

# Studia graeco-arabica

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### *Cover*

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḡawī 300, f. 1v  
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

*Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. On Astronomia. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 3*, edited and translated by F. Jamil Ragep and T. Mimura. Foreword by N. El-Bizri, Oxford U.P. in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Oxford 2015, xxv + 163 pp., Arabic pagination pp. ٥-١١٤

The astonishing, and in many respects enigmatic encyclopaedia known as the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* has attracted the interest of the scholars since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the *princeps* came to light in Calcutta (1816), followed by the edition published by Fr. Dieterici in 1886 under the title *Die Abhandlungen der Ichwān aṣ-Ṣafā in Auswahl zum ersten Mal aus arabischen Handschriften herausgegeben*. After several other editions complete or partial, a multi-authored and multi-volume Arabic edition accompanied by an annotated English translation was initiated in 2008, in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, under the direction of Nader El-Bizri as the general editor, and with Carmela Baffioni, Hermann Landolt, Wilferd Madelung and Ismail K. Poonawala as members of the Editorial Board. Several parts of the corpus are already available: after an introductory volume (El-Bizri [ed.], 2008) epistle 22 entitled *The Case of Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn* was published (L.E Goodman and R. McGregor, 2009); then, epistles 10-14 *On Logic* (C. Baffioni, 2010) and epistle 5 *On Music* (O. Wright, 2010); then again, epistle 52A *On Magic I* (G. de Callataj and B. Halfants); epistles 15-21 *On the Natural Sciences* were published subsequently (C. Baffioni, 2013), and then again epistle 4 *On Geography* (I. Sánchez and J. Montgomery, 2014). Now it is the turn of *Epistle 3 On Astronomia*, edited, translated and annotated by Jamil Ragep and Taro Mimura.

As we are told in the foreword by the general editor Nader El-Bizri (p. xxii), reproductions of nineteen manuscripts of the predictably larger textual tradition of the *Epistles* were put at the disposal of the editors of the various volumes. J. Ragep and T. Mimura selected seven of these nineteen, “based on our assessment that these were the best witnesses” (p. 10), six from Istanbul and one from Tehran (among the seven manuscripts selected, ms. ٢ = Tehran, Mahdavi private collection 7437, and ms. ٤ = Istanbul, Atif Efendi 1681 will occur below, in a quotation from the editors). A list of variant readings is provided at pp. 12-15, that however shows instances of conjunctive errors only capable of grouping two manuscripts against another group of three. This brings the editors to say: “These examples, which could be multiplied, confirm what has been already noted by the editors in this series, namely, that it is difficult to determine the relationship between the different manuscripts” (p. 16). This remark paves the way for the editors to state that what they offer is not a critical edition. Indeed, although the subtitle of the volume runs *An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 3*, the editors state that “Giving the ambiguities regarding the textual transmission of the *Epistles*, we make no claims that we have produced a ‘critical edition’. On the basis of the textual relationships discussed above, we chose ms ٢ as our main witness inasmuch as it has fewer additions and modifications and presents a more straightforward text than its main rival in this regard, i.e. ms. ٤; the assumption is that such an ‘uncluttered’ witness preserves an earlier version of the text. However, as mentioned above, we make no claims that this version is the only possible authorial version” (p. 17).

After the Introduction (pp. 1-20) comes first the annotated English translation of the epistle (pp. 25-89), followed by six *Appendices* (pp. 93-150), by the *Bibliography* (pp. 151-4) and *Indexes* (pp. 155-62); then the Arabic text comes (pp. ٥ - ١٦٠), accompanied by an index of names and terms (pp. ١٦١ - ١٦٤).

A prominent feature of the epistle *On Astronomia* is highlighted by Ragep and Mimura, namely that it is less intended to provide a scientific account of the astronomical science of the time than to impart information on a sort of philosophical astronomy. The epistle “is written by reasonably competent amateurs whose purpose (...) is didactic rather than propaedeutic” (p. 4). The *Iḥwān*, as

Rajep and Mimura aptly remark, might have had access to a variety of scientific sources, both Greek and Arabic: the editors list Ptolemy's *Almagest* and *Tetrabiblos*, the *Elements of Astronomy* by al-Farḡānī, the *Introduction to Astrology* by Abū Ma'sar al-Balḥī, and the *Zīğ* by al-Battānī as the sources that were surely available to the Iḥwān on a chronological basis (p. 5). However, of all these only Ptolemy is mentioned, which implies that either the Iḥwān were unacquainted with or did prefer not to use the other works listed above. But even in their use of Ptolemy they appear to be selective. This is well explained by Ragep and Mimura, to whom I will now give the floor, because what they say is very clear and instructive: "the astronomical and astrological content is not meant to be exhaustive or even comprehensive. (...) much is left out, such as the basic information on planetary models and even an explanation of the 'building devices' of those models, namely, epicycles and eccentrics. This is curious and in a real sense idiosyncratic. Since the appearance of Ptolemy's *Almagest* in the second century CE, anyone presenting a summary of Ptolemaic astronomy would have been expected to provide some accounts of the models (...). Not only does Ptolemy himself do this in his *Planetary Hypotheses*, but competent summaries before the Iḥwān are also provided by Farghānī and even by Proclus (...). Proclus had little sympathy for the phenomenalist astronomy of Ptolemy (...). Nevertheless, he felt it necessary that his students at the Academy on Athens be acquainted with this astronomy, and he provided a quite competent summary of the *Almagest* in the *Hypotyposis*. (...) It is certainly of interest that in the introduction to *Epistle 3*, the Iḥwān themselves claim that the purpose is so 'that the path for learners will be facilitated and [astronomia] will be brought closer to comprehension for beginners'. But again, the astronomical content is so abridged, and other available elementary texts would have provided a much more comprehensible and coherent introduction to astronomy, that one is left wondering what type of 'learner' or 'beginner' they have in mind. Evidently, the answer is someone who wished to gain moral guidance through well-chosen examples of astronomical knowledge. This would help explain why so much that one might expect in a work whose purpose was to provide such a summary is left out" (pp. 6-7). It is against this background that one can better understand why the auctoritates siding with Ptolemy in this epistle are Hermes, Pythagoras, and the pseudo-Aristotle of the *Theology*. (pp. ۸۸ - ۸۹ of the Arabic, pp. 62-3 of the English trans.).

A final, minor remark specifically on this: at pp. ۸۷. ۸ - ۸۸. ۱ of the Arabic, p. 62 of the English trans., we encounter the claim that "In ancient wisdom it is related that whoever can cast off his body, reject his senses, calm his suspicions, and ascend to the celestial sphere, is rewarded there with the most excellent reward (جُوزِيَ هُنَاكَ بِأَحْسَنِ الْجِزَاءِ)". In their footnote on p. 62, Rajep and Mimura remark that this statement is "very much in line with the doctrine one finds in Plotinus", and are looking for the exact source of the passage. Indeed, they are right: the source is the Arabic Plotinus, namely the same pseudo-*Theology* that a few lines later (p. ۸۹. ۴) the Iḥwān quote once again. The passage about "ancient wisdom" mentioned above comes from the Arabic adaptation of Plotinus IV 8[6], 1.11-12, where Heraclitus' utterances are transformed into an advice to ascend to the intelligible world. The Arabic says: "He said: 'who desires that and raises himself up to the exalted world is necessarily requited with the best of all possible rewards (جُوزِيَ بِأَحْسَنِ الْجِزَاءِ اضْطِرَارًا)" (p. 23.2-3 Badawī, English trans. Lewis, p. 227): another proof, if proof is needed, of the pervasive influence of this part of the pseudo-*Theology* (incidentally, the same part from which the other quotation in this epistle is taken).

The book is rich and accurate, and so clearly annotated that even an outsider reader like I am can learn much from it.

CDA