

# Studia graeco-arabica

9



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### *Cover*

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

*Les Épîtres des Frères en Pureté (Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā). Mathématique et Philosophie.* Présentation et traduction de six épîtres par Guillaume de Vault d'Arcy, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2019 (Sagesses médiévales), 318 pp.

This book labours under a double misapprehension: its author has a grotesquely inflated opinion of his own competences in the field, and, as a consequence of this, an utterly unwarranted disregard for the competences of other scholars who have preceded him. It opens on the extraordinarily pretentious statement that the reading now offered of the “Épîtres des Frères en Pureté” (instead of ‘Épîtres des Frères de la Pureté’ – much irrelevant fuss is made even on this point) “rompt radicalement avec le flou historique et l’ésotérisme dans lequel l’œuvre était tenue jusqu’à présent” (p. 13). All the others have gone astray, but here I am and time has finally come for truth to dissipate the aberrations of my poor ‘fellows in scholarship’, past and present (and presumably future): this odd self-aggrandizing tone is given from the outset and readers should not expect it to change until the end of the book. Guillaume de Vault d'Arcy’s revolutionary (and, in his own eyes, blindingly brilliant) idea, first presented in his still unpublished PhD-thesis at the Sorbonne, and recently elaborated upon in a vast number of overlapping and nauseatingly repetitive articles, is that al-Kindi’s disciple, the philosopher Aḥmad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhṣī,<sup>1</sup> is the one and only author of the corpus of epistles traditionally ascribed to the ‘Brethren of Purity’ (my apologies for impenitently sticking to time-honoured usage). In order to reach this conclusion, de Vault proceeds by elimination, from a series of inferences which, he assures us, will unfailingly unveil what he calls “le portrait-robot du rédacteur” (p. 23). Undeterred by the many problems and contradictions encountered on the way, our detective quickly jumps from questionable evidence to unwarranted conclusions, thus to speed up the identification of the culprit. Let us take a first example. Bent on establishing that the *Epistles* are the creation of a unique compiler, de Vault limits himself to invoking a single passage taken from the *Fihrist* (viz., a kind of table of contents found in some manuscripts of the *Rasā'il*, but whose authorship and relation to the rest of the corpus remain far from clear). In the *Fihrist*, one finds the expression *ṣāhib ḥādīhi al-rasā'il*, which de Vault translates as “le propriétaire de ces épîtres” and which is supposed to mean ‘anyone having a copy of the corpus in his possession’. Against all semantical likelihood, and by who knows what mountebank’s tricks, de Vault infers from this that the isolated mention of an ‘owner in the singular’ (“le propriétaire est singulier”, p. 23) here also refers to the (single) author of the work. Apparently unable to recognize a contradiction when he sees one, he nevertheless points out in the same section (correctly, let it be said in fairness to him) that the plural *naqūl* (‘we say’) is incomparably more attested than *aqūl* (‘I say’) throughout the corpus. Let us take another example. From a number of cross-references between some of the epistles, and from the overall unity of style of the corpus (two issues of a far greater intricacy than this book suggests), de Vault infers that the *Rasā'il* are necessarily “l’œuvre de maturité de quelqu’un qui a précédemment écrit des traités indépendants sur la plupart des disciplines philosophiques, dont les *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* ne sont alors que la mise en forme systématique” (p. 28). But this is merely a peremptory affirmation based on vacuous speculation, a kind of pseudo-reasoning ubiquitous in de Vault’s ludicrous ‘proof’ pretending to have “définitivement balayé l’idée courue que les *Rasā'il* sont une compilation hétéroclite” (p. 28). For this indeed is the mark of his own

<sup>1</sup> For a clear and balanced overview of this scholar about whom very little is known, see P. Adamson, “al-Sarakhṣī, Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib”, in H. Lagerlund (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, Springer, Dordrecht 2011, pp. 1174-6 – a reference apparently unknown to de Vault.

style: a degree of dogmatism rarely seen in recent scholarship, allied to a degree of unparalleled prejudice, both combining to a breath-taking gift for misinterpreting a classical text. There is no need to dwell more on this, if not to add that the book also abounds in approximations (for instance, on p. 21, the author of the *Ġāyat al-ḥakīm* and the *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* is given as “al-Maḥdī al-Qurṭubī”), dubious neologisms (“octonarite”, p. 53), misspellings (“*New Heaven*”, p. 304) and other language errors of all kinds [“the name Sabian come to be applied (...) and finally come to mean” (p. 30)]. In terms of doctrinal content, de Vaultx seems to have a particular issue with the Šīʿite dimension of the *Rasāʾil* and with the many established scholars who have appropriately underlined its significance in order to provide a better understanding of the work and the context of its transmission. He also has a manifest issue with the on-going international project of critical edition of the *Epistles* at Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies. The volumes of this edition, which de Vaultx constantly refers to as “l’*édition de Londres*” (while in fact it is published at Oxford and New York) or as “*les Ismaili Studies*”, are based upon a set of up to 15 manuscripts, including some of the earliest and most authoritative codices. The volumes having appeared since the beginning of the project in 2008 have all contributed to reveal that the process of elaboration and transmission of the *Rasāʾil* was considerably more complex and elusive than was previously assumed on the basis of the ‘Beirut’ uncritical edition established by Buṭrus al-Bustānī in 1957.<sup>2</sup> As I have briefly recapitulated in my introduction to *Epistle 7*,<sup>3</sup> itself not exempt of important divergences from Beirut, this includes at this stage: a long digression of one manuscript regarding *Epistle 2*;<sup>4</sup> thirteen additional chapters to *Epistle 3* in two manuscripts;<sup>5</sup> several important divergences of the manuscript tradition regarding *Epistles 10* and *12*;<sup>6</sup> various significant additions of material in some of the manuscripts of *Epistles 15*, *16* and *18*;<sup>7</sup> at least two different versions of *Ep. 32* and, in general, several important problems affecting both this epistle and the one that follows it, namely *Epistle 33*;<sup>8</sup> at least two versions of *Epistle 51*;<sup>9</sup> at least two different versions – one short and the other longer – of *Epistle 52*,<sup>10</sup> and some suspicion that the long version might not have been part of the original corpus. Ignoring these advancements in serious collective

<sup>2</sup> For the shortcomings of this Beirut edition, see in particular: I.K. Poonawala, “Why we need an Arabic Critical Edition with Annotated English Translation of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*”, in *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ and their Rasāʾil. An Introduction*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford-New York 2008, pp. 33-57; A. Hamdani, “The Arrangement of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* and the Problem of Interpolations”, *ibid.*, pp. 83-100).

<sup>3</sup> See N. El-Bizri – G. de Callatāy, *The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. On Composition and the Arts. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 6-8*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2018, pp. 85-6.

<sup>4</sup> See N. El-Bizri, *On Arithmetic and Geometry. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 1 & 2, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2012, pp. 161-3.

<sup>5</sup> See F.J. Ragep - T. Mimura, *On Astronomia. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 3, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2015, pp. 94-116.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Baffioni, *On Logic. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 10-14, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford-New York, pp. 157-86.

<sup>7</sup> See C. Baffioni, *On the Natural Sciences. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 15-21, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2013, pp. 359-92.

<sup>8</sup> See P. Walker in P.E. Walker - I.K. Poonawala - D. Simonowitz - G. de Callatāy, *Sciences of the Soul and Intellect. Part I. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 32-36, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2015, pp. 1-13.

<sup>9</sup> See B. Halflants in G. de Callatāy - B. Halflants, *On Magic I. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 52a, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2011, pp. 70-71.

<sup>10</sup> See G. de Callatāy in G. de Callatāy - B. Halflants, *On Magic I. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 52a, Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, Oxford U.P. - IIS, Oxford - New York 2011, pp. 5-10.

scholarship and sticking to the Beirut edition as to some kind of out-of-time and unadulterated text, as does Guillaume de Vaulx, is a dogmatic, narrow and archaic approach. Writing, as he does to justify his choice, that the Beirut edition “bien que non critique, reste d'une qualité bien supérieure à la nouvelle” (pp. 61-62) is intellectual deceit, in addition to being ridiculously naive. What can be saved from this imposture? Not much, honestly, but French-speaking readers who neither read Arabic nor English will find here an access to six important epistles by the Brethren of Purity, namely 1 ('On Arithmetic'), 2 ('On Geometry'), 6 ('On Arithmetic, Geometric, and Harmonic Proportions'), 29 ('On the Point of Death and Birth'), 33 ('On the Intellectual Principles according to the Brethren of Purity'), 50 ('On the Species of Governance').

Godefroid de Callatay

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