

# Narratology as Philosophy: The Case of the Brethren of Purity

By Ian Richard Netton

## Preamble

Imagine a cauldron bubbling over a large fire. And then imagine that in that cauldron there is a great variety of elements: some blend with others; some retain throughout the mixing process their own individual identity. That cauldron is the Middle East in the 10th and 11th centuries AD. The brew which it contains is, for the most part, the Islamic religion of one brand or another. But this religion shares the pot, uneasily sometimes, with a number of other constituents: Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, Neopythagoreanism, Zoroastrianism, astrology, folklore, magic.

Turn now to the city of Basra in Southern Iraq. It's on the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab river, about 50 miles below the place where the two great rivers of Iraq, the Tigris and the Euphrates, merge.<sup>1</sup> Over the last few decades this city has featured in the news many times, whether it be with regard to the Iran-Iraq War, the two Gulf Wars or the present uneasy situation in the contemporary Middle East. Basra is famous in Arabic studies as the birth place of Arabic grammar and in Islamic studies as a major centre for the Mu'tazilites.<sup>2</sup> Pellat emphasises this when he quotes Louis Massignon to the effect that "Baṣra, in fact, is the veritable crucible in which Islamic culture assumed its form, crystallised in the classical mould, between the first and fourth century of the *bidja*".<sup>3</sup>

This was, indeed, a cosmopolitan city in every sense of the word. In addition to its "intense religious and intellectual activity", it was "a com-

<sup>1</sup> Ch. Pellat & S.H. Longrigg, art. "Al-Baṣra", *EI2*, Vol. 1, pp. 1085-1087. See also Charles Pellat, *Le Milieu baṣrien et la formation de Gāhiz*, (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1086.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

mercial centre”, “a financial centre, thanks to the Jewish and Christian elements” and “an industrial centre”.<sup>4</sup> It had a port on the river “which accommodated ships of fairly large tonnage”.<sup>5</sup> And it hosted numerous immigrants from, for example, Iran, India, Sind and Malaya.<sup>6</sup> Exposure to foreign cultures and influences, in addition to indigenous Arab culture, was inevitable and diverse.

Now the majority of scholars believe that the Brethren of Purity, whom we know in Arabic as *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, had their home in Basra.

Their highly syncretic writings are as cosmopolitan as the city of Basra itself, saturated not only with Greek, Judaeo-Christian and Islamic influences, but exhibiting Persian, Indian, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Manichaean elements as well. They know the Eastern Islamic world as well as its Western counterpart; their Epistles are infiltrated by Persian vocabulary on the one hand and Greek on the other; the stories and anecdotes which they revel in narrating have their origins in both the East and the West; and they are well aware of the ancient religions of India.<sup>7</sup>

Who *were* these Brethren of Purity? Debate has raged for a long time over their exact names and the exact dates when they lived. What is important, I think, for this essay is to try and provide some account of their *thought*. What we *can* say about them with some certainty boils down to this:

- They were a group of philosophers and thinkers who lived sometime in the 10th/11th centuries AD in Basra.<sup>8</sup>
- Their exact names are disputed but they produced 52 *Epistles* (*Rasāʾil*) which constitute a diverse and eclectic encyclopaedia of the knowledge of the age, ranging from Arithmetic, through mineralogy to philosophy and magic.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 1085.

<sup>7</sup> For a complete introduction and orientation to all this, see Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ)*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002; repr. of Allen & Unwin edn. of 1982), [hereafter referred to as **MNP**]. For the actual Arabic text of the *Epistles*, see *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, (4 vols., Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), [hereafter abbreviated to **R**].

<sup>8</sup> MNP, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 2 and passim.

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