

Abu L-‘Ala’ Zuhr, The Quack of Al-Andalus

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Abstract: *Abu l-‘Ala’ Zuhr is one of the most important Arab scientists of the Middle Ages. In his books, the two main currents of the medieval Arabic medicine converge: the classical one which comes basically from the Greek tradition and the popular one which comes essentially from the quackery of whose practice he is the main representative in Al-Andalus. This article focuses on this subject and it is an approach to the study of his life and his work. It is included an appendix with the English translation of some fragments of his work entitled Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass (Book of the experience's facts).*

Keywords: *Banu Zuhr. Abu l-‘Ala’ Zuhr. Medieval Arabic Medicine. Popular medicine in the Middle Ages. Quackery.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Abu l-‘Ala’ Zuhr (c.1060-1131) is one of the most important Arab scientists of the Middle Ages. In his books, converge the two great currents of the medieval Arabic medicine: the classical one which comes basically from the Greek tradition and the popular one which comes primarily from the quackery of whose practice he is the main representative in Al-Andalus. His full name is Abu l-‘Ala’ Zuhr Ibn ‘Abd Al-Malik Ibn Muhammad Ibn Marwan Ibn Zuhr Al-Ishbili Al-Iyadi. He belonged to a distinguished Andalusian family of physicians and writers who flourished during some generations in Muslim medieval Spain, the Banu Zuhr, and he is the father of the famous Avenzoar. Among the Latins was known with several names such as Abuleli, Aboali, Ebilule, Abulelizer and Albuleizer [1].

2. LIFE AND WORKS OF ABU L-‘ALA’ ZUHR

It is not clear the date and the place of his birth, probably around 1060 in Seville, although it is also said in Denia (Valencia). When Abuleli was young he moved to Cordova where he met Abu 'Ali Al-Ghassani, who taught him in the Great Mosque and advised him to study the science of hadith together with Abu Bakr Ibn Mufawwaz, Abu Ja‘far Ibn ‘Abd Al-‘Aziz and Ibn Ayyub, receiving in this subject, the hadith, a carefully education and an accurate training. He is also remarkable for cultivating adab (belles lettres) and even was in correspondence with Al-Hariri, the well known author of maqamas. But, over all, he reached renown in the field of medicine. His activity as a physician began under the kingdom of the Abbadi prince of Seville Al-Mu‘tadid (1042-1068) and he used the teachings from his father Abu Marwan ‘Abd Al-Malik Ibn Zuhr Al-Iyadi because, as already stated, he belonged to a distinguished family of scholars and physicians, the Banu Zuhr, in which the medical science was taught from father to son inside the dynasty. Another facet of his public personality is the political one. In fact, it is said that he became vizir of the Almoravid caliph Yusuf Ibn Tashufin (1061-1106) and so the Latins called him Alguazir Albuleizer. Abu l-‘Ala’ really belonged to the privileged class of court physicians with a noted public life, what is a common feature in the history of Islamic culture and civilization. He died in Cordova in 1131 [2].

Among his works, some of them lost and known by the quotations of Ibn Abi Usaybi‘a [3], we have to mention, for example, the following ones:

- Kitab al-Tadhkira (Memorandum) also named Kitab al-nuqat al-tibbiyya (Book of medical principles).
- Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass or Kitab khawass al-hayawan (Book of the experience's facts and the animals' peculiarities).
- Kitab al-adwiya al-mufrada (Book of the simple medicaments).

- Kitab al-idah bi-shawahid al-iftidah (Book of the enlightenment through the attestation of the defamation).
- Kitab hall shukuk Al-Razi ‘alà kutub Jalinus (Book of the resolution of Al-Razi's doubts about Galen's writings).
- Maqala fi-radd ‘alà Abi Ibn Sina fi-mawadi‘ min-kitabihi fi l-adwiya al-mufrada (Treatise of the refutation of Ibn Sina's Book of the simple medicaments).
- Maqala fi-bastihi li-risala Ya‘qub Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi fi-tarkib al-adwiya (Treatise of the commentary to Ya‘qub Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi's epistle of the composition of the drugs).
- Jami‘ asrar fi l-tibb (Collection of medicine secrets).
- Al-Wasiyya (The recommendation). Etc. [4]

3. SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE OF ABU L-‘ALA’ ZUHR

Abu l-‘Ala’ achieved renown as a doctor for his qualities of practical physician. He made the diagnosis of the diseases only by means of the examination of the urine and the pulse. It is appropriate to underline that he gave up a method which was introduced in the medical practice among the Ancients: it consists of enquiring into the patient's antecedents as well as his ascendancy and living conditions. He had an extensive knowledge of both Ancient and Arabic medicine and he used in his therapeutics the remedies suggested by the classical tradition but also made use of rare remedies (nawadir). His most important works are: Al-Tadhkira (Memorandum) that he wrote for his son, Avenzoar, in order to teach him the secrets of medicine; and Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass (Book of the experience's facts). In both books the two main currents of the medical science in the Middle Ages converge: the classical one, which comes basically from the Greek tradition, represented over all by Al-Tadhkira; and the popular one, which comes essentially from the quackery, represented over all by Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass [5]

The Tadhkira allows us to know better the ideal of the expert physician. This book is structured by guiding principles (nuqat) and each principle or nuqta is introduced by the Arabic word tadhakkar (remember that). Opposite to the doctors of that time, whom Abu l-‘Ala’ accused of using the remedies without sufficient precautions, he recommended the moderation and the prudence in the treatment. In the framework of the medicine of the humors and a therapeutics based on the qualities of the remedies (cold, hot, dry and humid) and their degrees, he shows us the damage it could cause to take a drug in an overdose as that could lead to a disorder in inverse order. According to Abu l-‘Ala’ the corrective strength of the medication must be proportional to the pathogenic tendency; and this means that it is necessary to test in the patient the simple remedy or the composite one using the one or the other in accordance with the principle of the first degree. Later and depending on the results obtained, the physician can increase the strength in progressive development. These practical recommendations founded the progress of the medicine on the precise remark of the effects of a treatment carefully dosed and tested [6].

Secondly, the Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass, which allows us to know better the technique of quackery at that time. This book is an example in Al-Andalus and the Muslim West, as well as is the Kitab Al-Maliki (Royal book) from ‘Ali Ibn Al-‘Abbas Al-Majusi (10th century) in the East. The quackery or folk medicine is meant as the technique which bases its therapeutics mainly on the magic, the sorcery and the witchcraft with the use of talismans, amulets, lucky charms and other wonderful remedies such as singular drugs, potions, concoctions and cooking of amazing, astonishing and stunning properties for the cure of diseases; and also using rites and rituals. Not lacking in these practices the master formulas. This esoteric medical activity has been existed in all civilizations and has been taken root in the humanity for a long time. Today it still persists as an alternative medicine even in advanced societies [7]. The Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass is structured according to Arabic alphabet letters, so that each element of Nature (animal, vegetable or mineral) appears into the chapter of the letter with which its Arabic name begins [8]. However, in spite of having a big dose of quackery, this book is enriched with a lot of references to Ancient and Arabian authors, or those who wrote in Arabic language such as, for example, Hippocrates, Dioscorides, Aristotle, Plato, Galen, Democrito, Ptolomeo, Pitagoras, Ibn Masawayh, Ibn Masarjawayh, Qusta Ibn Lawqà, Hunayn Ibn Ishaq, Al-Razi and Al-Jahiz, etc. So, we can conclude that Abu l-‘Ala’ was an expert in both the Greek scientific knowledge as in the Arab or, at least, in an important share of these.

Both books, the Tadhkira, for its influence on the practical medicine linked to classical knowledge, and the Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass, for its connection to the folk medicine, define and summarize the great magistral lines of Islamic medical science in the Middle Ages. Furthermore these writings make to Abu l-‘Ala’ one the most interesting authors of Muslim Spain.

4. APPENDIX

Fragments of the Kitab mujarrabat al-khawass according the Arabic manuscript no.520 from the Bodleian Library at Oxford (UK).

4.1. Fragment no.1 (f°13r°)

Henbane: If a bit of henbane is hung over the sick of colic, the patient will heal and will succeed in everything ; and it is aphrodisiac if is applied to the penis macerated in water [9].

4.2. Fragment no.2 (f°14r°)

Bórax: Apply borax on the navel and the pubis, pounded and kneaded with honey, acts as a potent aphrodisiac. If it is put a bit of borax in a pot with meat, it (the meat) will cook without fire. If it is hung borax fried over somebody, this will be awake meanwhile the status lasts

4.3. Fragment no.3 (f°91v°)

Goat: For the difficult parturition: Hang over the left thigh of the parturient the right horn of a goat lightens the parturition. For insomnia: If you take some ash from white goat's horn burned and place it under the pillow of the sleepless, without he knows it, certainly the patient will not fail to sleep meanwhile the status lasts [10].

4.4. Fragment no.4 (f°96r°-f°96v°)

Narcissus: Its root has dryer strength. It lightens the healing of the big wounds, including the cut of the joints. It has properties for pregnant and sterile. Furthermore it is hot and good for those who hold cold temperaments. Enchantment: If you take a beetle and hide it into a rose, [the scarab] will die; and it will revive if you put it into a narcissus [11].

4.5. Fragment no.5 (f°99v°)

Salamander: Hang over a pregnant the heart of a salamander protects her from the parturition [12].

5. CONCLUSION

Abu l-‘Ala’ Zuhr holds a very outstanding place in the history of medieval Arabic medicine for his connection to as the classical scientific tradition as the popular one. In fact, he is the main representative of the folk medicine in Al-Andalus.

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