Hannā ibn Masawayh

Hannā (or ūHaYY) ibn Masawayh (777-857) the teacher of Hunain ibn 'IsHāq (d 873) was a Nestorian physician born in Bagdad but whose father was originally from jundýSaAwr. This town is located in Khuzistān (in what is today the South region of Iran). During the Sassanid period, the town was an important center of learning where Greek and Indian medical literature were combined into a pre-Arabic Syriac system of science under Nestorian leadership. ibn Masawayh married the beautiful daughter of the physician 'abdallāh alTaŷfwrī. Caliph hArwn alrashīd (786-809) ordered ibn Masawayh to translate into Arabic the Greek medical books that were found in Byzantine Ankara after its siege in 806 [ibn juljul]. In due time he became a prominent member of the medical profession in Baghdad, a leading practitioner, teacher and medical author whose writings were among the first Arabic medical texts that were translated into Latin and soon became the leading textbooks of medical students in almost all European medieval medical schools and the medical schools of the Renaissance. ibn Masawayh was known in the West as Mesūe.

ibn Masawayh was an uncompromising man of principle with a very strong personality. He was a severe teacher. He had a bad temper and a caustic repartee, which have earned him many enmities. However this did not prevent him from becoming the physician of many prominent personalities at court and to earn the confidence of six successive Abbasid Caliphs.

ibn Masawayh had an ugly face but a brilliant mind. His wife was very beautiful but feebleminded. He used to say (many years before HG Wells) “my son should have her looks and my intelligence.” When the son was born, he had his father’s ugly looks and his mother’s feeblemindedness; so much so that the father threatened to kill his son and dissect him for the sake of science. His brothers-in-law threatened him and finally convinced him to desist [1-2].

In 836 he had the occasion to dissect a large ape. The ape was one of the gifts that were sent to Caliph almu’tāsim from Nubia in Africa. In another version, ibn Masawayh asked the Caliph to request the ruler of Nubia to supply him with apes of a particular species considered to resemble man most closely and prevailed on the Caliph to build for him, on the bank of the Tigris, a special dissection hall where animals could be kept and where he could dissect them. He then recorded his
anatomical observations in a monogram, which unfortunately has not survived [3]. Can we hope it could surface one day to light?

It was around this time that ibn mAsawâyh entertained scientific relations with a much younger alkindy (d 873) who was regarded as the greatest philosopher of his time [7].

ibn mAsawâyh described in his writings leprosy and its contagion, and was the first to report pruritus due to the ingestion of certain food items such as fish and milk products [1].

APHORISMS

ibn mAsawâyh was among the very first physicians to write medical texts in Arabic. He wrote 44 works, 30 of which are still extant, and only four being so far published [4].

His “nawAdir” [Aphorisms] have a very long publication history both in Arabic, in Latin, and recently in modern European languages. There are eight original Arabic manuscripts (four in Cairo); two Arabic editions have so far been published (the first by Sbath [6]). The book has been translated into Latin twice (an anonymous translation and a second translation by the Portuguese Gilles de Santarem [d 1265]). These translations have known a great popularity; there are at least 70 Latin manuscripts in the libraries in Europe (of which 20 are in Great Britain). In the manuscript of the State Library of Munich one can find a portrait of ibn mAsawâyh as the Latin artist imagined him [1] (Figure 1).

After the Bible, the book has been one of the first books to be ever printed; it went through at least 17 Latin editions [5] and was used for teaching medicine in many early European universities.

Although not as fluent in style as the “masA’il” [Questions] of his student Hunâyn, nor as condensed as the famous “Aphorisms” of Hippocrates, they have a special flavor and robustness that are not transparent in the other two books. They reflect the severe character of the author.

The total number of ibn mAsawâyh adages, aphorisms, axioms, or maxims varies from manuscript to manuscript and from edition to edition but in general they stand between 132 and 134. As an example, I have chosen, from a variety of subjects, the following 14 for a free English translation:

**Choice of physician**

*The patient should restrict himself to one reliable physician, his errors are usually insignificant compared with the benefit derived from his services*  
(Aphorism Nº 80)

*The patient who consults many physicians is prone to fall into the combined errors of all of them*  
(Aphorism Nº 81)

**Evidence-based medicine**

*Do not abandon yourself to old treatments unless they have been well tested*  
(Aphorism Nº 5)

*One cannot learn about all medications in a short life, restrict yourself to the most tested and the most commonly used*  
(Aphorism Nº 4)

**History taking**

*There is no medical condition that cannot be improved by history taking*  
(Aphorism Nº 32)

**Diet**

*When a patient desires a dish that may be harmful, do not deprive him of it, rather try to modify it in a way it would no longer harm him*  
(Aphorism Nº 58)

**Stroke management**

*Stroke patients are advised to remain in contact with warm bodies, not fire, but the bodies of young women*  
(Aphorism Nº 46)

**Therapy**

*Do not use medications that might harm the principal organs*  
(Aphorism Nº 50)

*In his management, the physician should follow nature even if healing could take longer*  
(Aphorism Nº 79)

*When two medications are of equal benefit, choose the one that is more fragrant or more tasteful*  
(Aphorism Nº 47)

*Inhalants are more beneficial to the brain than medications taken by mouth*  
(Aphorism Nº 103)

*An important part of every therapy is to include olfactory, visual, tasteful, and auditory components to help the psyche*  
(Aphorism Nº 21)

**Prognosis**

*Always give a good prognosis, even if you are not sure, because recovery depends on morale*  
(Aphorism Nº 39)
The longer a habit has been ingrained, the more detrimental it becomes and the more difficult to shed off (Aphorism № 48)

REFERENCES