

A RARE AND EXTREMELY EARLY FRAGMENT OF AVICENNA'S CANON, ONLY TWO REMOVES IN THE CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION FROM THE AUTHOR HIMSELF

Abu 'Ali al-Husain ibn 'Abdullah ibn Sina (d. AH 428/1037 CE)

***Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* ('The Canon of Medicine'), parts of Book I and Book III**

Abbasid Baghdad

Circa 1060-1165 CE



folio 21.4 x 14.4 cm; Arabic manuscript on paper; two volumes comprising parts of Books I and III; Vol. 1, 49 folios plus one flyleaf; Vol. 2, 48 folios plus one flyleaf; each folio with 17 or 18 lines of black scholar's naskh, copious marginal and interlinear notes throughout both volumes, colophon at the end of both manuscripts recording the conclusion of each book, inscription on final folio of Book I indicating that it was collated against Ibn Tilmidh al-Baghdadi al-Tabib's copy (itself copied from a manuscript in Ibn Sina's own hand), rebound in brown Mamluk leather bindings with blind tooled medallions, doublures of Vol. 1 with silhouette decorations, Vol. 2 with cream paper doublures

Provenance:

Collection of Djafar Ghazi

The present volumes are amongst the earliest surviving fragments of Ibn Sina's great medical encyclopaedia *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*) and are of the utmost rarity. The usefulness and popularity of the *Canon* meant that many copies were made in the medieval period, but surviving manuscripts from the first century and a half after Ibn Sina's lifetime are extremely rare. The key aspect of the present volumes that indicates such an early date is the inscription on the final page of Book I, stating as follows:

“This section was checked/collated against a copy owned by Ibn al-Tilmidh al-Baghdadi the physician, and the copy of Ibn al-Tilmidh was checked/collated against a copy in the hand of the author”

This statement of the chain of transmission tells us that the present volumes are only two removes from the autograph manuscript of Ibn Sina himself, placing them among the earliest and most accurate survivals.

Abu'l Hasan Sa'id bin Hibatullah, known as Ibn al-Tilmidh, was a Christian Arab and one of the leading physicians of his time. He was born around 1074 and was trained by another physician called Abu'l Hasan Said bin Hibatullah, who died in 1101 or 1102. Ibn al-Tilmidh became head of the Adudi hospital in Baghdad and taught several other prominent medical scholars. Towards the end of his life he was

appointed supervisor of all medical practice in Baghdad and the surrounding area by the Abbasid caliph, and he died in February 1165 CE. Ibn al-Tilmidh was probably active as a practising physician by around 1095, when he would have been 21, and at the latest by the time of his teacher's death in 1101/1102 CE. The manuscript against which the present volumes were collated could thus have been in the possession of Ibn al-Tilmidh as early as c. 1095 CE, and the two present volumes could therefore have been copied and checked against Ibn al-Tilmidh's copy any time from that date onwards to the end his life in 1165.

However, Ibn al-Tilmidh's grandfather was a physician also known as Ibn al-Tilmidh. Indeed, the grandson is said to have taken his grandfather's name because the latter was a distinguished physician and had such a strong influence on his grandson. His full name was Mu'tamad al-Mulk Abu'l-Faraj Yahya ibn al-Tilmidh, he was born around 1030-1040 CE and died in the early years of the twelfth century. Thus, if the manuscript against which the present volumes were collated belonged to the older Ibn al-Tilmidh, they could have been copied during his lifetime from around 1060 to c. 1105 CE.

The style of the script in the present two volumes would support an early dating, for while the general character is typical of scholars' handwriting in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there is one diagnostic feature that suggests a date in the eleventh. This is the small vertical tail that protrudes downwards below the line on the medial/terminal *alif* when it is joined to the preceding letter. This is a feature of some of the earliest examples of dated Arabic handwriting and can be seen on papyri of the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, such as examples in the Egyptian National Library and Archives, the Institut für Papyrologie, Heidelberg and the Khalili Collection (see Moritz, *Arabic Palaeography*, 1905, pls.102-106; see Guesdon and Vernay-Nouri, *L'Art du livre arabe*, Paris, 2001, p.35, no.12; Khan, *Bills, Letters and Deeds*, London, 1993, nos. 1-2, 6, 34, 74, 90, 101, 102). The feature survived in the context of certain Qur'anic scripts, in personal handwriting, scholars' hands, official correspondence and legal documents until the late tenth/early eleventh century (for example, see Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 2006, figs. 5.1,-5.5, pp. 146-155; Guesdon and Vernay-Nouri, *L'Art du livre arabe*, Paris, 2001, p. 45, fig. 22; Moritz, *Arabic Palaeography*, 1905, pls.118-126), but is more rarely found on manuscripts of the twelfth century, except in Maghribi scripts where it survived for longer.

Nevertheless, the younger Ibn al-Tilmidh became more famous than his grandfather and is known to have assembled a large library of medical and other books, so the use of a manuscript in his extensive library against which to collate the present volumes would have been quite likely. Furthermore, three extant fragments of the *Qanun* copied in Ibn al-Tilmidh's own hand survive (UCLA MS Ar. 108, Cambridge University Library MS Browne P. 5, see Albert Z. Iskandar, "Another Fragment from the Autograph of Ibn al-Tilmidh's 'Marginal Commentary on Ibn Sīnā's Canon of Medicine'", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1981), pp. 253-261). Inscriptions in those sections record that Ibn al-Tilmidh copied his personal edition directly from a manuscript in Ibn Sina's own hand, information that is echoed in the inscription at the end of Book I of the present two volumes. Thus the copy of Ibn al-Tilmidh to which the present inscription refers may well be the actual manuscript represented by the UCLA and Cambridge fragments.

A date between c. 1060 and 1165 accords with the result of a C14 test carried out on the paper of the first volume. It states a 95.4% probability of manufacture between 1048 and 1218 CE (available on request). It should be noted that this indicates an absolutely equal probability that the paper dates from any part of this date range. It does not indicate that certain dates within the date range are more or less likely.

The earliest extant dated copy of any part of the *Qanun fi'l-Tibb* is a manuscript of Book V dated 444/1052, now in the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto (see Sotheby's, London, *Arts of the Islamic World*,

22 April 1999, lot 22; *Spirit and Life, Masterpieces of Islamic Art from the Aga Khan Museum Collection*, Geneva, 2007, no. 96, p. 131). The next earliest is a manuscript comprising Book IV, dated 466/1073 (Sotheby's, London, *Arts of the Islamic world*, 13 April 2000, lot 13). A fragmentary undated copy said to be from the eleventh century is listed as being in the Muzah-i Kilisa-yi Araminah Library in Isfahan (see Roper (ed.), *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*, London, 1992, vol. III, p.476). A copy of Book III containing an inscription providing a *terminus post quem* of 1143-44 was sold at Sotheby's, London, *Arts of the Islamic World*, 25 October 2017, lot 15. The three fragments in Ibn al-Tilmidh's own hand (mentioned above, UCLA MS Ar. 108, Cambridge University Library MS Browne P. 5), date from the mid-twelfth century. The present two volumes are thus among the five or six earliest surviving copies of the text. The earliest surviving complete copy is dated 626/1229 (Sotheby's, London, *Arts of the Islamic World*, 12 October 2000, lot 50).

THE PRESENT MANUSCRIPTS

These two manuscripts comprise parts of Book I and Book III of the Canon. Book I concerns general physiology and anatomy, causes of disease, their prevention and treatment while Book III discusses the pathology of organs and systems in the body.

The present Vol. 1 is made up of text from Book I and includes sections on blood (*Fann* 4) and on exercise, health, beverages, water (*Fann* 3, *Fasl* 8). Vol. 2 contains some parts of Book III as well as parts of Book I. The hand is the same in both volumes, indicating that the same copyist wrote both (and no doubt the other volumes of the originally complete set).

This copy has certainly been used by other medieval physicians and scholars, for the margins contain copious notes and glosses written in several early hands in black ink. On some pages the margins and even the interlinear spaces are entirely filled with notes. Most of the marginal and interlinear notes are slightly later additions, added by Islamic physicians of the later medieval period who were using these volumes for study and/or practice. But careful examination reveals that some are in the same hand as the main text itself, indicating that the copyist added notes or corrections at the time of writing, and some are in the same hand as the collation note on the final page of Book I, indicating that the scholar who collated it also made notes and/or corrections (in this case against Ibn al-Tilmidh's copy). The marginal notes are by the same hands in both copies, indicating that the same collators and later scholars used both parts).

The present volumes represent not only a highly important early copy of the great medical work of Avicenna, but also a fascinating element in the early chain of transmission from Ibn Sina himself to Ibn al-Tilmidh and onwards.

IBN SINA

Ibn Sina was one of the greatest figures in the history of science. Known in the West by his Latin name Avicenna, he was one of the key figures in the great flowering of knowledge that occurred in the Islamic world in the medieval period, a movement now recognised as being of fundamental importance to the development of Western thought, philosophy and science. He was born around the year 370 AH/980 CE in Afsana, a village near Bukhara in Central Asia. When he was young his father, who was a Samanid governor, moved the family Bukhara.

Early in the Abbasid period the rulers made a conscious effort to foster the development of science and philosophy, including astronomy, mathematics, mechanics, astrology, medicine, pharmacology and optics. Multilingual scholars were employed to translate the works of the Ancients, predominantly the Greeks and Indians, and these were then studied by Arab and Persian scholars who further developed the ideas, elaborating and refining the knowledge and establishing important new theories of striking originality, as well as producing highly influential summaries of a wide spectrum of fields of science

and learning. These practices and the resulting blossoming of intellectual activity spread to other courts and cities across the Islamic World. The subsequent translation of some of this corpus of thought developed in the medieval Islamic world into Latin and its dissemination across Europe fundamentally influenced the Renaissance and the development of Western thought.

Ibn Sina was a polymath in the true sense of the word, having made fundamentally important contributions to medicine, philosophy and logic, but having also written on the natural sciences, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, music, economics and politics. He was a prolific scholar and is most widely recognised for two large compilations - the *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* 'the Canon of Medicine' and the *Kitab al-Shifa* 'The Book of Healing (of the Soul)'.

The 'Canon of Medicine' was an encyclopaedic work in five parts that gathered the knowledge of the ancient physicians and natural philosophers, principally Galen, Hippocrates, Aristotle and Dioscorides, as well as earlier Arabic authors, and presented them in a coherent manner. Begun before 405 AH/1015 CE, it was 'a clear and ordered 'Summa' of all the medical knowledge of Ibn Sina's time, augmented from his own observations, and it constituted a monumental unity which maintained its authority until modern times.' (A-M Goichin, 'Ibn Sina' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition, Leiden, 1954-2005, vol. 3, p. 942). It is divided into five books: the first concerns general physiology and anatomy, causes of disease, their prevention and treatment; the second describes *materia medica* and simples - remedies based on herbal, animal and mineral sources; the third book discusses the pathology of organs and systems in the body; the fourth concerns fevers, tumours, wounds, fractures, surgery, poisons and personal hygiene; and the fifth contains his work on pharmacopoeia, with descriptions, recipes and ingredients of approximately 650 compound drugs.

Ibn Sina was widely recognised as one of the great medical writers of the ancient and medieval world, and the significance and value of Ibn Sina's *Canon* was recognised very early in the West. It was translated by Gerard of Cremona between 1150 and 1187 and was translated numerous further times over the following centuries. In the last thirty years of the fifteenth century alone sixteen translations were made, while in the sixteenth century there were twenty-one. It was a standard medical text book all over the Islamic World and in European universities throughout the middle ages and early modern period. It appears in the oldest known syllabus of teaching, that of the Medical School of the University of Montpellier in 1309. Several eminent European physicians learned Arabic solely to be able to read Avicenna in the original. It was first printed in Latin in Milan in 1473 and in Arabic in Rome in 1593. Ibn Sina was mentioned by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*:

'I saw the good collector of medicinals,
I mean Dioscorides; ...
and Euclid the geometer, and Ptolemy,
Hippocrates and Galen, Avicenna,
Averroes, of the great Commentary.
I cannot describe them all in full;
My ample theme impels me onwards so;
What's told is often less than the event.'

(*Inferno*, canto IV, 142-3, transl. Mandelbaum)

and by Chaucer in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*:

'With us ther was a doctour of Phisyk;
In al this world ne was ther noon him lyk:
To speke of phisik and of surgerye...

Wel knew he the olde Esculapius,
And Dioscorides, and eek Rufus;
Old Ypocras, Haly, and Galien;
Serapion, Razis and Avicen; ...'

(*English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray*, Harvard Classics, 1909-14)

Sources:

AVICENNA x. Medicine and Biology," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. III, Fasc. 1, pp. 66-110,
www.iranicaonline.org/articles/avicenna.

Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 2006

Brockelmann GAL I 457 (597) no.82 and GAL S. I, 823-4 no.82

English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray, Harvard Classics, 1909-14

A-M Goichin, 'Ibn Sina' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edition, Leiden, 1954-2005, vol. 3, p. 942.

Guesdon and Vernay-Nouri, , *L'Art du livre arabe*, Paris, 2001

Inferno, canto IV, 142-3, transl. Mandelbaum

Albert Z. Iskandar, "Another Fragment from the Autograph of Ibn al-Tilmīdh's 'Marginal Commentary on Ibn Sīnā's Canon of Medicine', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1981), pp. 253-261

Khan, *Bills, Letters and Deeds*, London, 1993

Oliver Krahl, *The Dispensatory of Ibn al-Tilmīdh*, Leiden, 2007

Moritz, *Arabic Palaeography*, 1905, pls.102-106

B. Musallam, "AVICENNA x. Medicine and Biology," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, III/1, pp. 94-99

Seyyid Hosein Nasr, *Islamic Science, An Illustrated Study*, London, 1976, pp. 178-9

Roper (ed.), *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*, London, 1992, vol. III, p.476

Spirit and Life, Masterpieces of Islamic Art from the Aga Khan Museum Collection, Geneva, 2007

Young, Latham and Serjeant (eds.), *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period*, CUP, 1990