

A History of Pharmacy In Pictures

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13. Avicenna—the "Persian Galen" (*About 980-1037 A.D.*)

THERE IS in almost every field of endeavor one genius through whom the essential achievements of his period are expressed in such perfection that he seems to stand for his time. In relation to Arabian Pharmacy and Medicine, that man was the Persian, Pur-i-sina, known in Arabic as Ibn Sina, and called Avicenna by the Western world.

According to George Sarton, Avicenna was "the most famous scientist of Islam and one of the most famous of all races, places and times." More recently, in connection with the celebration in 1952 of Avicenna's millennium under the auspices of the Iranian government, Ali Asghar Hekmat referred to Avicenna as "the absolute Prince over realms of philosophy and medicine from the eleventh up to the eighteenth century . . . the loyal agent for the transportation of ideas between the Orient and the Occident all through the long period of the Middle Ages as well as in the Renaissance."

There were great scientists writing in Arabic both before and after Avicenna. And yet, whenever Arabian Pharmacy or Medicine is mentioned, it is Avicenna whose name appears first and predominantly.

It was about 980 that a boy named "Hussein", grandson of the Persian, Sina, a well-to-do state functionary, was born in the city of Bukhara, in Central Asia. He became better known in the west as Avicenna. At an early age, he exhibited a powerful mind. He wrote most of his works in Arabic, which in the Orient was analogous to Latin in the Western world.

The enormous breadth of Avicenna's intellectual endeavors—philosophy, poetry, and diplomacy as well as pharmacy, medicine and natural science—made him outstanding in his period. During his 58 years, he travelled extensively, studying the great works of the age, teaching a multitude of pupils, writing about 200 books and treatises, and administering for the state as a Vizir. From time to time, he was the companion and favorite of the ruling Princes, who encouraged his scientific works. He was not always successful as a minister, however, and spent

some part of his later life in prison or in hiding. But even in those hard moments, he did not waste his time; many books and treatises were compiled either in jail or in concealment.

It was Avicenna's main medical work, his *Canon Medicinæ*, which can be regarded as "the final codification of all Graeco-Arabic medicine." Its impression on the medical and pharmaceutical world in the Orient and Occident was enormous. The *Canon* was an authority taught and referred to up to the seventeenth century. In the Orient it is still dominant.

Of the five books into which the *Canon* is divided, the second deals with the simple drugs and the fifth with compounded remedies. Adopting and elaborating on Galen's ideas, he earned the cognomen of "The Arabian Galen."

A large part of this *Canon*, so important to Pharmacy, was written by Avicenna after his escape from political imprisonment and while he lived concealed in the home of an apothecary friend—and it is this period of his varied career that is illustrated in our picture. Seated in Oriental fashion on cushions, amidst priceless rugs and tapestries and before an intricately-designed wall of ceramic tiles, Avicenna is depicted at work on his manuscripts. In these, he paid much attention to the right ways of preparing drugs. He recommended gilding and silvering of pills, not only as a means of covering bad smell or taste of the ingredients, but because of his belief in the blood-purifying effects of these noble metals. He used iron in various forms, and advised that food and drink be acidulated with a little sour milk or vinegar.

Avicenna exerted such an enormous mental energy that his physical body could not endure for long. His life ended in 1037 in Hamadan, (the ancient Ecbatans) and his tomb still exists. Under the patronage of the Iranian government, a monument was built over the tomb in 1952, and a commemorative postal stamp issued pertaining to Avicenna, the scientist, who, though born a Persian, belongs to the world.

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