

Medieval Islamic Medicine

Peter E. Pormann and Emilie Savage-Smith

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One of the acknowledged contributions to late medieval western education was the tradition of Islamic medicine, both for its role in preserving earlier Greek medical knowledge and, as the authors of this book demonstrate, for innovative and creative advances in medical diagnosis, treatment, and patient care. Pormann and Savage-Smith provide an informative overview of the history of medicine in the Islamic world, from the Prophet's sayings to the period of extensive contact with European colonialism. Their work supplements and updates the slim volume of Manfred Ullmann, to whom this book is dedicated, entitled *Islamic Medicine* (Edinburgh University Press: 1976).

Consciously avoiding a sweeping history of a vast scientific field, the authors narrate a readable story of Islamic medicine and provide suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter. Without question, this volume can be considered the best and most critical introduction to the field and a guide for future research.

One of the most important critical issues probed is the impact of Greek medicine, especially as mediated through Byzantine sources, on the emergence of a distinctive “Islamic” approach to medicine. The synthetic corpus of the Hippocratic writings and the works of Galen formed the holistic basis for the scientific development of medical theory (chapter 2), including the humoral system, diet, pharmacology, disease diagnosis, anatomy, and surgery. The authors also discuss other currents of medical knowledge, from the Alexandrian medical curriculum to the knowledge found in Sasanid Persia, Syriac Christian sources, India, and even unto China. The translation of non-Arabic texts was a major contribution, but “Greek medicine as well as some elements of other medical traditions were transformed and not merely given permanent right of abode as aliens, they were assimilated, adapted, and finally adopted in the truest sense of the word into Islamic society” (p. 37).

The authors do not simply present a descriptive survey, but also provide an important corrective to earlier Orientalist misperceptions. For example, they refute Bernard Lewis’ careless claim that Muslim translators had no interest in Greek culture but took only what was “useful from the infidel” (p. 28), such as medicine. On the contrary, the translation into Arabic was based on the availability of texts in Late Antiquity and “not by some innate philistinism” (p. 29). Another issue of historical interest is the relation of the popular prophetic medicine (*al-tibb al-nabawi*) genre with formal medicinal texts. Although Muslim physicians routinely railed against quackery and charlatans claiming to practice medicine, they did not criticize this particular genre by name, even though it was not based on the same formal principles. Nor, as the authors argue, did this genre bring about a decline in the scientific scholarship on medicine (p. 75).

While details on medical theory and pharmacology are fairly common in the scholarly literature (although less so in English than in German), less has been published about the practical roles of physicians and patient care. The authors’ attention (chapter 3) to medical education, regulation, ethics, social status, hospitals, cooperation among Muslim, Jewish, and Christian physicians, and public health care is therefore a welcome addition. One interesting paradox is the role of women in medical treatment. While it is probably the case that health care was for the most part provided by women (as mothers, wives, nurses, and midwives), there is virtually no record of trained women

physicians in Muslim societies. The famous physician al-Razi (d. 925), for example, complained that patients would go for advice to women with traditional knowledge if a given medical cure did not work immediately (p. 104).

Unlike most scholarly histories of medicine in Muslim contexts, the authors also include details on popular forms of medicine, including prophetic medicine (pp. 71-75 and 150-51) and such “magical” practices (pp. 144-58) as amulets, talismans, magic medicinal bowls, astrology, and divination. It is important to note that learned physicians, among them al-Razi, also wrote about things that would be considered as occult or magical today, especially the inherent properties of substances. Many of the *materia medica* texts include such magical prescriptions sometimes as cures, but often as protective measures against evil spirits or illnesses. Yet as the authors observe, the difference between Antiquity and medieval Europe is “that in Islam the invocations are most often (though not exclusively) addressed to God rather than to demons” (p. 145). A valuable part of the book is the final chapter on the continuance of Islamic medical practices and texts through to the modern era. As the authors note, traditional healers continue to serve patients in India and Pakistan, as well as in most parts of the Muslim world, alongside the formal medical establishment. A trip to almost any local *suj*, where herbs and medicants are often available, is proof of that.

Anyone interested in the history of Islamic science will find this a useful book to own. In addition to the historical survey on medicine in its broadest human aspect (the authors do not treat veterinary science, which overlaps in significant ways), insights on methodology are provided. A major historiographic dilemma, however, is matching textual claims to actual practice. An example of this is the use of hollow needles to remove cataracts (pp. 131-35). Although there are some claims to the successful use of such needles, a fourteenth-century Egyptian oculist named al-Shadhili provides ten reasons why they would not successfully remove cataracts. The authors conclude that medical case histories and the usefulness of medical instruments, often accepted at face value, must be corroborated with other material. Medical illustrations, they argue, must also be used with caution. For example, there is no textual evidence that Muslim physicians performed Caesarian sections, despite several famous illustrations (pp. 134-35). There is still much to be learned from the corpus of medical texts; this volume is an authoritative start for anyone interested in the subject.

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