

SARTON MEDAL CITATION
PROFESSOR A. I. SABRA

The Sarton Medal is the most prestigious honor the History of Science Society confers upon scholars in the discipline. It recognizes a lifetime of scholarly achievement and is awarded annually to a historian of science selected from a distinguished field nominated by members of the Committee on Honors and Prizes, the wider Society administration, and ultimately any member of the Society. It is my honor to introduce this year's recipient of the Sarton Medal, A. I. Sabra, Professor Emeritus in the Department of the History of Science at Harvard University.

Professor Sabra's scholarly career spans now fully fifty years in teaching and scholarship in the history of Islamic science, and especially the exact sciences in Islam and the West. Following his undergraduate work at the University of Alexandria, Professor Sabra pursued postgraduate work in the philosophy of science under Karl Popper at the University of London, receiving his PhD 1955. The remainder of the '50s was spent in Alexandria, where he held positions as Lecturer and then Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy. In the 1960s, he returned to London, where he was a Senior Research Fellow, then Special Lecturer, and finally Reader in the History of the Classical Tradition at the Warburg Institute. In 1972, he moved to Harvard University, where he remained until his retirement in 1996.

Beginning with a note on Newton's corpuscular theory of light published in *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* in 1954, the history of optics has been a central focus of his more than fifty articles and thirteen books, edited volumes and translations. Most of us are thoroughly familiar with *Theories of light; from Descartes to Newton* (1967), now one of the great classics of postwar history of science.

Somewhat less widely read, but I think no less significant, is Professor Sabra's *The Optics of Ibn Al-Haytham: Kitāb al-Manāzīr. Books I-II-III (On direct vision)*, the Arabic text of which appeared in 1983, followed by the English translation in 1989, both of which contain introductions to and commentaries on the text, Arabic-Latin glossaries and correspondence tables, and other scholarly apparatus.

Professor Sabra's generation emphasized textual editing and translation because it saw itself as starting with few resources for scholarship, and when it looked to predecessors it could see the results that casual selection had produced: studies that were defective because of the unlucky choice of an aberrant exemplar and therefore had to be done again. If one truly believes that one's discipline is to flourish for generations, it is extraordinarily unselfish to provide one's successors with these tools.

Without editions of ancient and medieval texts, the historian must locate a *suitable* (and I place special emphasis on this, because without the preliminary work that goes into establishing a text, one is as likely to choose a defective copy as a superior one) exemplar, then wade through the seemingly impossible hand of the scribe, then search for sources on which the author of the text relied, and only then attempt to make some sense

of the author's ideas. While it is true that classic historical interpretations can continue to serve scholars in succeeding generations, it is far more likely that a *good* (and again, I place emphasis here, because a poor edition serves no one) edition will continue to be a resource for generations of historians in the field. Seen from this perspective, Sabra's work in editing texts – and they are genuinely fine editions – can stand as the foundation for generations of scholars to come after him.

Faced with the overwhelming number of texts needing editions, it might have been tempting to concentrate on texts rather than interpretation. Sabra himself recognized this dilemma, for in his 1995 Distinguished Lecture to the Society, he noted that while some in his field were beginning to ask and answer larger questions about science within the larger Islamic culture, others were concerned that doing so diverted attention from the vast number of texts waiting for editions and analysis. His response?

The skeptics have a point, and I share their concern. But this is not an either/or matter. As for the argument that 'we do not yet know enough to ask the big questions,' my answer is this: it is only by attempting to formulate appropriate questions that can be fruitfully examined in light of what we now know that we make it possible for others to come up with deeper and more probing questions in the future.¹

Retreats to the text invoked a day of omniscience that would never come, and in the meantime it "tempted others to fill the vacuum with easy and useless essentialist generalizations."

Following his own advice, Sabra possessed a strong and insightful interpretive role for his discipline. In his "Science and philosophy in medieval Islamic theology: the evidence of the fourteenth century" (1994), he forcefully argued against those who would see *kalām* merely as apologetics dressed up in the language of Greek philosophy. His "Situating Arabic science: Locality versus essence" (1996) and especially his "The appropriation and subsequent naturalization of Greek science in medieval Islam: A preliminary statement" (1987) emphasize still more broadly the cultural dimensions of Islamic science. Because of his interests in the exact sciences, it would have been easy for him to have fallen under the spell of emphasizing the technical over the cultural, but this has not been the case, and it is Sabra who has helped steer his discipline away from a certain narrowness. And while Bashi was among the first in line to reject facile comparisons of Islamic and Western medieval science, let me also say that his analysis of science in Islamic culture has deepened my own appreciation for the place of science in western medieval Europe, not because the answers he has suggested can be transplanted in new soil, but because his questions have challenged my assumptions about fundamental issues of transmission and assimilation of science.

It is, I think, customary in these citations for the speaker to say a few words about the recipient's teaching and direct mentorship of students. Sadly, I have no direct experience, for like the apostle on the road to Damascus – you'll have to forgive a

¹ A. I. Sabra, "Situating Arabic Science: Locality versus Essence," *Isis* 87(1996) 654-670 at 664.

European medievalist for invoking a biblical reference, although I suspect Bashi is reluctant to identify with his half of the image, and I'm certainly uncomfortable about Paul – I am only a recent disciple. Yet it would be hard to go very far in the discipline without finding younger (and not so young!) scholars whose careers have been enriched by personal contacts, sometimes in the classroom, but very often through the exuberant and warm generosity of his advice and assistance. First in Egypt, later in the United Kingdom, and finally in the United States, A. I. Sabra has upheld the highest standards of historical work and richly merits recognition as a Sarton Medalist.

CITATION READ BY STEVEN LIVESEY

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