

Farid S. HADDAD*

Haddad FS. The nawAdir [Aphorisms] of yuHanna ibn mAsawaÿh. J Med Liban 2008 ; 56 (4) : 242-244.

yuHanna ibn mAsawaÿh

yuHanna (or yaHyY) ibn mAsawaÿh (777-857) the teacher of Hunaÿn ibn 'isHAq (d 873) was a Nestorian physician born in Bagdad but whose father was originally from jundÿSAPwr. This town is located in KhuzistAn (in what is today the South region of Iran). During the Sassanid period, the town was an important center of learning where Greek and Indian medical literature were combined into a pre-Arabic Syriac system of science under Nestorian leadership. ibn mAsawaÿh married the beautiful daughter of the physician `abdallAh alTajÿwrÿ. Caliph hArwn alrashÿd (786-809) ordered ibn mAsawaÿh to translate into Arabic the Greek medical books that were found in Byzantine Ankara after its siege in 806 [ibn juljul]. In due time he became a prominent member of the medical profession in Baghdad, a leading practitioner, teacher and medical author whose writings were among the first Arabic medical texts that were translated into Latin and soon became the leading textbooks of medical students in almost all European medieval medical schools and the medical schools of the Renaissance. ibn mAsawaÿh was known in the West as Mesÿe.

ibn mAsawaÿh was an uncompromising man of principle with a very strong personality. He was a severe teacher. He had a bad temper and a caustic repartee, which have earned him many enmities. However this did not prevent him from becoming the physician of many prominent personalities at court and to earn the confidence of six successive Abbasid Caliphs.

ibn mAsawaÿh had an ugly face but a brilliant mind. His wife was very beautiful but feebleminded. He used to say (many years before HG Wells) "my son should have her looks and my intelligence." When the son was born, he had his father's ugly looks and his mother's feeblemindedness ; so much so that the father threatened to kill his son and dissect him for the sake of science. His brothers-in-law threatened him and finally convinced him to desist [1-2].

*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 Tel/Fax : +1 310 541 0435



FIGURE 1. Portrait of ibn mAsawaÿh from page 32 of the Latin manuscript Grabdin [aqrAbAðÿn], Munich State Library N° MS Lat. 733.

In 836 he had the occasion to dissect a large ape. The ape was one of the gifts that were sent to Caliph almu'taSim from Nubia in Africa. In another version, ibn mAsawaÿh asked the Caliph to request the ruler of Nubia to supply him with apes of a particular species considered to resemble man most closely and prevailed on the Caliph to build for him, on the bank of the Tigris, a special dissection hall where animals could be kept and where he could dissect them. He then recorded his

anatomical observations in a monogram, which unfortunately has not survived [3]. Can we hope it could surface one day to light ?

It was around this time that ibn mAsawaÿh entertained scientific relations with a much younger alkindÿ (d 873) who was regarded as the greatest philosopher of his time [7].

ibn mAsawaÿh described in his writings leprosy and its contagion, and was the first to report pruritus due to the ingestion of certain food items such as fish and milk products [1].

APHORISMS

ibn mAsawaÿh was among the very first physicians to write medical texts in Arabic. He wrote 44 works, 30 of which are still extant, and only four being so far published [4].

His “nawAdir” [Aphorisms] have a very long publication history both in Arabic, in Latin, and recently in modern European languages. There are eight original Arabic manuscripts (four in Cairo) ; two Arabic editions have so far been published (the first by Sbath [6]). The book has been translated into Latin twice (an anonymous translation and a second translation by the Portuguese Gilles de Santarem [d 1265]). These translations have known a great popularity ; there are at least 70 Latin manuscripts in the libraries in Europe (of which 20 are in Great Britain). In the manuscript of the State Library of Munich one can find a portrait of ibn mAsawaÿh as the Latin artist imagined him [1] (Figure 1).

After the Bible, the book has been one of the first books to be ever printed ; it went through at least 17 Latin editions [5] and was used for teaching medicine in many early European universities.

Although not as fluent in style as the “masA’il” [Questions] of his student Hunayn, nor as condensed as the famous “Aphorisms” of Hippocrates, they have a special flavor and robustness that are not transparent in the other two books. They reflect the severe character of the author.

The total number of ibn mAsawaÿh adages, aphorisms, axioms, or maxims varies from manuscript to manuscript and from edition to edition but in general they stand between 132 and 134. As an example, I have chosen, from a variety of subjects, the following 14 for a free English translation :

Choice of physician

The patient should restrict himself to one reliable physician, his errors are usually insignificant compared with the benefit derived from his services
(Aphorism N° 80)

The patient who consults many physicians is prone to fall into the combined errors of all of them
(Aphorism N° 81)

Evidence-based medicine

Do not abandon yourself to old treatments unless they have been well tested
(Aphorism N° 5)

One cannot learn about all medications in a short life, restrict yourself to the most tested and the most commonly used
(Aphorism N° 4)

History taking

There is no medical condition that cannot be improved by history taking
(Aphorism N° 92)

Diet

When a patient desires a dish that may be harmful, do not deprive him of it, rather try to modify it in a way it would no longer harm him
(Aphorism N° 38)

Stroke management

Stroke patients are advised to remain in contact with warm bodies, not fire, but the bodies of young women
(Aphorism N° 46)

Therapy

Do not use medications that might harm the principal organs
(Aphorism N° 20)

In his management, the physician should follow nature even if healing could take longer
(Aphorism N° 79)

When two medications are of equal benefit, choose the one that is more fragrant or more tasteful
(Aphorism N° 47)

Inhalants are more beneficial to the brain than medications taken by mouth
(Aphorism N° 103)

An important part of every therapy is to include olfactory, visual, tasteful, and auditory components to help the psyche
(Aphorism N° 21)

Prognosis

Always give a good prognosis, even if you are not sure, because recovery depends on morale
(Aphorism N° 39)

*The longer a habit has been ingrained,
the more detrimental it becomes and
the more difficult to shed off*
(Aphorism N° 48)

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