

# 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

Al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥtī, *Commentary on Aristotle De Generatione et corruptione*. Edition, Translation and Commentary by Marwan Rashed, De Gruyter, Berlin 2015 (*Scientia graeco-arabica*, 19), 438 pp.

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<sup>1</sup> and having published in 2005 an edition of the Greek text of Aristotle’s *GC*,<sup>2</sup> 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*,<sup>3</sup> neither is it mentioned among the *Commentaria antiqua* listed at the end of the Introduction to the 2005 edition of the Greek *GC*, where the only Arabic commentary cited is Averroes’ *talḥīṣ* (middle commentary).<sup>4</sup> 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 *Talḥīṣ kitāb al-kawn wa-l-fasād* was listed among Avicenna’s works.<sup>5</sup> 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,

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques, Suppl.*, CNRS-Éditions, Paris 2003, pp. 304-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Aristote. De la génération et la corruption*, texte établi et traduit par M. Rashed, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2005 (Collection des Universités de France).

<sup>3</sup> 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-Nadīm in the *K. al-Fihrist* lists the following: (i) Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq; (ii) Abū ‘Uṭmān al-Dimašqī; (iii) Ibrāhīm ibn Bakkūs. The Greek commentaries mentioned in the *K. al-Fihrist* are (i) Alexander of Aphrodisias (lost in Greek): according to Ibn al-Nadīm, it was translated into Arabic by Qusṭā ibn Lūqā as for the 1<sup>st</sup> book, and by Abū Biṣr Mattā ibn Yūnus; (ii) Olympiodorus (lost in Greek): it was translated by Uṣṭāṭ and then again by Abū Biṣr Mattā ibn Yūnus; this translation was corrected by Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī; (iii) Themistius (lost in Greek); (iv) John Philoponus (ed. G. Vitelli, *CAG* XIV.2).

<sup>4</sup> *Aristote. De la génération et la corruption* (as in n. 2), p. ccliv. The edition quoted is that by Ḡamaladdin al-‘Alawī (Beirut 1995); in the same year 2005 a new edition of Averroes’ *Middle Commentary* was published: *Averroes (Abū l-Walīd ibn Ruṣd) Mittlerer Kommentar zu Aristoteles’ De generatione et corruptione mit einer einleitenden Studie versehen*, herausgegeben und kommentiert von H. Eichner, Verlag F. Schöningh, Paderborn - München - Wien - Zürich 2005 (Abhandlungen der Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 111; Union Académique Internationale, Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi [...] *Averrois Opera* editioni curandae praest Gerard Endress. Series A. Averrois Arabicus, 17). In addition to the *Middle Commentary*, Averroes authored also an *Epitome* of the *GC*: *Ḡawāmi’ al-Kawn wa-l-fasād*, ed. A.W. al-Taftazānī - S. Zāyid, Cairo 1991; see also J. Puig Montada, *Abū l-Walīd Ibn Ruṣhd (Averroes). Epitome del libro sobre la generación y la corrupción*, edición, traducción y comentario, CSIC, Madrid 1992 (Colección Pensamiento islámico, 2).

<sup>5</sup> The lists of Avicenna’s works, where the latter is credited with a *talḥīṣ* 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-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥṭī 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.<sup>6</sup> The attribution to the 9<sup>th</sup> century theologian al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥṭī<sup>7</sup> originates from the fact that in Ibn al-Nadīm's *K. al-Fihrist* an abridgement (*iḥtišār*) of Aristotle's *GC* is listed among the works of the latter; hence the idea that the anonymous *talḥīṣ* and the *iḥtišār* attributed to al-Nawbaḥṭī 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.<sup>8</sup>

As we have just seen, the starting point of the argument in favour of al-Nawbaḥṭī's authorship<sup>9</sup> lies in that in his entry on the latter Ibn al-Nadīm mentions an "abridgment of Aristotle's *De Generatione et corruptione*".<sup>10</sup> 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).<sup>11</sup> Another one is that "the author knows the Greek commentators well".<sup>12</sup> Also, he "was probably acquainted and coeval with the translator Qusṭā b. Lūqā" (p. 355); he "probably used

<sup>6</sup> A brief "Introduction to the critical edition", pp. 3-5, contains the indication of the two manuscripts, one of them (Istanbul, Topkapı, *Ahmet 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 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>7</sup> 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-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbaḥṭī (d. between 300/912 and 310/922), the important Imāmi theologian of Baghdad, author of the celebrated 'Book of opinions and religions', *Kitāb al-ʿArāʾ wa-al-Dīyānāt*. [...] 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 Šīʿī inclination of this family is well attested in the ancient sources. [...]" (p. 346).

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

<sup>9</sup> This is done after a section devoted to disprove Avicenna's authorship, pp. 343-6.

<sup>10</sup> *K. al-Fihrist*, p. 177.16-17 Flügel = p. 226.1 Taḡaddud. The text is a bit different in the two editions. The edition Flügel reads: كتاب اختصار الكون والفساد لأرسطاليس; the edition Taḡaddud reads: كتاب اختصار الكون والفساد لأرسطاليس. Dodge, p. 441, translates: "Abridgment of Aristotle's *De generatione et corruptione*" (as in Taḡaddud). Commenting upon the title as given by Taḡaddud, 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 *Iḥtišār kitāb al-kawn wa-al-fasād li-Aristūṭālīs*, '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*".

<sup>11</sup> "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).

<sup>12</sup> To support this claim Rashed first goes back to Ibn al-Nadīm's testimony, which includes the information that al-Nawbaḥṭī 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-Nawbaḥṭī" (p. 355).

Abū ‘Uṭmān al-Dimaṣqī’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-šī‘a*” (p. 360), namely the only extant work of al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbaḥtī.<sup>13</sup> 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 *talbīṣ* 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 everlastingly (*dā’iman*). [...] 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-Nawbaḥtī: “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-‘ālam*). 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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<sup>13</sup> See above, n. 7.

necessary, given that one thing strikes the reader of this summary of the *GC*: at variance with al-Kindī's epistle on generation and corruption with which Rashed compares the *talhbīs*,<sup>14</sup> 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,<sup>15</sup> that all the doxographical references to other philosophers – Leucippus, Democritus, Plato... – so abundant in the *GC* do not feature in the *talhbīs* confirms this “didactical” stance.

This obviously does not mean that the *talhbīs* 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-Nawbaḥṭī's authorship, is that the author “relies systematically (although without saying so) on Alexander's 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*<sup>16</sup> has repeatedly recourse to Alexander's ἐξήγησις, which he quotes often (though not always) with approval.<sup>17</sup> The acquaintance of the Arab readership with Alexander's lost commentary has been proven too, by a number of scholars going from G. Serra<sup>18</sup> to E. Gannagé<sup>19</sup> to H. Eichner,<sup>20</sup> and this surely elicits Rashed's hypothesis that also

<sup>14</sup> In fn. 87 at p. 97 the reference is to al-Kindī's epistle *On the Explanation of the remote agent cause of the generation of corruption* (*Fī l-ibānati 'an al-'illati al-fā'ilati al-qaribati li-l-kawn wa-l-fasād*).

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

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

<sup>17</sup> Expressions like ὡς φησιν Ἀλέξανδρος are frequent: p. 12.6 Vitelli, p. 86.31, p. 98.2, 6, p. 122.6, p. 135.3, p. 137.27-28, p. 222.33, p. 223.9 (ἀπορεῖ δὲ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος), p. 234.28, 33-34 (see below, at the end of this note), p. 249.18 (ζητεῖ δὲ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος), p. 255.17-18, p. 268.1 (ζητεῖ δὲ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος), p. 287.9-10 and 25-26, p. 314.9. The label ὁ ἐξηγητῆς Ἀλέξανδρος occurs several times: p. 82.13, p. 214.23, p. 226.18; similar expressions are οὕτως μὲν οὖν ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος ἐξηγήσατο, p. 16.7-8, p. 23.24 and p. 291.18-19; Ἀλέξανδρος δὲ τὸ [...] ἀντι τοῦ [...] ἐξέλαβεν, ὅπως συνεχῆς ἡ πᾶσα τῆς λέξεως εἴη διάνοια, p. 81.22-24; ὁ μὲν οὖν Ἀλέξανδρος οὕτως ἐξηγήσατο, *ibid.*, l. 27; ἡ τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἐξήγησις, p. 82.28. Other formulae are the following, which I quote in order to substantiate the claim that Philoponus often meets with approval Alexander's interpretation: διόπερ ἀμείνων ἴσως ἢ ἑτέρα ἐξήγησις, ἣν ὁ Ἀφροδισεὺς ἐκτίθεται Ἀλέξανδρος, p. 77.8; ὁ μὲντοι Ἀλέξανδρος προσφύεστερον τοῦτο ἐξηγήσατο, p. 15.2-3; διὰ τοῦτο ἀληθεστέρα μοι δοκεῖ εἶναι καὶ τῆ λέξει σύμφωνος ἢ παρὰ Ἀλεξάνδρω ἐξήγησις, p. 55.20-21; οὕτως Ἀλέξανδρος ἐξηγήσατο συμφώνως τοῖς ἐν τῇ Φυσικῇ εἰρημένους, p. 59.13-14; ἵνα τῷ Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ ἐξηγητοῦ χρησόμεθα ὑποδείγματι, p. 62.17-18; ὁ μὲν γὰρ Ἀλέξανδρος ἀπλούστερον, καθάπερ καὶ φαίνεται λέγων Ἀριστοτέλης, οὕτως ἐξηγήσατο, p. 234.20; κατὰ μὲν Ἀλέξανδρον λέγοντας, p. 235.32; there are also instances of disagreement: ἀλλοίωσιν δὲ χρὴ νοεῖν οὐχ, ὡσπερ Ἀλέξανδρος, τὴν γένεσιν, p. 232.2; also the passage quoted above, p. 234.33 ff., bears traces of a criticism of Alexander's exegesis. To my knowledge, no systematic study exists so far of Philoponus' attitude towards Alexander of Aphrodisias.

<sup>18</sup> G. Serra, “La traduzione araba del *De generatione et corruptione* di Aristotele citata nel *Kitāb al-taṣrīf* attribuito a Ḡābir”, *Medioevo. Rivista di storia della filosofia medievale* 23 (1997), pp. 27-66.

<sup>19</sup> E. Gannagé, “Matière et éléments dans le commentaire d'Alexandre d'Aphrodise *In De generatione et corruptione*”, in C. D'Ancona - G. Serra (eds.), *Aristotele e Alessandro di Afrodisia nella tradizione araba*. Atti del colloquio “La ricezione araba ed ebraica della filosofia e della scienza greche”, Padova 14-15 maggio 1999, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2002 (*Subsidia mediaevalia patavina*, 3), pp. 133-49; Ead., *Alexander of Aphrodisias, On Aristotle on Coming-to-Be and Perishing 2.2-5*, Duckworth, London 2005 (*Ancient Commentators on Aristotle*). A useful summary of the attestations of Alexander's commentary in Arabic philosophical literature is provided in the Introduction to this translation, pp. 7-9.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to the commentaries accompanying the edition of Averroes' *Middle Commentary* quoted above, n. 4, where the presence of Alexander's exegesis in Averroes is stated, see also H. Eichner, “Ibn Ruṣd's *Middle Commentary* and

the *talḥīṣ* draws something from Alexander. However, at variance with the testimonies examined in the studies mentioned above,<sup>21</sup> the *talḥīṣ* 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 *talḥīṣ* 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 *Šifā'*: 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 *talḥīṣ* attest the same interpretation of Aristotle's tenets that other works refer to Alexander, one may agree that the *talḥīṣ* too is echoing Alexander's lost commentary;<sup>22</sup> 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-Nawbaḥṭī's alleged authorship, and notwithstanding the fact that the dependence of the *talḥīṣ* 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

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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.

<sup>21</sup> The main testimonies are the *Kitāb al-taṣrīf*, a treatise belonging to the corpus of alchemical texts attributed to Ḡābir ibn Ḥayyān, and Averroes' *Epitome* and *Middle Commentary* on the *GC*.

<sup>22</sup> If I am not wrong, there are no such cases in the *talḥīṣ*.