F. Jamil Ragep and Taro Mimura (eds.)
Edited and Translated by F.J. Ragep and T. Mimura. Foreword by Nader El-Bizri
(Epistles of the Brethren of Purity) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in
Association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London 2015), pp. xxv + 162
(introduction, translation, appendices, indices) + 164 (edition), £50.00, ISBN 978 0

For more than five years, the Institute of Ismaili Studies and its editor-in-chief
Nader El-Bizri have been publishing, together with Oxford University Press, a
series of Arabic editions and English translations of the “Epistles of the
Brethren of Purity” (Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ). This encyclopaedic text, authored
by a group of scholars flourishing most likely in tenth-century Baghdād and
Baṣra, provides a comprehensive collection of the knowledge of their time. Its
main purpose appears to have been didactic, propaedeutic, or even propagan-
distic. Its neo-Platonic perspective and its Ismaili tendencies seem obvious.
Widely received and adapted, not only in Arabic texts, but also, in (partial)
translations, in Persian, Hebrew and Latin, its 52 epistles – or 50 or 51, depend-
ing on the rendition – deal with (i) mathematical sciences and logic, (ii) the
natural sciences and natural philosophy, (iii) the sciences of the soul and the
intellect, and (iv) metaphysics, divination, magic, law and religion.

To date, the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ series has yielded nine volumes on
the following epistles: 1 and 2 (arithmetic, geometry), 3 (astronomy, astrology
– this is the book under review here), 4 (geography), 5 (music), 10 through 14
(logic), 15 and 21 (natural sciences), 22 (fable on the case of the animals versus
man before the king of the jinn), 32 through 36 (sciences of the soul and intel-
lect 1), and 52a (magic). Three more volumes have been announced for the fu-
ture (www.iis.ac.uk/publications/forthcoming; 2016–06–16): 39 through 41
(sciences of the soul and the intellect III), 43 through 45 (legal and theological
sciences), and 52b (magic).

F. Jamil Ragep, renowned historian of astronomy in Islamicite societies, and
Taro Mimura, editor of SCIAMVS and distinguished scholar who has published
on topics related to the subject under discussion, have now published Epistle
3. Its title, “On astronomia,” refers to the Greek term used in the introduction to
the Arabic text. The volume of 32 chapters deals with descriptive astronomy
and astrology, as well as topics related to philosophy and religion. Mathemati-
cal-technical astronomy and astrology, as found, for example, in zijes (astro-
nomical/astrological handbooks with tables), is excluded.

After subdividing the science of the stars into three branches – this time
not referred to by its Greek but by its Arabic term, ʿilm al-nujūm – Epistle 3
describes the spherical organisation of the cosmos, followed by an introduction of basic astrological concepts. These comprise, among other things, domiciles, terms, decans, lords of the triplicities, characteristics of the zodiacal signs, and astrological houses; the list is similar to that produced in other introductions to astrology, such as those by Abū Maʿṣhar, al-Qabīṣī, al-Bīrūnī or Kūshyār b. Labbān. The next part, which describes basic astronomical concepts like the movement of the sun and the effects of the seasons, is reminiscent of similar texts in almanacs and anwāʾ literature. Then, eclipses, and the motions and visibility of planets are discussed, again in a descriptive, approximate way appropriate for readers requiring a general introduction only, who may not yet be well versed in mathematical-technical astronomy and astrology. The final chapters use this information to support the doctrines of the Brethren of Purity, presenting philosophical reflections ad gloriam dei and demonstrating that astronomy and astrology illustrate divine wisdom.

Although the astrological and astronomical part is basic and inconspicuous, it occasionally presents small surprises, as, for example, in the abbreviations of the planets’ names. While on Arabic and Persian astrolabes, the final letter of the Arabic name is used to abbreviate the planets, one group of manuscripts in Epistle 3 presents a variant: abbreviation through use of the first letter, and of the Persian names for Saturn and Mars in order to avoid a duplication of letters. Incidentally, this feature indicates both different strands and their relation to Persian traditions.

For this edition project, the Institute of Ismaili Studies “carefully selected from over one hundred extant manuscripts” (p. xxiii, n. 3) 19 copies “of the oldest complete manuscripts, along with significant supplementary fragments” (ibid.), and acquired reproductions of them. From this group, Ragep and Mimura chose seven manuscripts, “the best witnesses” (p. 10), as a basis for their edition. Their primary reference manuscript is Tehran, Mahdavi 7437 (fol. 31b-49a), which is dated 640 H (1242/43) and is, according to the editors, the most reliable copy, though not the oldest (i.e., Istanbul, Atif Efendi 1681, is dated to 1182, fol. 24a-38a). The edition appears to be reliable, and the Arabic sound.

As for the translation, it is easy to read, and renders the Arabic faithfully. Technical terms are translated by using standard wording. The ambivalent “house” (bayt - buyūt) is rendered as “houses” when describing the domiciles of the planets, and as “place” when concerning the astrological house system. The use of Arabic letters for the sigla of the manuscripts, not only in the edition but also in the translation, makes it a cumbersome task for readers not familiar with Arabic to track the different strands. Transcribing them would have been an alternative solution.