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Summary

Since Muḥyī el-Dīn el-Taṭāwī’s supposed rediscovery, in 1924, of Ibn al-Nafīs’ thirteenth-century commentary on Avicenna’s anatomy, a heated international debate has evolved over the presumed priority of discovering the circulation of the blood, prior to William Harvey’s *De motu cordis* (1628). Protagonists of this dispute before Fancy (2006) have paid very little attention to the profoundly different physiological and epistemological frameworks the historical actors were working in, despite striking similarities in some anatomical details of their respective concepts. While actual links between the European successors of Ibn al-Nafīs, such as Miguel Servet(o) (Michael Servetus) or Realdo Colombo (Real-dus Columbus) remain speculative, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in the Islamic world, the work of the former was by no means lost: it continued to be cited in Arabic and Turkish sources well into the nineteenth century by authors such as Şemsettin İtaki (1632) and Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār (1813).

Introduction

Our knowledge of the history of medicine in Islamic civilisations is still lamentably limited. Even the most influential classical texts, such as Haly Abbas’ *Kāmil al-Ṣinā‘a* (late tenth century), still await comprehensive critical editions, let alone reliable translations into Western languages, which would make these writings available to a wider readership of historians not specialising in Middle Eastern philology.¹ We should therefore not be surprised to find statements to the effect that certain singular empirical or conceptual innovations did not produce any echo in the subsequent

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literature – an assessment perhaps based on the fact that later, ‘minor’ texts have escaped the attention of historians of medicine? This observation should caution us against taking those claims at face value. A good example of such oversight is the case of Ibn al-Nafīs’ description of the pulmonary transit of the blood, which is the main subject of this chapter. Ibn al-Nafīs’ text was brought to the attention of modern western readers in the 1930s thanks to a dissertation by an Egyptian medical student in Berlin and Freiburg, Muḥyī el-Dīn el-Taṭāwī (1896–1935), and as late as 2008, two leading Turkish historians of medicine claimed that ‘in the Muslim world, there was no physician who became aware of this discovery; they did not utter a word about it’. Almost twenty years earlier, economic historian Peter Gran had published an extensive study on a well-known nineteenth-century scholar from Egypt, Hasan al-ʿAttār (1766–1835), where indeed we find a lengthy quotation from Ibn al-Nafīs’ description of the pulmonary passage in a text written in Damascus around 1813. It needs to be said, however, that this quotation had been taken out of its medical context and found itself buried in a book on the socio-economic history of early modern Egypt, where it, too, escaped the attention of medical historians.


3 Kâhya E. – Demirhan Erdemir A., *Medical Studies and Institutions in the Ottoman Empire (with brief information about the scientific studies)* (Ankara: 2008) 29. The particular irony of this remark will become apparent below, when we discuss a Turkish text from the seventeenth century dealing with Ibn al-Nafīs’ idea, written by the Ottoman court physician Şemsettin Itaki, who does indeed discuss these ideas at some length. This text was studied and edited by one of the authors of the above quotation, Esin Kâhya. However, the quoted remark does not occur in the Turkish edition of their survey published on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of the Ottoman Empire, where they offer an otherwise almost identical presentation of Ibn al-Nafīs, *eadem, Osmanlıdan Cumhuriyete Tıp ve Sağlık Kurumları* (Ankara: 2000) 57–58.
