

BASRA AND IKHWAN AL-SAFA SCHOOL OF THOUGHT AS REPRESENTATIVE OF SILK ROAD CIVILIZATIONS

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The city of Basra, established on the shore of Basra Bay in the south of modern Iraq, played an important role in agriculture and trade for centuries, with its geography and its position where two great rivers of Mesopotamia flow.

Before being established with its current name by the Muslim Arabs, the city was known as Teredon in the Chaldean period and Vehištebad Erdeşir in the Sasanid period. It was reestablished with the name Basra in the early period of Islam by Arabs between Hijri 14-16 (635-637 CE). Afterward, the city became one of the most important centers of trade, science and thought; had a perfect cultural diversity; and hosted important schools of Arabic language and thought for centuries. Besides the commercial effects of its being a transfer point on the axis of Europe, Mesopotamia, Iran, and India, the schools of thought which emerged here were affected by this mobility.

In this paper, we try to reveal the philosophical-religious approach which the Ikhwan al-Safa school of thought in Basra, one of the most important cities of the Silk Road, created in parallel with the characteristics of this city. Shiite Ismaili beliefs and thoughts in the region and its characteristics which feed different religions

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and traditions emerging from Egypt and with the scientific approach of Greek thought; with Indian-Iranian teachings that merge Greek thought and Neoplatonic philosophy, give us the summary of Silk Road civilizations.

Keywords: Basra, Ikhwan al-Safa, Silk Road

The Silk Road, passing through the whole of Central Asia, starting from China and finally reaching Europe, has been a vehicle to transfer culture, religion and civilization as well as commercial goods. China, trading goods like silk, paper and spices from different regions of East Asia, played an important role.

The paper aims to show various characteristics of Silk Road and Ikhwan al-Safa thought in terms of politics, administration, culture and religion. Since most of Arabia, where Islam emerged, was not suitable for agriculture, trade was an essential part of economic life and very developed. There were cities where markets were set up in every part of the peninsula. Traders from Mesopotamia to Abyssinia and from Egypt to Oman were able to talk to each other easily without any translator. The people of Mecca were able to trade comfortably with “*eman*,” which was a document of trust given to them. The prevalence of trade in Mecca could easily be seen in the life of Prophet Muhammad. It is understood from the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, who conducted trade in his youth with the ambassadors of Abd-i Kays, that he knew the market places in the east of the peninsula.¹

After the conquest of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Azerbaijan, Egypt and most of Anatolia, nearly all routes of the Silk Road were controlled by Muslims. In the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, this trade route continued to work. Moreover, importance was given to the shipping trade; its reflections can be seen in the stories of Sinbad the Sailor and 1001 Nights. In the Abbasid period, Muslim sailors went beyond Ceylon, where only Persian and Indian ships had gone previously, to fill the stores of big traders in Baghdad with Chinese silk and Indian spices and perfumery. The Chinese entered the Persian Gulf via the route of India’s Malabar coasts, especially during the Tang dynasty. They generally anchored in the cities of Sirat and Kishon on the eastern coast of the peninsula. There, they loaded goods from Basra, Oman and other places onto their ships. After that, they followed the Arabian coast until Muscat and then reached Quilon on the Malabar coast in four weeks. Following that, they passed Ceylon and

¹ *Mūsned*, IV, 206

the Malaka Strait and reached their own country. The road from the Shatt al-Arab delta, starting from Ubulle, extended to Hangzhou City near Shanghai.²

As mentioned above, with the rapid spread of Islam in Asia and Africa, the flow of history and the character of the Silk Road changed. The domination of Islam in Central Asia reached its peak with the victory of Ziyad ibn Salih's Islamic army over Kao Hsiang-che's army in the war of 751 in Talas, Central Asia. Silk weavers taken as captives in this war were sent to Kufe. Silk weaving factories were established in Samarkand. Moreover, Chinese paper first came to the Islamic world and from there spread to Europe. Thus, Samarkand paper also became popular and more factories were established in other Islamic countries. Chinese artisans were brought to Baghdad by Harun al-Rashid.³

SPREAD OF RELIGIONS OVER THE SILK ROAD

One of the permanent things carried through the Silk Road was religion. For example, Buddhism entered China and Japan via the northern route from India in the Northern Wei dynasty period in the 4th and 5th centuries. It is generally accepted that the spread of Christianity in Anatolia became possible with the starting of the Sassanid Empire. Although Christianity was never the dominant religion in Central and East Asia, it reached the borders of China via the Silk Road. In the Mongolian period, Dyophysite, a theological ideology in Christianity which goes back to the Greek theologian Nestorius, was one of the prominent cultural weapons of Christianity.

The spread of Christianity was more limited than the spread of Islam, which was dominant over other religions. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in CE 632, Islam rapidly spread over the Arabian Peninsula, and in the following century, it began to settle in old Roman cities in Syria, Egypt and all of North Africa. In a very short time, the western part of the Silk Road and thus the trade in Asia were controlled by Muslims. With the conquest of the Persian Empire, enlargement continued to the east. Islam first became popular in the city centers along the Silk Road and then moved to rural areas. Without any political or military attempt, Muslim settlements

² W. Heyd. *Yakın-Doğru Ticaret Tarihi* (trl. Enver Ziya Karal). Ankara 1975, p. 31-35. Nebi Bozkurt, a.g.m, p. 370

³ W. Barthold, *Moğol İstilasına Kadar Türkistan* (H. Dursun Yıldız), İstanbul 1981, p. 233-283. Prof. Dr. Ahmet Taşağıl, *İpek yolu tebliği*. www.ayk.gov.tr İpek Yolu Paneli Sunumu, alıntı tarihi 18 Ekim.

were created in Central Asia, China, Bengal and Indonesia. Zoroastrianism and the Mani religion, which had Persian backgrounds, also spread over the Silk Road.⁴

BASRA GAINS IMPORTANCE

Since the 1st century BCE, Rome had wanted to do business with the East by land and sea and to reach China, motherland of silk. However, Rome had to pass its road through the Persian lands in Parthia in order to do business with the East. For the first four centuries CE, the northern and eastern parts of the Silk Road were blocked partly or completely by Parthians and Sassanids Kushans and Huns (Xiongnu) and Hephthalites.⁵

Firstly Rome and then the Byzantine states, so as not to crash into these land route barriers, tried to make the sea silk trade routes over the Persian Peninsula and the Red Sea more active. Parthians, who were dominant in Iran and the biggest barrier to Silk Road trade for the Romans, gained great amounts of profit by controlling the Chinese silk trade and collecting trade taxes. As such, they tried to block direct connections with China. Their intermediary role was highly profitable. At that time, neither Western traders reached the East, nor did Chinese and Sogdian traders reach the West.⁶

With the aim of gaining dominance over this route, a few great wars occurred between the Roman Empire and Parthians just before Christ. In the 1st century CE, with the weakening of the Parthians, the two empires made a peace. In this period, Rome gained power, while the Parthians were defeated by the Kushans in the east and weakened. They signed a peace treaty with Rome for a fifty year period in 66 CE. In this period, Iran gained important profits through its position on the Silk Road.⁷

Rome under the leadership of Trajanus in the beginning of the 2nd century conquered the areas ranging from Petra in today's Jordan to the Parthian centers Ctesifon and Susa. With the advantage of spreading to the east, Trajanus, who created

⁴ See Vikipedi, İpek Yolu. 16 October.

⁵ See Kolb, C. C., (1983), "A Red Slipped 'Pseudo-Arretine' Ceramic from South Central Asia", *East and West*, 33 / 1-4, 1983, p. 82.

⁶ Tezcan, M, "Eskiçağ'da Roma İmparatorluğu'nun Karadeniz Bölgesi Vasıtasıyla Hindistan ve Çin ile Ticareti", *Karadeniz Tarihî Sempozyumu*, 25-26 Mayıs 2005, I. Cilt: Başlangıçtan 20. Yüzyıla, Yayına Hazırlayanlar: Kenan İnan vd., Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi Yay., Trabzon, pp. 3-36; p. 12.

⁷ Tezcan, a.g.m; s.13

a fleet of fifty ships on the Tigris, dreamed of connecting Egypt and Nabataea Arabia, Syria and the Persian Gulf, Syria and the Euphrates, and the Euphrates and the Black Sea and to extend trade relations with the East.⁸ He increased naval activities in the Persian Gulf, and he tried to do the same in the Red Sea. He tried to create a naval force and dreamed of building a new canal with military ports on every side of the canal and connecting the newly established Arabian state. He also dreamed of connecting Egypt and Arabia and reopening the old trade routes to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.⁹ Thanks to the discovery of monsoon winds, which facilitated sailing from the Gulf of Aden to India and from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, sailors preferred these routes. This also made the removal of the Iranian barrier possible.¹⁰

However, in later periods, Iranian-Roman rivalry continued increasingly. In this rivalry, the Tigris-Euphrates basin and Basra continued to have strategic importance. In different periods, Rome-Byzantine or the Sassanid Empire in Iran governed this region or taking Tigris as the border, divided the region. The Sassanids generally had the advantage in this period and this continued until the collapse of the Sassanid Empire in the 7th century. Even after this period, having control of Silk Road trade was the main strategy of states and empires in the region. This situation continued until the victory of Emperor Heraclius over the Sassanid army in 627 in front of Nineveh.

The Sassanid Empire collapsed in 651, after the coming of Turks from east over Transoxiana and after the defeat of the Sassanid army by the Islamic state army in the Qadisiyyah War. The Islamic army gained control of Iran. After the Qadisiyyah War, the Islamic army defeated the Byzantines in the Yarmouk War. Thus, Byzantines started to retreat from the region. As a consequence, all the Byzantine lands along the Silk Road in the east like Antioch, Alexandria, Armenia, Syria and Egypt were taken by Muslims. In the 9th century, the Byzantines, who conquered Macedonia, some parts of Syria, a great part of Armenia and even the Lake Van basin, could no longer sustain its military supremacy in the region and no longer gained its previous powerful position in trade. Seljuk Turks coming from the east at the beginning of the 11th century again removed the Byzantines from the east in a short time. Trade routes changed hands again.¹¹

⁸ Warmington, 1974: 91-92; Tezcan, 2007: 13-14.

⁹ Warmington, 1974: 96-97

¹⁰ Tezcan, a.g.m; s. 7-8

¹¹ Mehmet Tezcan, "The Iranian Branch of the Silkroad and the Prevention of Silkroad Trade By Iran", http://www.tekedergisi.com/Makaleler/1621417040_6tezcan.pdf sayı:3/1, 2014, s. 117-118

Thus, Islamic dominance starting from the first Islamic conquests continued through the Umayyad, Abbasid, Seljuk and Ottoman Islamic states from the 9th century. Trade and civilization activities on the Silk Road came under the control of Islamic states and cultures in the coming centuries.

10TH CENTURY BASRA AND THE THOUGHT OF IKHWAN AL-SAFA

In the previous section, we briefly mentioned the role of Basra in the Silk Road sea trade and its interactions with trade and culture in the East and in the West. For centuries, this city, over which Roman and Iranian civilizations and Arabic elements contended, always protected its importance both in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods and in the periods of later Islamic states and even during the British invasion.

The Abbasids established a strong government in the 8th and 9th centuries, provided stability in the conquered lands and gained dominance on the Arabian Peninsula and in Mesopotamia and Iran. With this dominance, the Silk Road brought prosperity to the region, and science and cultural activities increased in parallel with trading activities.

In the 10th century, Abbasid magnificence declined and its authority started to weaken. At the end of this period, Abbasids lost their strength. Turkish tribes came and Shiite movements dissented with Abbasid's Sunni understanding. Thus, many small governments which were previously loyal to the caliphate center in Baghdad declared their independence. This situation brought the establishment of many new states in the large Islamic civilization. The Caliphate of Cordoba on the Iberian Peninsula; Ubeydogullari in Africa; Ikhshidids and Fatimids in Egypt; Hamdanids in Aleppo; Shaybanids in the Euphrates region; Qarmatians in Oman, Bahrain and Yemen; Samanids in Horasan and Transoxiana; and Ghaznavds and the Buyid dynasty in Afghanistan and Punjab are some examples of this situation. This chaotic situation weakened the Abbasid Caliphate, and in the 10th century, Andalusian Umayyads and the Fatimids in Egypt asserted their claim to the caliphate, and the Abbasids were seriously threatened by these two states.¹²

¹² See Macit Fahri, *İslâm Felsefesi Tarihi*, p. 133, Cebbur Abdunnur, *İhvânü's-safâ*, Dârü'l-mearif, 4. ed. p.5, For detailed information about these states: Hasan İbrahim Hasan, *Tarîkhu-İslâm*, Cairo, 1984, v.3, p. 39-212.

Political chaos unavoidably brought chaos in the intellectual area and a search for different approaches. As a result of the weakening of the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate, Shiite Fatimids and the Buyid dynasty gained power. This gave way to the support of Shiite intellectuals for Hermetic traditions because of the affinities between some Shiite thinkers and Hermetic tradition. Shiite radicals and parties like Rafida and Jahmi and more independent thinkers who approached Hermetic thoughts with sympathy found the opportunity to freely express their thoughts, which they had concealed before, in the regions where Abbasid authority weakened and small states declared their independence. Thanks to Hisham bin Hakem, who aimed to indoctrinate Shiite thought, the Shiite movement increased its secret activities during the Al Ma'mun period. Hattâbiyyah developed and turned into Ismailism, and Batiniyya emerged. With the participation of Meymânal-Kaddâh and his son Abdullah, Hattabiyyah prepared the ground for the emergence of the Ismaili movement. This movement was compatible with the Qarmatian movement in terms of its beliefs and esoteric aspects, which emerged at the same time during Al Ma'mun's reign.¹³ Against this rapidly increasing esoteric Shiite tendency, on the one hand Ma'mun applied some political tactics, while on the other hand, he assisted the spread of Greek thoughts with rational characteristics all over the Islamic world by starting a translation movement.

Shiite sources at that time criticized the political actions of Ma'mun and accused him of spreading Greek thought and of destroying the science of prophethood. Some sources present compilations of Ikhwan al-Safa epistles as a Shiite-Ismaili reaction against this culture policy of Ma'mun. Yemenite historian Idris Imaduddin, who died in Hijri 872, said that Ma'mun tried to change the laws of the Prophet Muhammad to base humans upon Greek philosophy and science. Therefore, Imam Abdullah b. Muhammad compiled Ikhwan al-Safa because he worried about people's leaning towards Al Ma'mun's vain promises and rejecting his grandfather's law.¹⁴

The reign of the Fatimids is accepted as the golden age of Ismailites politically and intellectually. Latest studies on Ismailite cultural heritage and written materials even took Massignion (1883/1962) to name the 9th century CE as the "Ismailite Century". There is no doubt that Ikhwan al-Safa had relations with Ismailites and they wrote epistles which reflect the knowledge of that time.

¹³ Muhammed Âbid el-Câbirî, *Arap Akl'nin Oluşumu*, trc. İbrahim Akbaba, İz Yayınları, İstanbul, 1997. p. 320-321.

¹⁴ Muhamed Âbid el-Câbirî, *Arap Akl'nin Oluşumu*, p. 325. Quotation from Idris Imadüddin, *Uyûnu'l-akbbâr*, V.4.

THE AUTHORS AND SOURCES OF THE IKHWAN AL-SAFA EPISTLES

Emerging in Basra during the Buyid dynasty in the 9th century CE, they named themselves Ikhwan al-Safa and Hullanul Vefa and Ehlul Adl ve Ebanul Hamd (Brothers of Pureness and Friends of Fidelity, Party of Justice and Children of Gratitude) but they chose to conceal their names. The identities of this group of scholars, when and where they lived, their religious or intellectual schools, and the exact time of their compilation have kept researchers busy for a long time.¹⁵

Since they preferred to be secret because of their philosophy of life and because of the fragile conditions of their time, they concealed their names, but we can find some more information about the writers of the Ikhwan Al-Safa epistles in Islamic sources. Classical sources mention five names. They are Zeyd b. Rifâa, Ebû Süleyman Muhammed b. Ma'şer el-Büstî el-Makdisî (el-Mukaddesî), Ebü'l-Hasan Ali b. Hârunez-Zencânî, Ebû Ahmed el-Mihricânî and Avfi. There is no certain information about the emergence of this society, but from Beyhakî's and Şehrezûrî's statements, it can be understood that these writers were the group who wrote the Ikhwan al-Safa epistles. However, it is also understood that the real words in the epistles belonged to Makdisî.¹⁶

Basra, where Ikhwan al-Safa and other parties emerged, also created a rich atmosphere in terms of intellectual debate. The thoughts of this society, through the epistles, spread to different regions, starting with Baghdad. Ikhwan said that its brothers spread to different places in the region and that there were noblemen, princes, amirs, viziers, workers and traders among the people who adhered to them¹⁷.

¹⁵ For a discussion on the results of scholarship on the subject, see Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr, *İslâm Kozmoloji Öğretilerine Giriş*, trc. Nazife Şişman, İnsan Yayınları, İstanbul 1985, p.37-40. See also Burhan Köroğlu, *İslam Kaynakları Işığında Yeni Platoncu Felsefe*, Marmara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis), p. 181-183

¹⁶ Zahiruddin el-beyhakî, *Târîhu hükemâ'il-İslâm(Tetimme-i sivâni'l-hikme)* ed. Muhammed Kürd Ali, Mecmau'l-ilmîyyi'l-arabî, 1946, Dimeşk, p. 35-36; Muhammed b. Mahmûd eş-Şehrezûrî, *Nüzhetü'l-errâb ve ravzatü'l-efrâb*, p. 303, see *DİA*, "İhvân-ı Safâ" maddesi Enver Uysal V.22 . p.1, Macit Fahri, *İslâm Felsefesi Tarîhi*, p.134.

¹⁷ Burhan Köroğlu, *İslam Kaynakları Işığında Yeni Platoncu Felsefe*, p. 184

AIMS OF THE COMPILATION OF THE EPISTLES AND THEIR CONTENTS

The aim of the compilation of the Ikhwan al-Safa epistles can be deduced from the statements in the work called “Ikhwan al-Safa Creed Epistle Number 44”. In this epistle, they are mentioned as a group of friends who underestimated the world and its charms, adopted the science of God as their primary area of interest, dedicated themselves to the truth regardless of its source and sought the truth.¹⁸

According to these definitions, Ikhwan aimed to approach its members with a method which took mental and spiritual nurturing as its basis and to make those people perfect by revealing their secret capabilities to reach salvation and free their spirit. Epistles told that men could escape this worldly prison only by finding knowledge and reminded people that men are prisoners in this world. Sciences like astrology, angelology or embryology were dealt with not only for their theoretical and mental or practical applications. These sciences, by informing the reader about the beauty and harmony of the universe and about the need to pass beyond material beings, were written to help solve the nodes in their souls. To reach this aim, Ikhwan al-Safa composed different world views and sciences in their philosophy with harmony.¹⁹

The sources which they used were books on mathematical and natural sciences written by scholars and philosophers; holy books such as the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Quran and pages brought to the prophets by angels; movements of stars; parts of horoscope; and books on astronomy, geology and botany. Ikhwan al-Safa, who used these sources freely in epistles, describes the ideal type of people. The ideal and perfect person in terms of morality should be like an Iranian in his lineage, an Arab in his creed, an Iraqi in his morality, a Hebrew in his cunningness, a Christian in his behaviors, a Syrian in his praying, a Greek in his knowledge, an Indian in explaining the secrets, and eventually and especially be like a sufi in his all spiritual life.²⁰

Ikhwan al-Safa’s ideas on these different religions, sects and philosophical systems as the source of their philosophy caused them to be evaluated as thinkers with eclectic characters. However, when the epistles were examined in depth, their selections from

¹⁸ İhvân-ı Safâ, Resâilu İhvânî’s-Safâ ve Hullânî’l-Vefâ, Ed. Butros el-Bustânî, Dâru Sâdır, tsz, Beyrut. IV, Epistle 44.

¹⁹ Seyyid Hüseyin Nasr, *ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁰ Burhan Koroğlu, *ibid.*, p. 186

scientific literature and holy books and the traditions related to these books and other mystical traditions show that they had an aim of creating a Hermetic-Gnostic centered mystical thought system.

The person that they regard as a perfect person was a synthesis of an Iranian carrying traces of Iranian religions, a Hebrew of the Jewish Cabbala, a Christian of the Hellenistic period, a Syrian raised by New Pythagoreanism and Eastern New Platonism, a Greek who learned Hellenistic Greek sciences with hermetic characters, an Indian of mystical Indian wisdom and a sufi carrying Gnostic knowledge. It is not a coincidence that the eclectic ideas of Ikhwan al-Safa such as their view of the ideal person emerged in a culturally rich and diverse region, i.e. Basra and the Silk Road.

Ikhwan al-Safa considered all these elements and wrote epistles like Hermetic, New Pythagorean and New Platonic compilations. In their epistles, they often referred to Hermes, Agathadeimon and Pythagoras, adopted the theory of an unidentified almighty God, believed in an infinite mind which governs the universe, and referred to the book of Athulucya which they thought of as a work of Aristotle. All these show the effects of different intellectual sources. Their interest in Hermetic-rooted esoteric sciences shows another aspect of these effects. Ikhwan al-Safa's emphasis on the godly nature of the self and self-need for asceticism and nurturing the self with science and asceticism and making it return to its godly nature also show the Hermetic effects which were mixed with other trends in the Hellenistic age.

Pythagorean philosophy, which was common in the Hellenistic age, was also among the sources of Ikhwan al-Safa. Until the emergence of Ikhwan al-Safa in the Islamic world, Pythagorean philosophy had a limited effect, but with Ikhwan, it started to be used on a bigger scale. The members of Ikhwan also stated that their roads were the roads of Pythagorean philosophers and that it was the most correct road. Especially while explaining the relation between numbers and the cosmological order, they often referred to Pythagorean theories and used their theories in explaining the cosmological system.²¹ They expressed this position in the epistle "The Creed of Ikhwan al-Safa and the Road of Godly People" as such:

In summary, our brothers should never approach a science with hostility, should never reject a book and should never oppose a sect with bigotry. Because our view and sect cover all sects and contain all sciences, their method is listened to and questioned. It is required to examine all beings from the start to the end, with

²¹ İhvân-ı Safâ, Resâil, I. p.48, II. p.140, III. p. 178, 181, 200.

apparent and esoteric, with obvious and secret, by means of accepting that each of them came from one principle, one reason, one self, various substances, covering all different types, and different kinds and by covering the changing parts.”

This position, which can be understood as establishing an eclectic philosophical system at first sight, when examined carefully, can be seen as catching the integrity which exists in all Hermetic traditions.

CONCLUSION

It is not a coincidence that the philosophical system of Ikhwan al-Safa emerged along the axis of Basra and Baghdad in the 10th century and later spread over that region. The region of Basra, one of the most important routes on the Silk Road for centuries, was a place where both Islamic culture and universal thought expressed themselves. It was a place where Persian, Arabic, Roman, Indian and Chinese goods were traded and many religions, philosophical systems and theories of science found the opportunity to express themselves. Baghdad lived its golden age especially during the Abbasid period. Similar to Islamic cities in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, Samark, and Bukhara, Tashkent and other Islamic cities in Central Asia became the leading places where science and thought developed along with commercial and industrial activities.

Ikhwan al-Safa produced an eclectic and original system of philosophy by melting this blend of religions, philosophies and cultures in Islamic thought. In addition to the views of Neo-Platonists, the most typical representatives of Greek and Hellenistic thought, and by means of reaching a synthesis of rational knowledge and mystical knowledge, they tried to formulate a system in which they gathered the elements of Manichaeism, Mandaicism, Zoroastrianism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Indian culture to gain a true knowledge of humanity, the universe and God, for them, the highest bliss that people aim to.

This paper has shown how effective culture and geography are in the making of thought and that the Silk Road had infinite opportunities in offering people not only material wealth but also a wealth of thought.

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