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Cover
Mašhad, Kitâbḫâna-i Āsitân-i Quds-i Radawî 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

After having authored in 2003 the entry “De Generatione et corruptione. Tradition arabe” for the reference work *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques* edited by Richard Goulet and having published in 2005 an edition of the Greek text of Aristotle’s *GC*, M. Rashed now presents the edition and English translation of an Arabic commentary on this Aristotelian treatise. The reader of the two works quoted above may think that this is a newly discovered commentary, because it does not feature in the 2003 survey of the Arabic reception of the *GC*, neither is it mentioned among the *Commentaria antqua* listed at the end of the Introduction to the 2005 edition of the Greek *GC*, where the only Arabic commentary cited is Averroes’ *talḫīṣ* (middle commentary). This is not the case, however, because the existence of the text here edited has been known, and its manuscripts signalled, since the first half of the last century, when a *Talḫīṣ kitāb al-kawn wa-l-fasād* was listed among Avicenna’s works. But, as Rashed has it, “(...) this commentary has until now escaped the notice of historians of Arabic philosophy” (p. v), and for this reason the volume under examination is gratefully welcomed as an important piece of work in our increasing documentation about the knowledge of Greek philosophy in the Arabic-speaking world of the classical age.

The book is comprised of three main parts: the edition with facing English translation (pp. 6-63); the commentary (pp. 67-340), and a section devoted to the alleged author al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥtī (pp. 344-92).

One may be struck by the adjective ‘alleged’, given that no trace of hesitation is expressed in the title of the book – no question mark or formulae suggesting anything other than an authorship that lies beyond any doubt. And it lies indeed beyond any doubt in Rashed’s eyes: after having listed eight reasons in support of his conviction, he says: “In view of the eight arguments briefly discussed so far,

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3. It is useful to sum up the main data analysed by Rashed in the entry mentioned above, n. 1. No Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *GC* is extant, but Ibn al-Nadîm in the *K. al-Fihrist* lists the following: (i) Hunayn ibn Ishâq; (ii) Abû ‘Uṯmân al-Dimašqî; (iii) İbrâhîm ibn Bakkûs. The Greek commentaries mentioned in the *K. al-Fihrist* are (i) Alexander of Aphrodisias (lost in Greek); according to Ibn al-Nadîm, it was translated into Arabic by Qusṭâ ibn Luqâ as for the 1st book, and by Abû Bîr Mattâ ibn Yûnûs; (ii) Olympiodorus (lost in Greek): it was translated by Uṣṭâr and then again by Abû Bîr Mattâ ibn Yûnûs; this translation was corrected by Yahûa ibn ’Adî; (iii) Themistius (lost in Greek); (iv) John Philoponus (ed. G. Vitelli, CAG XIV.2).
5. The lists of Avicenna’s works, where the latter is credited with a *talḫīṣ* on the *GC*, are (in chronological order) that by O. Ergin (1937), that by G.C. Anawati (1950), and that by Y. Madhavi (1954), whose information is analysed and commented upon by Rashed, pp. 3-4.
I do not hesitate to attribute to al-Hasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḫtī this abridgement of Aristotle’s GC (p. 361). However, it should be said from the outset that the work here edited is anonymous in the two manuscripts that are known to date. The attribution to the 9th century theologian al-Hasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḫtī originates from the fact that in Ibn al-Nadīm’s K. al-Fihrist an abridgement (iḫtiṣār) of Aristotle’s GC is listed among the works of the latter; hence the idea that the anonymous talḥīṣ and the iḫtiṣār attributed to al-Nawbaḫtī are one and the same work. Rashed is aware that the two terms designate different literary genres, but argues that the difficulty can be circumvented.

As we have just seen, the starting point of the argument in favour of al-Nawbaḫtī’s authorship lies in that in his entry on the latter Ibn al-Nadīm mentions an “abridgment of Aristotle’s De Generatione et corruptione”. To the key argument represented by this piece of information (pp. 350-2) other satellite arguments are added, since Rashed considers that “the first is strong but remains somewhat external to the text transmitted” (p. 352). Among these, one that is “more integral to the substance of the text transmitted” (ibid.) is that the author of the anonymous treatise “is at home in Baghdadi kalām” (pp. 352-4). Another one is that “the author knows the Greek commentators well”. Also, he “was probably acquainted and coeval with the translator Qusṭā b. Lūqā” (p. 355); he “probably used

6 A brief “Introduction to the critical edition”, pp. 3-5, contains the indication of the two manuscripts, one of them (Istanbul, Topkapı, Abmet III 1584) taken from Anawati’s list of Avicenna’s works, and the other (Erfurt, Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, orient. A 1158) taken from Madhavi’s list (see the preceding note). Both reach back to the beginning of the 16th century.

7 Information on him is provided at pp. 346-50. Rashed says: “If not Avicenna, who is the author of our treatise? I shall argue in the present section that it is Abū Muḥammad al-Hasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbaḫtī (d. between 300/912 and 310/922), the important Imāmī theologian of Baghdad, author of the celebrated ‘Book of opinions and religions’, Kitāb al-Ārāʾ wa-al-Diyānāt. [...] He belonged to a well-known Persian family established in Baghdad, close to the heart of power, which included in its ranks famous astrologers at the service of the Caliphs since the foundation of the Abbasid capital. The Shiʿi inclination of this family is well attested in the ancient sources. [...]” (p. 346).

8 Basically, the argument runs as follows: the literary genre of the edited work is indeed that of an abridgment (muḫtaṣar or iḫtiṣār); there is no reason to think that in Ibn al-Nadīm times there was a clear-cut distinction between talḥīṣ and iḫtiṣār; the title of al-Nawbaḫtī’s work as given by Ibn al-Nadīm sounds in any case odd (see below n. 10).

9 This is done after a section devoted to disprove Avicenna’s authorship, pp. 343-6.

10 K. al-Fihrist, p. 177.16-17 Flügel = p. 226.1 Taǧaddud. The text is a bit different in the two editions. The edition Flügel reads: كَتَابُ اِختِصَارُ الكُونِ والفَسَادِ لَاِرِسْطَالِيسِيِّ الإِرْسَطَالِيَّ. Dodge, p. 441, translates: “Abridgment of Aristotle’s De generatione et corruptione” (as in Taǧaddud). Commenting upon the title as given by Taǧaddud, Rashed, p. 351 n. 23, remarks that “It seems odd to speak of the ‘book of the abridgment of the generation and corruption by Aristotle’. I would rather tentatively suggest that the genuine title was Iḥtiṣār kitāb al-kaun wa-al-fasād li-Arisṭūtālis, ‘Abridgment of the book of generation and corruption by Aristotle’.” The title as given in the edition by Flügel runs “Abridgment of the abridgment of Aristotle’s De generatione et corruptione”.

11 “It is of course difficult to claim that an anonymous text cannot have been written by any other scholar than its presumed author. Yet, in the present case, we can come near to proof, for a very simple reason: at many points in his paraphrase, the author expresses thoughts foreign to the Aristotelian tradition, but closely reflecting ontological technicalities typical for the mutakallimūn, and especially for the Baghdadi school” (p. 352).

12 To support this claim Rashed first goes back to Ibn al-Nadīm’s testimony, which includes the information that al-Nawbaḫtī held “close relationships with the translators of his time” (p. 354), and then sums up the results of his own commentary: “we remarked that the author seems very well informed about the ancient exegesis of GC. It is beyond any doubt that he used Alexander’s commentary on this work when paraphrasing the first book. The situation is less clear for the second book, where we have found no trace of such a use of Alexander. The commentary is less rich philosophically than that on the first book, even though the author had some Greek source at his disposal and made use of it in a couple of places. We have suggested that in these passages, he may have used Olympiodorus’ commentary on the second book” (ibid.). This elicits in Rashed’s eyes the conclusion that “our author had access to two Greek commentaries when writing his exegesis of Aristotle’s treatise. That would come as no surprise if he is al-Nawbaḫtī” (p. 355).
Abū ʿUṯmān al-Dimašqī’s translation of Aristotle’s *GC* (pp. 355-8); he “was an atomist” (pp. 358-9), and “adopts a markedly anti-Kindian stance” (p. 359). Finally, “the style of the introduction is reminiscent of that of the introduction of the *Kitāb firaq al-šīa*” (p. 360), namely the only extant work of al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥṭī. None of these is admittedly a positive argument, all of them being rather instances of a Why-Not reasoning that would have been better mirrored in the title of the book, in my opinion, if some caveat had been added. But the precise identification of the author of the *talḥis* is less important than the analysis of its contents and sources.

The treatise is subdivided “into fourteen chapters, which basically correspond to the structure of Aristotle’s treatise” (p. 5). After a general survey that serves as an introduction, the chapters deal in sequence with generation and destruction in relationship to categories, Non-Being, substance, and accidents (Chapters 1-4); with change and its different meanings, including growth and its causes (Chapters 5-7); with contact, action and passion, and mixing (Chapters 8-10). All this roughly corresponds to the contents of Book I of Aristotle’s *GC*. The remaining four chapters, 11 to 14, deal with topics expounded in Book II: elements, change in the elementary bodies, homeomers, and the eternity of the movement of the celestial bodies. In dealing with all these issues, the author “appears to be keen on giving natural philosophy strict boundaries, probably to keep it immune from metaphysical or theological contamination”, as Rashed remarks at the beginning of his commentary (p. 67).

This is why when one reads that

> generation and destruction exist forever (abadan), with no intermission, for the sole reason that the common matter, i.e. the substratum, of the opposed forms, is one and will remain everlasting (dāʾiman). [...] Therefore, generation and destruction exist forever; neither is subject to privation in the world, and neither exists without the other, because when there is generation, there is destruction and when there is destruction, there is generation (p. 12; Arabic text, p. 13.17-21),

one must resist the temptation to wonder how it is possible that a theologian, no matter of which allegiance, might endorse such a claim. Rashed is well aware of the problem this may represent for his identification of the author of this work with al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥṭī: “on this issue of eternity, the author seems *prima facie* adopt a strategy which is contrary to what we would expect of him if his goal was really to rewrite Aristotle’s system in terms compatible with *kalām*” (p. 96). Rashed has an argument to try to prove that the assessment quoted above is less surprising than it may seem in a theologian’s mouth. “The author does not appear particularly embarrassed by the eternalist connotations of what he is saying here. I do not believe, however, that this fact is sufficient to counter our hypothesis. For it should first be noted that the question of a *parte post* eternity is much less of a problem for Islamic theologians than that of a *parte ante* eternity. (...) A second argument is still more cogent: the author says [...] that neither generation nor corruption will ever be suppressed from the world (min al-ʿālam). But this word, for an Islamic theologian, is perfectly unambiguous. [...] We may understand our text as meaning that as long as the world will exist, generation and destruction will take place in it. The author is likely to have played with this ambiguity, saying both that according to Aristotle this world is eternal and that in truth, although time is infinite a *parte post* (but not a *parte ante*) this world is temporally finite. This strategy is already to be found in some passages by al-Kindī” (p. 97). I wonder if all this is really

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13 See above, n. 7.
necessary, given that one thing strikes the reader of this summary of the GC: at variance with al-Kindi’s epistle on generation and corruption with which Rashed compares the *talḥīṣ*, the latter is not intended to be a work where the author utters his own opinions; rather, some effort is made, or so it seems to me, to provide a sort of non-committal abridgment of Aristotle’s doctrines. The fact, aptly remarked by Rashed, that all the doxographical references to other philosophers – Leucippus, Democritus, Plato... – so abundant in the GC do not feature in the *talḥīṣ* confirms this “didactical” stance.

This obviously does not mean that the *talḥīṣ* counts as a mere summary of Aristotle’s tenets in the GC. As the second main thesis advanced in this book, after that of al-Nawbhaṭī’s authorship, is that the author “relies systematically (although withou saying so) on Alexander of Aphrodisias’ lost commentary” (p. vi), it is now time to turn to this issue.

Alexander of Aphrodisias’ commentary on the GC is lost to us, but it left some traces in Greek. To mention only the work which is more germane to our discussion, it was still available to Philoponus, who in his own commentary on the GC has repeatedly recourse to Alexander’s *ezήγησις*, which he quotes often (though not always) with approval. The acquaintance of the Arab readership with Alexander’s lost commentary has been proven too, by a number of scholars going from G. Serra to E. Gannagé to H. Eichner, and this surely elicits Rashed’s hypothesis that also

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14 In fn. 87 at p. 97 the reference is to al-Kindi’s epistle On the Explanation of the remote agent cause of the generation of corruption (Fī l-iḥbāṇati ‘n al-ilāti al-fā ilāti al-qaribati bi-l-kawn wu-l-fasād).

15 “The author systematically neglects everything pertaining to the doxographical genre” (p. 73).

16 Ioannis Philoponi In Aristotelis libros de generatione et corruptione commentaria (...) ed. G. Vitelli, Reimer, Berlin 1897 (CAG XIV.2).


18 The acquaintance of the Arab readership with Alexander’s lost commentary has been proven too, by a number of scholars going from G. Serra to E. Gannagé to H. Eichner, and this surely elicits Rashed’s hypothesis that also


the talḫīṣ draws something from Alexander. However, at variance with the testimonies examined in the studies mentioned above,21 the talḫīṣ never mentions Alexander’s name. Rashed thinks that it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct Alexander’s exegeses through a comparison with other texts. For instance, in commenting on the general introduction to the talḫīṣ that I have mentioned shortly before, he says: “In his introduction, the author announces that he will deal with ‘absolute generation and destruction’ and that he will ‘explain the difference between them and the other changes’. He will also, he tells us, examine the causes of generation and destruction. Since the causes set forth in the present treatise must be general, and since the form [...] is particular, the author will deal with the general agent and the general substratum only. [...] At any rate, the ‘generality’ he alludes to is clearly different from logical universality. The causes studied in GC are not abstractions or causal notions, but they must, directly or indirectly, be causes for every generated being. [...] This concern for the distinction between notional and ontological priority plays a major role in the first book of the Physics of the Šifāʾ: Avicenna dedicates the whole third chapter to it. Similarly, Averroes’ Long Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics is clearly indebted to this discussion. It is a fair guess, then, that Alexander’s reflexions lurk in the backgrounds of our three Arabic texts. In both proems – to his commentary on the Physics and on GC – Alexander is likely to have distinguished two main significations of commonness” (pp. 67-8).

The main problem I see in this reconstruction, that I take as an example of the method of this inquiry, is that we do not have Alexander’s proem to the commentary on the Physics, which is lost, nor do we have Alexander’s proem to the commentary on the GC, which is lost too. Obviously, when passages in the talḫīṣ attest the same interpretation of Aristotle’s tenets that other works refer to Alexander, one may agree that the talḫīṣ too is echoing Alexander’s lost commentary;22 but only in such cases. When Rashed says that “As one can see from reading through our commentary, many other passages attest to the influence of Alexander. The new text is therefore a third and essential piece of evidence, alongside the commentaries of Philoponus and Averroes, for the nature and content of Alexander’s lost commentary. In particular, it allows us to establish that in his Epitome of the treatise On Generation and Corruption, Averroes faithfully follows Alexander’s exegesis” (Preface, p. vi), I get the impression that this way of dealing with the text begs the question at issue. A text that never cites Alexander’s commentary – that we do no longer possess – turns out to be a means of establishing that Averroes, when citing Alexander apropos passages of the GC where it is not Philoponus who attests Alexander’s exegesis, was indeed drawing from Alexander’s commentary.

Notwithstanding my perplexities about al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥtī’s alleged authorship, and notwithstanding the fact that the dependence of the talḫīṣ from Alexander’s lost commentary does not seem to me to be argued for in a convincing way, this volume is important and its author deserves the gratitude of those working in the field for having edited and translated another piece of the Graeco-Arabic legacy.

Cristina D’Ancona

Alexander’s Commentary in their Relationship to the Arab Commentary Tradition on the De Generatione et corruptione”, in D’Ancona-Serra, Aristotele e Alessandro di Afrodisia nella tradizione araba (as in n. 19), pp. 281-97.

21 The main testimonies are the Kitāb al-ṭasrīf, a treatise belonging to the corpus of alchemical texts attributed to Ḥābir ibn Hayyān, and Averroes’ Epitome and Middle Commentary on the GC.

22 If I am not wrong, there are no such cases in the talḫīṣ.