

Ibn Rushd Averroes

– Written by Emilia Calvo, Spain

Al-Andalus produced some of the brightest intellectual minds of the Middle Ages. One of them was Ibn Rushd, who is universally considered one of the greatest philosophers of Islam. His philosophical work has enjoyed universal recognition as a major influence in Medieval and Renaissance European philosophy. In fact, the history of substantial Averroism influence continued up to the end of the 16th century and beyond. Ibn Rushd was also a pre-eminent physician, but his philosophical and judicial works somewhat overshadowed his medical works although some of those, too, enjoyed much respect and influence.

Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd, known in

the Latin West as Averroes, was born in 1126 AD in Córdoba (Spain) to a family of distinguished jurists. His grandfather was a *qadi* (judge) in Córdoba and composed several valuable works. His father held the same position and Ibn Rushd himself was appointed *qadi* of Seville. There he met the most influential physician of his time, Ibn Zuhr (Avenzoar), who probably contributed to his medical training.

Initially educated in Islamic law and theology, Ibn Rushd developed a career which also focused on the study of philosophy, medicine, astronomy and other sciences of Greek tradition. Ibn Rushd served as a judge in the courts of Seville, Córdoba and Marrakech and also as a chief physician under the Almohads, the North

African dynasty that ruled al-Andalus and North Africa between the 12th and the 13th centuries.

He summarised and commented on most of the philosophical and logical works of Aristotle and the scientific works of many other authors, both Greek (Plato, Ptolemy, Euclid, Galen) and Islamic (al-Farabi, Ibn Sina al-Gazali, Ibn Bajja) as well as authors of other areas such as the Jewish botanist Nicholas of Damascus.

In 1153, Ibn Rushd was in Marrakesh where he was acquainted with the philosopher and astronomer Ibn Tufayl who held the position of court physician. In 1168, Ibn Tufayl introduced Ibn Rushd to Abu Yaqub Yusuf, the Almohad sovereign who was interested in philosophy, astronomy



Image: Ibn Rushd in Rafael Sanzio's *The School of Athens* (1509). {{PD-1923}}

metaphysics, 12 on theory of the soul and of the knowledge, 20 on medicine, 8 on Islamic law (*Sharia*), 6 on Islamic theology, 4 on grammar and poetry, 1 on ethics and 3 on politics.

Aristotle was his philosophical model and his commentaries on Aristotle's works occupied him throughout his life to the point that he was known as 'the Commentator'. He wrote three types of commentaries on the works of Aristotle which correspond to different stages in his life. The shortest were brief summaries (*Jami*) compiled at an earliest stage, most of them between 1160 and 1170. The intermediate were paraphrases (*Talkhis*) while the longest are known under the title of *Tafsir* and are presented following the style of the Qur'anic commentaries.

As a student of Aristotle's, Ibn Rushd sought to remove neoplatonic influences from Aristotelianism as described by Ibn Sina and, as a devout Muslim, he attempted to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with Islamic theology. He rejected the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation and held that the individual intellect does not survive death. Immortality, therefore, is general, not particular.

His most prominent original work in philosophy, the *Tahafut al-tahafut* or *The Refutation of Refutation*, was written in 1184 in response to al-Ghazali's work, *The Refutation of the Philosophers*. Ibn Rushd defended Aristotelian philosophy against the claims of al-Ghazali that philosophy

and medicine. The caliph raised to them the question of the eternity or the creation of the world. Ibn Rushd initially remained quiet, but he eventually joined the conversation and impressed the caliph with his brilliance.

Ibn Tufayl suggested that Ibn Rushd comment on the works of Aristotle at the request of the caliph who had often complained about the darkness of the philosophy of the Greeks and of the Arabic translations available. Ibn Rushd undertook this work while he assumed the judicature first in Seville in 1169 and then in Córdoba, in 1180. In 1182, he succeeded Ibn Tufayl as chief physician to Abu Yaqub Yusuf. But at the end of the 12th century a wave of fanaticism beset al-Andalus and in 1196 Ibn

Rushd was banished and isolated in the city of Lucena, near Córdoba. His philosophical works were prohibited and it was only a few months before his death in 1198 that he was rehabilitated.

Because of the censorship laws of the time, some of his works on logic and metaphysics were lost. Much of his work has survived only through Hebrew and Latin translations and not in their original Arabic. Ibn Rushd wrote more than 100 works, including original works, his commentaries on most of Aristotle and Galen's works, and his commentary on Plato's *The Republic*. Among them there are 9 on astronomy and mathematics, 5 on Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), 18 on physics, 18 on logic, 9 on

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contradicts religion and is therefore an affront to the teachings of Islam. Ibn Rushd was criticised by later Muslim scholars for this book. Nevertheless, it had profound influences on European thought until the beginning of modern philosophy. His commentaries were used as standard texts, in preference to the treatises of Aristotle, in the 14th and 15th centuries and were included in the syllabi of several Western universities such as Paris.

Ibn Rushd was acquainted with the fundamentals of astronomy and, at an early stage of his life, wrote a *Mukhtasar al-Majisti, Summary of the Almagest*. That work contains a critical account of Ptolemy's work in the light of the achievements of some earlier astronomers, which amended Ptolemy's models. This work is preserved in the Hebrew translation made by Jacob Anatoli in 1231.

As a physician, Ibn Rushd wrote some original works in medicine as well as commentaries on several medical works of Galen as well as a *Commentary on the Rajaz poem of Ibn Sina on Medicine (Sarh Urjuzat Ibn Sina fi l-Tibb)*.

The didactic poem was widely used by Arab physicians to summarise their own medical treatises, using the *rajaz* meter to facilitate the teaching of medicine. Ibn Sina (980-1037) wrote his *Urjuza* using the same structure and content as his *Canon of Medicine*. He was one of the first Arab physicians to adopt this method. Among all *urjuzas* composed, the most famous was probably this one, considered, in the words of J. Vernet, as "the supreme example of the compendia in verse to be memorized." It was translated into Latin in 1280 with the title of *Avicennae Canticae*, following Ibn Rushd's commentary.

In the case of Galen's commentaries, the opinion of the Greek author is sometimes corrected to follow Aristotle's principles, but there are also attempts at harmonisation such as in the case of breathing, voluntary according to Aristotle while involuntary in Galen. In this case Ibn Rushd admits some influence of conscious will. One example of Galen commentaries by Ibn Rushd is the *Paraphrase of the Temperaments of Galen (Talkhis Kitab al mizaj li-Jalinus)*, written at the request of Ibn Rushd's sons, Abu l-Qasim and Abu Muhammad. It deals with the

four elements of which the animal body is composed. It describes their composition during the different stages of the animal, as well as the signs of them according to the theories of Aristotle, Hippocrates and the ancients. It ends with speculation about the qualities, cold, wet, hot and dry, existing in power but not in action, with reference to the actions exerted by drugs in the body with specific reference to the books of Galen, *On the Constitution and Properties of Simple Drugs* and *On the Therapeutic Method*.

Among his original works there are several monographic treatises devoted to

practical questions with a wide range of subjects such as fever, sickness and theriac (antidotes). But the most comprehensive work was his medical encyclopaedia entitled *Kitab al-Kulliyat fi-l Tibb* or *Book of the Generalities in Medicine* (i.e. general medicine), written at the request of the caliph in 1162. It was an extensive manual of medicine where Ibn Rushd compiled everything that had been written on the matter. The motive was that the basic ideas about medicine would serve both the doctor and the layman as well to remind the layman of the doctor's expert knowledge.



Image: Monument of Ibn Rushd by Pablo Yusti (1967) in Cairaouan Street in Córdoba, Spain. Image by Mohamed Lounes/Gamma-Rapho

He also aimed to gather the ideas already exposed by Greek authors like Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen, and also by the Arab authorities such as al-Razi, Ibn Sina, al-Kindi and Ibn Zuhr.

The work is divided into seven books, including anatomy (*tashrih al-a'da'*), physiology (*al-sihha*, health), pathology (*al-marad*, disease), symptoms (*al-'alamat*, signs), therapeutics (*al-adwiya wa' l-agdiya*, medicines and food), hygiene (*hifz al-sihha*, the maintenance of health) and medication (*shifa' al-amrad*, the cure of diseases).

The first four books are mainly theoretical, while the other three are more practical, offering a combination of his theoretical philosophical ideas with the practical ones characteristic of a doctor who practiced this art. This is especially clear in the last book on medication, which also informs us as to the actual medicines developed in al-Andalus at that time.

Ibn Rushd indicates that this book is complemented by the *Taysir* (*The facilitation*), written by his friend Ibn Zuhr, the great Sevillian physician. The purpose of the composition of both books was probably to replace the *Canon* of Ibn Sina so that al-Andalus would have a medical work of importance and dimension equal to the one compiled in the East.

In his expositions Ibn Rushd used his own experience and observations. The treatment of anatomy in this work has been considered one of Ibn Rushd's most original contributions, changing the head-to-toe order and the Galenic description of a living body to that of a passive body. Nevertheless, the anatomical descriptions are not

completely original since he mostly relied on earlier manuals such as al-Razi's *Hawi*, although he corrects some mistakes in these sources. The last book on pharmacology offers some interesting data taken from his experience, such as the material on diet in al-Andalus. Another one is the correction to al-Kindi's law for determining the degree of a compound which was controversial among the medieval European physicians.

Ibn Rushd's encyclopaedia was translated into Latin as *Colliget* by the Jewish Bonacosa in Padua, in 1285. Several Latin editions of it were published in Venice, the first of them in 1482, followed by nine more between 1490 and 1574, some of them together with Ibn Zuhr's *Taysir* and Ibn Rushd's *Treatise on the Theriac*.

From these editions the *Colliget* was well known by Western medicine. In fact it was the basis for many medical concepts among some European doctors. This was the case of the Jewish Moses ben Samuel who converted to Christianity with the name of John of Avignon. He knew the book perfectly and quoted it in his medical *Sevillana Medicina*, sometimes indicating even the chapter and the paragraph. The German Johannes of Ketham, author of *Compendium of Human Health*, also used the Latin version of the work. So also Bernard of Gordonio, a doctor from the South of France, author of a treatise, *Lilio de Medicina*. Although depending more basically on Ibn Sina, it also took into account two works of Ibn Rushd: his commentary on Ibn Sina's *Urjuza* and his *Treatise on the Theriac*.

The Treatise on the Theriac (*Maqala fi'l-tiryaq*) is a medical-philosophical reflection

that includes the Greek theories of Galen and Democritus, as well as the ones by Arab physicians like Ibn Sina and al-Majusi, sometimes amending them with his own medical experience. The treatise deals with issues like the justification for the creation of the *theriac* by the ancients to be an antidote to all kinds of poison, especially animal poisons; the confirmation of its usefulness for healing diseases as well as for preserving health; the use of wine, especially in the case of young people who need their intake; the need to resort to a legal scholar if legal problems arise, depending on the individual case; and on the expiration date of compounds and on the period of preparation and use of them. It was translated into Latin by the Italian physician Andrea Alpago with the title *De Theriaca*.

In summary, the medical work of Ibn Rushd can be considered closer to Renaissance medicine than Medieval medicine. It was well known in the European cultural centres, perhaps also because of the enormous prestige and fame that he achieved as a philosopher and thinker. In any case, the *Colliget* was still in use in Europe in the 16th century.

Further Reading

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2. Forcada M. *Ibn Rushd*. In: Glick TF, Livesey SJ, Wallis F, ed. *Medieval Science, Technology and Medicine: An Encyclopaedia*. New York: Routledge 2005. p. 253-255.
3. Mazliak P. *Avicenne et Averroes: Médecine et biologie dans la civilisation de l'Islam*. Paris: Vuivert, 2004.



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