

## **The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science**

*Kevin van Bladel*

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Unfortunately there is still far too much by way of conjecture, innuendo, ahistoricity, ideology, and basic guesswork in the study of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, at least in what passes for historical studies of these intellectual traditions. But as we have seen the serious study of intellectual history, particularly in the Graeco-Arabic period and in classical Islamdom, flourish, so too has attention been placed upon those critical intersections between disciplines and bodies of knowledge. One can no longer argue for the Neopythagorean roots of a particular intellectual tradition or claim that a thinker's "esoteric" doctrine is due to his/her "hermeticism."

The publication of Kevin van Bladel's revised Yale doctoral dissertation is a wonderfully solid historical masterpiece that greatly contributes to our understanding of certain strands of intellectual transmission in the late antique Near East, as well as disabuses us of many a myth about the presence of Hermes and hermeticism in classical Islamic learned culture. Hermetic manuscripts on the occult, alchemy, and the esoteric doctrine of the soul abound within collections of Sufi works and without; what is critical is to make sense of why they exist where they are found and to acquire a deeper sense of what constitutes the Arabic Hermes in the same way that we now understand far better the Arabic Plato and the Arabic Aristotle.

The historical transmission of texts and ideas is not just an obsession of the positivist pedant, but rather a method to avoid woolly thinking on cross-cultural relations and their possibilities, exigencies, and lacunae. It is true that unless texts were available to translators and adaptors, they could not have emerged in an Arabic form. But we should not insist too much on strict historical orthographical trails, however, for orality did figure as a medium

of transmission (no doubt partly influenced by Platonic logocentrism) and texts sometimes disappeared and reappeared over the ages. Nonetheless, the story of how early Muslims appropriated Hermes is a case in point of how ideas and figures were taken from their Hellenic (or Hellenizing Near Eastern, or maybe even orientalising Hellenic) contexts and naturalized within an Arabic idiom. The author rather carefully avoids the use of the terms *Hermeticist* and *hermeticism*, because we have no evidence of any Muslim community's continuous engagement with hermetic learning and practice from late antiquity into classical Islam.

Van Bladel's study is divided into two parts: (1) the background and intellectual formation of the Arabic Hermes located in the tripartite history of Islamic learned culture located in Hellenic late antiquity, Sasanian Iran, and those elusive Sabaeans of Harran and (2) an examination of the shift from the concept of Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice-Hermes of the doxographies, to the notion of Hermes-Idris as the prophetic sage and teacher and the proliferation of wisdom sayings associated with him, some of which are extracted and adapted (though not many) from the Greek *Hermetica*, which in itself survives due to its existence with Gnostic *corpora* in late antique Egypt, not least the Nag Hammadi codices. But missing from this picture is one important element of what passed for Hermetic texts in Arabic, namely, the alchemical and astrological (and generally occult) works that have interested Charles Burnett and his many students at the Warburg Institute in London for some years. The question that still remains to be considered is the relationship between the alchemical and the philosophical-mystical.

Chapter 1, on the Hellenic heritage and context of the translation movement, does not actually tell us much about the transmission because we have so little evidence of direct translations from what we know as the Greek Corpus Hermeticum into Arabic. Chapter 2 moves onto the Sasanian context. The skill with which van Bladel demonstrates the existence of a middle Persian hermetica, primarily in alchemy and astrology, shows the value of training in ancient Iranian languages for those studying late antiquity and early Islam. Chapter 3, on the Sabaeans, engages with a thorny debate on the transmission of modes of learning in late antiquity with the likes of Michel Tardieu arguing for a vibrant school in Syria that bore the Alexandrian tradition of Neoplatonism as well as hermeticism, and which bridged the suppression of philosophy in the sixth century to its revival in Abbasid Baghdad. It seems that Sabaeans in Baghdad islamized their doctrines and, in pursuit of a prophet for their religious community and dispensation, adopted Hermes. This may well have been one of the sources for the

appropriation of Hermes into a “prophetic chain of philosophical initiation.” What emerges from part 1 is that there are elements of fragmentary evidence; but, unlike the transmission of Plato and Aristotle, there is little actual historical evidence from the Hellenic, Iranian, and Syrian backgrounds to Islamic learned culture.

Part 2 engages with the construction of the Arabic Hermes. Chapter 4 deals with the confused understanding of Trismegistus and the idea that there were in fact three Hermeses. In fact, the early Muslims merely seemed to have perpetuated the notion that there were multiple Hermeses and did not misunderstand the term *trismegistus*, as previous scholars have argued. Once again the analysis is based on careful consideration of the texts. The final chapter analyzes the prophetic appropriation of Hermes drawing on existing Judaeo-Christian patterns. Ismailis incorporated Hermes’ prophetic teachings, as did compilers of wisdom sayings such as Mubashshir ibn Fatik. It is disappointing that so little of this chapter is devoted to the famous *Zijr al-Nafs* text, which enjoyed widespread fame in philosophical and Sufis circles in medieval Islamdom. Ultimately van Bladel’s book seems like a prolegomenon – a solidly historical foundation on the basis of which a serious study of what constitutes “hermeticism” in medieval thought needs to be undertaken.

Sajjad H. Rizvi  
Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies  
University of Exeter, United Kingdom