

Ibn Al Jazzar and the Kairouan medical school of the tenth century AD

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Summary

This brief account of the Tunisian physician Ibn Al Jazzar heralds the Congress of the International Society for the History of Medicine to be held in his native country in September 1998. His life work reveals him as a pioneer in distinguishing the arts of medicine and pharmacy.

Résumé

Cette brève contribution sur le médecin tunisien ibn Al Jazzar introduit le congrès de la Société Internationale d'Histoire de la Médecine qui se tiendra dans son pays d'origine en septembre 1998. Son oeuvre en a fait un des principaux pionniers de l'art de guérir et de la pharmacie.

Abu Jaafar Ahmad Ibn Al Jazzar (898 AD) led an exemplary life. He studied the Koran, theology, grammar and literature at an early age and received his first instruction in medicine from his father Ibrahim, an oculist and from his uncle Abu-Bakr, a renowned Kairouan doctor. His principal master was Isaac Ibn Suleiman Al Israili, under whom he studied Greek and Arab works such as those of Dioscorides and Galen, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Sapour Ibn Sahl, Al Kindi, Ibn Massawayh, and Ibn Omrane.

Of a calm and reserved temperament, Ibn Al Jazzar refused lucrative official positions at court, preferring to give consultations without charge to the poor. He professed and practised in the prestigious scientific institution 'Beit El Hikma' or house of wisdom, built in the reign of Caliph El Moez (953-975). The historian Ibn Abi Oussaibia records that his prescriptions, dispensed by himself as therapist and pharmacist, were then supplied by his assistant Rachiq, working from a purpose-built pharmacy

in the hall of his master's house. His book, *Kitab EkFouqara*, (Medicine for the poor) emphasised the most efficient and cheapest therapies.

He exemplified the distinct roles of the physician and pharmacist in his own practice. He published at least forty three works, pamphlets and epistles, principally in the fields of medicine and pharmacy.

Reputed for the rigour of his teaching and his skill in therapeutics, Ibn Al Jazzar's best known work was the practically named *Zad El Mousa firwa QaoutElHakhir* (Provision for the traveller and the day's subsistence). It was later translated by Constantinus Africanus, without naming the author, under the title *Viaticum* and was destined to play an important role in the medical renaissance of Europe. Translated into Greek, it is quoted amongst the first four Arab works in a Western language, and as such was taught in the European medical faculties at least until the 17th century.

Zad El Mousafir opens with the classification of diseases, and their names in Persian, Greek and Syriac together with their popular synonyms

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Ahmed Ibn Al Jazzar a Kairouan (An allegorical composition made by Dr Sleim Ammar from a postage stamp of AH Bellagha)

followed by their etiology. A brief physiology precedes symptomatology and treatment, minor surgery and finally the use of minerals (salts, copper, arsenic and mercury). His work covers illnesses of the head and neck, lung and stomach and other viscera, the liver and kidneys, the genital organs and skin; viz. vascular cephalgia, epilepsy, migraine, hemiplegia, mental confusion, comas, acute delirium, amnesia, insomnia and its treatment, narcolepsy and paralysis agitans. A chapter is devoted to love-sickness. The various skin complaints include hair-loss, leprosy, eczema, ulcers and abscesses.

The second great medico-pharmaceutical treatise by Ibn Al Jazzar is known as *Itimad fi AlAdouia al Mofrada* (Basic treatise on simple medicines) and ranks as one of the most important since the *De materia medica* of Dioscorides. The *Itimad* records 280 simple medicaments with their therapeutic properties, their faking and possible substitutions. Ibn Al Jazzar describes more than thirty pharmaceutical formulas, some of which are still in use today.

Siassat Essibyane wa tadbiruhum (Infant and child care and the education of children) is the first complete work on paediatrics and child care. This treatise was re-published in 1968 by the Tunisian Publishing House.

Other well known works by Ibn Al Jazzar are found in the manuscripts of a Treatise on stomach disease; 'Of simple medicines'; 'Ailments of the elderly'; 'Of medicine for the poor'; 'Epistle on urines', 'The substitution of medicaments'; 'On perfumes' and 'Diseases with identical causes and different symptoms'. Other interesting works attributed to Ibn Al Jazzar have unfortunately been lost; notably, 'Of the danger of bleeding unnecessarily'; 'On sleep and sleeplessness', and 'On tubercular leprosy, its causes and its treatment'.

Ibn Al Jazzar produced a considerable volume of work, remarkable for its quality. His



importance lies in his concern to classify and differentiate between medical specialties such as infant and child care, epidemiology, gastroenterology, geriatrics, hygiene and therapeutics, whilst his broad knowledge of pharmacy marks its recognition and becomes a turning point in its history.

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