Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Ṣafā′)

The Brethren of Purity and the Friends of Loyalty (Ikhwan al-Ṣafā′) is the name used by the authors of a large and influential encyclopedic work of mediaeval Islam in order to disguise their identity. The work is traditionally referred to in literature as the “Epistles of the Brethren of Purity” (Rasā’il Ikhwan al-Ṣafā′) because it presents itself as a collection of about fifty treatises written in the form of epistles and addressed to a fictive “brother.” In addition to this collection, there are a “Comprehensive epistle” (Risāla al-jāmi‘a) and a “Most comprehensive epistle” (Risāla jāmi‘at al-jāmi‘a), both of which also circulated under the name of the Ikhwan al-Ṣafā′ and whose exact relation to the corpus itself is unclear. The contents and structure of the corpus, its sources, its aims, and the place it occupies in the history of Islamic thought will be dealt with below, after consideration of the vexing issues of date, authorship, and doctrinal affiliation, which are closely related to one another and to which significant modern scholarship has been devoted.

1. Date of composition, authorship, and doctrinal affiliation

Not surprisingly for a work whose anonymity has been so jealously preserved, internal evidence on these issues is either nonexistent or inconclusive. The work includes verses by the poet al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965), but it is not known whether these and other materials of about the same period are part of the original work or later interpolations. There is a gap of at least two, and more probably three, centuries between the supposed time of compilation of
the Rasāʾīl and the oldest known manuscript (Istanbul, MS ‘Āṭīf Efendi 1681, dated 578/1182), an interval that might account for a considerable number of modifications, intentional or not, in the transmission of the text.

External evidence is less elusive, although far from providing all the necessary information. The littérateur Abū Ḥayyān al-Ṭawḥīdī (d. 414/1023), his mentor Sulaymān al-Manṭiqī (also known as al-Sijistānī, d. c. 390/1000), and, independently, the Muʿtazili theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī (d. 415/1025) provide converging information about a group of men of their time who were believed to be the authors of the corpus and were active in Basra around the year 370/980 as secretaries of the local Būyid governorate (Stern, Authorship, and New information). Combining the three sources with one another, one is led to conclude that a collection of fifty-one epistles was made by several men, presumably all Ismāʿīli Shiʿīs: Zayd b. Rifaʿa, Abū Sulaymān Muḥammad b. Maʿshar al-Bustī (also known as al-Maqdisi), the qādī Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Ali b. Hārūn al-Zanjānī, Abū Aḥmad al-Mihrajānī (also known as al-Nahrajūrī), Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿAwfī, and Abū Muḥammad b. Abī l-Baghl. Al-Sijistānī, however, attributes the entire corpus to Abū Sulaymān al-Bustī.

There is, however, in modern scholarship an increasing tendency to regard these accounts as providing no more than the possible terminus ad quem of a process that began much earlier. Various inconsistencies and multiple traces of rearrangement in the text invite us rather to view the corpus of the Rasāʾīl as a “stratified compilation” (Baffioni, Ikhwān al-Šāfāʾ), whose beginning could plausibly be dated to as early as the middle of the third/ninth century. On the basis of internal evidence, especially that which suggests Ismāʿīli proclivities, some scholars have regarded the Epistles as a work of propaganda whose compilation should be dated entirely (Hamdani) or in part (Marquet) to before the establishment in Ifrīqiya of the Fāṭimid caliphate of ʿUbaydallāh in 297/909. The clearest indication that this collection of treatises was already in wide circulation across the Islamic world in the first half of the fourth/tenth century is that it is described that way in the Rutbat al-ḥakīm, an Andalusī work on alchemy, whose ascription to the traditionalist and occultist Maslama al-Qurṭūbī (d. 353/964) now seems irrefutable (Fierro; de Callataÿ, Magia). In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that the influence of the Brethren upon Andalusī authors was much deeper than has usually been assumed and that it certainly began before Maslama al-Qurṭūbī’s time. Textual comparison suggests that the Rasāʾīl Ikhwān al-Šāfāʾ may even have served as a model for the mystical philosopher Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931), the first author of al-Andalus credited with an original form of thinking (de Callataÿ, Philosophy). This tends to confirm, on a more general level, the profound impact by eastern Ismāʿīli Neoplatonism on the mystically oriented authors of al-Andalus (Stroumsa; Ebstein).

Regarding the Ismāʿīli connection, Nizārī and Mustaʿlian-Ṭayyibi sources, especially from the middle of the sixth/twelfth century, mention the Rasāʾīl and usually assert that they were compiled by Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl (d. 225/840), the second of the early imāms who had gone into hiding to escape persecution at the time of the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-
Ma’mūn (r. 198–218/813–33) (al-Hamdānī; Stern, New information). It is puzzling that the Epistles appear to have remained completely unknown to the Fāṭimid. Outside Iṣmāʿīli circles, the Epistles were sometimes mentioned also by late Twelver Shiʿis, who generally credited either Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) or ʿAlī himself (r. 35–40/656–61) with their authorship. Among various other fanciful attributions is a tradition that ascribes the authorship of the Rasāʾil, and specifically the Risālat al-jāmiʿa, to the Andalusī astronomer Maslama al-Majrīṭī (d. c.398/1007), but this evidently results from the above-mentioned confusion about the author of the Rutbat al-ḥakīm.

In addition to the problem of authorship of the two “additional epistles,” namely, the Risālat al-jāmiʿa and the Risālat jāmiʿat al-jāmiʿa, the exact number of Epistles in the corpus is in question. Ancient sources say fifty, fifty-one, or fifty-two, the latter figure being also the one used in the Bombay, Cairo, and Beirut editions, the three classic, albeit not critical, editions of the work. Because the exceptionally long “Epistle on magic” (the fifty-second in those editions), introduces itself as the fifty-first and last of the collection and refers to “the previous fifty epistles,” it has been suggested that we should dismiss as spurious the one immediately preceding (number fifty-one, “On the arrangement of the world”), which is out of place and which largely duplicates Epistle 21 of the corpus (Marquet). It also appears that the editors of the three uncritical editions of the text have merely juxtaposed two different, mutually exclusive, versions of the “Epistle on magic”: a shorter one, which includes the famous narration about the rituals of astral magic performed by the ʿṢābiyans of Ḥarrān, and a longer one, which is a hotchpotch of sources of various provenance (de Callataŷ and Hالفants).

2. An encyclopedic corpus of science and philosophy

The corpus of the Rasāʾil presents itself as a harmonious whole and makes plain the authors’ care to organise its contents as a sophisticated programme of instruction and moral purification. The work is divided into four major sections, each consisting of several rasāʾil and corresponding to a specific category of sciences.

First is the section on the “mathematical sciences” (fourteen epistles), which begins with the sciences of the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), to which is added an epistle on geography; proceeds to the theory of proportions and the classification of scientific and practical disciplines; and ends with five epistles on the various parts of logic. Curiously, it also contains an epistle devoted largely to ethics. While modelling their logic and classification of knowledge on Aristotle, the ʿĪkhwān borrow the substance of the other sciences mainly from Nicomachus of Gerasa, Euclid, Ptolemy, and the Pythagoreans.

The second section covers the “corporeal and natural sciences” (seventeen epistles), where the paramount influence of Aristotle is reflected in the list of subjects and titles. After an introductory epistle dedicated to the basic concepts of matter, form, motion, time, and place, it deals with the heavens and the world, the coming into being and passing away of sublunary beings, and meteorology. Then it considers the three natural kingdoms (mineral, plant, and
animal), before turning to a series of topics whose place in the programme of study is less clear: the composition of the corporeal system, sense and the sensible, the place where the drop of sperm falls, and the modalities of birth and death, as well as the claim of the sages that man is a microcosm, the limits of human knowledge, and the reasons for the differences in languages, scripts, and idioms.

The third section is devoted to the “sciences of the soul and of the intellect” (ten epistles). Again, the guiding principle behind the order of subjects is not completely clear, although Neoplatonic emanationism may in some way be regarded as the backbone of the whole system. After two introductory epistles on the intellectual principles—according to “the Pythagoreans” and “the Brethren of Purity” respectively—the authors deal successively with “the world as ‘macrohuman’” and with the intellect and the intelligible, before addressing issues such as the celestial revolutions and cycles, the quiddity of love, resurrection, and causes and effects.

The fourth and last section concerns the “nomic, divine, and legal sciences” (eleven epistles, or ten, if one excludes the penultimate epistle in the editions). This metaphysical section, which is the most problematic in terms of inner coherence, is also the one in which the greatest effort was made by the authors to harmonise the classical heritage with their own creed as Muslim believers and their own peculiar vision of prophecy. The Īkhwān begin with a reflection on opinions and religions (الирاء والديوانات), continue with an epistle on the way leading to God, and then deal with “the creed of the Brethren of Purity” and the way they conceive of mutual help and sympathy for each other. The last epistles are devoted to the faith of the believers, the conditions of prophecy, the modalities of the call to go to God, the modality of the states of “the spirituals,” the various species of governance, and, concluding the section and the whole corpus, magic, incantations, and the evil eye.

This impression of disorder is even stronger when this list of topics is compared with the group of philosophical sciences in the purposefully designed classification of human knowledge as put forward in Epistle Seven and which follows the Aristotelian scheme more closely. Even so, in its size, its systematic approach, the number and diversity of its sources, its scope, and its ambition to transcend all sorts of particularism to offer a unifying theory, the work as it has come down to us qualifies as one of the major representatives of the encyclopaedic genre in Islam and certainly the best extant example in pre-Mamlūk literature (de Callataï, Classification of knowledge). In spite of their proclivities towards esoteric teaching and their fondness for symbolic expressions, especially conspicuous in the last section, the authors employ a plain yet eloquent style, which is uniform throughout, save in a few places, such as Epistle Forty-eight, which is written as if from an imām to his partisans. The authors are partial to certain formulas that they repeat throughout the corpus, such as the admonition to their partisans “to wake from the slumber of ignorance and the torpor of negligence.” The coherence and unity of the encyclopaedia are also strengthened by the many cross references.
3. A syncretic project

The corpus of the Rasāʾil has been rightly defined as comprising “all the knowable of its time, as seen from a Neo-platonic and Pythagorean perspective” (Bausani), but its use of sources shows that its authors were, in fact, much more eclectic. In addition to Greek philosophy and science, which makes up most of the content of the epistles (Baffioni, Frammenti) and which the Ikhwān knew primarily through excerpts from late antiquity, one can trace the influence of other cultures—such as the Indian in cosmology and the Iranian in astrology and epic literature—although it would be preferable, in most cases, to view the Epistles as drawing on already existing forms of syncretism, such as Pythagoreanism, gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Ṣūfism (Netton; de Callataÿ, Ikhwān).

Like most Muslim philosophers of their time, the Ikhwān strove to reconcile the “rational” (or “philosophical”) sciences as inherited from the ancients and the “traditional” (or “religious”) as modelled on the message of the Qurʾānic revelation, but they did this with a sympathy for the two previous monotheistic traditions that was exceptional for mediaeval authors. Although clearly not as familiar with the Bible or the Torah as they were with the Qurʾān, the Brethren did, here and there, seem to consider these two texts, and other prophetic works, virtually on a par with it. This syncretic approach also led them to a certain levelling of authorities, by which it was assumed that all the great figures of the past, whether scientists, philosophers, prophets, or even poets, professed essentially the same truth.

Several features tend to confirm the view that the encyclopaedia is, if not a pure product of the Ismāʿīlī daʿwa (call) as such, at least a system with a strong affinity with Ismāʿīlī doctrine and a work of unmistakably Shiʿī resonance, as is proven, for instance, by their reference to the slaughter of the Prophet’s grandson ʿal-Ḥusayn at Karbalāʿ (61/680). The authors make much of their messianic expectations and develop a theory of prophecy that is based on the division of world history into cycles of seven thousand years each. They stress throughout the work the intrinsic coherence and hierarchic structure of the universe and constantly emphasise the distinction between the masses and the élite and the necessity for the latter to preserve the inner meanings of their teaching. Their reading of the Qurʾān is anything but literal, and their own language is often allegorical. The irenic character of the Brethren’s message, their idealistic views regarding the issue of the imāamate, and the seemingly apolitical project of their propaganda are, nevertheless, arguably more consonant with Ṣūfīsm than with Ismāʿīlism. In fact, the work, as it has come down to us, is far too eclectic to be considered the product of just one current.

Unlike later examples of the encyclopaedic genre in Islam, the Rasāʾil is not reducible to a mere compilation of sources. In addition to pursuing a philosophical project that was innovative in its conception and presentation, it features original views and even some genuine progress in its treatment of subjects such as mineralogy and geology.

4. Influence
It is reported that the Sunnī ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Mustanjid (r. 555–66/1160–70) had the Rasā’il publicly burnt in Baghdad. This did not prevent the unorthodox work from circulating widely from the Middle Ages onwards, and not only in Ismāʿīlī circles. More than one hundred copies of the original Arabic corpus, complete or partial, are extant. The Rasā’il were translated into Persian in premodern times, and the lengthy allegory of the trial between man and animals as narrated in Epistle Twenty-two enjoyed a great popularity of its own, being translated into Hebrew at least three times during the Middle Ages (Goodman and McGregor)—but the study of the Ikhwān’s influence, within or outside Islam, remains embryonic. The unorthodox character of the Rasā’il, which must have dissuaded many from acknowledging their debt while shamelessly plundering it, makes this study a complex and elusive task.

Outside those Ismāʿīlī sources that viewed the Rasā’il as their own property and went so far as to identify the work as “the Qurʾān of the Imāms,” the judgement of the work in classical literature was generally severely critical, especially when passed by Sunnī theologians such as ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024), al-Ghazālī (d. 504/1111), and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who were considered to embody Islamic orthodoxy.

By and large, and pending a further investigation, it appears that the writings of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ appealed especially to three categories of people: 1) mystics, especially the representatives of Islamic illuminist philosophy such as al-Suhrawardi (d. 587/1191), his heir and commentator al-Shahrazūrī (d. after 687/1288), and Mullā Ṣadrā Shirāzī (d. 1050/1640), who are all known to have made abundant use of the Epistles; 2) the Neoplatonists, particularly the Jewish authors active in Spain in the sixth/twelfth century, such as Joseph Ibn Zaddiq (Ibn Ṣaddiq, d. 544/1149) and Moses Ibn Ezra (d. after 532/1138), and their followers in the seventh-eighth/thirteenth-fourteenth centuries (Zonta); and 3) the great variety of scientists who, for one reason or another, found in the encyclopaedia of the Brethren a source of inspiration. It is known, for example, that some entire passages from the Rasā’il are reproduced almost verbatim by the geographer al-Idrīsī (d. 560/1165) and others by the cosmographer al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283). The long version of the epistle on magic is also a major source of the Ghāyat al-ḥakīm, a fourth/tenth-century work whose Latin translation, under the name Picatrix, made it the most influential treatise on astral magic in Europe well into the Renaissance. Although the corpus of the Rasā’il itself does not seem to have been translated into Latin, two literal translations of individual epistles have so far been identified: the fourth, on geography, and the fourteenth, on Aristotle’s Posterior analytics. The direct or indirect influence of the Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ upon later mediaeval authors in the East and the West has thus perhaps been greatly underestimated (Cordonnier; de Callataÿ, Ibn Masarra to Ibn ʿArabī).

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