
This is the first thorough study of the figure of Hermes in the Arabic world. The author promises to follow up an account of the Arabic Hermes with another book on the Arabic Hermetica (both topics were dealt with in his thesis). Altogether these books will provide a most solid foundation for scholarship on Hermes in the Islamic world—a Hermes who became known through translations in Europe in the Middle Ages, and who has never ceased to fascinate, in the areas of alchemy, astrology, talismanic magic and several other occult and divinatory sciences. But who was this Hermes? Van Bladel starts by setting out the questions that will be addressed: Who did early Arabic writers think Hermes Trismegistus was? How did they arrive at this concept? What is the relationship of the numerous works attributed to Hermes surviving in Arabic manuscripts to the better-known Greek and Latin Hermetica? Are the Arabic Hermetica in fact translations of Greek works, or are they inventions in Arabic? In the latter case, what motivated their authors to attribute these texts to Hermes (p. v)?

The introduction sets out the background: the identity of the Greek Hermetica and their diffusion in the Mediterranean world; the birth of Arabic scholarship and the presence of the books of the ancients in Baghdad. One thing that has to be addressed is the very meaning of ‘Hermetic’ and ‘Hermetism’. Van Bladel wants to quash immediately any suggestion that we are dealing with a religion having its own set of beliefs. ‘Hermetism’ is to be avoided in favour of ‘Hermes’. The next chapter immediately dispels the idea that the focus is the Hermes Trismegistus under whose name the Western *Corpus Hermeticum* was transmitted. It maps out an almost completely unexplored area: the Greek Hermes in Sasanian Iran. Much of Sasanian literature is lost, and the only way of recovering its contents is to look at the Arabic works that derived from it or the scholars and wise men with Persian names who can be presumed to have been familiar with it. The third chapter, on the other hand, questions what has become a common assumption about the transmission of Hermetism: that Hermes was the principal divine authority of the star-worshipping Sabi’ans of Harran, in northern Iraq, who were the main conduit of everything Greek and occult, and who must have been responsible for composing any Syriac and Arabic text that dealt with astrology and/or was attributed to Hermes. Van Bladel brings together the evidence that we have of the Harranians’ religion and their religious authorities, among which is Hermes. But he questions whether any of the extant Arabic texts attributed to Hermes can be directly associated with this religion. The largest element of these texts, the “Pseudo-Aristotelian
Hermetica” are not yet edited and judgement should be suspended until they have been properly analysed. But it is rash to assume that anything “Sab’ian” is from Harran, for the term “Sab’ian” refers simply to “paganism”, and was used of Ancient Egyptians, Ancients Greeks and Buddhists.

In the second part of the book van Bladel turns to accounts of Hermes. The most conspicuous of these is the idea that there were “three Hermeses”, the first of whom founded the sciences before the great Flood, the second lived in Babylon after the Flood and the third was in Egypt. Van Bladel reconstructs the origins of this legend, and lays the responsibility at the feet of Abu Ma’shar, who amplified a Greek tale of two Hermeses into an Arabic tale of three. Late antique Christian chronicles played an important part in this diffusion—in particular, that of Annianus, who, as van Bladel has discovered, is cited by name by Abu Ma’shar in another context, and is the likely immediate source for the two Hermes, whose ultimate source is the Book of Sothis. A final chapter brings together other legends of Hermes—as a lawgiver, as the personification of wisdom, and as someone who, like Muhammad, ascended to heaven. The conclusion restates the facts that remain, once ‘the overgrown fields of speculation about the Arabic Hermetica’ have been cleared (p. 234).

Arabic scholars first owed their knowledge of the Hermetica to the Sasanians, who had a largely astrological corpus of such literature in Middle Persian. There are hints that an Arabic version of the Greek Corpus Hermeticum might once have existed, and was known to al-Kindi and Ibn al-Qifti. The Harranians, too, may have had holy texts to buttress their regard for Hermes as a prophet, but these too are not yet identified. Abu Ma’shar, in the middle of the ninth century drew together both Iranian and Harranian accounts of Hermes and established a tradition regarding Hermes as three people of hoary antiquity. The legend of the “three Hermeses” spread to Europe through translations of alchemical works from Arabic, while the idea of Hermes as a prophet and law-maker travelled to Europe by way of collections of “sayings of the wise men”. The Arabic Hermes was an authority on astrology, alchemy and talisman-making rather than the wise sage of the Western Corpus Hermeticum. Greek antecedents have been found for only two Hermetic texts—the Kyranis, and the Kitab asrar al-nujum (‘Book of the secrets of the stars’—a common source shared with Rhetorius). But common motifs link the Arabic and Greek Hermetica: the discovery of books and tablets in underground chambers or Egyptian ruins, and the teaching of how to derive magical powers from the occult properties of things.

Van Bladel plots the future direction of research: editions of the many Hermetic texts, the search for authorship, the documentation of their use and