CHAPTER THREE

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE IN MINHĀJ AL-DUKKĀN

This chapter will deal with the practical knowledge required of a pharmacist, beyond the making up of medicines. Weights and measures, substitute drugs and synonyms of drugs (chapters twenty to twenty-two) form one group, and the identification and treatment of materia medica (chapters twenty-four and twenty-five) form another. In addition, I will discuss here the bits and pieces of practical advice which are scattered throughout the pharmacopoeia (chapters 2–19).

Lists of substitute drugs and plant synonyms help the practitioner decide what materials to use, while chapters on the gathering and storage of local products, and basic rules for the preparation of certain forms of medicine, mark stages in the transition from simples to compound medicines. Comparison of these chapters with similar works written by physicians may tell us more about the difference between pharmacists and physicians, and can confirm whether al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār was himself a druggist rather than a doctor.

How to handle materia medica:
Substitutes, synonyms, weights and measures

Judging from the prescriptions preserved in the Genizah, it would seem that of the thousands of items appearing in the herbals, only about one hundred and twenty simples were in fact in common use.1 This gap between theory and practice stimulated the development of closely connected lists of substitutes and of synonyms. In Minhāj al-dukkān, the relevant chapters follow each other; in al-Bīrūnī’s Kitāb al-ṣaydāna,

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usually thought of only in connection with synonyms, the preface includes a discussion of the need for substituting one drug for another.\footnote{Bīrūnī-Said, vol. 1, pp. 6–7; cf. Meyerhof-Bīrūnī, pp. 10–12 (Arabic text) and the discussion in Hamarneh, Bīrūnī, pp. 42–43.}

(a) \textit{Substitutes (chapter 20)}

If one does not have acetaminophen, one takes acetylsalicylic acid. Or, in lay terms, if one does not have Tylenol, one takes Bayer aspirin. All of us have learned basic information about drug substitutes. In antiquity and, more abundantly, during the Middle Ages, there existed a genre, known as “Quid pro quo” or “This for that”, that is lists of drug substitutes.\footnote{J. Riddle, Quid pro quo: Studies in the history of drugs (Ashgate: Variorum, 1992), p. vii.} In Arabic, such lists are usually given the title \textit{Fi abdāl al-adwiya} (‘On the substitution of drugs’), and that is indeed the title of the twentieth chapter of \textit{Minhāj al-dukkān}. In the full title, al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār indicates that this chapter is for use when a drug needed for making up a medicine is unavailable, and that it is in alphabetical order.\footnote{Minhāj al-dukkān, p. 203.} ‘Unavailable’ can be a function of geography (the Islamic world in the late thirteenth century extended from Granada to Acheh and Sofala, thus medical texts with \textit{materia medica} derived from Indian plants, for example, would not always be of the greatest practical use in the Islamic West) or of economics (a cheaper substitute for more expensive drugs prescribed in the treatises might be necessary).\footnote{M. Levey, “Substitute drugs in early Arabic medicine: with special reference to the texts of Māsarjawaih, al-Rāzī and Pythagoras,” Veröffentlichungen der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Pharmazie 37 (1971), p. 10.}

Al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār states that he has taken his list of drugs and their substitutes from al-Rāzī’s book on substitutes, and other books (\textit{min kitāb al-rāzī fī l-abdāl wa-min ghayrihi}).\footnote{No single entry is cited as taken directly from al-Rāzī.} Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925) lived and worked in Rayy and Baghdad, far to the east of Cairo. The fact that al-Kūhīn al-ʿAṭṭār chose to use him as his main source may indicate the state of the spice trade in his day: If most items were regularly and reliably imported from India and south-east Asia, there was little difference between third/ninth-century Baghdad or Rayy and seventh/thirteenth-century Egypt in terms of the availability of drugs and spices. Of course, this may also be taken to indicate al-Rāzī’s high