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A Mediaeval Compendium of Arabic Medicine:

Abū Sahl al-Masīhī's "Book of the Hundred"*

Carcant, Ebu Sahl Isa b. Yahya al-Masihī (400/1000?) 167
Suter, 29

GHADA KARMI**

Note: E. J. Brill edition

Introduction

The *kunnāsh*¹ (or compendium) type of book was very popular among Arabic physicians of the mediaeval period and became the commonest form of medical book to be written. It was supposed to be a comprehensive system of medicine in condensed form, so as to acquaint the reader with all the essentials of medicine without overloading him with too much detail. Many *kunnāshāt* declared this to be their explicit aim in their introductory remarks.² As time went on, the *kunnāsh* became the preferred type of medical work, to the despair of such educational purists as Ibn Riḍwān who strongly deprecated the substitution of these derivative works for the original works of the ancients.³

These books were not identical either in arrangement or in content, but they resembled each other in certain important respects: they all included at some point a section on diseases arranged from head to toe; many also

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1. The word *kunnāsh* is interesting. It does not appear to be of Arabic derivation, but comes from the Syriac *kunnāsha* (M. Ullmann, *Wörterbuch der klassischen arabischen Sprache*, Vol. I (Wiesbaden, 1970), p. 387, 20 A.

2. For example, ʿAlī b. al-ʿAbbās al-Majūsī (fl. 949-982) writes in the introduction to his *kunnāsh*, *Kāmil al-ṣināʿa al-tibbiyya* (Cairo, Bulaq, 1294/1877), Vol. I, p. 7, l. 28f, that he has composed his book:

"That it might be easy (for physicians) to find one book which contains all that is necessary (in medicine). I will not leave out anything that might be needed by students and learned scholars."

3. Ibn Riḍwān was an 11th-century physician of Cairo (d.1061) who took a great interest in the medical education of his day. For his biography, see Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aʿfībāʾ*, (henceforth: IAU) ed. A. Müller, (Königsberg, 1884). He wrote a tract on this subject, *al-Nāfiʿ fī kayfiyyat taʿlīm ṣināʿat al-tibb* ("the useful book on the quality of medical education"). The relevant extract is quoted by A. Z. Iskandar in his, "An attempted reconstruction of the late Alexandrian medical curriculum", *Med. Hist.*, 20 (1976), 241.

One wonders whether the *kunnāsh* type of book was not always preferred, almost from the beginning of the translation movement from Greek and Syriac into Arabic. *Kunnāshāt* in Syriac were certainly available before 700 A. D. and came to be written in Arabic from 800 A. D. onwards.