The Defense of Medicine in the Medieval Muslim World

The true or alleged failings of the physician as a practitioner and individual have no doubt been the subject of invective and ridicule ever since the first halting steps into the practice of medicine were attempted. Famous anecdotes which the people of the classical world already told each other were repeated with great relish by Muslim authors. They enjoyed telling about the comparison of physician and painter to make the point that physicians bury their dead and their mistakes remain undisclosed.1 We hear about the inhabitants of a Greek town with an inefficient general and a death-bringing physician. They were advised by Diogenes (in the Greek tradition it was Pausanias or Theocritus [Thearidas?]) to defend themselves against enemy pressure by appointing the general to the position of town physician and the physician to the position of general.2 We are treated to the joke about the ignorant physician who felt the left side of his patient and pronounced his liver affected. When the patient seemed aggrieved and the physician tried to console him by saying that it was not so bad, the patient exclaimed that he would rather die than go through life as someone who differed from all other people in having his liver on the left side.3 The Muslims not accepted by physicians, and medical writers felt compelled to refute interesting information could be gathered on widely held negative views about physicians, to be easily counterbalanced by numerous expressions of praise for the skilful and wise practitioner.

3 Cf. Abû Sulaymān al-Manṭiqî as-Sijistānî, Ṣiwân al-ḥikmah, according to the recension preserved in the Istanbul Ms. Murad Molla 1408, fol. 42b, also Beshir Ağa 494, fol. 46b. The role of the patient is played by a certain ‘ṭ-r-w-d (z)-t-y-s.’ This name could easily be read Herodotus. However, it is more likely that some obscure jokester is meant.
A very different subject—and one which I feel deserves the brief discussion of its main aspects presented on the following pages—is the attacks leveled against medicine as such. Physicians were, of course, not exempt from the imperfections attaching to all human beings. Attacks against individuals did not mean much and provided no valid justification for condemning the entire science or craft. But there were those who denied the basic soundness of medicine. Their arguments were naturally not accepted by physicians, and medical writers felt compelled to refute them. These writers often played something like the role of devil’s advocate. If they did not invent the arguments against medicine, they at least posed them anew in order to be able to discuss and reject them. A certain ʿAbd-al-Wadûd b. ʿAbd-al-Malik, who lived in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, wrote an essay entitled “The Blameworthiness of Making a Living from the Craft of Medicine” (Fî Dhamm at-takassub bi-ṣinâʿat aṭ-ṭibb). He begins by stating expressly that his “blame” of medicine is not meant to detract from its value. Rather, he presents the arguments against medicine in the spirit of debaters who take on the defense of obviously very weak opinions. Thereby they wish in fact to strengthen the opposite, correct point of view. An example would be advocating the opinion that the Nile flows in the direction of Ghânah, or the Euphrates in the direction of Anatolia, when everybody knows that these rivers flow in the opposite direction. The advocacy of anything running against commonly held convictions is likely to be completely ineffective. It is hard to change the opinions of people when they can be shown to be wrong. It is much harder to change their opinions when they happen to be right. This applies to the case of medicine. People are certainly right to be convinced of the value of medicine. Thus attacks upon medicine are not able to make them change their opinion. On the contrary, these merely serve to confirm them in their high esteem of it. This is how ʿAbd-al-Wadûd justifies his acting as a kind of devil’s advocate with regard to the alleged shortcomings of medicine.

A similar approach was taken by Ibn Hindû, who lived a century earlier, around the turn of the first millennium. A littérateur and government official, he was trained and deeply steeped in Greek philosophy. In the eyes of his contemporaries, this made him well qualified to write on medicine. He starts out by declaring the attacks upon medicine as not debatable, according to the rules of dialectics proposed by Aristotle:

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4 ʿAbd-al-Wadûd’s work is preserved in the Istanbul Ms. Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha 691. fols. 128b–133b, briefly described by me in *Oriens*, 1954, 7:58. The fact that ʿAbd-al-Wadûd was a younger contemporary of Zâfir b. Jâbir (see below, n. 14) confirms the dating suggested in *Oriens*.

5 “The Key to Medicine” (Miftâḥ aṭ-ṭibb) by Ibn Hindû was used by me in the Bursa Ms. Haraççî