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Micrologus

Nature, Sciences and Medieval Societies

XXXIII · 2025 Power, Religion, and Wisdom.
Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy
in al-Andalus and Beyond



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Godefroid de Callataÿ
Sébastien Moureau

POWER, RELIGION, AND WISDOM.
ORTHODOXY AND HETERODOXY
IN AL-ANDALUS AND BEYOND

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INTRODUCTION

“The origin and early development of philosophy in tenth-century al-Andalus: the impact of ill-defined materials and channels of transmission” (hereafter, PhilAnd) is an Advanced Grant ERC project funded by the European Research Council and conducted at UCLouvain and the Warburg Institute (University of London)¹. PhilAnd aims to provide new insights into an important chapter in the history of Islamic speculative thinking. It is concerned with the time and the form under which philosophy – in the sense of a rational, scientific, and comprehensive system to approach the reality of the world around us – appeared for the first time in al-Andalus, and with the role played by this formative stage in the history of philosophy as later developed in the Iberian Peninsula among the three monotheistic communities.

PhilAnd pursues three main objectives, namely:

- (1) to determine if the emergence of philosophy in al-Andalus did not significantly predate the time ordinarily acknowledged in modern scholarship;
- (2) to establish if the impact of this early phase on later developments of rational thinking in al-Andalus was not considerably greater than has usually been assumed thus far;
- (3) to provide evidence in order to assess, on a scientific basis, the originality of the first Andalusī philosophers with respect to their predecessors in the Orient.

The project stands at the crossroads of several major lines of inquiries in modern scholarship: the overall history of Arabic sci-

1. ERC Grant Agreement number 740618 (under the European Union’s H2020 ERC MGA Programme). The project started in October 2017 and was extended to March 2024: <https://sites.uclouvain.be/erc-philand/>.

ences in al-Andalus; the development of libraries and cultural centers in al-Andalus; the interaction of politics, religion, and science in the Peninsula; the common threads of Islamic and Jewish philosophy and mysticism in and outside the Peninsula; Greek-Arabic philosophy across the Mediterranean or more specifically in the context of Shī‘ism and Ismā‘īlism; Arabic translations into Latin and the legacy of Arabic sciences in medieval Europe; and the reception of Jewish literature in the Latin Middle Ages. Although the project was designed to develop and stimulate a network of collaborations with other related projects (see below, especially under SP6-8), PhilAnd is different from any of them and is fundamentally original in two crucial respects.

First, this project emphasizes the fourth/tenth century. This is a period that has often been disregarded by historians of Arab-Islamic philosophy concerned with al-Andalus on the assumption that philosophy in al-Andalus only emerged with the Jew Salomon Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron) (d. 450/1058) in the fifth/eleventh century or, even later, with the Muslims Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī (d. 521/1127) and Ibn Bājja (Avempace) (d. 533/1139) in the sixth/twelfth century. To a very large extent, the disregard of modern scholarship for the philosophical achievements of fourth-/tenth-century al-Andalus is the result of a series of confusions, misconceptions, and erroneous dating related to three authors (or possibly a group of authors, in one case), namely, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931), and Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī (d. 353/964). The role of these three figures in the transfer of philosophy between the eastern and the western parts of *dār al-islām* was in reality decisive, and this is why they are at the core of the present exploration.

Second, the project is resolutely focused on a major re-evaluation of “ill-defined” material and channels of transmission. This also requires some justification.

It has long been stressed that, among the sources that have been used by the author of the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm* the three most important are (1) the above-mentioned Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ and their *Rasā’il*; (2) the corpus of works traditionally ascribed to the alchemist Jābir b. Ḥayyān (supposed to have lived in the second/eighth century) and therefore usually referred to as the *Corpus Jābirianum*; and (3) the *Nabatean agriculture* or, more exactly, the corpus of Nabatean writings ascribed to Ibn Waḥshiyya (written in 318/930-1), which are

thus commonly referred to as the *Nabatean Corpus*. These three corpora show a number of remarkable similarities that inspire us to study them from a common perspective – something which has not been done so far. All three were produced in the Orient. All three show a marked tendency toward disciplines such as astrology, magic, and alchemy, which today are disdainfully qualified as “occult”, although in the Middle Ages they were regarded as part and parcel of the bulk of the “rational/philosophical sciences”. All three appear to have been significantly influenced by Ismā‘īlism, although the relation with Ismā‘īlism, and more generally with Shī‘ism, remains to be clarified in each case. All three present themselves as compilations whose elaboration may have extended over several generations, posing major problems with dating and authorship. All three are extremely syncretic compositions with a common Neoplatonic background to which a huge quantity of material of various provenance – in particular Hermeticism, Ṣābianism, and mysticism – has been superimposed. As a result of their Ismā‘īlism bias, all three works show a common, and distinctly *bāṭinī*, way of interpreting religious scriptures, and in particular the Qur’ān. It is also particularly worth noting that these three corpora of writings appear to have been introduced into al-Andalus around the same period, and quite possibly by the same man, namely Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī, the author of the *Rutbat al-ḥakīm* and the *Ghāyat al-ḥakīm*. How can we account for this fact? What prompted such a sudden interest in fourth-/tenth-century al-Andalus for doctrines so clearly at odds with the model imposed there by the Sunnī-Mālikī traditionalists? Was there anything like an Ismā‘īlī *da‘wa* (propaganda) in al-Andalus? In the reception of this type of knowledge, what role was played by the regime itself? And how profoundly did the introduction of heterodox material affect the subsequent development of Neoplatonism and mysticism as cultivated in al-Andalus among the three monotheistic communities? These questions, which remain largely unexplored, are at the core of the present project.

In order to explore these issues with the best prospects of achieving ground-breaking results, eight sub-projects (SP) have been defined, which are briefly presented here. Five of these SP specifically deal with aspects of the three above-mentioned eastern *corpora* – the Jābirian (SP1), the Ikhwānīan (SP2), and the Nabatean (SP3) – as well as with Ibn Masarra (SP4) and Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī

(SP5). In addition to the five linear sub-projects, the project also includes three transversal SP to reinforce its interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach, and to address wider and more complex cultural issues. Although these three are intimately connected with the former five SP, these latter three are conducted in the form of cross-disciplinary and international conferences held in the second phase of the project, namely:

- *Power, religion and wisdom: Orthodoxy and heterodoxy in al-Andalus and beyond* (SP6, at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, from 29 March to 1 April 2022);
- *Interconnections between Jewish and Islamic rationalistic forms of thought during the Middle Ages* (SP7, at UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, from 5 to 7 September 2023);
- *Science and Craft: The relations between the theoretical and practical sides of the occult and esoteric sciences in the Islamic world* (SP8, at the Warburg Institute, London, from 10 to 13 January 2023).

Most of the contributions to this special journal issue are reworked and extended versions of papers originally presented at the conference held at the IAS in Princeton. We have grouped the fourteen contributions in this issue as articles under five headings, respectively entitled *Andalusī Channels of Transmission*, *Contextualizing the Orient*, *Around the Corpus of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, *Two Newly Edited Texts on Magic*, and *Knowledge Organization*.

The first section of the volume, on the channels of transmission, opens with a contribution by Miquel Forcada on *Rational and More Than Rational Sciences in the Umayyad Caliphate: Dialogue, Debate, and Confrontation*. In this article, Forcada presents an extensive overview of the postures of the Umayyad rulers in al-Andalus vis-à-vis the rational sciences, with a particular focus on the occult disciplines. Tracing the links between men of power and men of science, he reveals the somewhat ambivalent attitudes of the former on certain occasions. Periods of persecution frequently alternated with moments of greater tolerance and even support, as is the case first, with the emir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān II, who encouraged the importation of books from the East and their dissemination through al-Andalus, and then with the caliphs ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III and al-Ḥakam II, the two sovereigns most favorable to rational thinking. This article concludes with important and original reflections about alchemy in

Umayyad al-Andalus and the central figure of Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī in line with Ibn Bishrūn's alchemical epistle. In *Intense Rivalry, Sectarian Secrecy, and Doctrinal Recourse to Reason: Obstacles to the Fourth-/Tenth-Century Transmission of Ismā'īlī Thought to al-Andalus*, Paul Walker explores the rivalry between the Fāṭimids and the Umayyads of the West, and tackles the issue of a possible transfer of *bāṭinī* Ismā'īlī doctrines from Fāṭimid sources to al-Andalus. To discuss this, Walker starts by reconsidering the concepts of *bāṭin* vs. *ẓāhir*, and *ta'wīl*, among Ismā'īlī thinkers such as al-Sijistānī. According to the esoteric doctrine of the Ismā'īlīs, part of knowledge is accessible only to the agents of *da'wa* (the *dā'ī*) and therefore was kept under a seal of secrecy. Walker argues that various factors impeded the transmission of the Fāṭimid doctrine into al-Andalus. First, he contends, the rivalry between the Fāṭimids and the Umayyads in al-Andalus was extreme, especially after the proclamation of the caliphate by 'Abd al-Raḥmān III, and in direct competition with Umayyad claims. Second, the doctrine of secrecy imposed on *dā'īs* did not favor the propagation of doctrinal tenets. Finally, the very content of these doctrines must have hindered their dissemination in al-Andalus. As far as we know, and according to Walker's conclusions, there is no concrete evidence of any transfer of Fāṭimid doctrine to Umayyad al-Andalus.

The second section of the volume focuses on issues related to specific sciences. In *Tracing the Sorcerer's Circle: Demons, Polysemy, and the Boundaries of Islamic Normativity*, Travis Zadeh offers a panoramic overview of the use of circles and related diagrams in the practice of Islamic ritual magic to subjugate intermediary beings in a variety of contexts. Indeed, the purposes of such rituals are multiple, as they "range from the therapeutic, prophylactic, divinatory, and revelatory, to diverse forms of love magic, the incitement of enmity, and the infliction of harm on enemies". Tracing the genealogy and history of the *mandal* across various cultural and linguistic areas, Zadeh explores an extensive number of sources, with particular emphasis on handbooks of practical magic such as those produced in the East by Fakhr al-A'imma al-Ṭabasī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and Sirāj al-Dīn al-Sakkākī between the fifth/eleventh and the seventh/thirteenth century. Normativity is a central question of Zadeh's contribution: in what sense can these rituals and practices be felt or defined as Islamic, given their origins and their transcultural history?

The next two articles lead us to the alchemical arts – arts which, like Maslama b. Qāsim al-Qurṭubī in his *Rutbat al-ḥakīm*, various thinkers in Islam have considered the pinnacle of all sciences. This was no doubt the case for Ibn Arfaʿ Ra’s, as Regula Forster amply demonstrates in her *To What Extent Is Alchemy an Esoteric Science? A Case Study of Ibn Arfaʿ Ra’s (fl. sixth/twelfth century)*. Ibn Arfaʿ Ra’s was a Moroccan scholar, poet, and alchemist, known in particular for a collection of poems entitled the *Shudhūr al-dhahab*, which inspired a host of commentaries throughout the nineteenth century. Taking as a case study one of these commentaries, namely the *Ḥall mushkilāt al-Shudhūr* that the Moroccan author wrote on his own *dīwān*, Forster examines whether alchemy can genuinely be considered an esoteric science, insofar as the opposition between *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* so dear to the Ismāʿīlīs does not figure in this work, nor, it would seem, in most alchemical writings. Along the same lines, she concludes by asking about the function of the commentary in relation to the work commented on: how is it so that the “esoteric” *Shudhūr* enjoyed a far greater popularity than the supposedly more “exoteric” *Ḥall*? The other contribution on alchemy is by Pierre Lory. His *Jābir b. Ḥayyān’s Alchemy, Ibn ‘Arabī and the Reading of the Book of Nature* is an exploration of the notion of transmutation in alchemy and mysticism. Lory first outlines Jābir’s doctrine of transmutation. Jābir’s world is one in which the possibilities of transmutation are innumerable and the elemental properties, to which the elements can be reduced, are constantly fluctuating. Lory identifies two types of transmutation: a “horizontal” transmutation, namely, of one matter into another, and a “vertical” one that consists of “the intensification or weakening of the energy in the substance, as well as the distribution of these energies of the soul according to the qualities of each”. What is of interest to Lory is the oft-debated issue of whether a philosophical and mystical vocation should be attached to alchemy, and whether the answer to this question can be found in the theory of knowledge. The authors of Jābir’s corpus distinguished between two kinds of knowledge: one based on the senses, and the other based on the intellect, which is the path of wisdom in which man is transformed. Alchemy and the science of balances, that is, the proportion of elemental qualities in substances, give access to this knowledge through the contemplation of the secrets of this alchemical “mesocosm”. The second part of the article presents a compari-

son of Jābir's doctrine with that of Ibn 'Arabī, who, according to Lory, does not give alchemy the same central place in the elevation of man, but rather uses it as an explanatory comparison. If certain convergences can be observed, it must be said that the differences are more numerous. In her article, *Who Are the Sethians in the Nabatean Agriculture?*, Elaine van Dalen provides a rich synthesis of the Sethian (Banī Ishīthā) sect in the famous *Filāḥa nabaṭiyya*, the *Nabatean agriculture*. She first presents the Sethians in classical Arabic sources, where they are described as communities living in southern Iraq and referred to by the generic term Ṣābiān. Van Dalen also highlights the links and contrasts between the Sethians and the Mandaeans, who are also referred to in literature as Ṣābiān. In the *Nabatean agriculture*, the Sethians are the hegemonic people of Qūthāmā's time in Babylon, Syria, and al-Jazīra. Van Dalen details the beliefs and practices attributed to them in *Filāḥa nabaṭiyya*, and thus draws out precise elements of their doctrine, which contribute to a better identification of this sect's cult. After dealing at some length with the figure of Seth, van Dalen finally tackles the question of how to identify the Sethians in the *Nabatean agriculture*. Having dismissed the Mandaean hypothesis (that the Mandaeans were described in the fourth/tenth century as the sons of Seth), she argues instead: "these indications tentatively place the Nabatean Sethians in the first to third century CE in either the Parthian or early Sassanid period, but similarity with Kentaeans pushes them to the fourth-fifth century". She concludes by addressing the question of the origin of these Sethians and their evolution up to the fourth/tenth century.

The third section of the volume is entirely devoted to the encyclopedic corpus of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', a field that has probably never attracted as much interest as it does today. This interest is no doubt stimulated at least in part by the current editorial project at Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies (OUP-IIS) to provide the first critical edition of the entire corpus of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. The volumes published to date in the series reveal that the process of redaction of the *Epistles* and their transmission was far more complex than previously assumed, and the exact relation between the *Rasā'il* and the *Risāla jāmi'a*, which was thought to crown the corpus, remains to be established.

In a continuation of his previous studies on the relation between the parts of the Ikhwān's corpus, in his article, *the Fihrist of the Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā': Textual Variants and Their Relation to al-Risāla al-Jāmi'a*, Janne Mattila provides the first in-depth investigation on the Ikhwān's *Fihrist*. This introductory section, which consists of a table of contents of the *Rasā'il* and a final section, is found in the majority of the manuscripts, although it was more likely composed later than the original collection of the *Epistles*, as Mattila explains. Based on an examination of nearly twenty witnesses, a substantial number of which are not part of the current OUP-IIS series, his survey reveals new features that may contribute to a better understanding of the process of redaction of the corpus. Regarding the table of contents itself, Mattila distinguishes three variants in the manuscript tradition and shows that these versions correspond to three different phases in a process of redaction during which the original text was progressively expanded. As for the final section, a part of the *Fihrist* designed to teach readers how to use the *Epistles* in practice, Mattila demonstrates that it also involves three versions, but, remarkably, in this case the process of expansion does not follow the same pattern. By extending his investigation to the *Jāmi'a*, Mattila also shows that large parts of it are textually dependent on the latest version of the *Fihrist*, the only one characterized by the presence of Ismā'īlī elements. He concludes, "this supports the claim of an Ismā'īlī contest for the genesis of the *Jāmi'a* as well". With *The Andalusī Reception of Ontological Options and Cosmological Descriptions in the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and al-Risāla al-Jāmi'a: A Case Study*, Carmela Baffioni reopens the question of the impact left by the philosophy of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' in al-Andalus. Her investigation focuses on two passages of the *Rasā'il* that inspired the Neoplatonist scholar Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī to write his *Kitāb al-ḥadā'iq*, also known as *Kitāb al-dawā'ir*, a treatise that proved to be most influential to many Jewish intellectuals in al-Andalus. By extending the textual comparison to the *Jāmi'a*, Baffioni brings to light important doctrinal variations between the works under consideration in her case study. As she contends, the resolutely Ismā'īlī turn found in the interpretation of the *Jāmi'a* is not present in the *Kitāb al-ḥadā'iq*; this prompted her to conclude that al-Baṭalyawsī's "*Kitāb al-dawā'ir* (Book of circles), although rich in the influence of the Ikhwān, is some distance removed from Ismā'īlī sentiment – at least with regard to the exam-

ination of its references to the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’”. Another contribution largely focused on the influence of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ on the Jewish world is provided by Gabriele Ferrario. In his article, *In a Hidden Place: Traces of Bāṭinism in the Fragments of the Cairo Genizah*, Ferrario shows that, along with alchemical fragments that mention titles of works from the Jābirian corpus, the Cairo genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue also contains several manuscripts that explicitly refer to the Epistles of the Ikhwān. Most remarkably, some copies even preserve entire passages from the *Rasā’il*, either in Arabic or in Judeo-Arabic. A diplomatic edition of two sections in Judeo-Arabic, respectively from Epistles 19 (on minerals) and 21 (on plants) is provided in the appendix of this contribution. In *Restoring Harmony through the Propaedeutic Science of Music: A Reconsideration of the Brethren of Purity’s Epistle on Music and Its Relation with the Epistle on Proportions*, Laura Tribuzio offers a thorough reconsideration of how to understand the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’’s approach to music. By placing the discourse in the framework of the Greco-Arabic tradition on music, yet in sharp contrast with previous scholarship on the Ikhwān, which is almost exclusively focused on *Epistle 5 (On Music)*, Tribuzio demonstrates that this treatise and the one that follows it in the collection must have been conceived, originally, as two facets of same subject, namely, harmony. Whereas *Epistle 6* (“Arithmetical, Geometrical, and Harmonic Proportions”) is concerned with the quantitative dimensions of harmony (that is, with its divine essence), *Epistle 5* presents itself as a study of the qualitative aspects of the “art of harmony”, that is, with music, to form some sort of a human counterpart to divine harmony. The interest and originality of the Brethren’s perspective, Tribuzio contends, lies in the fact “that the relationship between “music” and “harmony” was never formalized in the supposedly well-structured Greek tradition transmitted to the Arabic scientific literature”. *Epistle 6* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ is at the core of another contribution of the volume, but this time in line with another two of the sciences making up the mathematical quadrivium that opens the encyclopedia. Indeed, in *The Mathematical Orders of Architecture: Seeing Madīnat al-Zahrā’ from the Perspective of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’?*, Nader El-Bizri deals with the Epistle on proportions, complemented by the Ikhwān’s teachings found in epistles 1 (*On Arithmetic*) and 2 (*On Geometry*). El-Bizri’s contribution shows

how such treatises by the Ikhwān – along with others in the continuation of the Greek tradition of Euclid and Nicomachus of Gerasa – may help us better understand the geometric principles that guided the architects of the Madīnat al-Zahrā' complex near Córdoba, and more especially the principles at work in the Salón Rico of the caliph 'Abd al-Raḥmān III. As El-Bizri reminds us, in addition to their enlightening views on construction techniques, the esoteric perspective of the Ikhwān's doctrine allows us to better understand the symbolic significance of architectural designs such as the palatine complex of the Umayyads.

The fourth section of the volume includes the edition of two previously unpublished Arabic texts dealing with magic and the spiritual forces it involves. The first one, *The Book on Attracting the Rūḥāniyya of Every Animal: A Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetic Text*, prepared by Liana Saif and Charles Burnett, is the *Kitāb istiḥlāb rūḥāniyya al-bahā'im kullihā*, a chapter of the *Kitāb al-ustuwaṭṭās* pertaining to the corpus of Pseudo-Aristotelian Hermetica and which, like other parts of this collection, purports to record the conversations between Aristotle and his disciple Alexander the Great. The Arabic original, established on the basis of the available manuscript copies, is accompanied by an annotated English translation, as well as an edition of the Latin version of the same treatise as found in one surviving manuscript. In line with the previous section of this special issue, Saif and Burnett observe that a version of the Arabic original is also found in some manuscripts of *Epistle 52b*, one of the three known variants in which the epistle *On Magic* ascribed to the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' is known to have reached us. Rather coincidentally, the other edition presented in this section is also concerned with a passage of the same version of *Epistle 52* attributed to the Brethren of the Purity. The passage in question, which is found in other manuscripts than those featuring the *Kitāb istiḥlāb rūḥāniyya*, is concerned with the placebo effect, the power of imagination, and medical recipes involving spells suspended from different parts of the body. As Godefroid de Callataÿ and Sébastien Moureau, the editors of this text, argue in their contribution, *An Arabic Version of Qusṭā b. Lūqā's De Physicis Ligaturis?*, this passage, if not the source itself, is an Arabic text very closely related to the *De Physicis Ligaturis*, a work by Qusṭā b. Lūqā's that was, until now, only known in its Latin version. The edition of the Arabic variant is accompanied by an

English translation and preceded by various textual comparisons that show the similarities and the dissimilarities between the Arabic and the Latin texts. It is also preceded by an introduction that contextualizes this passage in the long 52b variant of the *Epistle* on Magic. This edition is soon to be published, along with the 52c variant, in the OUP-IIS series.

The final section (*Knowledge Organization*), includes a paper of a different kind. In *M-Classi, A New Digital Tool for the Classification of the Sciences, in Islam and Beyond*, Godefroid de Callatay, Rémy Baranx, and Huberts Naets describe the main functionalities of a newly created device designed to unite and boost future research on the organization of knowledge and, more specifically, the classifications of the sciences in and around the Islamic world.

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