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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. Sciences of the Soul and Intellect. Part I. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 32-36, edited and translated by P.E. Walker; I.K. Poonawala and D. Simonowitz; G. de Callatay. *Foreword* by N. El-Bizri, Oxford U.P. in Association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Oxford 2015, XXIII + 270, Arabic pagination ٥-٢٠٢ pp.

Despite the fact that they are often labelled ‘enigmatic’, the writings that compose this tenth-century Arabic encyclopaedia are better and better known thanks to generations of scholars¹ whose efforts are now resumed by the specialists at work on the ongoing project *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*.² The elusive character of the *Epistles* lies first and foremost in their deliberate anonymity, that reflects the nature of “secretive coterie”³ of the writers⁴ who either authored them or were their recipients; however, that of the exact identification of the origins of the encyclopedia is not the only question to remain unsettled. In many cases, that of the sources it depends upon is an open question as well. The *Epistles* are famously rich in references to ancient wisdom, especially even though not exclusively Greek; however, only seldom are the quotations explicit, and even when a school, a philosopher, or a scientist are mentioned, this is often in the form of rephrasing and interpretation.⁵ Thus, the series *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* represents a well welcomed contribution to the knowledge of the most influential example of dissemination of scientific and philosophical learning in Medieval Islam. If I am speaking of dissemination it is because, as the general introduction remarks, the encyclopedia is issued from and directed to a non-specialist audience.⁶

¹ An overview of the history of scholarship is provided at p. XIX of the *Foreword* (common to all the volumes of the series).

² A list of the *Epistles* already published features on a non-numbered page at the beginning of the volume.

³ N. El-Bizri, *Foreword*, p. xv.

⁴ At least four people are mentioned as the authors of the *Epistles* in the ancient sources (chiefly Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī) and the prevailing view in contemporary scholarship is indeed that of several scholars at work during a certain span of time, but the hypothesis of a single author has also been tentatively advanced: see S. Diwald, *Arabische Philosophie und Wissenschaft in der Enzyklopädie Kitāb Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ* (III). *Die Lehre von Seele und Intellekt*, O. Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1975 (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz), pp. 12-15. After having remarked that “Die einheitliche Stil scheint ein Indiz für einen einzelnen Autor zu sein, unabhängig von der Frage, ob es sich um eine Originalabfassung oder Redaktion oder Überarbeitung handelt” (p. 14), S. Diwald mentions the cross-references and comes to the conclusion that “auch die Vorverweise lassen keine zwingenden Rückschlüsse auf mehrere Autoren zu, sie sprechen aber auch nicht dagegen” (p. 15).

⁵ Relying on C. Baffioni’s multifaceted research (see in part. *Frammenti e testimonianze di autori antichi nelle Rasāʾil degli Iḥwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, Istituto Nazionale per la Storia antica, Roma 1994), G. de Callatay, *Iḥwān al-Safāʾ. A Brotherhood of Idealists on the Fringe of Orthodox Islam*, Oneworld, Oxford 2005 (Makers of the Muslim World), p. 74, sums up the issue of the sources as follows: the Brethren “were generally more familiar with the doctrines of ancient philosophers and scientists than with their actual writings (...) This suggests that for the most part they learnt about the philosophers’ views from doxographies (...) rather than from their actual works”.

⁶ N. El-Bizri, *Foreword*, pp. xvii-xviii: “In spite of their erudition and resourcefulness, it is doubtful whether the Brethren of Purity can be impartially ranked amongst the authorities of their age in the realms of science and philosophy. Their inquiries into mathematics, logic, and the natural sciences were recorded in the *Epistles* in a synoptic and diluted fashion, sporadically infused with gnostic, symbolic, and occult directives. (...) In terms of the epistemic significance of the *Epistles* and the intellectual calibre of their authors, it must be stated that despite being supplemented by oral teachings in seminars (*majālis al-ʿilm*), the heuristics embodied in the *Rasāʾil* were not representative of the most decisive achievements of their epoch in the domains of mathematics, natural sciences, or philosophical reasoning”.

Each volume of the series contributes to shedding light on the history of the brotherhood and its endeavour to collect and rework in the light of an ‘ecumenical’ spirituality the learned legacy that, in the view of the Brethren, antedates the rise of Islam. The translation of *Epistles* 32-36 offered in the volume under examination allows the reader to raise, and in part to solve, some of the riddles about the philosophical sources of the encyclopaedia. This is apparent in all the three main topics dealt with in the six *Epistles* of this volume,⁷ namely the hierarchy of the suprasensible principles (*Epistles* 32a and 32b, 33), the cosmos as a Macroanthropos (*Epistle* 34), the Intellect and Intelligible (*Epistle* 35), and the celestial cycles and revolutions (*Epistle* 36), all of them making up the “third section” of the encyclopaedia, labelled “On the Sciences of Soul and Intellect”. In this multi-authored volume, the translation of and introduction to the *Epistles* 32a, 32b, 33 and 35 are by P.E. Walker; *Epistle* 34 is translated by D. Simonowitz and the introduction is by I.K. Poonawala; finally, *Epistle* 36 is translated by G. de Callatay, who is also the author of the relevant introduction.

The first three *Epistles* are “Pythagorean” in the sense clarified by P. Walker in his Introduction to this subset: *Epistle* 32 expresses “the opinion of Pythagoras about intellectual principles”, while *Epistle* 33, as proclaimed in its title, elaborates on the “Pythagorean” ideas from the viewpoint of the brotherhood, thus promising “to be especially important for determining the exact doctrines espoused by the Brethren, as opposed to those they report from others”.⁸ The textual transmission is troubled, so that *Epistle* 32 is printed in two versions labelled 32a and 32b,⁹ but it is clear that already in *Epistle* 32 the doctrine expounded is by no means Pythagoras’, rather it comes from some other source. As a matter of fact, after the initial claim that Pythagoras taught the doctrine of divine creation according to numbers – a tenet that, albeit modified, can be traced back to the Pythagorean tradition – the topic that comes to the fore is that of the hierarchical order of creation, issued from a tradition of thought admittedly different from Pythagoras’.

A true Pythagorean devotes attention to each and every number, giving every one its due. Lists of things that come in pairs, triplets, and fours are provided in both versions but with considerable amplitude in 32b, which then continues at some length with things in sixes, sevens, and, most especially, fives. A second theme, markedly notable in 32a, is the rank order of creation, particularly in regard to intellectual beings, that is, the immaterial higher realm commencing with intellect, the soul, matter and form, nature, and the heavenly spheres. God is the source, the Originator of all, the One; all else begins when He emanates through His goodness an emanation of various excellences to intellect, and from intellect downward to soul and the rest below. Each lower stage in the scheme suffers a diminution in status, declining step-by-step from perfection towards imperfection.¹⁰

The descending hierarchy of beings after the One is presented as the doctrine of the Pythagorean school,¹¹ but it is immediately evident to the reader that its real source is to be found in one or more

⁷ As we shall see immediately below, *Epistle* 32 is split into 32a and 32b.

⁸ Walker, Introduction, p. 2.

⁹ Walker, Introduction, p. 5: “(...) there is considerable confusion in the manuscripts; although all contain parts and passages of the same material, it is in a different order. In the end there is nothing to indicate the superiority of one version over the other, or even to suggest what an original text might have been like. Thus it is necessary to conclude that two or more versions of *Epistle* 32 existed from the earliest period and that some scribes had access to one, which they copied, and yet others to another version, which is the one they copied without realizing that there was any difference”.

¹⁰ Walker, Introduction, p. 9.

¹¹ At p. ٥٠١٠ (= p. 17 of the English trans.) Pythagoras “the Sage” is mentioned, and at p. ٨٠١١ (= p. 18, English) the reference is to the school (*al-Fitāğūriyyūn*). Among the studies that contribute to shedding light on the sources of the

of the Neoplatonic texts translated and adapted in the 9th century Baghdad under the supervision of al-Kindī.¹² This comes as no surprise: there is scholarly consensus on the fact that the Arabic Neoplatonica, and chiefly the pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle*, are among the sources of the *Epistles*. My point in presenting here some textual parallels is less that of adding pieces of evidence to this well-established tenet than that of discussing the implications of such borrowings in the *Epistles* edited in this volume.

Epistle 32a combines the ‘Pythagorean’ doctrine of the one and the numerical series with the Neoplatonic account of the universal causality of the One in the typical adaptation of the “circle of al-Kindī”, consisting in that such a causality is put on equal footing with creation, and the procession of the first numbers from the one is put on equal footing with the emanation of the Intellect, Soul, nature, and matter from the Creator.

Thus one is the origin of numbers, just as the Creator is the cause of existing things (*‘illat al-mawǧūdāt*), the One who brings them into existence, orders and perfects them, finishes and completes them. Just as one has no parts to it, nor [does it have] a like, similarly the Creator is unique without likeness, or similar, or partner. Just as one exists in all numbers enveloping them, similarly God is present in every existent enveloping it. Just as one gives its name to every number and amount, similarly the Creator gives existence to every existent. Just as one maintains the permanence of number, similarly by the permanence of the Creator the endurance and permanence of existing beings is sustained. Just as one determines the value of every number and thing enumerated and measured, so too, similarly, the knowledge of the Creator encompasses all things, both the visible and invisible. They maintain that, just as the repetition of one generates numbers and increases them, so similarly from the Creator’s emanation and His munificence comes the generation of creatures, their perfection, and completion. Just as two is the first number generated by the repetition of one, similarly the intellect is the first existent emanated by the goodness of the Creator. Just as three follows after two, so similarly the soul follows after the intellect, just as four follows in order after three, similarly nature follows in order after soul, and just as five follows after four, similarly prime matter follows after nature.¹³

The cosmic hierarchy of this passage is clearly derivative and the Arabic Neoplatonica have been already taken into account by scholars who commented upon it,¹⁴ without however indicating specific sources. In view of this, it is useful to go deeper into detail in order to ascertain how literal the quotations are.¹⁵

The first passage in *Epistle 32a* that bears traces of direct reading of the pseudo-*Theology* is the following:

knowledge that the Brethren might have had of the ‘Pythagorean’ doctrines – obviously meaning almost everywhere Neopythagorean – see Diwald, *Arabische Philosophie und Wissenschaft* (above, n. 4), pp. 32-5 and C. Baffioni, “‘Detti aurei’ di Pitagora in trasmissione araba”, in V. Placella - S. Martelli (eds.), *I moderni ausili all’ecdotica*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli 1994, pp. 107-31.

¹² G. Endress, “The Circle of al-Kindī. Early Arabic Translations from the Greek and the Rise of Islamic Philosophy”, in G. Endress - R. Kruk (eds.), *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism. Studies on the Transmission of Greek Philosophy and Sciences dedicated to H.J. Drossaart Lulofs on His Ninetieth Birthday*, CNWS School, Leiden 1997, pp. 43-76.

¹³ Pp. ٨. ١١-٩. ١٦, English trans. Walker, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ Cf. Diwald, *Arabische Philosophie und Wissenschaft*, pp. 43-45.

¹⁵ In the tables below pp. 409-10 ‘Badawī’ stands for ‘A. Badawī (ed.), *Aflūṭīn ‘indal-‘arab. Plotinus apud Arabes. Theologia Aristotelis et fragmenta quae supersunt*, Dār al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, Cairo 1955, and ‘Lewis’ stands for *Plotini Opera*, ed. P. Henry et H.-R. Schwyzter. Tomus II. *Enneades IV-V*, accedunt *Plotiniana Arabica* quae anglice vertit G. Lewis, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1959.

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| ps.- <i>Theology of Aristotle</i> , III, p. 50.9-12 Badawī | <i>Epistle</i> 32a, pp. ١٢. ١٨-١٣. ٣ Walker |
| وأما نحن فنقول إنّ الله عز وجلّ علة للعقل والعقل علة للنفس والنفس علة للطبيعة والطبيعة علة للأكوان الجزئية، غير أنه وإن كانت الأشياء بعضها علة لبعض فإن الله تعالى علة لجميعها كلها، غير أنه علة لبعضها بتوسط وعلة لبعضها بغير توسط وهو الذي جعل العلة كما قلنا فيما سلفا | وذلك أنّ هذا الهيولى أول معلول النفس والنفس أول معلول العقل والعقل أول معلول البارئ جل اسمه وأنّ البارئ تعالى ذكره علة كل موجود ومُتَقِنُّهُ ومُتَمِّمُهُ ومكمله على النظام والترتيب الأشرف فالأشرف |
| Now we say that God is the cause of mind and mind is the cause of soul and soul is the cause of nature and nature is the cause of all particular existences, yet if one thing is the cause of another, God is the cause of them all, although He is the cause of some of them indirectly and of some directly, it being He that made the cause, as we said above (trans. Lewis, p. 205). | That is because this matter [i.e. prime matter] is the first effect of soul, and soul is the first effect of intellect, and intellect is the first effect of the Creator, and the Creator is the cause of all existing beings, their sustainer, completer, and perfecter, in accord with the arrangement and order in which the most noble is the most noble (trans. Walker, p. 21). |

A passage that could not have been written without direct acquaintance with the text of the pseudo-*Theology* is the following:

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| ps.- <i>Theology of Aristotle</i> III, p. 51.8-14 Badawī (modified) | <i>Epistle</i> 32a, pp. ١٣. ٥-٩ and ١٤. ٨-١٣ Walker |
| غير أنه وإن كانت النفس تفعل في الهيولى والعقل يفعل في النفس، فإنما تفعل النفس في الهيولى الصورة، ويفعل العقل في النفس الصورة أيضاً. فإن الله تبارك وتعالى هو الذي يحدث أنبيات الأشياء وصورها، غير أنه يحدث بعض الصور بلا توسط وبعضها بتوسط. وإنما تحدث أنبيات الأشياء وصورها لأنه هو الشيء الكائن بالفعل حقاً، بل هو الفعل المحض، فإذا فعل فإنما ينظر إلى ذاته فيفعل فعله دفعة واحدة. | فالعقل هو أول موجود أوجوده البارئ جلّ اسمه وأبدعه من غير واسطة ثم أوجد النفس بواسطة العقل ثم الهيولى وذلك أنّ العقل هو جوهر روحاني فاض من البارئ وهو باق تام كمال والنفس جوهرة روحانية فاضت من العقل وهي باقية تامة غير كاملة واعلم أنّ العقل إنما قبل فيض البارئ عزّ اسمه وفضائله التي هي البقاء والتمام والكمال دفعة واحدة بلا زمان ولا حركة نصب لقبه من البارئ عزّ اسمه وشدة روحانيته فأما النفس فإنها لما كان وجودها من البارئ تعالى ذكره بترسط العقل صارت رتبته دون العقل وصارت ناقصة في قبول الفضائل |
| But if soul acts on matter and mind acts on soul, soul makes form in matter, and mind makes form in soul. It is God who originates the essences and forms of the things, but he originates some of the forms directly and some of them indirectly. The reason why he originates the essences and forms of things is that he is the thing truly existing in actuality: indeed he is absolute activity, and when he acts he does but look at himself and perform his activity simultaneously (trans. Lewis, p. 207). | Thus the intellect is the first existent that the Creator brings into existence and the most noble of them, and He originates it without intermediary. Next He brings into being soul with the intermediary of the intellect , and then next prime matter. And that is because intellect is an immaterial substance emanating from the Creator, who is permanent, complete, and perfect, and the soul is an immaterial substance that emanates from the intellect and it is permanent and complete but not perfect (trans. Walker, p. 22). Know that the intellect receives the emanation of the Creator and His excellences, which are permanence, completeness, and perfection, in one fell swoop , outside of time, without motion or exertion, only because of its close proximity to the Creator and the intensity of its spirituality. As for the soul, because of its having its existence from the Creator through the intellect, its rank is lower than intellect, and it is deficient in the reception of excellences, and also because soul at one time directs itself toward intellect in order to have goodness and excellences extended from there, and yet at another, it turns toward matter in order to pass on the emanation with those godnesses and excellences that are extended to it (trans. Walker, pp. 22-23). |

Finally, the following passage from *Epistle 35* echoes the same section of the pseudo-*Theology* as the two passages from *Epistle 32a* quoted above:

| ps.- <i>Theology of Aristotle</i> III, pp. 51.14-52.5 Badawi | <i>Epistle 35</i> , p. ١٠٩.٢-١٠ Walker |
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| <p>وأما العقل، فإنه وإن كان هو ما هو بالفعل فإنه لما كان من فوقه شيء آخر نالته قوة ذلك الشيء، ومن أجل ذلك يحرص على أن يتشبهه بالفاعل الأول الذي هو فعل محض. فإذا أراد فعلا فإيما ينظر إلى ما فوقه فيفعل فعله غاية في النقاوة. وكذلك النفس وإن كانت هي ما هي بالفعل، فإنها لما صار العقل فوقها نالها شيء من قوته، فإذا فعلت فإنما تنظر إلى العقل فتفعل ما تفعل. فأما الفاعل الأول وهو فعل محض فإنه إنما يفعل فعله وهو ينظر إلى ذاته لا إلى خارج منه لأنه ليس خارجا منه شيء آخر هو أعلى منه ولا أدنى. فقد بان إذن وصح أن العقل قبل النفس وأن النفس قبل الطبيعة وأن الطبيعة قبل الأشياء الواقعة تحت الكون والفساد، وأن الفاعل الأول قبل الأشياء كلها، وأنه مبدع ومتمم معا، ليس بين إبداعه الشيء وإتمامه فرق ولا فصل البتة.</p> | <p>واعلم أن الموجودات كلها صور وأعيان غيريات أفاضها الباريء جل جلاله على العقل ومن العقل على النفس ومن النفس على الهيولى والعقل هو أول موجود جادها به الباريء جل جلاله وأوجده وهو جوهر بسيط روحامي فيه جميع صور الموجودات غير متراكمة ولا متزاحمة كما يكون في نفس العالم صور المعلومات ونفس الصانع صور المصنوعات قبل إخراجها ووضعها في الهيولى وأن العقل أفاض تلك الصور على النفس الكلية دفعة واحدة بلا زمان كفيض الشمس نورها على القمر</p> |
| <p>As for the mind, even though it is its real self in actuality, since there is something else above it the power of that thing attains it and consequently it desires to become like the first agent who is absolute activity. When it wishes to act it does but look at what is above it and perform its activity in the utmost purity. Similarly, even though the soul is her real self in actuality, since the mind is above her something of its power attains her, and when she acts she does but look at the mind and do what she does. Now the first agent, who is absolute activity, performs his activity looking at himself, not at anything outside himself, for there is nothing else outside him, be it higher than he or inferior to him. So now it is demonstrated and verified that mind is prior to soul and that soul is prior to nature and that nature is prior to the things that fall under genesis and corruption, and that the first agent is prior to all things, and that he originates and completes simultaneously, with no distinction or division at all between his originating a thing and his completing it (trans. Lewis, slightly modified, p. 207).</p> | <p>Know that all beings that exist are forms and changeable essences that the Creator emanates to the intellect, and from the intellect to the soul, and from the soul to prime matter. The intellect is the first existing being on which the Creator bestows existence, and thus causes it to exist. It is a simple, immaterial substance in which all the forms of existents are not jumbled together or overcrowded, as is the case with the forms of things known in the soul of the world and with the form of manufactured things in the soul of an artisan prior to their production and being put into matter. The intellect emanates these forms to the universal soul in one fell swoop, outside of time, as with the Sun's emanating its light on the Moon (trans. Walker, pp. 119-20).</p> |

Thus one can confidently say that, at least as far as *Epistles 32a* and *35* are concerned, the pseudo-*Theology* is much more than a vague source of inspiration for their author, or authors: it counts as a literary source properly speaking.

As I.K. Poonawala points out in his introduction, *Epistle 34*, entitled “The Universe is a Macroanthropos”, mirrors *Epistle 26*, whose title runs “On the Meaning of the Saying of the Sages that the Human Being is a Microcosm”.¹⁶ The “Sages (*ḥukamā*)” alluded to in this title and at the beginning of *Epistle 34*¹⁷ are described as belonging to the Platonic tradition broadly speaking,¹⁸ and

¹⁶ Poonawala, Introduction, p. 54.

¹⁷ Cf. p. ٥٣. ١ (= p. 83 in the English trans. by D. Simonowitz).

¹⁸ Poonawala, Introduction, p. 54 recapitulates as follows the main implications of the topic: “The Platonic idea of a world soul animating the universe had, as its corollary, the concept of the human body as a representation of a miniature universe that was animated by its own soul. The supposed analogy between the whole and its parts served not only to develop a cosmology in which the reality of the individual person received due attention but was also fundamental to astrology and other fields in which belief in a metaphysical relationship between man and the rest of nature is postulated”.

here too attempts have been made to indicate the intermediate sources that might have transmitted such formulae and doctrines, thus prompting their adoption in the *Epistles*.¹⁹ Prof. Poonawala rightly claims that the doctrine of cosmos as a macroanthropos is best accounted for against the background of the main doctrines of the Brethren about “man as the central link between the two worlds: terrestrial and celestial” (pp. 54-5), and refers to the Neoplatonic origins of this idea, mentioning also the pseudo-*Theology* (p. 58). Thus, it is puzzling to find at p. 66 the statement of a 13th century author who attributes the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity to Ġaḡar al-Šādiq quoted without any caveat, or, to be more precise, presented in the context of what seems to be substantial agreement. Since Prof. Poonawala will elaborate more on this point in further publications,²⁰ I deem it useful to discuss the issue here, and to submit to him in this review the reactions of an outside reader.

The claim that Ġaḡar al-Šādiq authored the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity comes from “the eighth Yemeni *dā'i* Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Walid al-Qurashī (d. 667/1268)” (p. 66). This author states in his *Unique Treatise Concerning the Confirmation of the Basic Principles of the Creed* that the *Epistles* were “issued or put into circulation” (p. 66, fn. 37) by Ġaḡar al-Šādiq, the “hidden Imām” of the Ismaili tradition, who died in 765/147 H. This assessment, as explained by Prof. Poonawala shortly before, is in itself derived from an earlier source, lost to us: the biography by the Ismaili author Ġaḡar ibn Manšūr al-Yaman (d. ca. 957/346 H) of his father Ibn Ḥawšab, who can thus count as the original source of the information.²¹ Thus, we have a 10th century Ismaili source claiming that the *Epistles* were authored, or transmitted, by the “hidden Imām” of the 8th century. To this piece of evidence Prof. Poonawala adds the following commentary:

In my opinion, it is high time to put aside the thesis put forth by S.M. Stern and supported by W. Madelung that the authors of the *Rasā'il* were the Qarāmiṭa and that the *Epistles* was composed around the middle of the fourth/tenth century. Both Y. Marquet and Abbas Hamadani have vigorously refuted their arguments piece by piece. Most recently, the Fāṭimid historian of repute Michael Brett has strongly argued against the thesis of Stern and Madelung on quite convincing grounds (p. 66).

This creates a drift towards the idea that, *since* the date proposed by Stern and Madelung for the creation of the encyclopedia is wrong, *then* the testimony of the Ismaili authors quoted above might be right. However, the literal quotations from the pseudo-*Theology* that result from the tables at pp. 409-10 above show that the *terminus post quem* of the compilation of at least

¹⁹ Diwald, *Arabische Philosophie und Wissenschaft*, pp. 130-2, lists the texts, both religious and philosophical, that are likely to have contributed to the topic of man as microcosmos and cosmos as macroanthropos. She rightly points to the ‘Saying’ 10 of the *Tabula smaragdina*, p. 114 Ruska (cf. J. Ruska, *Tabula smaragdina. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der hermetischen Literatur*, Heidelberger Akten der von-Portheim-Stiftung, Bd. 16, Heidelberg 1926, Arabic text p. 113: علي تكوين العالم الأكبر تكوين العالم الأصغر, German translation p. 114: “Gemäß dem Bau der großen Welt ist der Bau der kleinen Welt”) as to one of the sources of *Epistles* 26 and 34. In addition to the sources and studies indicated by S. Diwald in her 1975 study quoted above, cf. R. Finckh, *Minor mundus homo. Studien zur Mikrokosmos-Idee in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1999 (Palaestra. Untersuchungen aus der deutschen und skandinavischen Philologie, 306), with a special focus on the Latin tradition.

²⁰ Poonawala, *Introduction*, p. 66: “I will pursue the theme of this story in the introduction to my edition and translation of the forty-first epistle with more details and fresh thoughts”.

²¹ Attention has been called to this text, as Poonawala highlights at p. 66 n. 35, by A. Hamdani, “An Early Fāṭimid Source on the Time and Authorship of the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Šafā'*”, *Arabica* 26 (1997), pp. 62-75.

Epistles 32a and 35 is 842/227 H, that is the date of the death of the caliph al-Mu‘taṣim, who is mentioned at the beginning of the pseudo-*Theology*. Here we are told in as many words that the translation was done under al-Mu‘taṣim’s reign,²² and since what features in *Epistles* 32a and 35 is not a generic echo of Plotinian doctrines, but the literal wording of the Arabic adaptation of Plotinus’ writings, the conclusion imposes itself that the author, or authors, of these two *Epistles* had either the pseudo-*Theology* or at least the Arabic adapted version of Plotinus at his or their disposal.²³ This rules out the authorship of Ġaf‘ar al-Šādiq alleged by the Ismaili sources of the 10th and 13th centuries.

Epistle 36, as G. de Callatay has in his Introduction, “is authentically the astrological epistle of the entire corpus” (p. 137). It is subdivided into two parts, the first of which is devoted to the celestial revolutions, while the second “goes straight into the realm of astrological speculation” (p. 138). A section of the Introduction is devoted to the “science of the stars (*‘ilm al-nuġūm*)” according to the Brethren, with its three main branches – cosmology, computations, and astrology – as stated in *Epistle* 3, *On Astronomy*, recently translated in the same series.²⁴

The authors clearly desired (...) to proceed some steps further towards the unknown. Beyond the multiplicity of the elements that constitute the body of the world, they were eager to climb, in some way as Plato has done in the *Timaeus*, back to the universal soul which, thanks to the intellect instilled in it by God, makes this great body a moving and living being. (...) the Ikhwān narrate how the universal soul originally gave rise to a multitude of individual souls, how these latter souls descended from the all-encompassing sphere (*al-falak al-muḥīt*) in order to spread out, up to the centre of the Earth, through all individual bodies of the sublunary world, and finally how the same souls may hope to climb back one day to the external sphere, their ultimate objective, announcing the resurrection of all the individual human souls” (p. 144).

This main cosmological frame accounts for the conviction of the brotherhood that there are paths downwards and upwards that connect the earth and heaven. Men dwelling in the sublunary world can know the celestial movements, and here Ptolemy provides them with his guidance;²⁵ not only, but they can also know how the celestial powers influence their life:

The transmission of this influx from the stars does not stop at the Moon, but goes as far as the centre of the Earth (and of the universe). Because the souls of absolutely all beings that come-to-be under

²² Pseudo-*Theology of Aristotle*, p. 3.1-9 Badawī (see above n. 15).

²³ A detailed discussion of this issue goes beyond the limits of this review, and I will limit myself to saying that the passages in bold in the table of p. 409 belong not to the original text of Plotinus, in Greek, but to its Arabic adaptation, that dates from the thirties or the forties of the 9th century (see the preceding note).

²⁴ *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. On Astronomy. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 3*, edited and translated by F.J. Ragep and T. Mimura. Foreword by N. El-Bizri, Oxford U.P. in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Oxford 2015, reviewed in the 2016 issue of *Studia graeco-arabica*, pp. 265-6.

²⁵ As G. de Callatay has it, “In astronomical terms, the universal soul moves the external sphere, that is, the whole celestial vault, according to the diurnal revolution from East to West. In turn, this ultimate sphere, the *primum mobile*, carries the revolutions of the eight other spheres, that is, in increasing order of distance from the all-encompassing sphere, the sphere of the fixed stars and then the seven planetary spheres: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon. For a terrestrial observer standing at the centre of the world, the speeds of revolution of these eight spheres with respect to the external sphere decrease in proportion to the distance from the *primum mobile*, as if a certain loss of energy was noticed in each transmission from one sphere to the next below. Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, the principal basis of the Ikhwān’s astronomy, reveals that the movements of these spheres are in reality of great complexity” (p. 145).

the sphere of the Moon originate in the superior realities of the heavens, it naturally follows that their existence is caused by one revolution or another in the heavenly spheres. (...) An astrological treatise par excellence, the epistle on cycles and revolutions is also, by nature, that which most clearly reveals the inner convictions of the Brethren in terms of the powerfulness of astral influences. From the coming-to-be of worms, insects, and lice to the emergence of new religions and empires, and from the replacing of men on the royal throne to the interchange of land masses and seas over the entire surface of the Earth, it would seem that nothing in this world of coming-to-be and passing away escapes the influence of this extreme determinism (p. 146).

Another section of the Introduction (pp. 146-56) is devoted to the sources of the “science of the stars” cultivated by the brotherhood, and provides the reader with all the essential pieces of information on the Greek and Iranian sources of these ideas. The same is done in the numerous and rich footnotes on the translation, thus offering a well-welcomed help to the understanding of a highly technical and demanding part of the encyclopaedia.

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