CHAPTER TWO

THE PRE-MAMLUK VETERINARY TRADITIONS

A. Introduction: The Sources of Mamluk Veterinary Knowledge

The writers of Arabic veterinary literature drew their information from many different sources, which are often difficult to trace, mainly because the material reaches us as a jumble of traditions coming from different cultures, such as Greek, Persian, Armenian, and Indian. We often find that identical contents are ascribed by different authors to two different cultures. Not only is the identification of the traditions problematic, but also the names of the writers, particularly those whose works were incorporated in the Arabic-Muslim tradition after being translated into Arabic.

In this chapter it is not my intention to reconstruct the sources used by writers of Arabic veterinary treatises of the Mamluk period. Studies of this nature have been conducted by scholars, some of them philologists and others veterinarians. Despite the importance of these studies, the question arises as to whether their authors took a sufficiently critical approach in adopting unquestioningly the ascription of the Arabic essays to Greek, Persian, Indian and other sources, assuming that such ancient treatises existed in reality. My assumption is that expressions such as “the Persians said,” “the Greek sages said” are, at least in some cases, formulas used by the Arab writers that do not constitute proof of the existence of a written source, and certainly do not prove the existence of a specific book.

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1 See the section on historiography in the Introduction.
2 Möller attempted to identify the primary sources of treatises that bore names such as ‘The Byzantine Writings’, ‘The Indian Writings’, ‘The Persian Writings’. He claims that these writings were translated into Arabic during the Umayyad period, and particularly during the early Abbasid period, and became the basis for all the works on falconry that were later written in Arabic. He does not attach any importance to the addenda, notes or forewords of these later treatises, regarding them merely as mistakes in the original text. See Möller, Studien, pp. 44-60.
3 In his research, Björck deals with the ways in which Greek veterinary knowledge was transmitted to Arabic, and for this purpose he investigates the Greek sources that formed the basis for Arabic veterinary treatises and attempts to identify them by textual comparison. He mainly examines passages from the Greek corpus and compares them to those in Ibn al-ʿAwwām’s book (12th century). Björck uses descriptions of Arabic manuscripts in various catalogues, stating explicitly that he does not know Arabic and therefore uses the French
fore, one should be skeptical about the attribution of certain information to a particular tradition. At the same time, one should not take lightly those oral traditions that were handed down from generation to generation, and from one culture to another, until they were compiled in treatises and set down in writing, thus preserving a direct link to a certain heritage. This occurred mainly in the period, known as the Golden Age (ninth to tenth century CE), when many of the oral, literary and scientific traditions were set down in writing and collected in books. In this context it is important to note the traditions that originated in classical Greek medicine and reached the Islamic world through translation to Arabic.  

Oral traditions handed down over the generations include professional knowledge transmitted from father to son, thus preserving the profession within the family. An example related to veterinary medicine concerns the cadi Ḥayyān b. Bishr who questioned a veterinarian on the manner in which he had acquired his profession. The latter explained that he had inherited the profession from his father, who in turn had inherited it from his father, and he from his father, and so on and so forth. Thus, like the role of cadis, the profession of animal doctor was also handed down through the generations and preserved in the family. Since traditions associated with particular cultures were passed down by word of mouth, it may be assumed that the authors who eventually set them down in writing saw fit to mention their origin. Indeed, we find differences in content between traditions attributed to different peoples. In fact, we can distinguish between traditions belonging to the Graeco-Roman-Byzantine heritage and those

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translation of Ibn al-ʿAwwām. Both in Ibn al-ʿAwwām and in the descriptions of Arabic manuscripts in catalogues he identifies the major Greek writers who, according to him, were the direct or indirect source of the veterinary knowledge that is presented in the work of Ibn al-ʿAwwām. Using editions of two veterinary treatises in Latin and Medieval Italian, he concludes, in contrast to the compiler of the corpus, that ‘the Indian Hippocrates’ cited in Ibn al-ʿAwwām is not the Hippocrates of the Greek corpus. See Gudmund Björck, “Griechische Pferdeheilkunde in arabischer Überlieferung,” Le Monde Oriental, Revue des Études Orientales, vol. XXX (1936), p. 10.

4 Claude Cahen compares the translation movement in the early Abbasid period to the European Renaissance of the 12th and 13th centuries. This was mainly the period of the “House of Wisdom” founded by Caliph al-Maʾmūn, when many classics were translated into Arabic and became models for Arabic prose writers for many generations. See Claude Cahen, L’Islam: des Origines au début de l’Empire Ottoman, Frankfurt am Main: Börsch, 1970, pp. 87-96; Ignaz Goldziher, A Short History of Arabic Literature, tr. Pessah Shinar, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1979, pp. 86-100 [Hebrew]; M. Ullmann, Islamic Medicine, pp. 7-40.