Case Study: The Epistles of the Ikhwan al-Safa’ a research project at the IIS

Key Facts:

- Publishing partnership with Oxford University Press.
- Over 20 international scholars have contributed their expertise to the project.
- One of the earliest known encyclopaedias from 9th/10th century CE
- Earliest manuscript of the Epistles in the Institute’s collection probably originates from Syria and was copied in the mid-13th century
- Diverse subject areas include, geography, music, geometry, divine sciences, to history.

The Ikhwan al-Safa’ or Brethren of Purity were a group of Muslim thinkers based in Basra, Iraq, who, in the 10th century, thought seriously about the key issues of the time in a political and historical context. Consequently, they produced an encyclopaedic work of 52 Epistles (treatises) which treated themes in mathematics, logic, natural philosophy, psychology, metaphysics and theology, in addition to moral and didactic fables.

Though the identity of the Ikhwan al-Safa’ remains a mystery, it is apparent that their agenda was primarily intellectual. Their contributions to science and philosophy were immense for their time. Seeking to show the compatibility of the Islamic faith with other religions and intellectual traditions, the authors of the Epistles drew on a wide variety of sources. Traces of Babylonian, Judaeo-Christian, Persian, and Indian elements, as well as the influences of diverse schools of Hellenistic wisdom, permeate the Epistles.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies is leading an ambitious project to make the work of these thinkers more readily accessible by publishing a complete critical edition and annotated English translation of the Epistles of the Ikhwan al-Safa’. The series will provide the first comprehensive study in English of the 9th/10th century corpus and its authors. Published by Oxford University Press, the IIS’ Epistles project has attracted the participation of more than twenty internationally renowned scholars.