

# HISTOIRE DE LA MÉDECINE/HISTORY OF MEDICINE IMPOTENCE AND LIBIDO IN ARABIC MEDICAL LITERATURE

<http://www.lebanesemedicaljournal.org/articles/56-3/histoire1.pdf>

Farid S. HADDAD\*

---

Haddad FS. Impotence and libido in Arabic medical literature. *J Med Liban* 2008 ; 56 (3) : 189-192.

---

## DEFINITIONS

*albAh* is the common word used for libido ; impotence is called diminished libido. In more recent times [1] the impotent male has been called *almarbwT* which means "he who is tied".

## INTRODUCTION

The subjects of andrology, sexology and eroticism have always fascinated man in general and physicians in particular. Islam created a climate where these subjects were very freely discussed [2]. Authors of Arabic medical texts were especially interested in these bodily functions. A separate chapter on these topics can be found in almost every Arabic medical textbook. Furthermore numerous Arabic medical authors have written separate monographs on *'ilm albAh* (the science of semenology). About one hundred of these monographs have unfortunately been lost and are known only by title [3-8]. At least 13 have survived in manuscript form [10-13] but are not easily available for study, and fewer still have been published in the original Arabic [14-16]. To our knowledge, only one book has been translated into a European language [15-18]. A study of all available texts, whether in manuscript or in printed form, reveals that, although the various authors differed about various aspects of the subject and in certain specific details, they were in agreement on the general principles. The whole subject has been previously discussed [19-20].

The following discussion is broadly based on mahAbAdy's book with supplementation from a few other Arabic medical texts. mahAbAdy's very interesting illustrated medical manuscript, the only known copy of which is in my possession [5], is a 264 folios compendium of extracts from several well known Arabic medical textbooks with a few sections in Persian. Each subject is covered in a separate chapter. The illustrated manuscript was copied in Patna, Bihar, India, in AH 944. It has not yet

been possible to identify the author in any of the available reference works. The book contains several interesting features including, among other things, the following :

1. Copies of four of the famous five anatomy charts of the Arabs [21-24]. Similar charts exist in the India Office, the Wellcome Institute in London, the Bodleian in Oxford, the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, the Mansur treatise at Duke University in Durham (Trent collection), in Cleveland, and in several other places [24]. They will be the subject of a special study to be published at a later date.
2. A section on diet for patients with ascites [22 f 24].
3. A section on medical ethics [22 ff 31 and 31v].
4. A section on diseases of the hair, and on cosmetology [22 f 35v].
5. A section on sleep and dreams [22 ff 73 and 73v].
6. A section on *Dracunculus medinensis* [22 ff 156 and 161v].
7. A section on anorexia nervosa [22 f 209].
8. An illustrated section on sexology, andrology and erotology [22 ff 234-5].

## SEMEN AND STERILITY

The astounding theory propounded by the Greek authors concerning the origin of semen in the brain and its descent down through two channels behind the ears, did not undergo any significant change in the Arabic medical literature except for the addition of the fact that cutting the vas deferens results in sterility [22 f 235v].

## PREMATURE EJACULATION AND THE SIZE OF THE PENIS

mahAbAdy gives the following prescription for premature ejaculation [22 f 232] :

Poppy seeds	10.0 drachms
Opium	1.0 drachm
Cypress cone	1.0 drachm
Chalk	1.0 drachm
Frankincense	0.5 drachm

To increase the size of the penis, mahAbAdy suggests the following [22 f 234] : ginger\*\*, safron\*\*, pepper and musk\*\*.

---

\*Curator of The Sami I Haddad Memorial Library, Rancho Palos Verdes, California.

Correspondance : Farid S. Haddad, MD. 6409 Vista Pacifica. Rancho Palos Verdes. CA 90275 USA.  
e-mail : [haddadmd@cox.net](mailto:haddadmd@cox.net) Tel/Fax : +1 310 541 0435

---

\*\*These items had been previously mentioned by alrAziy [26-27] who had also mentioned the testicles and the fat of a lion as well as hazelnuts and pistachios. aljAHi [28] and aldamiyriy [29] mention also the flesh of a reptile called the "saqanqwr" [1]

## FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE LIBIDO AND POTENCY

mahAbAdy gives three groups of factors that influence libido and potency, namely actions, diet, and talismans :

a) The **actions** that incite man's libido and increase his appetite for intercourse include the following [22 f 232] :

- Being happy and free of anxiety and sorrow
- Thinking about sex and intercourse
- Reading books on sex and on the different positions of coitus
- Watching a human or animal couple having intercourse
- Watching the beloved one, especially when she is naked
- Hearing a nice female voice
- Talking to the beloved one
- Touching the beloved, especially her genitalia
- Shaving the female pubic hair
- Kissing the beloved one, and
- Sucking the tongue of the beloved one.

b) The **dietary** items that improve sexual power include the following :

Turnips, carrots, asparagus, green beans, chick peas, pine seeds, almonds, walnuts, grapes, figs, meat, chicken, birds eggs, egg yolk, milk, pigeons, brain of birds, and testicles of the rooster\*\*.

c) **Talismans** for impotence

For the treatment of impotence, mahAbAdy gives a full description of seven rings each of which could cure impotence if worn by the patient as recommended. He illustrates the inscriptions on the rings by seven colored miniatures ; he describes the material of which the rings are to be made and gives the most propitious time of the zodiac at which the rings could be made [22 ff 234v and 235].

The first ring is made of amber mounted on iron. The inscription shows an ape with an erect penis. The ring is made at the time of Mercury (Fig. 1).

The second ring is made of turquoise set in silver when the moon is in Taurus or Virgo. The inscription shows a swan with a fish in its beak (Fig. 2).

The third ring is made when the moon is in the Balance or in Venus. The inscription shows a naked man facing a naked woman ; his hand is on the penis and her hand is on the vulva, a snake encircles her leg (Fig. 3).

The fourth ring is made of cornelian with the moon in Mars. The inscription bears a naked man facing a naked woman. He holds the tail of a black snake in the left hand and, with his right hand, he directs its head towards the woman's genitalia (Fig. 4).

The fifth ring is made when Mercury looks into Venus. A squatting woman is seen on the inscription with her hand on her genitalia and at her foot a small bird holding a twig in its beak (Fig. 5).

The sixth ring is made of a black stone set in silver



FIGURE 1

Inscription on the first potency ring : [22].

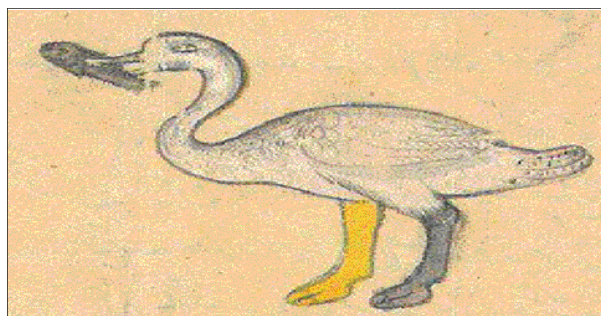


FIGURE 2

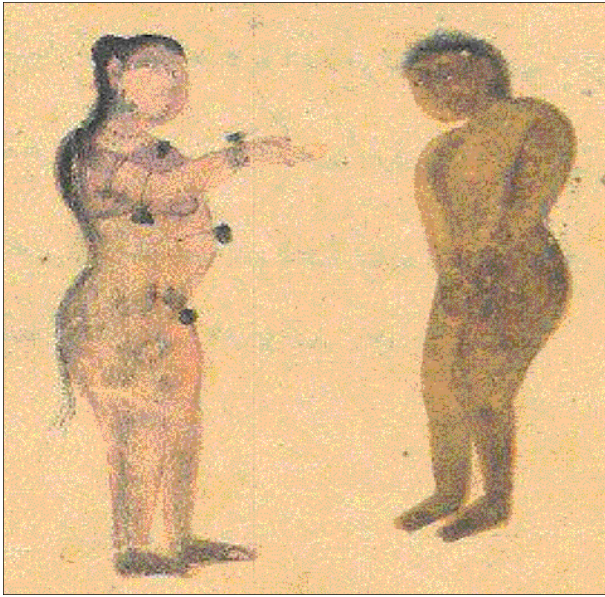
Inscription on the second potency ring : [22].

when the Sun is in Gemini. The inscription represents a man riding on a swan that is stepping on a fish (Fig. 6).

The seventh ring is made of silver ; the inscription on the stone represents a black crab. It is to be worn either on the thumb or the small finger (Fig. 7).

## THE HYGIENE OF INTERCOURSE

Intercourse is to be avoided with a woman who is old or very young, a woman who is menstruating, parturient or sick, a woman who had had no sex for a long time, who is a virgin, ugly or sterile. Intercourse should be avoided after a meal or after a bath, it should also be



**FIGURE 3**  
Inscription on the third potency ring [22].



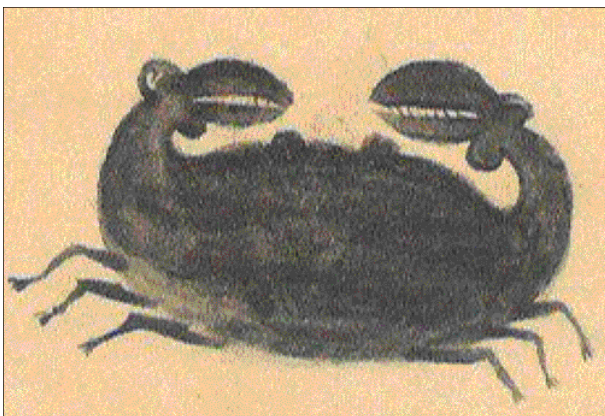
**FIGURE 5**  
Inscription on the fifth potency ring [22].



**FIGURE 4**  
Inscription on the fourth potency ring [22].



**FIGURE 6**  
Inscription on the sixth potency ring [22].



**FIGURE 7**  
Inscription on the seventh potency ring : [22].

avoided during a bath, and when the man is drunk, hungry, thirsty, angry, sleepy, tired or fatigued, as after exercise or sport [22 f 231v].

The best time for intercourse is at bedtime, and the best position is with the woman on her back.

A prospective wife should be devoid of all the following defects [22 f 231] :

ENGLISH TERM	ARABIC TERM
Old and wary	<i>Canhabara</i>
Tall and skinny	<i>lahbara</i>
Aged	<i>nahbara</i>
Short and ugly	<i>Haydara</i>
A mother	<i>lafwT</i>

#### DISCUSSION

Modern medicine has not yet recognized the potential value of the dietary regimen of the Arabs for the treatment of impotence ; and no attempt has yet been made to scientifically investigate, in controlled clinical experiments, the value of this dietary regimen ; nor to isolate the active principles, if any, of the various dietary items. An exception to this broad and general statement is obvious ; it is the isolation and, later, the synthesis of testosterone and its use, with occasional benefit, in the treatment of specific types of impotence.

Although it has not yet been possible to trace the origin of the potency rings described by mahAbAdy, and although the symbolism of their inscriptions, including the animals, the attitudes depicted, and the colors used, have not yet been deciphered, it is reasonable to assume that these seven rings employed in the management of impotence could be considered as a form of psychotherapy, which has remained in use, in one form or another, for several centuries

Actually the use of the potency rings seems to have survived up to the present day, at least in the qa imiyye quarter in Baghdad, where it is reported that the heirs of hACim muHsin SAyig, son of hACim aby alward alHusayny, possess a silver ring with a Chinese-iron-stone on which is inscribed the following phrase: “*a`wdu bi`izzati allAh, 'a`wdu bijalAli allAh, 'a`wdu bikalimAti allAh*” [May the power of God protect me, may the Glory of God protect me, may the words of God protect me]. The family who possess the ring would willingly lend it, without a fee, to any patient and allow it to be used for the treatment of impotence [1].

Similar psychotherapeutic measures are still in use, in modern day medicine, in the management of what has become known as erectile failure or erectile dysfunction ; they include various forms of relaxation therapy and viewing sessions involving pictures and films as well as books and other reading material. Psychotherapy was fairly successful in diminishing the performance anxiety of the patient and in providing him with biofeedback training and erotic fantasies. Psychotherapy thus remained almost the only form of therapy for erectile failure until fairly recently when newer and more effective therapeutic modalities were introduced. Only in the last few years did the surgical implantation of penile prostheses become popular.

Only very recently, the intracavernous injection of pharmacological agents (such as papaverine, phentolamine, phenoxy-benzamine and prostaglandin) was

shown to have fairly consistent results in the treatment of erectile failure. A search for an effective penile pacemaker is still going on [30]. The story of Viagra is too well known and need not be commented upon here.

#### REFERENCES [MSS : manuscript]

1. `alluwjy `a. aljawz almarbwT. Baghdad : as`ad Press, 1964, p 38.
2. Bouhdiba A. La sexualité en Islam. Paris : Quadrige/PUF, 1982, pp 171-93.
3. ya`qwb ibn isHAq alkindy. fy albAh, MSS 9 SI, p 374 (VIII).
4. alrAzÿ. albAh, MSS [9 vol I, p 235].
5. ibn sÿnA. fy albAh, MSS [9 vol I, pp 458-94].
6. ibrAhÿm almugrabÿ almAliky (c 1658 AD). fy albaAh, MSS [9 vol II, p 465].
7. `aly ibn sahl. fy albAh, MSS [9 vol SI, p 414].
8. Unknown author. kitAb albAh, MSS [9].
9. Brockelmann K. Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur. Vol. I Weimar, 1898 ; Vol. II Berlin, 1902 ; Suppl. I Leiden, 1937 ; Suppl. II Leiden. 1938.
10. alfwsÿ (d 1273). kitAb albAh wa alTarAkÿb alsultAniyÿat, MSS in Damascus [14].
11. altÿjAnÿ muHammad (d 1310). tuHfatu al`arws wa rawdatu alnufuws. MSS in Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris and in Tunis [9 vol II, p 257].
12. alsuÿwTÿ (d 1505). Five monograms still in MSS form.
13. ibn naSr. jawAmi`i alla Ati. MSS in munajjid [14].
14. almunajjid SalAHu aldÿn. alHayAt aljinsiÿÿat `ind al`arab, Beirut, 1958.
15. alsuÿwTÿ (d 1505). al`yDAH fy `ilm alnikAH. Published repeatedly (Printed).
16. alsuÿwTÿ (d 1505). alraHmat fy alTibb wa alHikmat (Printed).
17. ibn kamAl Pasha (d 1573), or almuftÿ. rujuw` alCaÿJ ilaY SibAh (Printed).
18. nafzaAwÿ `umar. alrawd al`ATiru fy nuzhati alJATiri (Printed and translated into French as “Le jardin parfumé”) [9 SI, p 368].
19. Haddad FS. Arab andrology and sexology. Proceedings XXX<sup>th</sup> International Congress History Medicine, Düsseldorf 1986 ; 1988 : 1253-64.
20. Haddad FS. One hundred and one lascivious dreams. Paradise Valley : Shad Board, 2003 : 60-8.
21. Haddad SI. Anatomy charts of the Arabs. Ann Rep Orient Hosp 1949 ; 2 : 9-12.
22. mahAbAdÿ hf. majmuw`a Tibbiÿÿa. MSS N<sup>o</sup> 90 [23].
23. HaddAd farÿd samÿ, and Biesterfeldt HH. fihris almaJTuwTAti alTibbiÿÿa al`arabiÿÿa fy maktabat alduktuwr samÿ ibrAhÿm HaddAd. Aleppo : Aleppo University Press, 1984.
24. O'Neill YV. An anatomical mystery with global dimensions. Actes du XXV<sup>e</sup> Congrès international d'histoire de la médecine (Québec, 1976) III : 1031-44.
25. Savage-Smith E. Personal communication, 1989 11 04.
26. alrAzÿ abw bakr muHammad ibn zakariÿÿa. alkunnaAC alfAJir MSS N<sup>o</sup> 11 [23].
27. alrAzÿ abw bakr muHammad ibn zakariÿÿa. alHAWÿ MSS N<sup>o</sup> 10 [23].
28. aljAHi a`u. alHaÿawAn. Cairo : albAbÿ, 1945, 7 : 223 quoted by `allwjÿ [1 p 49].
29. aldamÿrÿ. HayAtu alHaÿawAni. Cairo : istiqAma Press, 1954 ; 2 : 25, quoted by `alluwjiÿ [1].
30. Haddad FS : Guide to diagnostic imaging, New York : Medical Examination Publishing Co Inc, 1984 ; 5 : 353.