

AVICENNA – A PRODIGY OF HISTORY

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Abstract: *The formation of the personality of the great Abu Ali ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, as well as his life and works, represents one of the most unique and remarkable pages of the historical and cultural heritage of Uzbekistan. This article traces Avicenna's legacy from his early youth, highlighting the significance of his encyclopedic works, which were important to both the East and the West, as well as the most ancient folios of Avicenna preserved in the world's unique manuscript collections.*

Keywords: *biographical manuscript, medical treatises, philosophy, scientific heritage, canon, autograph manuscripts*

Introduction

How much of the vast heritage of world civilization have we already discovered? And how much still preserves its astonishing secrets and stories? Manuscript masterpieces and the destinies of outstanding personalities—thinkers who stood at the pinnacle of achievement during the Muslim Renaissance—once made Central Asia and the Middle East the epicenter of science and philosophy. Their personalities continue to inspire admiration among all those who care about the development of civilization. We return again and again to the lives of these remarkable figures and to their intellectual masterpieces.

Abu Ali ibn Sina—known in the East as ash-Shaykh Ar-Ra'is (the Chief Master) and in the West as Avicenna—and everything he created represents one of the most distinctive and unique chapters in the historical and cultural heritage of Uzbekistan.

“I developed a passion for the science of medicine, and medical science is not among the most difficult sciences. Naturally, I mastered it in the shortest possible time. Distinguished physicians began to seek my advice. At that time, I was sixteen years old.”

These lines come from the biography of Ibn Sina, which he dictated around the year 1012 to his student and close companion



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Abu Ubayd al-Juzjani (Abu Ubayd Abdulwahid ibn Muhammad al-Juzjani, d. 1070). This biography covers the first half of Avicenna's life. The second half of the great physician's life was written by al-Juzjani, based on his personal observations during his stay with Avicenna until Avicenna's death.

The earliest and most reliable source on the life and scientific activity of Ibn Sina is the manuscript "Mukhtasar min Tarikh al-Shaykh al-Ra'is Abu Ali ibn Sina" ("A Short Biography of Shaykh al-Ra'is Abu Ali ibn Sina"). It consists of two parts.

The first part—covering his birth, life in Bukhara, and his move to Khorezm—was written by Ibn Sina himself.

The second part describes Avicenna's life in Gurganj, Ray, Qazvin, Hamadan, and Isfahan, and was written by his student Abu Ubayd al-Juzjani, who remained inseparable from the great scholar for twenty-five years. Numerous copies of this manuscript, produced in different periods, are preserved in libraries in Egypt, Iran, France, Great Britain, and Uzbekistan.

Another biographical manuscript titled "Risala fi Tarikh Ibn Sina" ("Treatise on the Biography of Ibn Sina") was copied by an unknown calligrapher in 1155. This manuscript is essentially a retelling of the previous biography, with only a slight difference in the treatise's title. However, its exceptional value lies in the fact that one of its pages contains a poem attributed to Ibn Sina, which, according to legend, he recited shortly before his death:

"From the dark dust up to the heavenly spheres

I unraveled the secrets of great words and deeds..."

It is known that during his relatively short life—he lived only 57 years—Abu Ali ibn Sina studied and wrote more than 450 works on medicine, philosophy, literary studies, chemistry, astronomy, mechanics, and psychology. He was also an accomplished poet who left behind incomparable rubaiyat. More than 240 of his works have survived to the present day in manuscripts copied by different calligraphers in various historical periods.¹

The surviving correspondence between Abu Ali ibn Sina and Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1048) represents a unique example of scientific dialogue, deep philosophical reflection on ancient authors, devotion to science, and an intellectual search for the "cornerstone of the universe." This correspondence is preserved at the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhan al-

Biruni in Tashkent. The two great scholars worked together in Dar al-Hikma—the House of Wisdom—known in scholarly circles as the Ma'mun Academy of Khorezm.

The full name of Avicenna was Abu Ali al-Husayn ibn Abdullah ibn Ali. He was born in 980. His father, Abdullah, originally from Balkh, served as a state official at the court of the Samanids. It is evident that the young Ibn Sina received an excellent education from an early age.

What kind of person was Avicenna? By the age of ten, he had memorized all the surahs of the Holy Qur'an, and by the age of sixteen, he had independently studied the works of ancient authors.

The worldview of Abu Ali ibn Sina was shaped by the philosophical teachings of Aristotle and Plato. Although medicine was his primary field of research, philosophical issues occupy a central place in his intellectual legacy. According to various sources, he wrote more than eighty works on philosophy, theology, and Sufism. Religious themes played an important role in his studies. His Persian treatises, such as "The Story of the Bird," "Solomon and Iqbal," and "The Tale of Yusuf," demonstrate the breadth of his philosophical outlook.

Avicenna was thoroughly familiar with the works of Euclid, Ptolemy's Almagest, fiqh (Islamic religious law), and logic. He belonged to the small elite of highly educated people and, from an early age, realized the necessity of acquiring knowledge for its own sake.

"When I had mastered logic, natural sciences, and mathematics, I turned to theology and read Aristotle's Metaphysics."²

While still a young man in Bukhara, Avicenna read Aristotle's Metaphysics forty times. He even memorized the work, yet still could not understand its purpose.

"I despaired of understanding it and told myself that this was a book whose meaning could never be grasped."

One evening before sunset, he visited the marketplace of scribes where manuscript books were sold. Bukhara at that time was a remarkable cultural center, and the book market served as a meeting place for poets and scholars engaged in lively debates.

A bookseller praised a certain book and offered it to Avicenna.

“No benefit lies in this book,” Avicenna replied and pushed it aside. But the merchant insisted:

“The owner of the manuscript urgently needs the money.”

Avicenna eventually purchased it. The book turned out to be a commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* written by the great encyclopedic scholar Abu Nasr al-Farabi.³

“The doors of the fundamental ideas of this book were opened to me. I was overjoyed and the next day distributed generous alms to the poor,” he wrote in his autobiography.

This story is only a small attempt to lift the veil over the life and formation of a genius whose life was filled with dramatic events, losses, persecutions by powerful rulers, and the overcoming of many difficulties.

In 1002, Ibn Sina left for Gurganj, and nine years later, fleeing from Mahmud of Ghazni, he left Khorezm with his teacher, Abu Sahl al-Masihi, and traveled to Abivard, north of Khorasan. Later, he moved to Nishapur, and from 1014 to 1037, he lived and worked first in Ray, then in Hamadan and Isfahan.

His monumental work “*Kitab al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*” (The Canon of Medicine) determined the development of medical science for many centuries and became the foundation of practical medicine and pharmacology.

Avicenna began writing the Canon of Medicine at the age of twenty and completed it in 1020, when he was forty.

In the 12th century, Gerard of Cremona (1114–1187) translated the Canon from Arabic into Latin, and later it spread throughout Europe in numerous copies. After the invention of the printing press, the Canon became one of the first books printed, after the Bible, and rivaled it in the number of editions.⁴

The works of Avicenna were admired by the great geniuses of the European Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) referred to Avicenna in his Codex devoted to human anatomy around 1500, indicating a careful study and analysis of the principles presented in *The Canon of Medicine*.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), the greatest poet of the Italian Renaissance, also placed Avicenna alongside the great scholars of antiquity. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante writes:

“There is the geometer Euclid, there Ptolemy,

Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna,
Averroes, the great commentator of our age.
I cannot name them all one by one,
I must speak briefly of them all,
And often my words are not sufficient.”

According to historians, Omar Khayyam died while studying a treatise by Ibn Sina. Researchers have also discovered that in Ireland, a translation of Avicenna’s Canon of Medicine into Irish, dating from the 16th century, was found.

One of the earliest surviving manuscripts of the Canon, dating from the 12th century, has been preserved since the 19th century in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg.

In 1819-1825, in two stages, the Russian Academy of Sciences purchased a collection of Arabic manuscripts from the French diplomat Jean Baptiste Louis Jacques Rousseau (1780-1831), who served as a consul in Aleppo and Tripoli. Among the Rousseau collection was an invaluable tome, the most famous book in the history of medicine, Kitab al-Qanun fi-t-Tibb, or The Canon of Medicine, by Abu Ali ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna.⁵

An extremely rare manuscript of the Canon is preserved in the Süleymaniye Library in Turkey. This unique copy contains 140 pages in Arabic and includes an inscription indicating that Avicenna himself wrote part of the manuscript.

Another remarkable manuscript preserved in the same library is “Kitab al-Shifa” (The Book of Healing), copied in 1031. It contains a short note written by Avicenna himself:

“Praise be to Allah who brought us to this in the month of Rajab of the year 422. I, the author known as Ibn Sina, hoping for the forgiveness of my Lord, read and compared” Thus, this note was written by Avicenna six years before his death.

The encyclopedic work “Kitab al-Shifa” (The Book of Healing) includes sections devoted to logic, natural sciences, mathematics, and theology (metaphysics). Before it was transferred to the Süleymaniye Library, the manuscript had belonged to the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Sultanate, as evidenced by the seal impression preserved in the colophon.

Returning to “The Canon of Medicine” (Kitab al-Qanun fi al-Tibb), it should be noted that until the twentieth century, no translation of the Canon from the original Arabic into any other language—except Latin—had been undertaken anywhere in the world.

In the 1930s, an attempt was made to translate the Canon into English; however, unfortunately, only half of the first book was translated. It was only between 1934 and 1961 that scholars of Uzbekistan, in cooperation with the Medical Academy of the USSR, succeeded in producing a complete translation of the Canon into Russian and Uzbek, accompanied by scholarly commentaries. This work lasted twenty-seven years.

The translations into Uzbek and Russian were carried out by scholars using manuscripts from the Rousseau Collection, which is preserved at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOM RAS). The translators also relied on the famous Bulaq edition, published in Cairo in 1877. However, the legacy of the brilliant Avicenna extends beyond his medical research, as noted above. Manuscripts devoted to themes of spiritual perfection, divine love, courage, bravery, and justice include the poetic collection “Muntakhab Ash‘ar Ibn Sina” (“Selected Poems of Ibn Sina”) and the allegorical treatise “Risalat al-Tayr” (“The Treatise on the Bird”). In this work, Avicenna compares the philosopher's soul to a captured bird that, struggling to free itself from earthly bonds, flies through the infinite expanse of the universe in search of truth until the angel of death releases it from its final chains.

In many of his works, Ibn Sina quoted verses from the Qur‘an and interpreted certain surahs from the perspective of his own religious and philosophical views. These tafsirs are preserved in many libraries around the world. Ibn Sina also made a significant contribution to Sufi literature. Biographical accounts and historical literary sources indicate that he corresponded with well-known Sufi scholars of his time.

Scholars often refer to the famous treatise by Nizami Aruzi of Samarqand, “Majma‘ al-Nawadir” (“Collection of Rarities”), later known as “Chahar Maqala” (“The Four Discourses”). This work was written in 504 AH (1110–1111 CE) and contains information about several prominent figures of that era, including Abu Abdullah Rudaki, Omar Khayyam, Abulqasim Ferdowsi, and Avicenna.⁶

In one section of his manuscript, Nizami Aruzi describes the medical profession and recounts an episode in which Ibn Sina

treated a young man suffering from lovesickness. Standing beside the patient's bed, Avicenna would often say:

"Are you with me? If you are with me, you will recover. If you remain with the illness, I will hardly be able to help you."

This episode is illustrated by a miniature in *Chahar Maqala* depicting Ibn Sina at the bedside of the sick young man. Specialists emphasize that this image should not be regarded as an authentic portrait of Avicenna but rather as a symbolic representation.

Another important work is "Risala fi al-'Ishq" ("Treatise on Love"). This text consists of an introduction and seven chapters. In it, Ibn Sina argues that love is an innate force inherent not only in human beings but also in animals, plants, and all living creatures.

Even this single work demonstrates that the most important principle in Avicenna's life was reason. As one well-known hadith states:

"Do not attempt to read the Qur'an until you have learned to reason."

It is extremely difficult to present a complete picture of the life and intellectual achievements of the great thinker Abu Ali ibn Sina within a single narrative. One can confidently say that his life was filled with dramatic events during a period of profound upheaval, war, and religious conflict. Despite these circumstances, he managed to devote himself entirely to science and reason. The story of Avicenna's life is therefore a story of remarkable breakthroughs and intellectual illumination, as well as the extraordinary endurance and perseverance of genius.

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¹ **Starr, S. F.** *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*. Alpina Publisher, 2017.

² **Mukhtasar min Tarikh al-Shaykh al-Ra'is Abu Ali ibn Sina** ("A Short Biography of Shaykh al-Ra'is Abu Ali ibn Sina"). In: *Abu Ali ibn Sina*, Vol. I. Medical Literature Publishing House, 1996, p. 21.

³ **Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Farabi** (870–950) was one of the greatest encyclopedic scholars. He was a philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, physicist, music theorist, and author of commentaries on Aristotle's works, from which he received the honorary title of the "Second Teacher." He was also among the first remarkable scholars to divide logic into two parts—idea and proof; among the first in physics to

advance the theory that air has volume that changes depending on space; and one of the first medieval thinkers to describe astrology as a “false science” and distinguish it from astronomy

⁴ The Medici were a dynasty of Florentine rulers, who were essentially the “godfathers” of the Italian Renaissance. The most prominent member of this dynasty was Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), who was a patron of the great Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Michelangelo Buonarroti. Lorenzo de' Medici was a skilled diplomat, and his reign was marked by his benevolence towards Florence and his avoidance of conflicts with other Italian city-states.

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The Canon of Medical Science in Irish was discovered by Padreg O Mahan, a professor at University College Cork, who studied early books published in London. the author)

⁵ Jean Baptiste Louis Jacques Rousseau was a professional hereditary diplomat whose father and grandfather served in Persia, and he was also the nephew of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a prominent French Enlightenment thinker.

⁶ Abu Ali ibn Sino. T I, Medical Literature Publishing House, 1996, p. 21.