

The Arabic Hermes

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

ΟΠΝ: ἡ ἐνταυθα ἡ ἱερὴ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς ἐκείνης τοῦ αὐτοῦ
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An Investigation based on the review
by Christian H. Bull (University of
Bergen), *Numen* Vol. 59.

ὡς τοῦ κοιθῆμισθ' ἐν ὅ-
 ῃ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ νῆαι αὐτὸς πεισ-
 τῆ γὰρ κείνου ἐστὶν ἡ ἀλκιμότης.

“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

****The Barrier****

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

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

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****

1. **Background:** Analyzing Roman Egypt, Sasanian Iran, and the Harran controversy.
2. **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 Hermes

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 of Hermes

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

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 Missing Antecedents

Armenian Definitions

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.



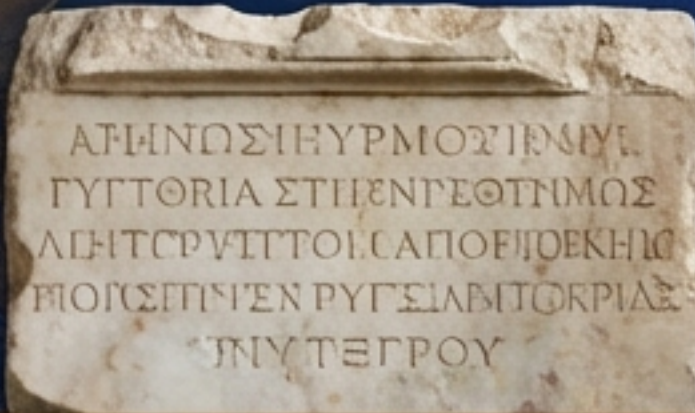
Utility: Well-indexed with an extensive bibliography; a functional tool for scholars.



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.

Hermes Explains: Waking Up to Western Esotericism

Thirty Red Pills that Challenge the History of Western Culture



Based on the anthology edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi.

Swallow the Red Pill

ACCEPTED TRUTHS

- ❑ Rationality
- ❑ Secularism
- ❑ Linear Progress
- ❑ Disenchantment



THE HOOK: In 1999, *The Matrix* popularized the “Red Pill”—a choice to wake up from a comfortable illusion. The study of Western Esotericism offers the same choice regarding our history.

THE INSIGHT: The “Grand Narratives” of Western culture—that we are purely rational, scientific, and secular—are incomplete. To study esotericism is to access the “rejected knowledge” of the Academy.

“To question widely accepted truths rather than just accept them at face value is what the search for knowledge is and should be all about.” — Hanegraaff, Forshaw & Pasi

The Myth of a Disenchanted World



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

“We live in a disenchanted world.”

Modernity (Industrialization, Bureaucracy, Science) has supposedly purged the world of magic, mystery, and spirits.

ESOTERIC REALITY:

“Modernity is deeply enchanted.”

Polls consistently show 40–50% of people in “rational” post-industrial societies believe in paranormal phenomena. Science and magic co-evolved: from Quantum Mysticism to Vitalism.



KEY TERM: Occulture — The hidden spiritual current pulsing through the heart of modern society.

Deconstructing Origins: Hermes & The Gnostics



The Projection



The Seekers
(Not a Church)

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

Hermes was a pre-Christian prophet and Gnosticism was a rival religion.

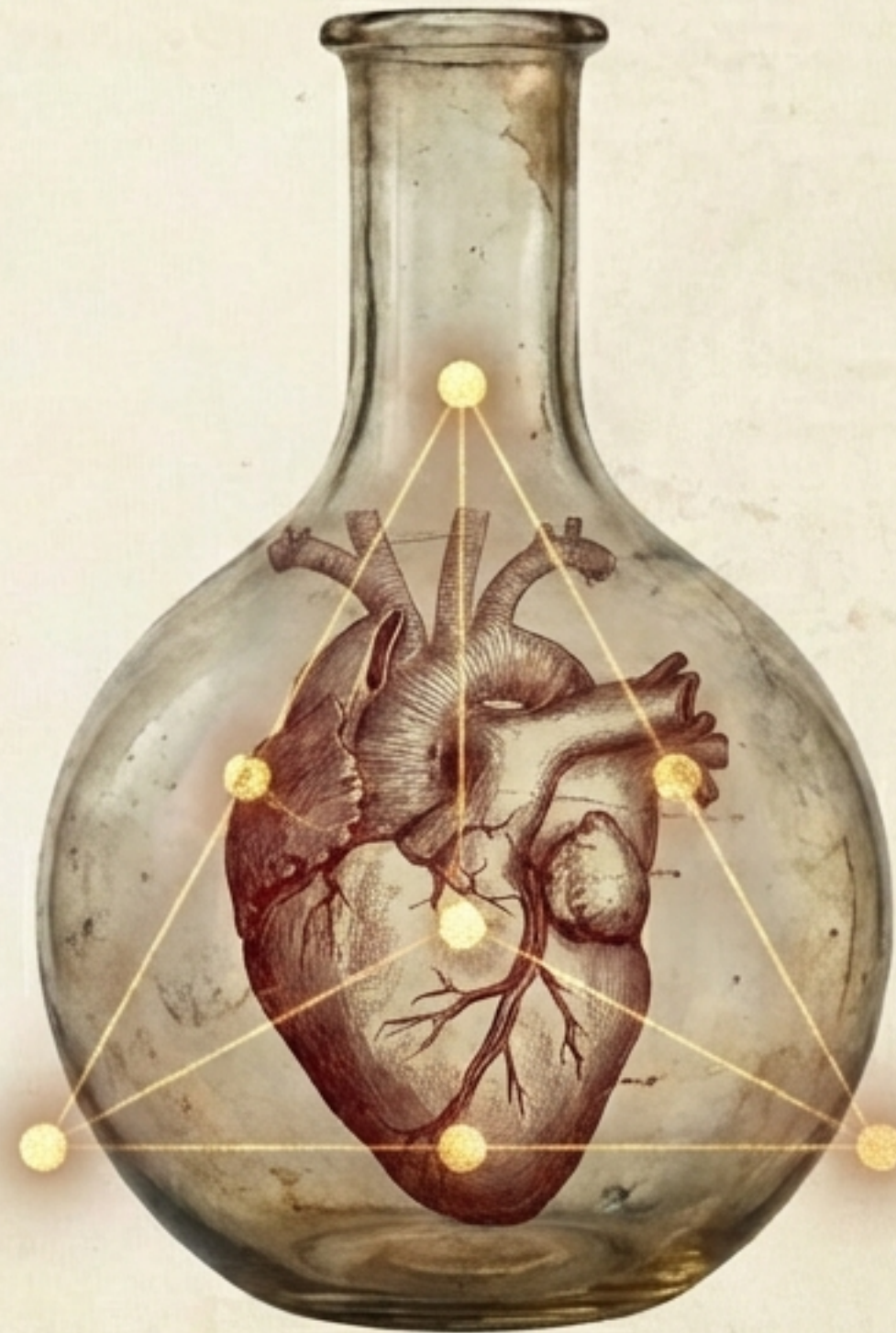
ESOTERIC REALITY: Authority is a construct.

1. Hermes Trismegistus never existed. He was a “mythical authority” constructed by the Late Pagan Mind to validate wisdom.
2. There was no “Gnostic Church.” Gnosticism is a modern category applied to a fluid spectrum of early Christian intellectuals seeking direct knowledge (gnosis).

The Science of the Soul (Alchemy & Numbers)

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

Math is for counting
and Alchemy is just
failed chemistry.



ESOTERIC REALITY:

Science of the Soul.

NUMBERS: For pre-moderns like Pythagoras, numbers were living 'forms' that governed harmony and the soul. To calculate was to manipulate reality's fabric.

ALCHEMY: Not just gold-making. It was a spectrum. For Franciscans, alchemy was a way to distill the 'Quintessence' to survive the Antichrist. The "Great Work" mirrored the life of Christ applied to matter.

The Cognitive Tool: Imagination

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

Imagination is just fantasy—it isn't real.

ESOTERIC REALITY:

Imagination is a creative power.



VIS IMAGINATIVA:

In esoteric tradition (Paracelsus, Boehme), imagination is a specific faculty used to access higher reality.

TRANSITIVE POWER:

It acts upon the world. Paracelsus called it a “Sun in man.” To imagine is to “impress” the spirit onto matter, changing reality itself.

Monastic Magic: The Paradox of Faith



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Medieval monks were terrified of demons.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Monks were the experts in demon management.

THE PARADOX: Monasteries were hubs for necromancy because monks were the literate elite with access to the texts.

CASE STUDY: Hildegard of Bingen (12th Century) performed exorcisms where she debated theology with demons, using them as knowledgeable informants from the spirit world.

Agency & Identity: Women in Esotericism



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Religion is patriarchal; there is no room for women.

ESOTERIC REALITY: The esoteric sphere empowered women.



THE FLIP: Women leveraged the Victorian trope of the “passive” female to claim superior spiritual access as mediums.

RESULT: Movements like Theosophy and the Golden Dawn rejected male priesthoods, validating authority through direct experience. Figures like Helena Blavatsky linked occultism directly to the Suffrage movement.

Agency & Identity: The Black Esoteric Milieu



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Esotericism is for white folks.

ESOTERIC REALITY: A distinct Black Esoteric Milieu exists.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES: African Americans used esotericism to dismantle white supremacy. Figures like Sun Ra and the Nation of Islam combined Theosophy and Freemasonry to create new "religio-racial" identities.

THE STRATEGY: Claiming ancient, divine lineages (Egyptian, Moorish) to bypass the narrative of inferiority and offer spiritual liberation.

Politics & Power: Secret Societies

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:
The Illuminati are controlling
the world.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Secrecy is a form
of social capital.

SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: Secret societies
like Freemasons don't hoard world-
ending secrets. They use secrecy to
create status and trust.

THE FACTS: The historical Illuminati
(1776) wanted moral reform, not world
domination. The panic was a "polemical
narrative" created by political
opponents.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Modern Art



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Modern Art is secular and purely aesthetic.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Abstract Art is painted Theosophy.

THE ROOTS: You cannot understand the Avant-Garde (Mondrian, Kandinsky, af Klint) without Occultism. They were painting the “unseen geometries” revealed by Theosophy.

VISUAL CULTURE: Films like Richter’s “Ghosts Before Breakfast” drew on the visual language of séances—floating objects and mediumship.

The Pop Culture Vehicle: Fiction



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: It's just a story.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Fiction is the Trojan Horse of the Occult.

PROPAGANDA: Occultists (Crowley, Fortune, Blavatsky) deliberately wrote novels to "ventilate their ideas" to the masses.

THE IMPACT: Fiction acts as the public heart and pulse, normalizing esoteric concepts like astral travel and secret histories for a global audience.

Summary: The Esoteric Engine



Esotericism is not a weird sideline of history. It is the engine room.

It drove the development of chemistry, medicine, abstract art, feminism, and political resistance. It is the 'Other' against which mainstream Western culture defines itself.

The Red Pill Swallowed



To study esotericism is to wake up to the fact that the dominant grand narratives of Reason, Science, and Religion cannot be trusted at face value.

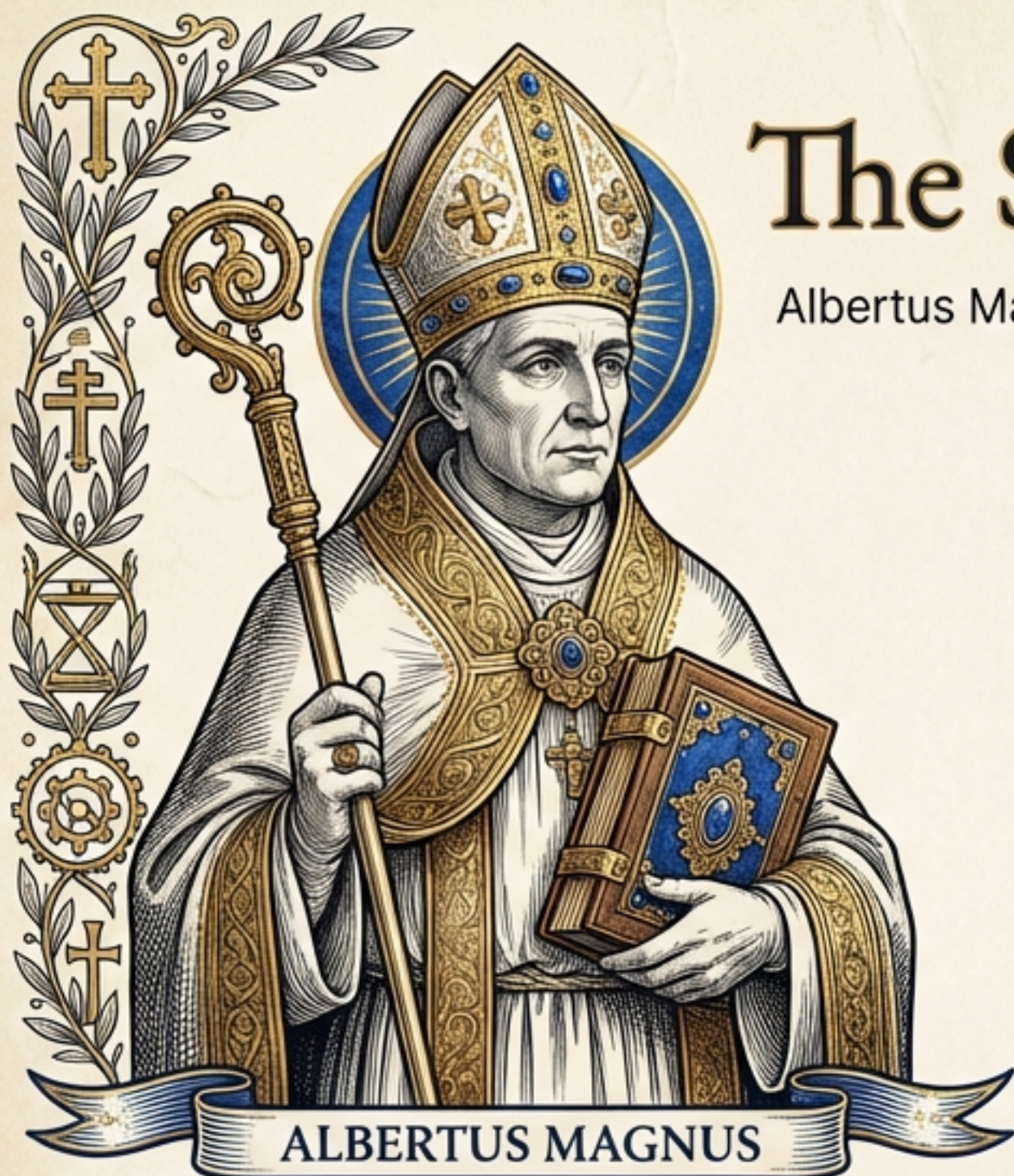
We do not live in a disenchanted world.
We live in a world where the magic has been rewritten as art, science, and politics.

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alchemical list offer it round wrong
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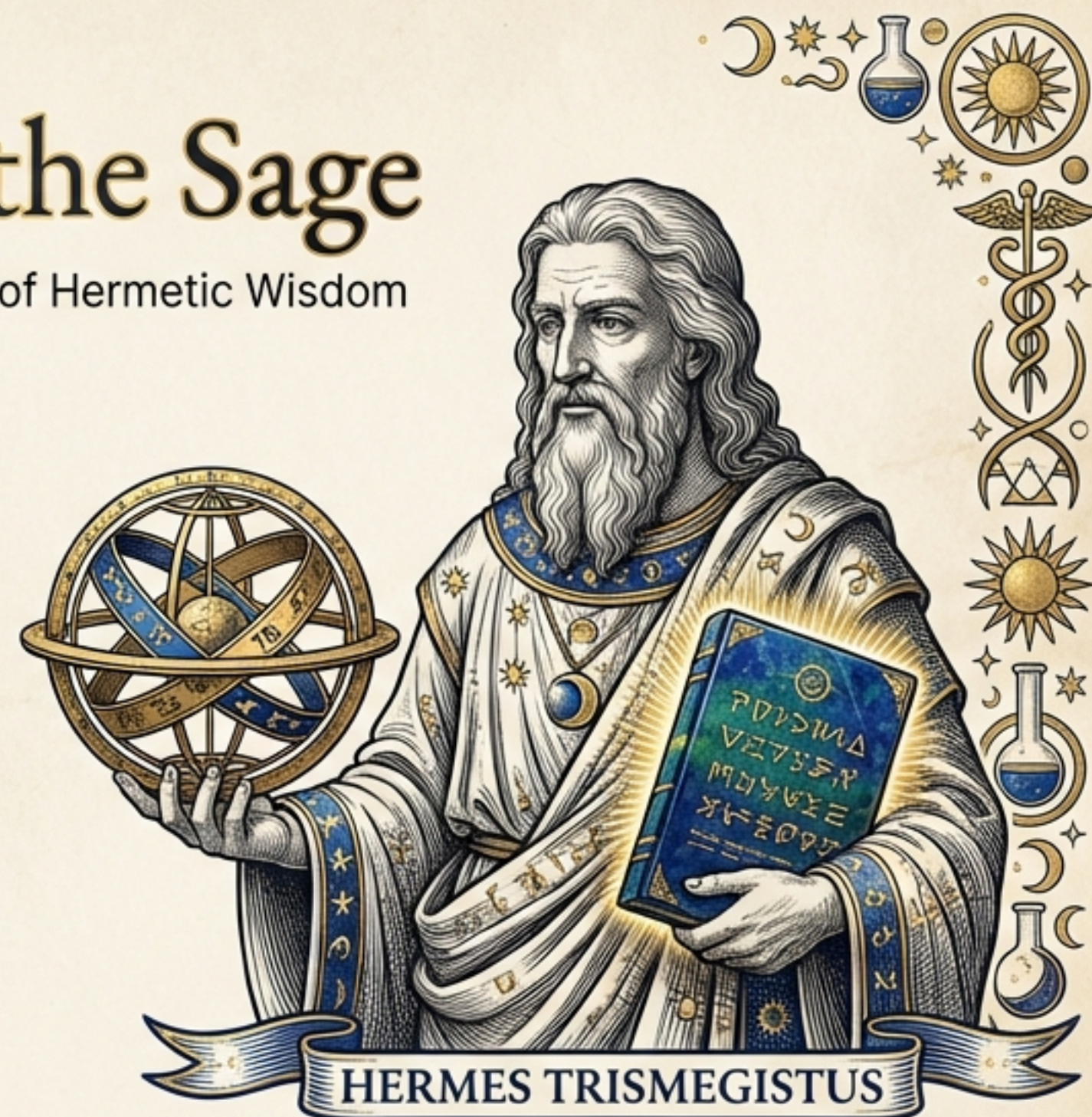
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The Saint and the Sage

Albertus Magnus's Critical Integration of Hermetic Wisdom



The Saint: Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–1280). Doctor of the Church, patron saint of scientists.

• **The Sage:** Hermes Trismegistus. Mythical 'Father of Philosophers' and authority on alchemy. •

The Inquiry: Why did a pillar of Christian theology cite a pagan occultist 94 times?

An Intellectual Anomaly

Venturing beyond Aristotle into the Occult

Albertus Magnus's stature as an outstanding philosopher of his time is universally acknowledged... yet one aspect sets him apart: his frequent citation of the mythical author Hermes Trismegistus.



Key Insight: Albert treated Hermes not merely as a magician, but as the "First Philosopher"—a valid authority to be tested.

The Evolution of an Opinion (1240–1280)

Phase 1: Pre-1250

Negative/Dismissive

Citations in *In I Sent.* view
Hermes as a source of idolatry.

Phase 2: c. 1250

(The Watershed)

Phase 2: c. 1250 (The

Explosion of Interest

Albert writes *Physica* and
discovers the *Asclepius*.

Phase 3: Post-1250

Nuanced Engagement

Frequent positive citations in *De
mineralibus* and *Metaphysica*.



“There is no longer any discernable trend... Albert judged
Hermes on a case-by-case basis.” — David Porreca

The Watershed Moment: Discovering the *Asclepius*

The Shift:

Around 1250, Albert accessed the *Asclepius*. This text provided the philosophical framework to integrate Hermetic thought into Christian cosmology.

Cormorant Garamond on the *Asclepius*. Britoccital framework to integrate Hermetic thought into Christian cosmology.

Order
Inard
Fate



The Two Hermes

The Philosopher:
Author of *Asclepius*.
Deals with First Cause,
Fate, and the Soul.
(Accepted by Albert)

The Technician:
Author of *Alchimia* and
Tabula Smaragdina.
Deals with metals,
stones, and astrology.
(Tested by Albert)

The Mechanism of Fate (*Heimarmene*)

The Chain of Interlocking Causes

The First Cause (God)

Motion of the Heavens
(Stars/Planets)

Terrestrial Events
(Nature/History)



Albert adopts the definition from *Asclepius*:
Fate is a “chain of interlocking causes” (*implexio causarum*) originating from the stars.

“Ymarmenes is a collection of causes; necessity is their execution... and order is the distribution.” — *De caelo et mundo*

Reconciling Fate and Providence

PROVIDENCE



The "Blueprint" in the mind of the Architect (God). The eternal plan.

FATE



The "Model" constructed from that blueprint in the physical world.
The execution.

Albert positions Fate as the tool of Divine Providence, validating Hermes by aligning him with Christian order.

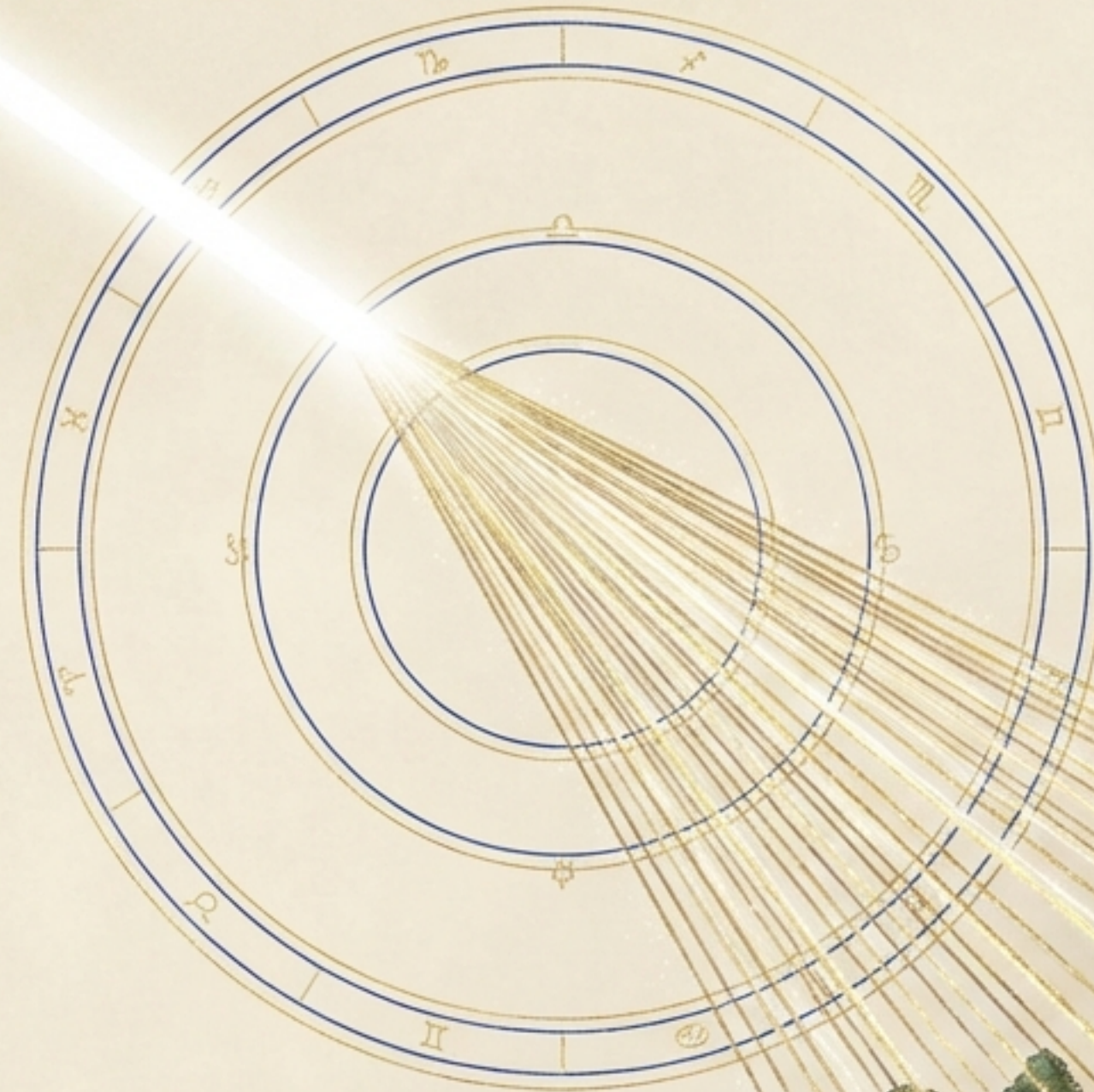
"There is nothing inappropriate about this way of describing fate." — *Summa theologiae*

The Flux of Forms

First Cause

Hermetic View:
An "outpouring" of light and influence from the Creator through the heavens.

Albert's Critique:
He rejects Pantheism (God mixed with matter) but accepts the mechanism of emanation via celestial motion.



Emanation

**Particular Forms
(Matter)**



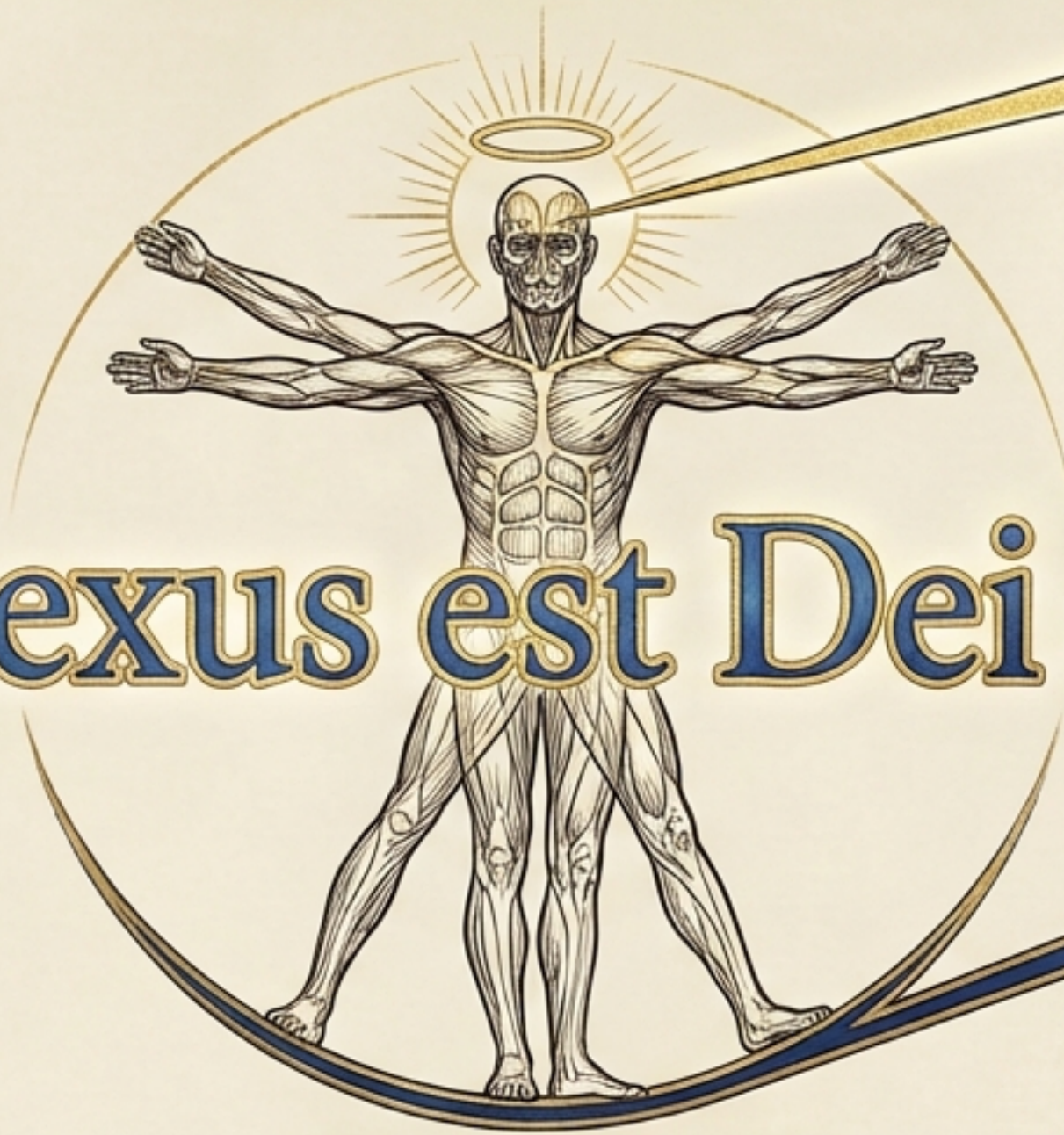
Man as the Nexus



THE DIVINE
(Intellect)

“Homo nexus est Dei et mundi”

THE WORLD
(Body)



Because of this dual nature, man is not just a subject of the world but its “Governor.” This justifies the study of natural magic—man is meant to master the material.

Science of Stones and Stars

Applying Hermetic Theory to Geology

The Principle:

Albert cites the *Tabula Smaragdina*: "The virtues of inferior things descend from superior ones."



Geology:

Stones have powers (magnets, gems) not because of demons, but because they channel specific stellar influences. This makes mineralogy a valid *scientia naturalis*.

The Alchemical Validation



The Verdict: Albert accepts the theory of transmutation. He praises the “utmost cleverness of the alchemists” (*summum ingenium alchimicorum*) for understanding how to manipulate elemental virtues.

- **Source:** *Alchimia* (attributed to Hermes).
- **Theory:** Metals are compound substances made of Mercury and Sulphur.
- **Specifics:** Albert cites Hermes on the properties of lead, tin, and gold.

Skepticism: The Case of the Basilisk

Albertus Magnus and the Mythical Creature

The Myth:

Hermes claims a basilisk can be hatched from a cock's egg brooded in dung.

Albert's Reaction:

"I do not believe this to be true."
(*ego non puto esse verum*).



Analysis Text:

Albert acknowledges the authority ("the saying is of Hermes") but rejects the biological fact based on observation. observation. He reinterprets the "basilisk in glass" as a metaphor for an alchemical elixir.

The Theological Boundary



REASON
(Philosophy)

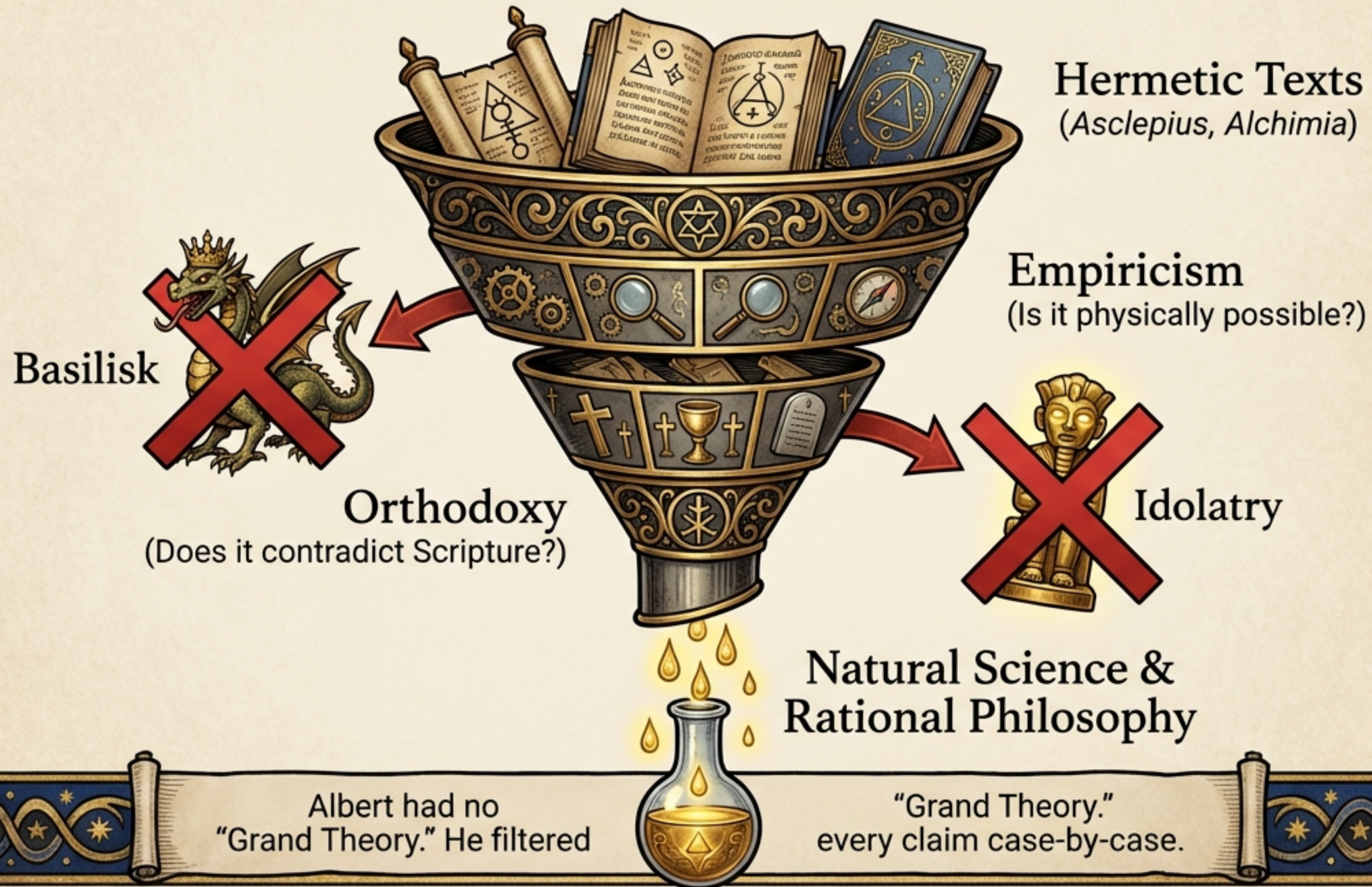


REVELATION
(Theology)

The Question: Did Hermes know the Trinity? (*Prisca Theologia*)

Albert's Answer: NO. He rejects the *Liber XXIV philosophorum* as a forgery. Hermes knew God only through Reason (Nature), not Scripture. Therefore, he is a philosopher, not a prophet.

The Albertine Filter



A Model of Critical Acceptance



1. No Grand Theory

Albert judged every claim on its own merit, without prejudice.



2. The Balance

He walked the tightrope between Orthodoxy (rejecting magic) and Curiosity (accepting fate/alchemy).



3. The Result

He legitimized the study of nature's 'occult' forces, paving the way for the scientific investigations of the High Middle Ages.

The Legacy



Albertus Magnus demonstrated that truth is universal. By sifting the “gold” of natural philosophy from the “sand” of pagan superstition, he proved that a Saint could learn from a Sorcerer.

He accepted the “First Philosopher” not as a god, but as a guide to the hidden powers of the natural world.