens (extraits)*, Paris 1994.

73 J. Papy, 'Lipsius's (Neo-)Stoicism. Constancy between Christian faith and Stoic virtue', in: L.C. Winkel et al. (eds.), *Grotius and the Stoa*, Assen 2004, p. 68–69.

74 Lipsius, *Physiologia Stoicorum*, vol. 1, p. 8–9. Cf. H. Hirai, 'Justus Lipsius on the World-Soul between Roman cosmic theology and Renaissance *prisca theologia*', in: H. Hirai and J. Papy (eds.), *Justus Lipsius and natural philosophy*, Brussels 2011, p. 63–79.

75 Fire is intimately associated with the description of Hecate in the Chaldaean Oracles, where she is described as nightly fire that speaks to the theurgist revealing him secret knowledge and leading his soul towards salvation. Cf. Proclus, *Timaeus* 2. 256, p. 3–4; Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 4.35. 4. In Greek thought, light and fire are closely associated with life and salvation. Hecate was also called *Phosphoros*, which means 'bringer of light.' See F. Graf, 'Nordionische Kulte. Religionsgeschichtliche und epigraphische Untersuchungen zu den Kulturen von Chios, Erythrai, Klazomenai und Phokaia', in: *Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana* 21, Rome 1985, p. 229.

76 Anthony Van Dyck, *Portrait of Isabella Brant*, oil on canvas, 153×120 cm, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, inv. no. 1937. 1. 47.

77 Healy, 'Portrait of Rubens and his son Albert' (n. 5), p. 243; T. Esposito, 'Portrait of Rubens and his son Albert', in: *Rubens in private. The master portrays his family*, Antwerp 2015, p. 194–195, no. 24.

78 See n. 9. The portraits of Peter Paul Rubens and Isabella Brant are mentioned in the inventory of Albert's estate of December 6, 1657: 'Item de contrefeytsels van den vaeder ende moeder van Mynheer', although the name of Albert is not mentioned. Cf. M. Rooses, 'Staet ende inventaris van den sterffhuysse van mynheer Albertus Rubens ende vrouwe Clara del Monte', in: *Rubens-Bulletin* 5 (1910), p. 29.

both were in Parisian collections. The earliest reference to Isabella's portrait is a record in the 1755 inventory of the collection of Pierre Crozat.<sup>79</sup> It remained in the possession of the Crozat family until 1772, when it was acquired by Diderot for Catherine the Great, to hang at the Hermitage Palace. This is similar to the story of the portrait of Rubens and Albert, which was purchased in Paris between 1771–1779 by Count Alexander Stroganov. In 1793 Stroganov published a catalogue of his collection,<sup>80</sup> in which he described a 'Portrait de Rubens et de son fils' that he admired for its action and movement.<sup>81</sup>

Similarities in the composition have already been pointed out.<sup>82</sup> Both Rubens and Isabella sit in a chair and are turned towards each other; he holds a piece of paper while she has a fan in her hand; they are both portrayed outdoors and in both cases the background shows a connection with Rubens's house and is separated from the figures in the foreground by a red curtain. The dimensions of the canvases are almost equal<sup>83</sup> and more importantly both paintings are executed relying on existing material, namely the drawing by Rubens from the British Museum and Susanna Fourment's costume painted by Van Dyck around 1620. This beautiful portrait shows Rubens's first wife enthroned beneath a flowing red curtain, wearing a dress of a reddish-yellow color and a black robe. She also holds a white rose which could be interpreted as a *vanitas* symbol.<sup>84</sup> In the background at the right we see the portico that separates the courtyard of Rubens's house from its garden.

The portrait of Isabella is almost universally dated c. 1621. According to André Félibien's account of 1666, Van Dyck painted a portrait of Isabella in 1621 just before leaving Rubens's studio for Italy, and presented it to his mentor as a gift.<sup>85</sup> Due to the lack of documentary evidence Félibien's claim has recently been dismissed as a romantic fantasy.<sup>86</sup>

79 L.A. Crozat (Baron de Thiers), *Catalogue de la collection Crozat* (1755).

80 A. Stroganov, *Catalogue raisonné des tableaux qui composent la collection du comte A. de Stroganoff*, Saint Petersburg 1793.

81 "'Portrait de Rubens et son fils", peint par lui-même. Plus on regard ce tableau, plus on l'admire. Ce n'est point de ces portraits froids, où le personnage représenté n'attache le spectateur que par l'intérêt qu'il inspire lui-même. Ici, il y a une action, il y a du mouvement; Rubens s'est peint tenant son fils par la main. Quelle sérénité règne sur cette physionomie! En même-temps, on la voit animée par un sentiment doux, c'est celui d'un père qui sent la présence d'un enfant chéri; il ne regarde pas son fils, mais ce fils l'a touché; dans l'instant la flamme électrique s'est communiquée de l'un à l'autre, et leurs coeurs on tressailli.' Cf. S. Jaeger, *Alexander S. Stroganov (1733–1811). Sammler und Mäzen im Russland der Aufklärung*, 2007, p. 311.

82 Healy, 'Portrait of Rubens and his son Albert', p. 243.

83 The original support of Isabella Brant is enlarged with additions to the top and the bottom, and so its original measurements are unknown. According to Arthur K. Wheelock (2005) the addition is 12.5 cm wide; therefore the dimensions of the original fabric are 140.5×120 cm.

84 N. De Poorter, *Van Dyck. A complete catalogue of the paintings*, ed. S.J. Barnes et al., New Haven, London 2004, p. 94, fig. 1. 100.

85 A. Félibien, *Entretiens sur la vie et les ouvrages des plus excellences peintres anciens et modernes*, Paris 1666–1688, vol. 7, p. 439–40.

86 Brown, *Engraved gems* (n. 46), p. 60.



Fig. 6a The portrait of Isabella Brant and the portrait of Rubens and Albert together. Isabella's portrait has been reduced to the original dimensions suggested by Arthur K. Wheelock (140.5×120 cm).

It seems more probable that Van Dyck painted Rubens's wife after her death, which could explain why the painter based his work on existing material. I wonder whether Isabella's death in 1626 should not be regarded as a *terminus post quem*. The idea of a posthumous portrait – previously suggested by Nora De Poorter – could also explain the place of honour allotted to Isabella who, as De Poorter pointed out, is seated heraldically



Fig. 6b The portrait of Isabella Brant and the portrait of Rubens and Albert together. Isabella's portrait has been reduced to the original dimensions suggested by Arthur K. Wheelock (140.5×120 cm).

on the 'right' side, unlike any other woman in Van Dyck's early portraits.<sup>87</sup> This would mean that Van Dyck made the portrait after his return from Italy in 1627. The portrait of Rubens and his son Albert has been dated around 1622 on the basis of Albert's

<sup>87</sup> De Poorter, *Van Dyck*, p. 94, fig. 1. 100.

ostensible age in the picture.<sup>88</sup> However, the presence of Hecate as goddess of the underworld suggests to me that the painting might somehow commemorate the death of Isabella and therefore be executed after 1626. Moreover, the goddess's role as *fatum* and providence, a force contrasted by *virtus*, recalls the Juvenal's inscriptions at the side arches of the portico of the Rubens House. The inscription on the left is concerned with the necessity of accepting one's fate; the other, complementary to the first, is a reminder and a practical advice to achieve virtue through self-control.<sup>89</sup> Curiously, Van Dyck painted the portico in mirror image, so that the position of the pair of satyrs and panels above the archways is inverted. He also gave the female satyr holding the cartouche on the left (*fatum*) – placed to the right – male features (figs. 7a–7b).<sup>90</sup> In Isabella's portrait the panel on the right (*virtus*) is situated on the left side, while the other panel (*fatum*) is cut off. What were Van Dyck's reasons for doing this? The changes Van Dyck made admit, in my opinion, a reasonable explanation if we accept the portrait of Rubens and his son as a pendant to Isabella's portrait. The panel



Fig. 7a left & right The female satyr holding the cartouche on the right (*virtus*) is placed to the left side of the portico in Isabella's portrait.



Fig. 7b left & right The female satyr holding the cartouche on the left (*fatum*) is transformed into a male satyr and placed to the right side of the portico in Isabella's portrait.

<sup>88</sup> Bastet, 'Oudheden uit Rubens' verzameling' (n. 2), p. 76.

<sup>89</sup> On the left panel we read: '*Permites ipsis expendere numinibus quid conveniat nobis rebusque sit utile nostris [...] carior est illis homo quam sibi*' ('Leave it to the gods to give us what is becoming and useful to us; man is dearer to them than they are to themselves'); on the right: '*Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano. Fortem posce animum et mortis terrore carentem [...] nesciat irasci, cupiat nihil*' ('we should pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body, for a courageous spirit, not afraid of death, which is free of wrath and without desire').

<sup>90</sup> We find many examples of sex-change in Rubens's artistic production, especially in several drawings after Italian masters, the artist transformed or changed the sex of the figures while retouching. Rubens changed the subject of the *Son of Laocoon* into what several experts have interpreted as *Eve with the snake*, while retouching a sketch by Cornelis Bos. Cf. K.L. Belkin, 'Decoratieve vrouwenfiguur door een slang omkronkeld', in: Belkin and Healy, *A house of art* (n. 5), p. 324–325, n. 90–91. He also transformed the figures while retouching a copy of an original design by Perino del Vaga which was for a tapestry to go underneath Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel. Cf. J. Wood, *Rubens's copies and adaptations from Renaissance and later artists. Artists working in central Italy and France*, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwvig Burchard 26, vol. II, London, Turnhout 2010, p. 427–431, n. 101.

on the right with the inscription dedicated to *fatum* could suggest an association with Hecate in the Hermitage painting, while the bizarre change of sex of the female satyr into male could also allude to the contrast and ultimate reconciliation between two opposite principles, the so-called Platonic principle of *discordia concors*. The principle of *discordia concors* was used by medieval Christian mystical-Platonic thinkers and Neoplatonic philosophers of the Renaissance to describe God and his *Logos*, Christ.<sup>91</sup> God was intended as the harmony between two antagonistic forces, who continuously changes according to the particular character of each pair of opposites, a definition shared by Rubens in his Theoretical Notebook.<sup>92</sup> It might well be possible that the portraits were conceived as a pair; and were probably executed after the death of Isabella to commemorate her and especially to express Rubens's philosophy, so deeply impressed in the complex decorative program designed by Rubens for his house.<sup>93</sup>

### Conclusion

Bastet's interpretation of Hecate as the Three Graces and of the drawing that Rubens holds in his hand as an architectural design cannot be upheld. Furthermore, the general view of the portrait as representing Rubens in the role of teacher and mentor to his son in the world of science and art is hardly convincing. The dark sky, the burning oil lamp and the vase with the Gorgoneion suggest an association with the original meaning of Hecate as goddess of the underworld, as demon that formulates oracles and predictions and rules over man's destiny. As we have seen the goddess's role in ancient society was complex and she was venerated in many different capacities. In Greek and Roman literature and art she is represented as both guide and protector of men at liminal places and as terrifying patroness of magic and sorcery and goddess of the underworld. Her ambiguity arises from the Stoic notion of Nature which she embodies; she is indeed considered the mistress of life and death. The presence of Hecate in the *Portrait of Rubens and his son Albert* proclaims Rubens's knowledge of the philosophical discussions around the sacred mysteries of God and Nature originated in Lipsius's Neostoic circle. Hecate's capacity to predict future events (as *fatum* and providence), her role as mistress of life and death, as intermediary between the intellectual realm of the *Father* and the created world (also called *Son* or *Logos*) led me to suggest that the portrait of Rubens and his son Albert was executed as a pendant to the portrait of Isabella Brant, Rubens's first wife and mother of Albert, after her death in 1626. These intimate

91 Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* I, 4: 'Oppositiones igitur his tantum, quae excedens admittunt et excessum, et his differenter conveniunt, maximo absolute nequaquam, quoniam supra omnem oppositionem est.' Johannes Scotus (Eriugena), *Periphyseon*, I, 72, where God is described as the harmony between two opposites; the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus also describes God in terms of coincidence of opposites (fr. 67); St. Paul, *Galatians* 3:28: 'In Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

92 Rubens, *Johnson MS*, fol. 3v (see note 64).

93 On this topic see, Esposito, *Peter Paul Rubens and the distribution of secret knowledge in Antwerp and Italy* (n. 34).

pictures were probably intended as a commemorative gift for Albert and were most likely destined to remain in the family. Since Hecate in the Portrait of Rubens and his son Albert embodies Lipsius's notion of God as *spiritus* or *animus* of the world, even if not painted by Rubens himself this fascinating picture should be associated with Rubens's mode of thinking. Moreover, the fact that it was painted by one of his pupils testifies of the diffusion and circulation of such thoughts inside the artist's workshop.