

## Medieval Islamic Medicine

Peter Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith, *Published in 2007*

**A brief commentary & review by:** Ahmed Ashour, MRPharmS, *PhD Fellow, University of Manchester, GPhC-Registered Pharmacist, [ahmed.ashour@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:ahmed.ashour@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)*

### Review

Historians and researchers' opinions on medieval Islamic medicine has always been split. While scholars such as the German Manfred Ullmann, have judged the advancements of Muslim physicians to being minimal and no more than an appropriation of the ancient Greek advancements and literature, others have lauded the impact medieval Islamic medicine had on the international and historical progression of this crucial body of knowledge and the systems, procedures and inventions that they introduced.

Tackling this extremely vast and at times, complex terrain, Pormann and Savage-Smith introduce this topic to the modern reader by splitting the contents of their piece not by time or location, but by themes and topics. They present 6 key themes in 6 chapters, namely: the emergence of Islamic medicine; medical theory; physicians and society; practice; popular medicine and afterlife; and by afterlife the authors speak of the afterlife of medieval Islamic medicine and not the afterlife in the sense of a human's life. Their book covers the time periods dating from the 7th to the 16th centuries, and a geographical range spanning from Spain in the west all the way to India in the east, suitably portrayed through a map at the start of the book.

This review is not meant as an overly scholarly critique of Medieval Islamic Medicine, but more of a layman's review and a brief survey, a synopsis, of this interesting piece discussing a time of real pride for the Muslim world, that has not always been recognised for its impact on western modern medicine. During the course of this review notable and influential individuals will be highlighted that have been discussed by Pormann and Savage-Smith and additional comments will be made on their impact and contribution to medical knowledge.

Chapter 1 starts by setting the scene to the beginning of this era. The authors provide a background to the various theories that were around at the time, and there were many of them. As well as highlighting the importance of the translation movement, that really saw a propulsion during

the Umayyad Caliphate, as the boundaries of the Islamic empire grew to encompass a number of cultures and languages, with Arabic becoming the official language of the state. But it is really in chapter 2 that the reader is first exposed to the giants of the medieval Islamic medicine world, and fittingly starts with a quote from Ibn Sina, known in the European world as Avicenna, in which he states: "Medicine is a science from which one learns the state of the human body with respect to what is healthy and what is not, in order to preserve good health when it exists and restore it when it is lacking". Pormann and Savage-Smith accurately report that this is the opening to Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine, a five-volume encyclopaedia that became one of his most notable works. While Pormann and Savage-Smith do not delve into the life of Ibn Sina, it is most definitely worth a mention at this point. Ibn Sina, began writing his first book at the age of 21, and his work was seen as the chief guide to medical sciences within the European universities sphere since the 12th century. Even though Ibn Sina passed away at the in the first half of the 11st century, his canon continued to be taught in European medical schools more than 700 years later. Another physician of note first mentioned in this chapter is Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi, Latinised as Abulcasis. His contributions are mentioned in various chapters, but his most significant contribution can be attributed to his work in the area of surgery where he is considered the greatest surgeon of the Islamic Golden Age. His work included 200 illustrations of surgical instruments, a number of them invented by al-Zahrawi, and his legacy was felt far beyond his geographic area.

In chapter 3, the physician's role is introduced, and the authors begin describing the social status of physicians throughout the change of the centuries. However, most interestingly in this chapter, the reader is introduced to the hospital system established in this period of time in the Muslim lands. While during this era there were many large and advanced (for the time) hospitals, none were more impressive than the Mansuri hospital in Cairo. A graphic detailing the plan of this hospital is presented in the book but in summary it was an all-inclusive healthcare

establishment that looked after the rich and the poor alike, and even utilised innovative methods to deal with some ailments (e.g. music therapy for psychiatric patients). The Mansuri hospital was named after its founder, Sultan Al-Mansur Qalawun, who was quoted as saying: “This hospital shall be opened to the old and to the young, to the poor patients, male or female, in order that they may be treated and cared for until cured.”, a quote not mentioned by Pormann and Savage-Smith.

The fourth chapter in the book is arguably the most eye opening, discussing the great al-Razi and his incredible work in building experience and documenting it in the form of textbooks and case histories. There are key examples of physicians improving the knowledge of the Greeks regarding the anatomy of the heart (i.e. Ibn al-Nafis), the anatomy of the jaw (i.e. al-Bagdadi) and the use of certain operations and their safety (i.e. al-Zahrawi and tracheotomies). Even though Al-Razi, or Rhazes, is highlighted by Pormann and Savage-Smith, I believe it is important we give more context to this great titan of Medieval Islamic medicine. Al-Razi practiced in Baghdad, where he was the chief physician, at the time a very noble position, with great power. He is responsible for the authoring of over 56 medical works, of which was his “Kitab al-Hawi fi al-tibb”, translated to The Comprehensive Book on Medicine. This was a large private compilation of Al-Razi’s gathered knowledge regarding medicine from previous authors, supplemented with his own experience dealing with cases. He also used this as a platform to criticise the works of those whose theories did not match what he witnessed in practice, including Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato and Galen. Al-Razi’s writings were not limited to clinical cases and knowledge, but he wrote extensively in issues such as the ethics of a physician and also, he wrote a hugely influential book titled “For One Who Has No Physician to Attend Him”. He dedicated this work to those who could not consult with a doctor for their medical needs due to poverty, travel or other reasons.

The book briefly mentions the use of popular and magical cures in its fifth chapter, and a mention is made of the topic of prophetic medicine. The authors do not however differentiate between Sunni and Shia evidences, and the book does not go into a great length of detail on this matter. Chapter 6 closes the book by superficially mentioning the afterlife of Islamic medicine (i.e. its transmission into Europe).

This review aimed to highlight some of the most influential players in the Islamic world to medicine, and how their contributions were far more widely reached and appreciated than as mere translators or caretakers of Greek knowledge. While not large enough to establish the medieval Islamic medicine movement on its own, it is a brilliant introductory surveying piece that is easy to

read and provides a comprehensive introduction to the area of medieval Islamic medicine and possibly most importantly, at the time provided a different view of the impact of medieval Islamic medicine on early modern medicine in western Europe. Its simplicity however is complemented by its accurate and appropriate referencing to more detailed writings for those wishing to pursue their reading to a greater depth. While this is an easy read for the general interested party, if you prefer to listen to some of the ideas mentioned in this book, Peter Pormann also produced a podcast series available through the University of Warwick website on this topic.