PART TWO

THE PHARMACIST AND SOCIETY
CHAPTER FOUR

THE PHARMACIST AND THE SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT

This chapter will study various aspects of the relationship between pharmacists and physicians in the Mamlûk Sultanate. Beginning with an overview of science and medicine in the Islamic world of the seventh/thirteenth to ninth/fifteenth centuries, I will attempt to show pharmacy’s place in the contemporary construction and practice of knowledge. After a section on the physician in Mamlûk society, I will discuss the position of pharmacists as shown by biographical dictionaries, a major source for social history of the Mamlûk period. Finally, I will discuss the position of pharmacists in hospitals.

Pharmacy against the background of contemporary science

Any discussion of pharmacy and the scientific context must begin with the question: Was pharmacy considered a science? Indeed, perhaps one must even go back and ask: What was considered science in Mamlûk Egypt, and in Islamic civilization in general? Sabra has pointed out that

There is no one scheme for the classification of the sciences that can be described as ‘essentially’ Islamic: in the intellectual history of Islam many schemes of classification were proposed at different times and places and in different circumstances by philosophers, theologians, bibliographers, encyclopedists, historians, educators, etc. All of these schemes were evidently guided by the various aims and standpoints of their authors, and therefore can be properly interpreted only with reference to their particular contexts.¹

However, I have observed that the treatment of medicine and pharmacy does not vary greatly within the various classifications. Hence, for the purpose of my investigation, I treat all classifications as a single