

A. I. Sabra

1924-2013

ABDELHAMID IBRAHIM (“BASHI”) SABRA, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF THE HISTORY of Arabic Science at Harvard University, passed away on 18 December 2013 in Lexington, Massachusetts after a long illness. Born on 8 June 1924 to a family of modest means in the Egyptian city of Tanta, Sabra was able to receive an education because he was his parents’ only child to survive infancy. After attending the local Coptic school, he won a scholarship to study philosophy at the nascent Alexandria University. There he studied with scholars such as Yusuf Karam and Abu al-Ala Afifi. His group of college friends included the later literary critic, poet, and translator, Mohammad Mustafa Badawi, the actor Mahmoud Morsi, and the novelist Edward al-Kharrat. In 1950, the Egyptian government sent him to study at the London School of Economics, where he pursued a doctorate in Philosophy of Science under the supervision of Karl Popper, which he completed in 1955. In the same year, he married fellow student Nancy Sutton, and they moved to Egypt where he taught at Alexandria University. In 1962, they decided to leave Egypt and Sabra took up a position at the Warburg Institute in London. Always an admirer of British society, he enjoyed the friendship of scholars such as Popper, Ernst Gombrich, Frances Yates, and D.P. Walker. In 1972, Sabra accepted an offer to join the History of Science Department at Harvard. He taught there until his retirement in 1996, serving one term as department chair. In 2005, he was awarded the George Sarton Medal for lifetime achievement by the History of Science Society. He had earlier received the Kuwait Prize, awarded by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences. He is survived by his wife of fifty-eight years, Nancy, and his sons, Adam and Peter.

A.I. Sabra’s publications are characterized by an elegance of style and an astuteness of content seldom encountered in the writings of historians of science. As such, his work has had an influence far beyond the specialized group working in the fields of Arabic and Islamic science.

Sabra’s earliest research was on the optics of early modern European science. The fruits of these early years came with the publication in 1967 of his well-received *Theories of Light from Descartes to Newton*, which was a revision of his PhD thesis. This synthesis of history and philosophy of science was an outgrowth of the training Sabra had received with Popper; in many ways Sabra became the most historically grounded of the “Popperians” but his philosophical training was never far below the surface of his many publications.

Though Sabra was a young professor in a philosophy department after his return to Egypt from England, his interests would take a decisive turn away from both philosophy of science and early medieval Islam that was somehow “natural,” but in fact it was a decision made reluctantly and with some regret. Sabra’s meetings with the Egyptian physicist Mustafa Nazif, who had written a remarkable work on the optics of Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen in Latin; d. ca. 1040), convinced him that there was much to be done on the history of Arabic/ Islamic science. And after his return to England, his colleagues at the Warburg Institute, especially Frances Yates and D.P. Walker, urged him to use his linguistic talents on the understudied scientific traditions of medieval Islam.

Publications related to Euclid’s fifth postulate began to appear when Sabra was teaching in Alexandria, and this work continued at the Warburg with noteworthy publications on Thābit ibn Qurra and Simplicius that substantially added to our understanding of what can be called the history of “non-Euclidean” geometry. Though he published relatively little on the subject, Sabra had a special affection for logic; his 1980 article, “Avicenna on the Subject Matter of Logic,” is required reading for anyone interested in the epistemological status of logic among Islamic philosophers.

Sabra was initially drawn to the study of astronomy through his edition (with Nabil Shehaby) of Ibn al-Haytham’s *Doubts (or Aporiae) Against Ptolemy*. In part, this turn to research on astronomy was influenced by the discovery by E.S. Kennedy and Otto Neugebauer that some of the alternative models inspired by Ibn al-Haytham’s criticisms were to play an important role in the work of Copernicus. But Sabra, ever vigilant against “precursoritis,” warned against taking this tradition out of its own context and seeing it only in terms of later European astronomy, a point he would make in his 1998 review article “Configuring the Universe.”

Sabra’s importance to the field, not only Arabic/Islamic science but more generally history of science and intellectual history, should be noted. In Alexandria, Sabra introduced Arabic readers to a number of important works through his translations, among others, of Popper’s *The Poverty of Historicism* and Jan Lukasiewicz’s *Aristotle’s Syllogistic, from the Point of View of Modern Formal Logic*. He would later produce a critical edition of the part of Ibn Sīnā’s *Shifāʾ* devoted to Euclidian geometry. Sabra also played an important role in bringing Islamic science into the mainstream history of science through his editorship of the articles dealing with Arabic/Islamic subjects in the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*; included among his own contributions was an outstanding biography of Ibn al-Haytham.

Sabra also influenced the field through his teaching, supervision, and mentorship. Both at the Warburg and at Harvard, he had a significant

impact on a number of historians of ancient and medieval Latin, and early modern science as well as philosophers of science. And through his support and encouragement, he played a decisive role in the early careers of several historians and philosophers of science who were not “officially” his students. At Harvard, he oversaw at least 7 PhD dissertations and played a supporting role for a number of others. His students, all of whom were to have productive careers, would carry on his research in the history of astronomy, optics, mathematics, and kalām, a fitting tribute to the man and his work. ✂

F. Jamil Ragep
McGill University
 and

Adam Sabra
University of California, Santa Barbara

Christoph Schumann **1969-2013**

CHRISTOPH SCHUMANN, PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND CONTEMPORARY History of the Middle East at the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany), passed away on 1 September 2013, after an aggressive kidney cancer was discovered coincidentally in mid-June. Two days before that fatal day, he had just submitted a pre-application, together with colleagues from the Middle East, for a large research project on changing concepts of identity and political order in the Arab world, and Christoph was excited to work on it in the years to come. It is very sad that he will not see the fruits of his efforts and thoughts ripening.

Christoph was born in 1969 in Munich and grew up there. Already as a teenager, his talents, interests, and personality showed: he led a Boy Scouts group by the age of twelve, acted as students’ speaker in his *Gymnasium*, and became active in the ecological and peace movement, participating regularly in demonstrations and other activities.

After his civil service in an institution for mentally handicapped children, he began studying political science, history, and Islamic studies at the Julius-Maximilians-University Wuerzburg in 1990, before moving to Erlangen in 1994. Here, Christoph obtained both his Magister Artium (1996) and his Dr Phil