

The Arabic Hermes

From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science: A Review of Kevin van Bladel's *Prolegomena*

The image shows a detailed gold-colored crown with multiple points and intricate patterns. It features a central cross-like motif and a sword-like shape pointing downwards. The crown is set against a background of stylized, swirling white clouds. The entire scene is overlaid on a faint, handwritten-style Greek text.

An Investigation based on the review by Christian H. Bull (University of Bergen), *Numen* Vol. 59.

ἀς τοῦ κόιθμι σηνύ εἰ ὅ/
πησικίας τὸν εἰτας πέρισσό=
τητάριειας ἀλικαῖ, Ε.

“Es wird eine
Zeit kommen...”

There will come a time
when one will
understand late
Hellenism by looking
backward from the
Islamic tradition."

— C.H. Becker
(via Julius Ruska, 1926)

The Gap Between Late Antiquity and the Golden Age

The Problem

Greek texts existed in Egypt, and centuries later, Islamic traditions flourished in Baghdad. But the connective tissue explaining how one became the other has been missing.

Roman Egypt

- Greek Hermetica
- Pagan Sages

The Transmission Gap

Islamic Golden Age

- Arabic Science
- Prophet Idris

Previous Scholarship: Major works like Florian Ebeling's "*The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus*" (2007) treat Arab Hermeticism only cursorily.

The Barrier

Arabic legends and works ascribed to Hermes have largely remained locked within the specialist domain of Arabists, inaccessible to Western classicists.

A Prolegomena to Unseal the Archive

The Objective

Kevin van Bladel's work is not just a history; it is a "clearing of the path." It aims to open the specialist field of Arabic Hermetica to a non-Arabist audience.

Structure of the Investigation

- Background:** Analyzing Roman Egypt, Sasanian Iran, and the Harran controversy.
- History:** Tracing the "Three Hermeses" and the transformation of Hermes into the Prophet Idris.



The goal is to prepare the ground for a future inventory of Arabic Hermetica, bringing C.H. Becker's prophecy closer to fulfillment.

Distinguishing the Community from the Literature

HERMETISM (The Social Group)



Definition: A specific social group or community following 'the Way of Hermes'.

Non-Existent in this Context.

Analysis: Van Bladel argues this term applies only to groups in Roman Egypt. There is no evidence of a "Community of Hermes" in the Islamic world.

HERMETIC (The Literature)



Literature specifically claiming Hermes as the author, and the tradition surrounding these texts.

The Focus of Study.

Analysis: A literary tradition, not a social one. (Note: A narrow definition risks excluding Greek texts ascribed to disciples like Asclepius, but provides necessary rigour).

The Sasanian Bridge: How Greek Traveled East



The Missing Link

Sasanian Iran serves as the crucial intermediary.

Several Arabic astrological Hermetica possess a Middle-Persian *Vorlage* (source text).

The Mechanism

Under Shapur I (3rd Century), Greek texts were translated into Middle Persian.

The Sources

Validated by 3rd-century texts: the Manichean *Šābuhragan*, *Kephalaia*, and Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*.

Van Bladel treats the legend that Alexander the Great stole texts from the Persians with historical sobriety, separating the demonstrable from the plausible.

Correcting the Record: The Myth of Harran



The Scholarly Myth

For decades, scholars believed in a “City of Hermetists” in Harran.

The Correction

Van Bladel proves this false. The confusion stems from the loose application of the term “Hermetism”.

The Reality: An Astral Cult

The Harranians practiced an **astral cult**. They honored Trismegistus because he was the astrologer *par excellence*, associating him with their moon-god, Sin.

Identity Politics

The Harranians claimed the identity of “**Sabians**” (mentioned in the Qur'an) to gain **protected status**, a strategy also used by the **Mandaeans**.

The Stratification of Legend: The Three Hermeses

Hermes I (The Original)

Descendant of Seth, Civilizer,
Prophet (Idris).

Hermes II (The Babylonian)

Lived after the Flood, Master of
Science and Medicine.

Hermes III (The Egyptian)

The City Builder, The Alchemist.

Tracing the Lineage

The motif of three distinct figures named Hermes is traced back to the *Book of Sothis* by pseudo-Manetho. Van Bladel tracks this trail through various chronicles, showing how a single figure was multiplied to accommodate conflicting timelines.

Tracing the lineage across chronicles and traditions.

Ascent of the Prophet: Hermes as Idris-Enoch



The Syncretism

Hermes is transformed from a pagan sage into the Islamic...

Transformation herane nock

Hermes is transformed from a pagan sage into the Islamic Prophet Idris (Enoch). In this form, he gains the status of a divine lawgiver and a scientist.

The Heavenly Ascent

The myth of Hermes' ascent is presented as a direct product of his identification with Idris.

"Whoever has the power to doff his body and to reject his senses ascends to the higher world."

— Suhrawardī (quoted by van Bladel)

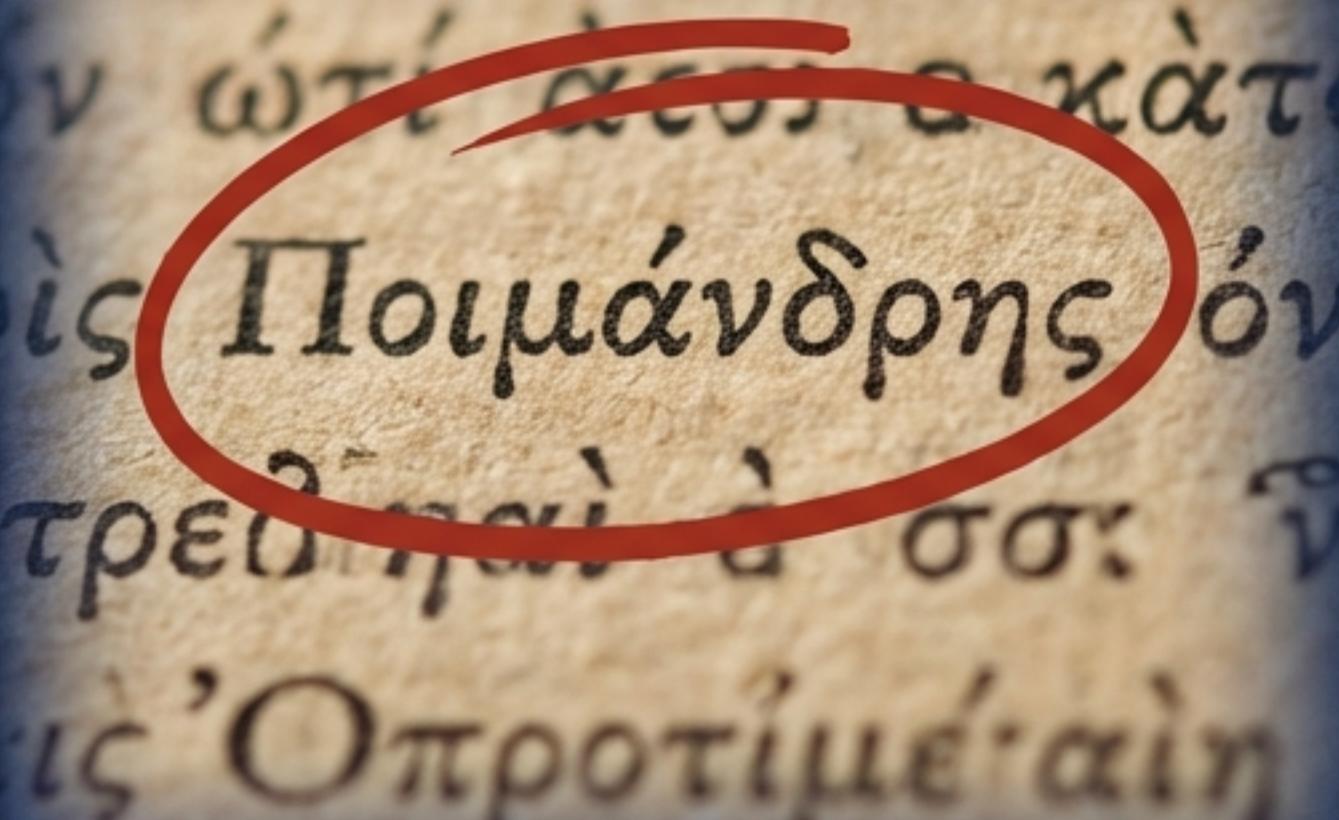
Peer Review I: The *Poimandres* Oversight

Corpus Hermeticum XIII

The Claim

Van Bladel argues that “*Poimandres*” is a name known only from the title of *CH I*.

Lato



πούεις ἵχας ο
νώτι ασσος κάτο
ίς Ποιμάνδρης όν
τρεδηναι σσος ι
ις Ὁπροτίμε· αἰη

The Critique (C.H. Bull)

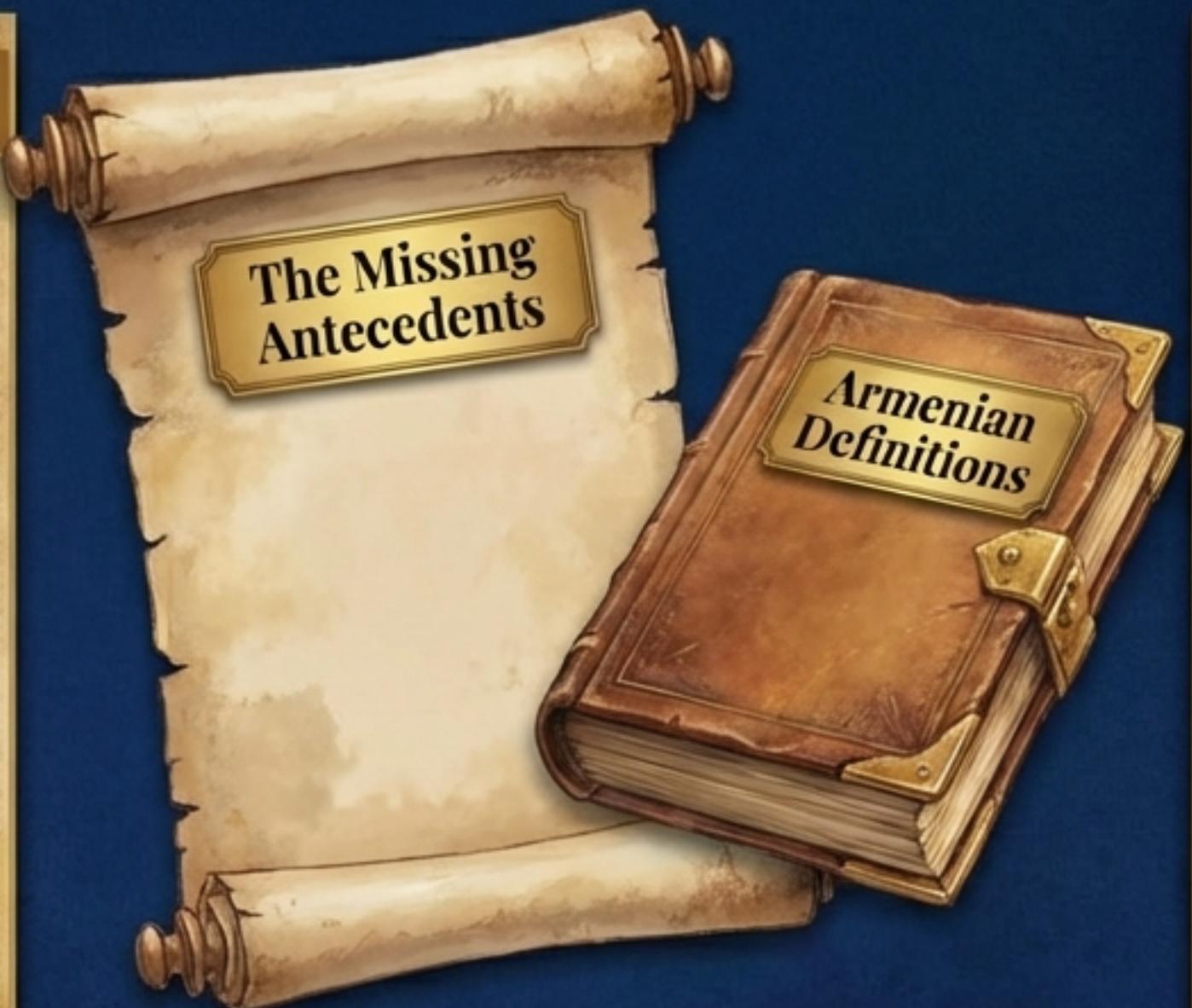
Poimandres is explicitly mentioned as *Hermes'* teacher in *CH XIII, 15.* This weakens the argument that the compiler of the Syriac oracles believed the entire corpus was called “*Poimandres*”.

A significant philological detail in an otherwise robust argument.

Peer Review II: The Missing Maxims

The Omission

The book discusses “**The Wisdom of the Arabic Hermes**” (gnomologies) without considering Hermetic antecedents.



The Armenian Connection

Scholar J.-P. Mahé hypothesizes that the *Armenian Definitions of Hermes* reflect the earliest stage of philosophical Hermetica. Van Bladel mentions this text in his intro but claims later that “there is no reason to suppose an earlier collection of maxims.”

This remains an open line of inquiry for future scholarship.

The Verdict: An Indispensable Treasure Trove



Assessment: Despite minor philological issues, the work is a “veritable treasure trove” of information.



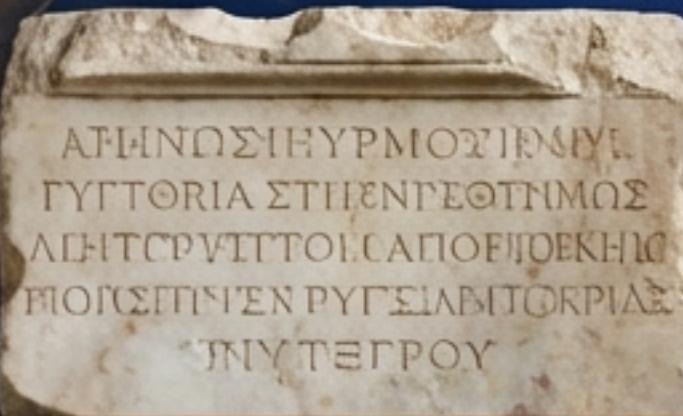
Utility: Well-indexed with an extensive bibliography; a functional tool for scholars.



Target Audience: Essential for students of Late Antiquity, Sasanian Iran, and Early Arabic Translations.

“No small feat!” – Christian H. Bull

Fulfilling the Prophecy



Hellenistic Hermes
(c. 300 BCE - 300 CE)

The Sasanian Transmission



Arabic Hermes
(c. 750 CE Onwards)

Reflecting on Becker:

The time C.H. Becker predicted—where we understand Late Hellenism through Islamic tradition—is closer than ever.

The Future

Van Bladel has not just written a history; he has unlocked a vault. The Arabic Hermes is no longer a stranger to the history of Western science.

THE INVESTIGATION CONTINUES.