

An Arabic Letter (ca. AH 6th/12th CE c.) Concerning the Production of a Manuscript of Ibn Sīnā's *al-Šifā**

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Abstract

Among the unexplored documents at Columbia University's Butler Library is an Arabic letter sent by a copyist to his patron informing the latter about the progress of work on a copy of Ibn Sīnā's *al-Šifā*. Datable to the 6th / 12th century, this document allows for a rare glimpse behind the curtain of manuscript production. This contribution consists of an edition and translation of the letter and seeks to provide the necessary context for its understanding.

Keywords

Columbia University – Butler Library – Arabic letters – Avicenna – Ibn Sīnā – manuscript production – patronage

Columbia University in New York City hosts a small but fine and, to date, largely unexplored collection of Oriental manuscripts.¹ After I recently had the chance to catalogue the manuscript notes in this collection, Jane Siegel, Butler Library's librarian for rare books, very kindly showed me a box of unregistered, loose

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1 See Dagmar A. Riedel: "Manuscripts, Printed Books, and Near Eastern Studies in North America: The Manuscripts in Arabic Script of the Columbia University Libraries", *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 6 (2015), pp. 280–310. A recent initiative, the *Muslim World Manuscript Project*, headed by Manan Ahmed, Sadegh Ansari, Zeinab Azarbadegan, and Mahmood Gharavi is planning to catalogue Columbia's holdings, for more see <http://xpmethod.plaintext.in/embodied-space-lab/mwmp.html>.

documents. This small and disparate collection ranges from early papyri and Mamluk petitions, to two block prints and a late Ottoman letter, several of them very well preserved. Unfortunately, the library has no information about whence and when it acquired any of these documents. Among the items that immediately caught my attention was an Arabic letter dealing with the production of a manuscript.

The letter, now given the inventory P. Col. inv. 823, measures 20.5 × 8 cm. It was once folded, twice vertically and thirteen times diagonally, starting from the bottom. No trace of a seal or other closing mechanism is visible. No address is discernible on the verso side, which was once visible when the document was folded. We can surmise that a servant carried this letter over the short distance between the writer and his addressee and thus an address was unnecessary.

Few assumptions can be made regarding the place and dating of the document. The language points to the Arabic world and the script likely precludes the Maghreb. Rather, the very cursive *nashī* with the many ligatures employed by the writer is reminiscent of a chancery style and was current from Egypt to Iraq from, roughly, the late Fatimid to the early Ayyūbid era, or the 6th/12th through the 7th/13th century. The placement of the isolated name of the sender in the upper left corner, along with the actual body of the letter starting with “*yunhī*” is in accordance with this dating. Werner Diem has shown that documents with the same format, layout, and paleographical features are datable to the 6th/12th century.² The only remarkable deviation from the current practice of letter writing is the absence of the *basmala* and greetings between the name of the sender and the start of the text.

Some remarks on the language are in order. Although he was employed as the copyist of a major work of literature and a strong command of language was, therefore, part of his preferred skill set, the writer does reveal several shortcomings. Obvious breaches of grammatical rules can be observed repeatedly in the use of *lam yu'iqhā* instead of *lam yu'iqhā* (lines 9 and 14) and *al-Manṭiqīyāt* instead of *al-Manṭiqīyāt* (lines 13 and 17). There is a discrepancy between the learning of refined and dignified calligraphy, which the sender obviously mastered, and that of grammar, to which he apparently did not pay close attention when writing an informal letter such as this one.

This letter shares with many others from the period a deplorable lack of context. We do not know the names of either the patron or the scribe (besides his *ism*, Yaḥyā), nor do we know precisely the date and place it was written.

2 See Werner Diem: *Arabische Briefe auf Papyrus und Papier aus der Heidelberger Papyrus-Sammlung*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991, pp. 60–61 (no. 11), 212 (no. 48), plates 13 and 45.

Still, this letter affords us a glimpse of the commissioned copying as work in progress. Other than the colophons that provide abundant information on the finished product, this document allows us to see behind the process that led to the creation of a manuscript. In the following, I will try to reconstruct the process the letter describes, despite not all relations between the several actors being completely clear.

There appear to be at least four persons mentioned in this letter. First, the copyist, who is also the author of the letter. He refers to himself in relation to the addressee as *‘abd* (slave) as well as *ḥādīm* (servant). He addresses an unnamed “master”, *al-mawlā*, who might be the man possessing the exemplar from which the writer transcribed his copy of the text. But the ultimate patron appears to be another unnamed “master”, called *al-mawlā al-raʿīs*. Between them, we find a slave of the patron (*ḡulām al-mawlā al-raʿīs*) as intermediary.

The writer acknowledges the receipt of two volumes, namely five and six. By this time, the fifth volume was already copied and collated (*muqābal*), while the sixth was only three quires (*karārīs*) short of being completely transcribed. The parts are only referred to by number and not called a volume (*ḡuzʿ* or *muḡallad*), but all consisted of several quires and would have been individually bound. In order to ensure a smooth process, the scribe had asked for volume seven before finishing number six. In response, the owner of the exemplar seems to have asked for the return of volume five, with the hint of an insinuation that the copyist had kept it for too long. But according to the writer of the letter, it was indeed the *mawlā* who had stalled progress of the work by asking that the collation of volume five be performed first, even though the copy was still unbound. The addressee of the letter (*al-mawlā*) provided the exemplar in instalments, apparently by handing each volume to the patron (*al-mawlā al-raʿīs*), from whence the copyist would fetch and later return them.

What, then, was copied? The work or works in question are named both *al-Šifāʿ* and *al-Manṭiqīyāt* (sic. = *al-Manṭiqīyāt*). This makes it clear that we are not dealing here with Qāḍī ʿIyād’s (d. 544/1149) famous work on the prophet Muḥammad, *al-Šifāʿ bi-taʿrīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā*. The book in question is rather Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAbdallāh Ibn Sīnā’s (d. 428/1036) encyclopaedia of philosophy, simply called *Kitāb al-Šifāʿ* or *Book of the Cure*. The *Manṭiqīyāt* is a reference to the large portions of Ibn Sīnā’s enormous opus that deals with every aspect of logic, the modern edition of which runs to nine volumes.³

3 Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā: *al-Šifāʿ*. [1] *al-Manṭiq*, 9 vols, ed. Ibrāhīm Madkūr, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Amīriya, 1952–1966. The nine volumes comprising *al-Manṭiq* are the following, vol. I: *al-Madḥal*, II: *al-Maqūlāt*, III: *al-ʿIbāra*, IV: *al-Qiyās*, V: *al-Burhān*, VI: *al-Ġadal*, VII: *al-Saḡṣaṭa*, VIII: *al-Ḥaṭāba*, 9: *al-Šiʿr*.

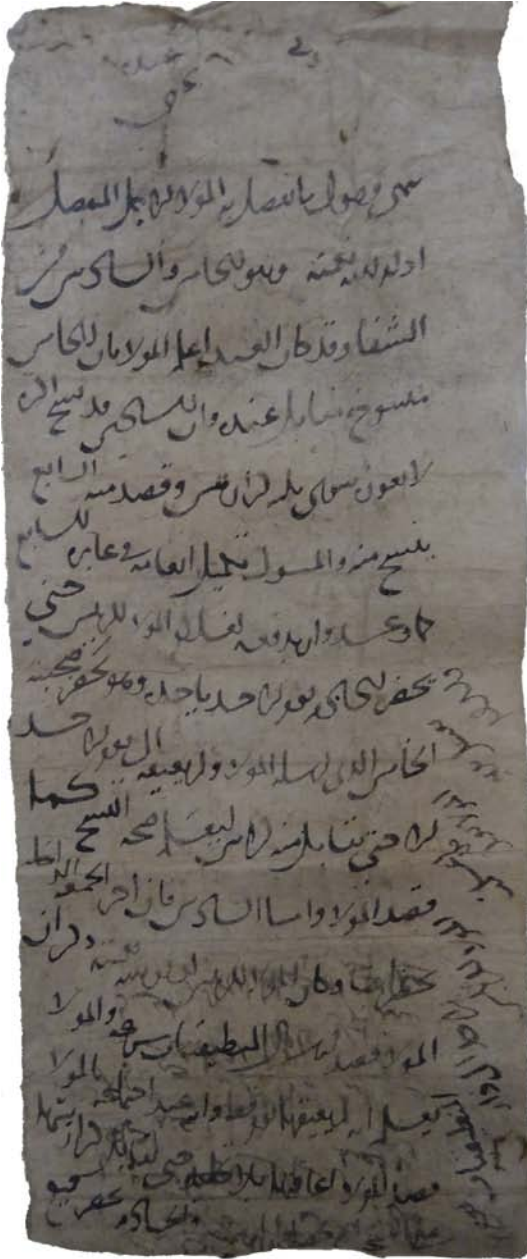


FIGURE 1 Letter concerning the completion of parts of *Ibn Sīnā's al-Šifā*. ms New York, Columbia University, P. Col. inv. 823, recto side.
 PHOTO BUTLER LIBRARY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Avicenna's *Šifā'* was probably not as successful as Qādī 'Iyād's work would be, but it, too, was avidly copied and hundreds of manuscripts have survived to date.⁴ The odds are good that at least one volume of Yaḥyā's work might have survived. If so, it would probably be one of the earliest.

Edition of P. Col. inv. 823:

	عبده	
	يحيى	
		1
	ينهى وصول ما تفضل به المولا الاجل المتفضل	1
	ادام الله نعمته وهو الخامس والسادس من	2
	الشفاء وقد كان العبد اعلم المولا بان الخامس	3
	منسوخ مقابل عنده وان السادس قد نسخ اكثره	4
	لا بقون سوى ثلاثة كراريس وقصد منه السابع	5
	ينسخ منه والمسول تكميل انعامه في عابرة السابع	6
	كما وعد وان يدفعه لغلام المولا الرئيس حتى	7
	يحضر الخادم يوم الاحد ياخذوه وهو يحضر صحبته	8
	الخامس الذي ارسله المولا ولم يعيقه الى يوم الاحد	9
	الاحد حتى يقابل منه الاثنيثن ليعلم صحة النسخ كما	10
	قصد المولا واما السادس فان اخر الجمعة الداخلة	11
	يحضر ايضا وكان المولا الرئيس ادام الله نعمته ذكر ان	12
	المولا قصد ارسال المنطقيات سرعة والمولا	13
	يعلم انه لم يعيقها يوم قط وانه عند اجتماعه بالمولا	14
	قصد المولا اعاقبتها بلا تجليد حتى تقابل كراريسها	15
	على النسخة [.....] والخادم يحضر جميع	16
		right margin:
		17
	المنطقيات يوم	17
	الاحد الى دار	18
	المولا الرئيس	19
	قد اعلمت	20

4 See Amos Bertolacci: "The Manuscript Tradition of Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā': The Current State of Research and Future Prospects. Introduction", *Oriens* 40 (2012), pp. 195–198, here p. 196. Bertolacci aims to collect information on the copyists and previous owners of the manuscripts of *al-Šifā'* online (see <http://www.avicennaproject.eu/index.php?id=57>), yet not one Yaḥyā is registered so far among the copyists.

المولا بعد	21
تقبيل يديه	22
والسلام	23

Translation

His⁵ servant

Yaḥyā

reports the arrival of what has kindly given the exalted and gracious master—may God prolong his favour—which is the fifth and sixth [volume] of *al-Šifā*. The slave had already informed the master that he had the fifth with him, copied and collated, and that most of the sixth was transcribed, so that not more than three quires remain. And he seeks from him the seventh

so that he may transcribe from it. The request is that his favours are completed by sending the seventh,

as he promised, and that he hands it to the slave of the master *al-raʿīs* so that the servant may visit on Sunday to collect it. And he will bring with him the fifth, which the master had sent. He did not delay (its return) until Sunday but to collate the two, so that he knows the soundness of the copy as the master intended. As for the sixth, he will bring (it), too,

on the coming Friday. And the master *al-raʿīs*—may God prolong His favour—mentioned that

the master intended for the *Manṭiqiyāt* to be sent quickly. And the master knows that he did not delay it even for a day and that, when he met with the master,

the master wanted it postponed without binding so that its quires could be collated

with the exemplar [...]. The servant will bring all of

5 When preceding a name, the personal pronoun in *ʿabduhu* would usually refer to God. Yet, when used in an address like this, *ʿabd* takes the place of the more common *manlūk* and *-hu* refers to the addressee. This is clear from one instance when a woman is addressed and the pronoun changes accordingly to *ʿabduhā*; see Diem: *Arabische Briefe*, p. 213 (no. 48).

[right margin:]

the *Manṭiqiyyāt* on
Sunday to the house
of the master *al-raʿīs*.
I informed
the master after
kissing his hands.
Peace.