Medicine in the Arabic-Islamic Tradition

Arabic-Islamic medicine is based on the classical tradition of Greek medicine through the primary sources by Hippocrates (460-377 BCE), Galen (129-216) and Dioscorides (1st century).
After the fall of the Roman Empire, many phisician and researchers (heirs to the tradition of the fathers of Ancient Greek medicine) moved to the East bringing with them texts, knowledge and academic works.
Arabic researchers showed a profound interest in Greek medicine and they assimilated and further analyzed its principles.
In the Arabic world, a meeting ground of differrent cultures, true centers of medical learning quickly developed, attracting scholars of Greek, Syrian, Persian, Jewish, and Hindu culture.
It was particularly thanks to the Abbasid caliphs (from 8th–9th centuries onward) that the Arabic world was able to inherit and develop this knowledge.
One of the greatest success of the Arabic medicine probably was the ability to integrate the knowledge of the time with the ancient Greek medical science, keeping alive its heritage up to the Renaissance.
Arabs had the credit of integrating different cultures and creating a bridge between the ancient culture and that of the Renaissance. Thanks to them, in the 16th century, Europe started to re-approach Galen and Hippocrates studies and, more generally, it started to show an interest in the classical medical theory.

Among the texts that spread most widely, initially throughout the Arabic Islamic world and later in the West, we should mention the works by al-Rāzī (known in the West as Rhazes / 864-930) whose main work *Kitāb al-hāwī fī al Tibb ('The Comprehensive Book on Medicine')* is a compendium of medicine showing both the originality of the author and his great knowledge of Greek, Persian and Indian medical culture, which he acquired thanks to the numerous translations of classical texts into Arabic; the works by al-Zahrāwī (known in the West as Abulcasis / Cordoba 936-1013), author of the famous Medical Encyclopedia *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf li-man ʿağiza ʿan al-taʾlīf* (completed in 1000), whose main volumes deal with surgery in its broader sense; the works by Ibn Sīnā (known in the West as Avicenna / 980-1037), in particular his undamental work *Kitab al-Qānūn fī al-Tibb ('Canon of Medicine')* regarded also in the West as the most perfect systematization of Arabic science.

The theoretical basis of the Arabic medical system is the 'theory of humours' of Greek origin, it was formulated by the Hippocratic school and then further elaborated by Galen.

In the human body coexist four humours: blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. Each humours is defined according to the qualities (hot, cold, wet and dry) and the elements (air, fire, water and earth) which they are made of.
Everything in the universe derive from the combination of the four elements with the four qualities.

The soul and the body form an indissoluble whole placed within a complex system of relations that constitute the universe, where every element contributes to realize and maintain the dynamic balance that we call 'health'.

Prevention is the first of therapeutic sciences (already the *Qur'an* clearly deals with topics like personal hygiene, nutrition and temperance as healing principles and, more than once, the need for protection and preservation of a person's health is highlighted, as well as the protection of the body for the well-being of the soul).

The main principle of the Arabic-Islamic medicine is that the result of the natural condition of the body has to be health and not illness. The human body has an innate tendency to correct any humoral imbalance and to restore the balance we need to reach this well-being. Treatment, climate, diet and any other external factor can only contribute to 'sustaining' this internal mechanism.

al-Qur'ān
Folio from a XVI cent.
Persian manuscript
End of *sūra* 46 / verses 32-35 and beginning of *sūra* 47 / verses 1-2 in *Thuluth* and *Naskhī* calligraphic form
[Iran • XVI cent. • art rep]

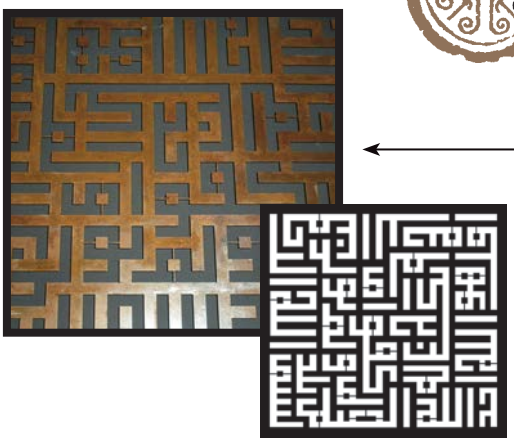
Maqāmāt
Miniature from a copy dated 1237 by Yaḥyā ibn Maḥmūd al-Wāsiṭī of the *Maqāmāt* di al-Harīrī (1054-1122)
In his shop, a barber performs bloodletting with the aid of a suction cup
[Iraq • 1237 • art rep]

Kitāb-al-Ḥašā'iš
Miniature with description of three plants.
Folio from a Persian translation by Ghiyāth al Dīn Muḥammad-i Raḍavī from the Arabic version by Isḥāq ibn Ḥunayn of *De Materia medica (Pèri hýlēs iatrikês)* by Dioscoride (Dioskourídēs - first cent.)
[Isfahān • 1658 • art rep]

Kitāb-al-Ḥašā'iš
Miniature with description of two plants.
Folio from a Persian translation of *De Materia medica (Pèri hýlēs iatrikês)* by Dioscoride (Dioskourídēs - first cent.)
[India, Deccan • 1595 • art rep]

Kitāb al-mawālīd
(Book of Nativities)
Miniature from a copy of the manuscript by Abū Ma'shar al-Balkhī (787-886) in which are described physical characteristics, illnesses, fortune, family and social life, as they relate to the different planetary conjunctions and zodiacal constellations.
The iconography of the constellations and planets is based on a tradition of representing Babylonian deities, in which Venus plays a musical instrument, Mercury is a scribe, and Saturn a dark-skinned figure wielding an axe
[Egypt • XV cent. • art rep]

al-Qānūn fī al-Tibb'
Opening chapter of the first volume of the *'Canon of Medicine'* by ibn Sīnā (Avicenna - 980-1037).
A fundamental work, regarded also in the West as the most perfect systematization of Arab science.
A synthesis of medical knowledge from classical Greek antiquity and the Islamic Middle Ages.
It merges Galenic tradition with clinical experience and Aristotelian philosophy.
Illuminated manuscript from 1645 in *naskhī* calligraphy (black ink on paper, with titles and keywords in gold).
[XVII cent. • graphic rep]



al-Qur'ān
Sūra 112 *al-īḵhlās* ('the pure faith')
in *kūfī handasī* calligraphic form
(geometric composition)

al-Ḥamdu lillāhi
First verse of the first *sūra (‘al-Fatihā’)* of the *Qur’ān*
in *kūfī handasī* calligraphic form
(geometric composition)

Liber canonis medicinae
Frontispiece of the Latin
translation by Gerardo da Cremona
(XII sec) of the work by ibn Sīnā
(Avicenna 980-1037)
al-Qānūn fī al-Tibb’
(‘Canon of Medicine’)
[XII c. • art rep]

Kitāb-al-Ḥašā’iš
Miniature depicting
the Greek physician
Erasístratos (d. 280 BCE)
accompanied by an assistant.
Folio from an Arabic translation
of *De Materia medica*
(Pèri hýlēs iatrikês)
by Dioscoride
(Dioskourídēs - first cent.)
[Baghdad • 1224 • art rep]

Automate from al-Jazarī
Miniature from a copy of the
Treatise on mechanical procedures
(al-Jāmiʿ bain al-ʿilm wa al-ʿamal
al-nāfiʿ fī ṣināʿat al-ḥiyal)
by al-Jazarī (1204-1206)
depicting an *automate* capable
of measuring the amount of blood
drawn during bloodletting
[Syria • 1315 • art rep]

Kitāb-al-Ḥašā’iš
Miniature depicting
the interior of a
medieval pharmacy.
Folio from an
Arabic translation
of *De Materia medica*
(Pèri hýlēs iatrikês)
by Dioscoride
(Dioskourídēs -
first cent.)
[Baghdad •
1224 • art rep]