Introduction

Un ouvrage peut être une source
de renseignements exacts,
tout en n’étant qu’une compilation

With these words the Belgian scholar Herman Janssens characterized the intrinsic value of a famous Arabic work titled ar-Riḥla “The Journey”, an extensive travel account composed by the 14th century Moroccan explorer Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and though the Kitāb al-Ḥāwī of Rhazes belongs to a very different literary genre, its epistemic importance, too, could quite fittingly be described such-wise. And yet, Rhazes’ Kitāb al-Ḥāwī is an entirely unique text, not only within the framework of Arabic medico-pharmaceutical literature but in scientific history full stop. Before turning to the compositional formation and inner structure of the Kitāb al-Ḥāwī, it may however be instructive to summarize briefly what few biographical data about Rhazes we possess.

Considering the deep impact Rhazes made notably on Islamic medicine, and considering moreover the huge significance he is accordingly credited with in secondary literature, the old Arabic sources themselves do in fact provide us with relatively little, and often anecdotal, information about his life. Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyāʾ ar-Rāzī (latinized and in this book always called Rhazes) was a true polymath who ranks among the most versatile and most authoritative thinkers in the history of Islam. Born in the ancient Iranian city of Rayy on 1 Ša’bān 251 / 28 August 865 and having in his youth studied

---

22 JanIB 109.
23 For relevant titles see UllMed 128 note 4, GaS 3/278, and GooRā 477a–b.
24 The key passages for the biography of Rhazes are NadFih 1/299,1–11; BiFih 4,8–5,10; ZauMuḫ 271,13–272,8 then 272,14–273,8; and IAU 1/309,16–315,13—all else follows from there. Rhazes’ essay titled as-Sīra al-falsafiya “The Philosophical Way of Life”, which is often (and somewhat misleadingly) referred to in secondary literature as his ‘autobiography’, is in reality an apologetic justification of his philosophical ideals and scientific achievements and contains virtually nothing we would today expect to find in an autobiographical account, cf. KrCP 303 with 309–321 (Arabic text) and 322–334 (French translation).
25 This date according to BiFih 4,8f.
philosophy, alchemy, literature and music, he later took up medicine and was soon appointed head of the large hospital of his hometown; in his “early thirties” (naʿīf wa-talāṯūn),26 that is around the year 284/897, he went to Baghdad and there, too, became director of a hospital,27 surrounding himself with a hierarchized circle of medical students; in those years he also undertook several journeys in the eastern realms of the Islamic world; towards the end of his life he went blind, left Baghdad and retreated to his birthplace Rayy where he died on 5 Šaʿbān 313 / 26 October 925,28 aged 62 lunar (or 60 solar) years. Rhazes, who is said to have never parted from his scrolls and manuscripts, was himself a prolific writer, always either drafting or making fair copies;29 the list of his own works (mainly medical, alchemical and philosophical) is long30 and proves, if nothing else, his wide-ranging intellectual interests and scientific originality. Ironically, Rhazes’ most distinguished and in many ways most important work, so-called al-Kitāb al-Ḥāwī fī t-ṭibb or “The Comprehensive Book on Medicine”, is a compilation of enormous proportions which he himself did not publish during his lifetime nor, perhaps, ever intend for publication. What do we know about it?

26 So IAU 1/309,17.
27 When Rhazes came to Baghdad, in the late 890s CE, there existed, for all we know, only one hospital, which had been founded nearly a century earlier, during the caliphate of Hārūn ar-Rašīd, by the Barmakids and accordingly named Barāmika hospital, later simply old hospital; a second hospital, known as Muʿtaḍidī, was however being built around 900 CE under the patronage of a ‘page’ (gulām) of the caliph al-Muʿtaḍid, followed by the foundation of another four hospitals in the city of Baghdad between the years 914 and 925 CE, see DuBīm 1223a–b. The question arises which of these hospitals Rhazes was directing, and here it seems almost certain that he is to be associated with either the Barāmika hospital (cf. DuBīm 1223a bottom) or else the Muʿtaḍidī hospital whose most propitious location he helped to determine (cf. SSMed 914 [and accordingly amend the reports IAU 1/309,31–310,10 to read muʿtaḍidī instead of ‘aḍudī’]), perhaps even with both; this conclusion is supported by the fact that three of the four hospitals founded between 914 and 925 CE appear to have had other directors (see DuBīm loc.cit.), and that in any case their foundation is rather late to be reconciled easily with the course of Rhazes’ career and his age at the time(s).
28 This date according to BīFih 5,7 f.; for different, less probable dates of Rhazes’ demise cf. ZauMuḫ 272,1 (“close to the year 320/[932]”) and IAU 1/314,11 ff. (“in the early 290s/[around 905]” or “just after 300/[913]” or “in the year 320/[932]”).
29 lam yakun yufāriqu l-madāriǧ wan-nusaḥ […] immā yusauwidu au yubaiyiḍu, see NadFih 1/299,9 f.