

Hunayn Ibn Ishaq

– Written by Hady Ahmad, United Kingdom

"I sought for it earnestly and travelled in search of it in the lands of Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt until I reached Alexandria, but I was not able to find anything, except about half of it at Damascus¹." These words from Hunayn Ibn Ishaq Al-'Ibadi on his extensive and exhaustive search for the original Greek text of Galen's *De demonstration*, highlight why this Middle Eastern physician became one of the most celebrated scholars of the Islamic medieval period. Hunayn, also known by his Latin name Johannitius, was one of the key figures in the major translation movement that was carried out under the auspices of the Bait al-Hikma, the 'House of Wisdom.' His command of Syriac, Arabic, Persian and

Greek languages enabled him to translate the works of the major Greek medical scholars such as Galen and Hippocrates into Arabic—the '*lingua franca*' of the Middle East at the time. Indeed the celebrated scholar Max Meyerhof deemed Hunayn to be "the greatest translator of scientific works from Greek into Syriac and Arabic"² due to his medical expertise, his mastery of Greek and his exacting standards. Hunayn, more than any other scholar of the medieval Islamic period, represented the caliph al-Mamun's vision of an Islamic golden age of learning. His important contributions to the field of medicine, particularly in ophthalmology and his seminal translations of Greek and Persian works, such as Galen's *Ars Medica*,

ensured ancient medical knowledge was both enhanced and preserved for future generations of physicians and scholars. Medical texts authored by him became standard revision guides in medical schools in both the Islamic world and Western Europe. He was also instrumental in turning Arabic into a language of science through his creation of a new Arabic lexicon that could convey Hellenic medical knowledge to scholars in the Abbasid empire.

'Abu Zaid Hunayn Ibn Ishaq Al-'Ibadi was a Christian born in the city of al-Hira³, located near the present day city of Najaf in Iraq. Descended from the Arab tribe of Al-'Ibad, as evidenced by his *nisba*, Al-'Ibadi, he belonged to the Syrian Nestorian

Church. His father, Ishaq, was a pharmacist at Hira. This Mesopotamian city, juxtaposed between three major cultural forces, Arab, Assyrian and Persian, came into prominence in the pre-Islamic era during the Lakhmid dynasty³. Hira played a critical role in the development of Hunayn's education and mastery of Arabic, Syriac and Persian, languages that formed the foundation of his scholarly endeavours. Hunayn would have mastered the Syriac language of the Nestorian Christians during his youth, together with Arabic, the language of his tribe. Persian, a scholarly language that learned men in Hira would study, would – like Greek – have been a language that Hunayn learned later in life⁴.

Hunayn received his medical training under Abu Zakariya Yuhanna ibn Massawayh, a famous physician who resided in Baghdad. Originally from Gondishapur in western Iran, Yuhanna ibn Massawayh had moved to Baghdad where he became the court physician to the caliph⁵. As a physician and medical writer who covered subjects such as fevers, dietetics, depression and ophthalmology, Yuhanna would have provided Hunayn with an excellent medical education. However, the relationship between the learned court physician and inquisitive pupil became strained due to Hunayn's rather too enquiring nature. This resulted in Yuhanna rebuking Hunayn and dismissing him from his tutelage, saying:

"What makes the people of Hira want to study medicine? Go away and find of your friends: he will lend you fifty dirhems. Buy some little baskets for a dirhem, some arsenic for three dirhems and with the rest buy coins of Kufa and of Qadisiyya. Coat the money of Qadisiyya with arsenic and put it in the baskets and stand by the side of

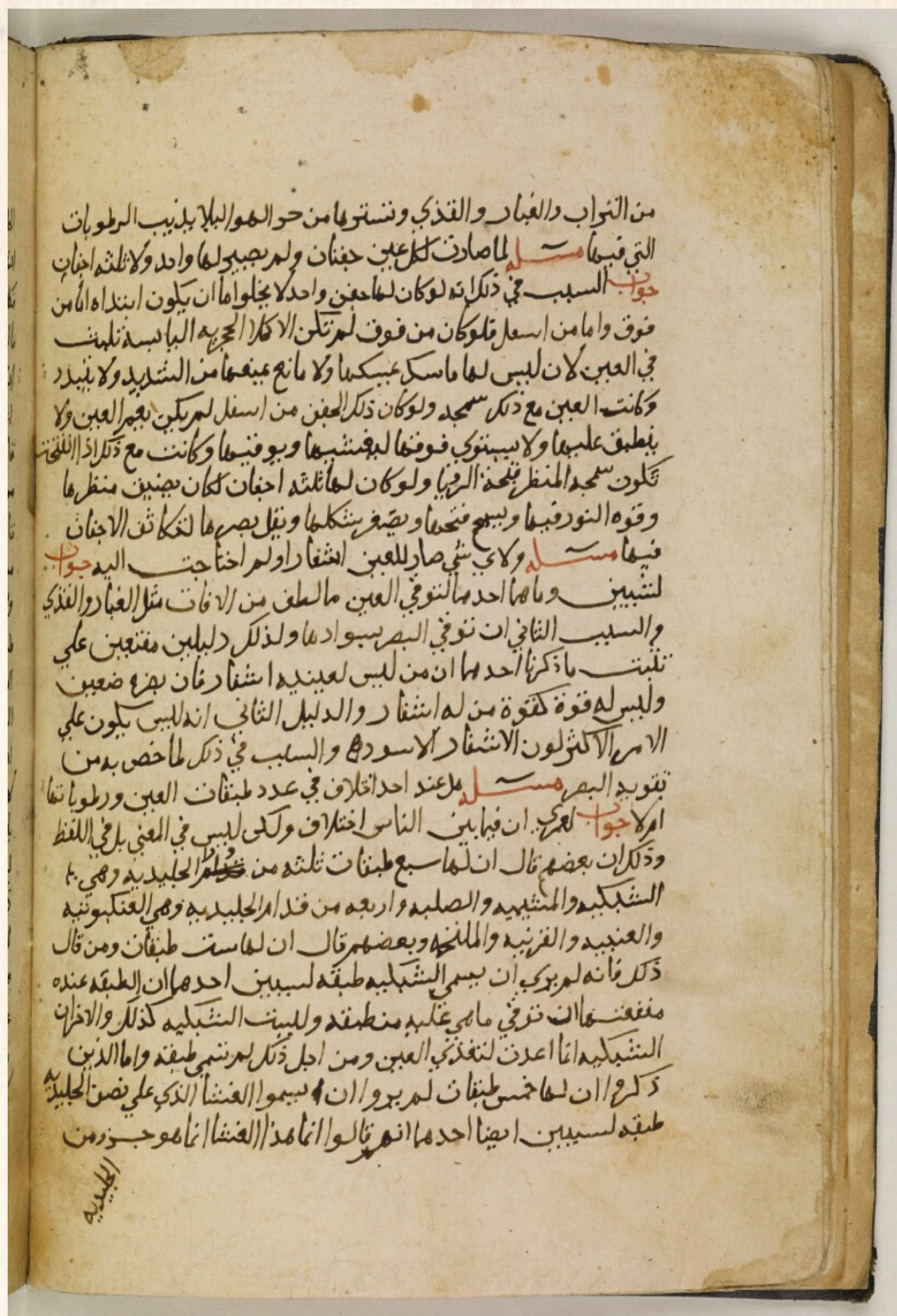


Figure 1: Hunayn's discussion of the reason why the eye has two lids in his *Masa'il fi al-'ayn*.

the road crying: 'Here is true money, good for giving alms and for spending...' Sell the coins; that will earn you much more than the science of medicine."

This episode in Hunayn's life was a decisive event which led to his decision to leave Baghdad, determined to continue his pursuit of medicine. As most medical literature of the time was Greek, he turned his focus to mastering the language. Sources indicate that Hunayn either spent time in Alexandria, a centre of Greek learning or in

Bilad-al-Rum, Byzantium. He returned to Baghdad during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun. Succeeding his father Harun al-Rashid as the seventh caliph of the Abbasid dynasty, Abu Jafar al-Ma'mun ibn Harun, wanted the 'skill and wisdom of the ancients' to be the foundation of a new age of learning and science in his empire. To realise his vision of turning Baghdad, the capital of his empire, into a seat of learning al-Ma'mun sent out cultural envoys to acquire scientific manuscripts

from both his lands and beyond. Impressed by his mastery of the Greek language, Gibra'il ibn Bukhtishu', the court physician of the caliph, commissioned Hunayn to translate the Hellenic medical manuscripts which had been brought to Baghdad by the caliph's cultural emissaries. These initial commissions were the beginning of a glorious chapter in the history of medicine in the Islamic medieval period, as Hunayn embarked on a period of scholarship that was unparalleled in the Islamic world at the time.

Hunayn's famed reputation as a scholar and translator rested upon two crucial elements. Firstly his translations of Greek works into both Syriac and Arabic were superior to previous translations due to his complete mastery of the languages and his creation of a new Arabic medical lexicography. Gotthelf Bergsträsser in a study of Hunayn's translation technique writes:

"The correctness is greater; nevertheless one is left with the impression that this is not the result of anxious effort, but of a free and sure mastery of the language. This is seen in the easier adaptation to the Greek original and the striking exactness of expression obtained without verbosity. It is all this that constitutes the famous *fasaha* (eloquence) of Hunayn!"

His desire to render the Greek text into Syriac and Arabic without losing the essence of the original text required that Hunayn develop a new Arabic medical vocabulary. Hunayn highlights the problem by stating that Arabic did not have many of the words for drugs and medical instruments that existed in Persian, Greek or Syriac⁸. As he chose to translate rather than transliterate medical terms, he had to compose this new Arabic terminology to accurately convey Greek medical expressions. His creation of this new Arabic medical lexis made Hunayn "instrumental in developing Arabic into a formidable international language of science"⁹ during this golden era of learning in the Middle East. Through his grasp and understanding of the Arabic and Greek languages, as shown by his philological works on grammar and vocabulary such as *Kitab fil-nahw* ('On Grammar'), Hunayn was able to accurately render Hellenistic medical knowledge into an eloquent and

precise Arabic adaptation. Hunayn would also revise his own translations later on in his life as his medical understanding and technique evolved or if a different manuscript shed new light on an existing text. Commenting on his translation of a Galenic text, he said:

"I translated it when I was a young man... from a very defective Greek manuscript. Later, when I was 46 years old, my pupil Hubasish asked me to correct it after having collected a certain number of Greek manuscripts. Thereupon I collated these so as to manuscript with the Syriac text and corrected thus in all my translation work!"

Hunayn would translate Hellenic works into both Arabic and Syriac with his nephew Hubaysh and his son Ishaq, both of whom became distinguished translators. The scholarly focus on Hunayn is based on his Arabic translations, as his works in Syriac – which formed a large part of his work – have not survived.

Hunayn's exacting translation methodology, his contribution to Arabic medical

lexicology as well as the sheer volume of the works he translated into both Syriac and Arabic would have sufficed to cement his reputation as a remarkable scholar. Hunayn, however also composed his own original medical works and his own reputation as a physician, oculist and his creation of an Arabic medical curriculum constitutes the second element of his inimitable reputation. His *Kitab al 'Ashar Maqalat fi 'l 'ayn* ('Ten Treatises on the Eye') "the earliest existing systematic text-book of ophthalmology"¹⁰, and his two medical manuals, *Masa'il fi al-tibb* ('Questions on Medicine') and *Masa'il fi al-'ayn* ('Questions on the Eye'), were instrumental in establishing Hunayn's reputation as an original contributor to medical theory both in the Middle East and later in Western Europe. Due to the way he had classified medical theory in the aforementioned treatises, Hunayn effectively established a structured programme of study for medical scholars". As Maria Chicco states: "Hunayn's manuals represent a great advance toward



Figure 2: Medical description of the eye by Hunayn Ibn-Ishaq in his *Kitab al 'Ashar Maqalat fi 'l 'ayn*.

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classification [with] some of his answers [being] remarkable for their descriptive precision and clarity of presentation¹².” Originally written for his sons and nephews, these manuals became indispensable tools for student physicians, as attested to by extant manuscript copies that contain copies of successful examination results based on Hunayn’s works. As standard medical texts in the Islamic world his works were translated into Latin with his *Masa’il fi al-tibb* rendered as ‘*Isagoge Johannis ad parvum artem Galeni*’ and his *Kitab al-Ashar Maqalat fi l’ayn* as ‘*Galenus Liber de Oculis translatus a Demetrio*’. These Latin translations became part of the teaching curriculum in European medical schools in Paris, Bologna and Padua¹².

In recognition of his knowledge and wisdom, Hunayn was appointed court physician by the Caliph al-Mutawakkil, the most prestigious post a medical scholar could hold. A respected scholar, a gifted linguist and an esteemed teacher, Hunayn Ibn Ishaq represented the type of scholar that was predominant during the medieval Islamic period. An Arab Christian fluent in the language of the ancients shaping the rise of a golden age of Islamic learning in a new scientific language – Arabic – shows the complexity, diversity and richness of this era in Middle Eastern history. Hunayn not only preserved the knowledge of the ancients but enriched it, classified it and laid the foundation for one of the greatest periods of scientific and medical scholarship the world had ever seen. He epitomised the notion of an ‘international scholar’ mastering Greek on his travels, collecting manuscripts in distant lands before penning a vast volume of work that brought him the highest

honours in the Abbasid empire. Held in high esteem during his lifetime in the Middle East and centuries on in Western Europe he set a benchmark for scholarship that lasted centuries beyond his death. Linguist, philosopher, teacher and physician, Hunayn Ibn-Ishaq was a towering figure in the shaping of our medical knowledge today.

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