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INTRODUCTION

It is said that *history has a short memory*. This saying led me to read with pleasure *Le Soleil d'Allah brille sur l'Occident* by Sigrid Hunke (1997, Albin Michel) and then I decided to translate part of Book IV that narrates science in those days, specifically hospitals and doctors during the Umayyad, Abbasid and Seljuk periods.

EXCERPTS SELECTED

[...] Adub al-Dawla, the ruler and pillar of the Abbasid dynasty (949-983 AD), decided to build a hospital. So he asked the physician Al-Rasi (Rhases for the West) to find the most favorable place for the establishment. Al-Rasi sent his servants to place a piece of meat (taken from a sheep of the same age slaughtered for this purpose) to be placed in different quarters of Baghdad. It is in the quarter where the meat kept the most fresh after 24 hours that Adubi Hospital was built (p. 127).

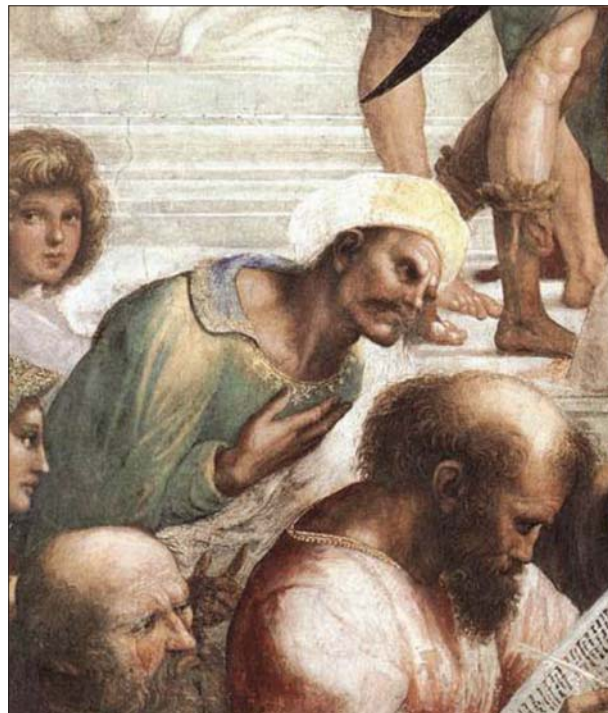
Other physicians, such as Sinan Ibn Thabit and his father, Thabit Ibn Sinan, also built hospitals and established ambulant sanitary services to serve villages and infirmaries in prisons. Income necessary for the foundation and maintenance of these hospitals was provided by the revenues of magnificent domains belonging to the hospitals (p. 129).

Physicians had also a scientific approach towards the patients. Abu al-Hakam, chief physician of the Nuri Hospital in Damascus, visited his patients every morning. He inquired about their health and listened to their grievances. He was accompanied by his assistants and male nurses. All that he prescribed medically or as a health diet was executed *illico*. Ending his round, he went to the casbah to treat the notables and the high civil servants of the government.

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Averroes, detail of the fresco *The School of Athens* by Raphael.

Then, he returned to the hospital and sat in the amphitheatre to read and prepare his courses. Nur al-Din, emir of Damascus, who ruled from 1146 to 1174, had installed in Nuri Hospital an important library that comprised a great number of books and manuscripts. Doctors and students joined Abu al-Hakam, who instructed students and discussed interesting cases that he encountered with doctors.

While Arab physicians inculcated practical science in their students, scholars in the religious schools in the West limited themselves to a theoretical science. At the bedside of patients in Arab hospitals, theory could be confirmed by experience and medical science studied directly on the human body (p. 131).

In the year 931, the Abbasid Caliph al-Muktadir knew that a doctor in Baghdad had made a professional mistake, leading to the death of a patient. From then on, he demanded that all doctors, except those at the service of the government, be subjected to an exam whose success would lead to a certificate of professional aptitude. He established a medical order whose president was Sinan Ibn Thabit, who was not to authorize a doctor to exer-

cise, except in the field of his specialty. Drawing limits and never bypassing them was the principle which inspired exams imposed on doctors before becoming specialists in a medical field (p. 134).

For major operations, the surgeon was assisted by colleagues. One colleague moistened the anesthetic sponge soaked with hashish, henbane and vetch that he held in front of the patient's nose. Another watched the pulse, and the third undertook the operation: incision was undertaken with extreme care, neither too big nor too deep. An assistant spread the lips of the wound with fine hooks.

“Cut slowly and gently to separate the tumor from the tissue around. Be careful not to spoil a blood vessel nor cut a nerve. Had you touch a blood vein, tie it carefully so as the blood does not hinder the operating area and prevent you from operating with care and precision. Once the tumor extirpated, introduce your finger into the opening to be sure that no residue is left. In case there is residue, extract it carefully. After making sure that all is cleaned, stitch the wound with a cat tendon after having removed a bit of the superfluous skin of the wound.”

This was the teaching of Ali Iben al-Abbas.

“But in case of cancer, where one cannot count on the efficacy of medicine, you must remove the outgrowth of the organ and cut largely around the cancerous tumor to be sure of having removed all the roots.”

A cloth soaked in wine must cover the wound to prevent all risks of infection.

It is quite obvious that a preoperational exam must be undertaken with utmost care. Far from being satisfied of examining the painful organ, one should proceed to a complete exam of the patient and ask: What are you complaining of? What are your habits? What diseases have you contracted? What are the sicknesses that your family suffers from? All information should be conscientiously noted.

Hence, the doctor subjects his patient to a series of questions, while examining his complexion, the state of his skin, his hair and the quality of his breathing. All this, to have an idea of the personality of the patient, his constitution and his temperament.

“Inquire about his state of mind. Ask a certain number of questions and force yourself to know whether his answers are reasonable or not. Order him to do a certain number of things to control his intellectual faculties and his docility (Hence, you would know if you could count on the exact execution of the prescriptions). Force yourself to know the nature of his character, what stimulates him and what depresses him.” (pp. 134-135)

Six hundred years ago, the faculty of medicine of Paris had only one book written by an Arab, Al-Rasi. This book was so precious that His Majesty, the very Chris-

tian Louis XI, had to deposit 12 silver pounds and one hundred golden crowns to borrow the treasured book. His Majesty wished that his doctors would consult it every time he got sick.

This work comprised the entire medical science from antiquity until 925 A.D. The colossal work included a large number of secondary writings found in the library of monasteries.

The Parisians knew the value of this treasure and erected a statue in the memory of Al-Rasi in the auditorium of the School of Medicine, boulevard Saint-Germain (p. 137).

Al-Rasi and his Arab colleagues had a major advantage over the West in the treatment of psychic patients that were incurable and alienated. But their example had practically passed unnoticed. All along the Middle Ages and until the mid XVIIIth century, the incurable, and more particularly the mental patients, were believed to be possessed by the devil and punished divinely for their sins.

In 1451, in Frankfurt, a mad man accused of having cursed the sacrament was punished as strictly as someone possessing all his mental faculties. In 1490, Contz Fogel, a leper affected with a mental sickness, was tortured for having blasphemed.

In the Arab countries, a mentally sick patient benefited from treatment in hospitals possessing a service for nervous illnesses or was treated in specialized clinics, such as in Baghdad and Cairo.

In the West and until the XIXth century, the mentally sick were thrown in dungeons and treated as criminals. No hospitals for mentally sick patients were found, except in Spain, a reminiscence of the Arab occupation.

In France, at the end of the XVIIIth century, Dr. Philippe Pinel fought the National Convention to withdraw the alienated from prisons and place them in hospitals (pp. 145-147).

Besides mental diseases, other sicknesses, yet not well-known, were attributed to devilish causes and were treated by exorcism, considered as the unique treatment. In the XIXth century, the poet and doctor Justinus Kerner of Weinsberg, friend of Goethe, Professors Schubert, Baader and von Ringseis of Munich, Professor Eschenmayer of Tübingen and Professor Heiroth of Leipzig agreed with the theory that a mentally sick person is possessed and in a state of sin, curable only through exorcism, prayers and the invocation of saints.

In 1824, Professor Windischmann of Leipzig celebrated the union of medicine and Christian theology in the following terms:

“Sickness is basically grounded in the soul, which is motivated by desire and finally leads to disturb the individual. Doctors who ignore the nature and the power of exorcism overlook the essential remedy, hence, the necessity of a Christian medicine.” (pp. 147-148)

It was Prince Oussama ibn Moukidh (1095-1188), the nephew of the sovereign of Chaisar, who kept good relations with his neighbors, the crusaders, who narrated the following sinister experience, not without cruel irony, illustrating the *admirable medical science of the crusaders*

Thabit Iben Sinan was asked to treat sick patients in the crusaders’ garrison that occupied the Munaytra casbah (Mount Lebanon). The two patients were a horseman with an abscess on the leg and a woman affected by a hectic fever. Thabit placed a suppurative plaster on the leg of the horseman. The abscess burst and the progress of the cure seemed to be on the right track. As for the woman, Thabit prescribed a diet of vegetables only.

In the meantime, a Frankish doctor arrived and declared the prescriptions faulty. He then requested a sharp ax, a tough horseman and asked the patient whether he preferred to die or live with one leg. At the response of the patient, the doctor placed the leg of the wounded horseman on a block of wood and ordered the robust horseman to cut off the leg with a hard blow. Thabit saw the horseman thud a terrible blow that was not sufficient

to cut off the leg. He then gave another blow as violent as the first one and the marrow ran out of the tibia. The unfortunate died in a moment.

Then the Frankish doctor examined the woman and said, *“A demon took over her and inhabited her head. Cut her hair!”* Her hair was cut and she started eating the same food as her compatriots, supplemented with garlic and mustard. The fever got higher. The doctor declared, *“The devil got into her brain.”* Holding a razor, he made an incision in the form of a cross on her head and tore a good part of the hair skin stripping the cranial bone that he rubbed with salt. The woman died within an hour.

Thabit asked whether his services were needed any longer. No was the answer. Thabit left having become conscious to have acknowledged from those good people things that he had ignored (pp. 117-118).

CONCLUSION

Reading S. Hunke’s book led me to correct the saying *“History has a short memory”* into *History has a selected memory*. One of the reasons for the decadence of the mentioned periods could be due to what Ibn Rushd, an Arab philosopher and theologian, said,

*When enslaving a nation is wanted,
Conceal ignorance in religion.*

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