

BOOK REVIEW

Some Recent Publications On The History Of Arabic Medicine

Alain TOUWAIDE, Ph.D*

* Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, Fellow of the International Academy for the History of Pharmacy, UK.

e-mail: atouwaide@hotmail.com

Plinio Prioreschi *A History of Medicine*. Volume IV: *Byzantine and Islamic Medicine*, Omaha: Horatius Press, 2001, xliii + 506 p. ISBN: 1-888456-04-3.

Averroës, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*. A Critical Edition of the Arabic Text with English Translation, Notes and Introduction by Alfred L. Ivry (*Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*), Provo (Utah): Brigham Young University Press, 2002, xl + 281 p. ISBN: 0-8425-2473-8.

Maimonides, *On Asthma*. A parallel Arabic-English text edited, translated and annotated by Gerrit Bos (Volume 1 of the complete medical works of Maimonides) (*Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*), Provo (Utah): Brigham Young University Press, 2002, 1 + 165 p. ISBN: 0-8425-2475-4.

After a series of original synthesis on the history of Arabic Medicine from Ullmann's *Islamic Medicine* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1978) to Conrad's "The Arab-Islamic Medical Tradition" in *The Western Medical Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Savage-Smith's "Medicine" in *Encyclopedia of the History of Arabic Science* (London, Routledge, 1996), this new volume by Plinio Prioreschi - the 4th of his comprehensive *History of Medicine* - aims at offering a panoramic view of the history of medicine in the Eastern Mediterranean world, particularly Arabic Medicine. Although it also includes Byzantine Medicine, it devotes only p. 1-167 to it, while it analyzes Arabic Medicine in three hundred pages (p. 169-467).

From a methodological point of view, the author contests the post-modernist historical school that contends, according to him (p. xx, note 3), that "there

is no objective truth (and therefore no scientific truth), and that science is a social construct and a tool for the exploitation of non-scientists". To that he opposes a solid presentation of authors and facts, thus contrasting the "process of deterioration of medical historiography" (p. xvii, among others).

The presentation is divided in five main parts: historical outline of the Arabic world (p. 171-180); religion and philosophy (p. 181-186); sciences and techniques (p. 187-201); medicine (p.202-414); overview (p. 415-467).

The bulky part devoted to medicine starts with a short presentation of Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Medicine (p. 205-208), followed by an overview of the translation period (p. 208-217). Then, Prioreschi divides his analysis into two parts: the Eastern and the Western Caliphates (p. 217-309 and 309-351 respectively). Here, his approach is essentially biographical and chronological. Indeed, he lists ten authors enumerated in chronological order and, for each, he briefly retraces their biography, mentions their work(s), comments on the most important ones, and quotes their contents or large textual extracts in English translation (reproduced from previously published works). For the Eastern Caliphate, the authors are the following (I reproduce Prioreschi's transcription of proper names): Isa ibn Haka, Yuhanna ibn Masawayh, Hunayn ibn Ishaq, Al-Tabari, Al-Kindi, Al-Razi, Al-Majusi, Ibn Sina, Ibn al-Nafis. A further paragraph deals with "Others": Sabur ibn Sahl, Qusta bin Luqa, Ibn Qurra, Ibn al-Jazzar, Mesue the Younger, Al-Biruni, Ali ibn Ridwan, Ibn al-Tilmidh, Abd-al-Latif, Al-Samarqandi, ibn al-Baytar, Mesue the Third and Ibn-al-Quff. For the Western Caliphate,

there are four authors: Al-Zahrawi, Ibn Zuhr, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Maymun. Among the others, we have principally Ibn Habib and Ibn Juljul.

This biographical section is followed by three thematic parts: (p. 352-367) supernaturalistic medicine (which includes the Prophetic Medicine on the one hand and, on the other, Medicine, Magic and Astrology); (p. 367-383) hospitals; (p. 383-414) physicians, education and ethics.

The large overview (p. 415-467) proceeds analytically and deals with anatomy, physiology, medicine and therapeutics (including psychiatry, ophthalmology and pharmacology) and surgery.

To conclude this presentation, Prioreshi offers two chapters of conclusions: in the first (p. 469-480), he evaluates the contribution of Arabic Medicine to world science, while in the second (p. 481-487) he compares Byzantine and Arabic Medicine. In so doing, he considers that Arabic Medicine considerably contributed to the advancement of medical science (a fact that, according to him, negates postmodernist theories [see p. 473]) and that the Arabic World encouraged the emergence of a form of alternative medicine as already did before the Roman and Indian Worlds (see p. 475). In the comparison between Byzantine and Arabic Medicines, Prioreshi suggests that, although both relied on the same sources and were deeply influenced by their religious context, they deeply differed: Byzantine Medicine only studied, collected, revised and commented on its ancient heritage (p. 481), while Arabic Medicine eagerly collected and translated ancient texts, also tending to be "more vibrant and innovative" (ibidem). He further attributes this difference to the opposed conceptions of medicine in Byzantium and the Arabic World: while in the former, medicine was considered an *ars perfecta*, in the latter it was seen as an *ars imperfecta*. Now perfection means completion (and thus impossibility to improve), whereas imperfection leaves the door open to progress.

A detailed index closes the work (p. 489-506). It includes both proper names and analytical concepts.

Prioreshi's ambitious enterprise results in an encyclopedia with the strength and limits of every project of this kind: in its attempt to give an overview

of the whole field, it has to rely on the current state of research, which it synthesizes. As such, this history is an introduction to the study of the history of medicine rather than a definitive work, proposing new data and fresh approaches for further investigations. At the same time, it will have to be taken with precaution: as every synthesis that does not rely on a personal examination of primary sources, it receives the oddities of the secondary literature it relies on, reinforcing them at the same time. An example is this affirmation according to which Constantine the African made a translation of Ibn al-Gazzar's *Zad el Musafir* in 1124 (see p. 294), while the most recent trace of Constantine currently known dates back to 1087.

The other two works are pretty different: they are critical editions of Arabic texts based on a personal consultation of primary sources, that is, manuscripts. They are part of the Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy (GrASP) series published under the editorial direction of Glen Cooper of Brigham Young University at Provo (Utah, USA). The series itself is part of a wider program, the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative (METI) directed by Daniel C. Peterson. According to the foreword of the two volumes signed by both Peterson and Cooper, "Islamic civilization represents nearly fourteen centuries of intense intellectual activity, and believers in Islam number roughly one billion. The texts that will appear in the GrASP series are among the treasures of this great culture, composed not only of Muslims but of Christians, Jews, and others who contributed to it in a quest for knowledge that transcended religious and ethnic boundaries. Together they not only preserved the best of Greek thought but enhanced it, added to it, and built upon it a corpus of scientific and philosophical understanding that is properly the inheritance for all the peoples of the world".

A further introduction by Dimitris Gutas (Yale University, New Haven CT, USA) in the Maimonides volume, explains that "the purpose of the publications is to present reliable text editions and accurate translations of seminal works from this vast and influential tradition [that is, the Arabic tradition], which to this day remains very little known and appreciated in the West. ...". This definition of the object and goals of the series is followed by a short

presentation of the assimilation of Greek Science in the Arabic World and of the classification of sciences and a discussion of its long-term effects. First, it preserved a cultural patrimony that could have been lost. Second, it demonstrated “the international character of philosophical and scientific knowledge”. Third, the understanding of this nature of knowledge made it possible to scientists of different origins (be it religious or ethnic) to be associated to the study and enhancing of this patrimony. Fourth, the inter-relation between the different disciplines fostered the advances in science and philosophy. And fifth, new resulting knowledge was transmitted to the West thanks to another enterprise of translation “just when the first universities were being established in the twelfth century”. As Gutas concludes, “the sciences and philosophy that were produced in Islamic Civilization form the foundation of Western Civilization”.

Though with some differences, the two works are built on a similar pattern. The two texts dealt with are presented in a large introduction (Averroës: p. xiii-xxi; Maimonides: p. xiii-l). While the Averroës’ introduction is more concerned with a philosophical presentation of the work dealt with (the *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, called in this way to be distinguished from the *Long Commentary* on the same treatise also by Averroës), the Maimonides’ introduction is broader: it gives first a biography of Maimonides (p. xxiv-xxx), then presents his medical works (p. xxxi-xxxiii) and the treatise on asthma, including its manuscript sources (p. xxxiii-xxxix), and an analysis of its contents (p. xxxix-xlvi). Characteristically, the treatise does not contain a general analysis of asthma; instead, it is just a cure for a determined patient (who is not identified), since, according to Maimonides, therapy cannot be universal, but has to be determined for each patient, individually.

In both works, the critical edition relies on a personal analysis of all the extant manuscript sources, shortly presented in Averroës’ edition (p. xxix) and analyzed with more details in the Maimonides’ one (p. xxxiii-xxxix). Both works are attested by Arabic manuscripts (two for Averroës and four for Maimonides) and Hebrew translations (two for

Averroës, each of which known by five manuscripts, and four for Maimonides, each of which known by only one manuscript). Maimonides’ text is also attested by two Latin translations (they themselves also attested each by one manuscript). The critical edition of the Arabic text, supplemented in some passages by the Hebrew text in Maimonides’ work, constitutes the main part of the two volumes (p. 1-137 for Averroës and 1-111 for Maimonides). It includes variant readings from the manuscripts at the bottom of the pages. The original text is translated into English on the left page. Notes of commentary (explanation of obscure passages, references to other works by the same author or, for example, references to their author) are given in the footnotes or at the end of the text (Averroës; p. 139-213; Maimonides: p. 123-138). Averroës’ text contains a particularly useful glossary (p. 215-261): the first part (p. 215-217) lists the names of the authors quoted in the commentary and the second (p. 218-261) the terms and concepts used in the work. References are given to the Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin texts, with the corresponding words (in Hebrew, Greek and Latin). In Maimonides’ edition, the text is followed by a comparison between the Arabic text and its Hebrew translation (p. 113-122). Both works include a bibliography (Averroës; p. 263-270; Maimonides: p. 139-150) and an index (Averroës: p. 271-281; Maimonides; p. 151-165).

Maimonides’ volume is the first of a corpus that will include all the currently extant works by the author. However paradoxical it might seem, indeed, Maimonides’ Arabic works are still largely unedited, while their Hebrew versions are better known.

The most achieved results of the highest standards for scholarly research, these two works will be indispensable tools for further research in the history of Arabic Philosophy and Medicine. Exclusively based on primary sources (be it in Arabic or in Hebrew) scrutinized with great accuracy, they witness of a full dominion of the matter and provide scholars with reliable texts translated with extreme exactness. Non-Arabist historians will take advantage of the translation, and historians of Arabic Medicine and Science will learn much from the introductions, bibliographies and index (in the case of Averroës).

Works of this kind are not only welcome, but also indispensable for a good understanding of the history of medicine and sciences, be it Arabic, Byzantine or other. Only with the closest scrutiny of manuscripts by codicologists and paleographers and of the texts by philologists with a deep understanding of the language of the text and the topic dealt with in the work,

it will be possible to have critical editions of the highest standard. Analysis of ancient scientific literature needs to rely on editions like those only. Further work of interpretation, synthesis or other will be reliable if - and only if - it refers to works of this kind and of a level of quality comparable to that presented by the two editions under consideration here.