

## Foreword

The Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā') were the anonymous members of a fourth-/tenth-century<sup>1</sup> esoteric fraternity of lettered urbanites that was principally based in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, while also having a significant active branch in the capital of the 'Abbāsid caliphate, Baghdad. This secretive coterie occupied a prominent station in the history of scientific and philosophical ideas in Islam owing to the wide intellectual reception and dissemination of diverse manuscripts of their famed philosophically oriented compendium, the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (*Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*). The exact dating of this corpus, the identity of its authors, and their doctrinal affiliation remain unsettled questions that are hitherto shrouded with mystery. Some situate the historic activities of this brotherhood at the eve of the Fāṭimid conquest of Egypt (ca. 358/969), while others identify the organization with an earlier period that is set chronologically around the founding of the Fāṭimid dynasty in North Africa (ca. 297/909).

The most common account regarding the presumed identity of the Ikhwān is usually related on the authority of the famed litterateur Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (ca. 320–414/930–1023), who noted in his *Book of Pleasure and Conviviality* (*Kitāb al-Imtā' wa'l-mu'ānasa*) that these adepts were obscure 'men of letters': Abū Sulaymān Muḥammad b. Ma'shar al-Bustī (nicknamed al-Maqdisī); the *qāḍī* Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Hārūn al-Zanjānī; Abū Aḥmad al-Mihrajānī (also known as Aḥmad al-Nahrajūrī); and Abū al-Ḥasan al-'Awfī. Abū Ḥayyān also claimed that they were the senior companions of a secretarial officer at the

---

1 All dates are Common Era, unless otherwise indicated; where two dates appear (separated by a slash), the first date is hijri (AH), followed by CE.

Būyid regional chancellery of Basra, known as Zayd b. Rifā'a, who was reportedly an affiliate of the Brethren's fraternity and a servant of its ministry. Even though this story was reaffirmed by several classical historiographers in Islamic civilization, it is not fully accepted by scholars in terms of its authenticity. Furthermore, some Ismaili missionaries (*du'āt*) historically attributed the compiling of the *Epistles* to the early Ismaili Imams Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allāh (al-Taḳī [al-Mastūr]) or his father, 'Abd Allāh (Wafī Aḥmad), while also suggesting that the *Rasā'il* compendium was secretly disseminated in mosques during the reign of the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–833).

Encountering 'veracity in every religion', and grasping knowledge as 'pure nourishment for the soul', the Ikhwān associated soteriological hope and the attainment of happiness with the scrupulous development of rational pursuits and intellectual quests. Besides the filial observance of the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith, the Brethren also reverently appealed to the Torah of Judaism and to the Gospels of Christianity. Moreover, they heeded the legacies of the Stoics and of Pythagoras, Hermes Trismegistus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Nicomachus of Gerasa, Euclid, Ptolemy, Galen, Proclus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus.

The Brethren promoted a convivial and earnest 'companionship of virtue'. Their eschatological outlook was articulated by way of an intricate cyclical view of 'sacred' history that is replete with symbolisms and oriented by an uncanny hermeneutic interpretation of the microcosm and macrocosm analogy: believing that the human being is a microcosmos, and that the universe is a 'macroanthropos'. The multiplicity of the voices that were expressed in their *Epistles* reflects a genuine quest for wisdom driven by an impetus that is not reducible to mere eclecticism; indeed, their syncretism grounded their aspiration to establish a spiritual refuge that would transcend the sectarian divisions troubling their era.

In general, fifty-two epistles are enumerated as belonging to the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, and these are divided into the following four parts: Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Sciences of the Soul and Intellect, and Theology. The first part consists of fourteen epistles, and it deals with 'the mathematical sciences', treating a variety of topics in arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, geography, and music.

It also includes five epistles on elementary logic, which consist of the following: the *Isagoge*, the *Categories*, the *On Interpretation*, the *Prior Analytics*, and the *Posterior Analytics*. The second part of the corpus groups together seventeen epistles on ‘the physical or natural sciences’. It thus treats themes on matter and form, generation and corruption, metallurgy, meteorology, a study of the essence of nature, the classes of plants and animals (the latter being also set as a fable), the composition of the human body and its embryological constitution, a cosmic grasp of the human being as microcosm, and also the investigation of the phonetic and structural properties of languages and their differences. The third part of the compendium comprises ten tracts on ‘the psychical and intellective sciences’, setting forth the ‘opinions of the Pythagoreans and of the Brethren of Purity’, and accounting also for the world as a ‘macroanthropos’. In this part, the Brethren also examined the distinction between the intellect and the intelligible, and they offered explications of the symbolic significance of temporal dimensions, epochal cycles, and the mystical expression of the essence of love, together with an investigation of resurrection, causes and effects, definitions and descriptions, and the various types of motion. The fourth and last part of the *Rasā’il* deals with ‘the *nomi*c or legal and theological sciences’ in eleven epistles. These address the differences between the varieties of religious opinions and sects, as well as delineating the ‘pathway to God’, the virtues of the Ikhwān’s fellowship, the characteristics of genuine believers, the nature of the divine *nomos*, the call to God, the actions of spiritualists, of jinn, angels, and recalcitrant demons, the species of politics, the cosmic hierarchy, and, finally, the essence of magic and talismanic incantations. Besides the fifty-two tracts that constitute the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*, this compendium was accompanied by a treatise entitled *al-Risāla al-jāmi’a* (The Comprehensive Epistle), which acted as the *summa summarum* for the whole corpus and was itself supplemented by a further abridged appendage known as the *Risālat jāmi’at al-jāmi’a* (The Condensed Comprehensive Epistle).

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. Nonetheless, their accounts of religiosity, as well as their syncretic approach, together with their praiseworthy efforts to collate the sciences, and to compose a pioneering ‘encyclopaedia’, all bear signs of commendable originality.

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-‘ilm*), the heuristics embodied in the *Rasā’il* were not representative of the most decisive achievements of their epoch in the domains of mathematics, natural sciences, or philosophical reasoning. Moreover, the sciences were not treated with the same level of expertise across the *Rasā’il*. Consequently, this opus ought to be judged by differential criteria as regards the relative merits of each of its epistles. In fairness, there are signs of conceptual inventiveness, primarily regarding doctrinal positions in theology and reflections on their ethical-political import, along with signs of an intellectual sophistication in the meditations on spirituality and revelation.

The *Rasā’il* corpus is brimming with a wealth of ideas and constitutes a masterpiece of mediaeval literature that presents a populist yet comprehensive adaptation of scientific knowledge. It is perhaps most informative in terms of investigating the transmission of knowledge in Islam, the ‘adaptive assimilation’ of antique sciences, and the historical evolution of the elements of the *sociology* of learning through the mediaeval forms of the popularization of the sciences and the systemic attempts to canonize them. By influencing a variety of Islamic schools and doctrines, the Brethren’s heritage acted as a significant intellectual prompt and catalyst in the development of the history of ideas in Islam. As such, their work rightfully holds the station assigned to it amongst the distinguished Arabic classics and the high literature of Islamic civilization.

The composition of this text displays impressive lexical versatility, which encompasses the technical idioms of mathematics and logic, the heuristics of natural philosophy, and the diction of religious pronouncements and occult invocations, in addition to poetic verses,

didactic parables, and satirical and inspirational fables. Despite the sometimes disproportionate treatment of topics, the occasional hiatus in proofs, irrelevant digressions, or instances of verbosity, the apparent stylistic weaknesses disappear, becoming inconsequential, when a complete impression is formed of the architectonic unity of the text as a whole and of the convergence of its constituent elements as a remarkable *oeuvre des belles lettres*.

Modern academic literature on the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* is reasonably extensive within the field of Islamic studies, and it continues to grow, covering works dating from the nineteenth century up to the present, with numerous scholars attempting to solve the riddles surrounding this compendium. The academic rediscovery of the *Rasā'il* in modern times emerged through the monumental editorial and translation efforts of the German scholar Friedrich Dieterici between the years 1861 and 1872. Several printed editions aiming to reconstruct the original Arabic have also been established, starting with the *editio princeps* in Calcutta in 1812, which was reprinted in 1846, then a complete edition in Bombay between 1887 and 1889, followed by the Cairo edition of 1928, and the Beirut editions of 1957, 1983, 1995, and their reprints.<sup>2</sup> Although the scholarly contribution of these Arabic editions of the *Rasā'il* is laudable, as they valuably sustained research on the topic, they are uncritical in character, and they do not reveal their manuscript sources. Consequently, the current printed editions do not provide definitive primary-source documentation for this classical text. Given this state of affairs, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London has undertaken the publication (in association with Oxford University Press) of a multi-authored, multi-volume Arabic critical edition and annotated English translation of the fifty-two epistles.

2 The principal complete editions of this compendium that are available in print consist of the following: *Kitāb Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa-Khullān al-Wafā'*, ed. Wilāyat Ḥusayn, 4 vols. (Bombay: Maṭba'at Nukhbat al-Akhhār, 1305–1306/ca. 1888); *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, ed. Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, with two separate introductions by Ṭaha Ḥusayn and Aḥmad Zakī Pasha, 4 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-'Arabiyya bi-Miṣr, 1928); *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, ed. with introduction by Buṭrus Bustānī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957); and an additional version, *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, ed. 'Arif Tāmīr, 5 vols. (Beirut: Manshūrāt 'Uwaydāt, 1995).

In preparation for the critical edition, reproductions of nineteen manuscripts were acquired by the IIS, and their particulars can be summarized as follows, with the corresponding Arabic sigla:

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris:

MS 2303 (1611 CE): [ر]

MS 2304 (1654 CE): [ز]

MS 6.647–6.648 (AH 695; Yazd): [د]

Bodleian Library, Oxford:

MS Hunt 296 (n.d.): [ج]

MS Laud Or. 255 (n.d.): [ح]

MS Laud Or. 260 (1560 CE): [خ]

MS Marsh 189 (n.d.): [غ]

El Escorial, Madrid:

MS Casiri 895/Derenbourg 900 (1535–1536 CE): [س]

MS Casiri 923/Derenbourg 928 (1458 CE): [ش]

Istanbul collections (mainly the Süleymaniye and associated libraries):

MS Atif Efendi 1681 (1182 CE): [ع]

MS Esad Efendi 3637 (ca. thirteenth century CE): [ن]

MS Esad Efendi 3638 (ca. 1287 CE): [أ]

MS Feyzullah 2130 (AH 704): [ف]

MS Feyzullah 2131 (AH 704): [ق]

MS Köprülü 870 (ca. fifteenth century CE): [ك]

MS Köprülü 871 (1417 CE): [ل]

MS Köprülü 981 (n.d.): [و]

Königliche Bibliothek zu Berlin:

MS 5038 (AH 600/1203 CE): [ب]

The Mahdavi Collection, Tehran:<sup>3</sup>

MS 7437 (AH 640): [ط]

The reconstruction of the contents of the *Rasā'il* by way of a critical edition is undertaken through manuscript reproductions that are significantly distanced in time from the original, and these have proved to be traceable to a variety of transmission traditions that cannot be articulated with confidence in terms of a definitive *stemma codicum*.<sup>4</sup> The dexterity of the copyists, their deliberate tampering, or commendable exercise of restraint and relative impartiality, along with their scribal idioms, would have conditioned the drafting of the manuscripts. Such endeavours would also have been influenced by the intellectual impress of the prevalent geopolitical circumstances in which

3 It is worth noting that these acquisitions by the IIS, which consist of the oldest complete manuscripts, along with significant supplementary fragments of an early dating, were each carefully selected from over one hundred extant manuscripts, which are preserved in thirty-nine libraries and collections, noted in alphabetical order by country, as follows: *Egypt*: Dār al-Kutub, Arab League Library (possibly also in the Arab League offices in Tunis); *France*: Bibliothèque nationale de France; *Germany*: Königliche Bibliothek zu Berlin, Herzogliche Bibliothek zu Gotha, Eberhard-Karls-Universität (Tübingen), Leipzig (Bibliotheca Orientalis), München Staatsbibliothek; *Iran*: Muṭahharī Library, Tehran University Central Library, Mahdavi Collection (private); *Ireland*: Chester Beatty Library; *Italy*: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Biblioteca Vaticana; *Netherlands*: Bibliotheca Universitatis Leidensis; *Russia*: Institut des Langues Orientales (St Petersburg); *Spain*: Biblioteca del Monasterio San Lorenzo de El Escorial; *Turkey*: Süleymaniye, Aya Sofia, Amia Huseyn, Atif Efendi, Esad Efendi, Millet Library, Garullah, Köprülü, Kütüphan-e-i 'Umūmī Defteri, Manisa (Maghnisa), Rashid Efendi (Qaysari), Topkapı Saray, Yeni Çami, Revan Kishk; *United Kingdom*: Bodleian Library, British Library, British Museum, Cambridge University (Oriental Studies Faculty Library), Institute of Ismaili Studies (including copies from the Hamdani, Zāhid 'Alī, and Fyzee collections), Mingana Collection (Selly Oak Colleges Library, Birmingham), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS); *United States*: New York Public Library, Princeton University Library.

4 Within both the English translation and the Arabic edition here, the beginning of each folio of the MS Atif Efendi 1681 [ع] manuscript is indicated, starting at verso folio 5: for example, (fol. 5b) in the English translation, and ط ٥ ع in the Arabic edition; or from recto folio 6, in the form: (fol. 6a) in the English translation, and ط ٦ ع in the Arabic edition. The pagination of the Beirut (Dār Ṣādir) printed edition is also noted using square brackets, for example [p. 48] or [٤٨].

this text was transcribed, in addition to its channels of transmission. By widening the selection of the oldest manuscripts and fragments, based on the period of the copying, the levels of completeness and clarity, and the recommendations of past and present scholars who have consulted these collections, a suitably grounded critical edition will be produced, and a more reliable textual reconstruction will offer us improved access to the contents of the *Rasā'il* beyond what is presently available through the printed editions (i.e., those from Bombay, Cairo, and Beirut). It is ultimately hoped that the collective authorial effort, in establishing the Arabic critical edition of the *Rasā'il* and the first complete annotated English translation, will eventually render service to the academic community and lay a scholarly foundation for further studies dedicated to the Brethren's corpus and its impact on the history of ideas in Islam and beyond.

The present volume comprises the Arabic critical edition and annotated English translation with commentaries of Epistle 1: 'On Arithmetic' and Epistle 2: 'On Geometry', from the first part of the *Rasā'il*, which focuses on the propaedeutical and mathematical sciences. This volume offers technical and epistemic analyses of mathematical concepts, and of their metaphysical underpinnings and bearings, as interpreted by the Ikhwān, in terms of investigating the properties of numbers and of geometric magnitudes, and based for the most part on the traditions derived from Nicomachus of Gerasa and Euclid. With a distinctly Pythagorean interpretation of mathematics within the symbolic order of mysticism, and also inspired by Islamic faith, the Ikhwān view arithmetic and geometry through a monotheistic spiritual lens. This outlook informed their treatment of mathematical knowledge as part of the quadrivium, which aimed at preparing the novices of their coterie to study logic and the sciences of nature and the soul, by way of preparation for the lofty topics of theology and metaphysics.

The content of this volume further offers enlightening perspectives from the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge, as regards the canonization and popularization of the mathematical sciences within the Islamic intellectual milieu, and particularly within the tenth-century urban culture of Mesopotamian and Syrian locales.



## Foreword

The *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* series, and this present volume, would not have been realizable without the scholarly contributions of numerous esteemed colleagues who are participating in this challenging textual endeavour to establish the Arabic critical edition and annotated English translation with commentaries of the *Rasā'il*. I am deeply thankful to all of them for their furtherance of this venture. I also express my gratitude to the distinguished members of the Editorial and Advisory Boards of the series for their continual academic support, especially to Professors Hermann Landolt, Wilferd Madelung, Ismail K. Poonawala, and Roshdi Rashed. Profound thanks must go as well to my dear colleagues at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, and to its Directors and Governors, past and present, for their generous sponsorship of this scholarly project. I would like to record here my indebtedness to Dr Farhad Daftary for his constant support of this institutional initiative. Most special thanks are due to my friend and colleague Ms Tara Woolnough for her meticulous copy-editing work and dedicated editorial care, and for her solicitous help in compiling the selected bibliography and establishing the English index. I also thank Mr Saleh al-Achmar for proofreading the Arabic text.

This volume would not have been completed without the motivating support of my wife, Dr Dina Kiwan, and the joy and blessings that our sons, Mouhib and Magdi, inspire in our life. As ever, I also relied on the encouragements of my parents, my sister, my two brothers, and on the thoughtfulness of my friends. I am truly indebted to all of them.

Nader El-Bizri  
(General Editor, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*)

Beirut / London, June 2012