

# AL-TIBB

HEALING TRADITIONS IN ISLAMIC  
MEDICAL MANUSCRIPTS

THE COLLECTION OF THE ISLAMIC ARTS MUSEUM MALAYSIA

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Project Manager: Siti Marina Mohd. Maidin

Writers and Research Team: Siti Marina Mohd. Maidin, Dr. Heba Nayel Barakat, Muhammad Syukri Mohd Shairi, Azlini Anuar Tan, Zahra Khademi and Dalia Mohamed.

Editor: Lucien de Guise

Designers: Ezreen Khirudin and Muhammad Syukri Mohd Shairi

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*Front cover: The opening chapter of Minhaj al-Bayan fi ma Yasta'miluhu al-Insan (LAMM 2016.11.12).*

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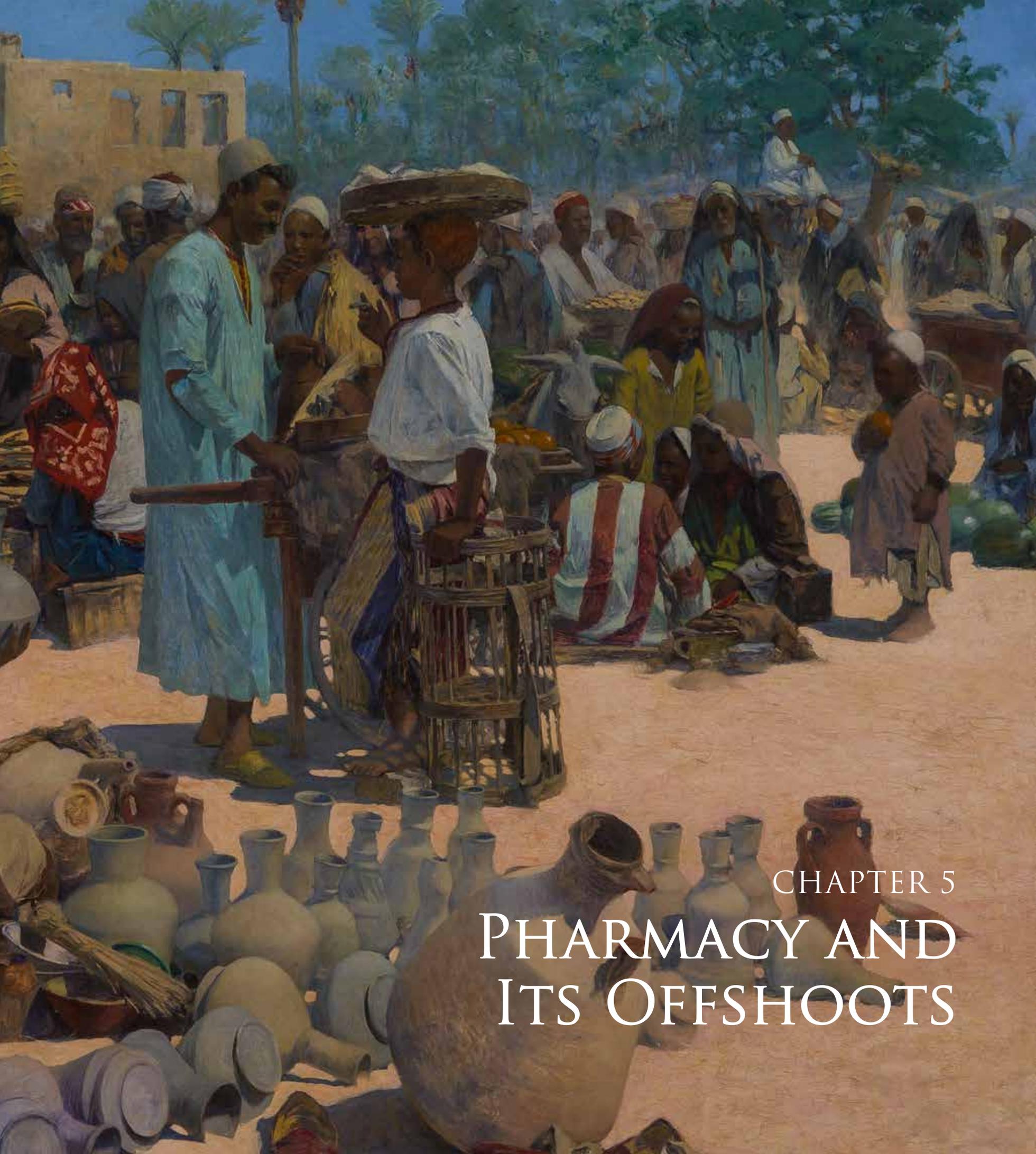
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CHAPTER 5  
PHARMACY AND  
ITS OFFSHOOTS

# Pharmacy and Its Offshoots

*Mohd Affendi Mohd Shafri*

The discipline of pharmacy started off as the study of medical materials. In the Muslim tradition, the first person to have written down a text listing the medicinal uses of plants was the Prophet Sulayman (ﷺ) (Solomon). Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah in his *'Uyun al-Anba'*<sup>1</sup> relays the Prophetic narration<sup>2</sup> that a plant emerged when the Prophet Sulayman (ﷺ) was in his prayer niche, upon which he asked its name and use. As other plants appeared, he made the same inquiry. He then had the edible ones taken to be cultivated, while those with medicinal properties were described in writing. This marks the beginning of pharmacy and the medical writing tradition.

The word 'pharmacy' only began to be used in the 1st century, when the Greek scholar Dioscorides coined the term '*pharmakon*' in his work, *De Materia Medica*.<sup>3</sup> According to him, *pharmakon* means both drug and poison. In the past, those who were highly skilled in medicine and pharmacology were usually also adept at creating poisons and their antidotes. Any discussion of drugs entails examining the materials, the combinations (both simple and complex) and the specific proportions that are used to try and restore the patient's health. As different individuals may respond differently to a drug regimen, pharmacists used their judgement and empirical evidence to adapt the proportions of ingredients according to the patient and the type and severity of the ailment. Galen incorporated this empirical knowledge regarding *materia medica* into the humoral system, explaining why these drugs worked in the way they did.<sup>4</sup> Four basic qualities are attributed to all drugs: they could be hot or cold, wet or dry. When the interaction of the drugs with the patient results in a balance of the body system, it will effect a cure or preserve the state of health.

Muslims inherited the Greek legacy through the translation of Greek, Persian and Indian medical books into Arabic. This was particularly intense during the period

of the 'Abbasid Caliphate. The school of medicine at Jundishapur was central to this activity as members of the Bukhtishu' Nestorian family, who presided over the Jundishapur Hospital, were frequently appointed as royal doctors to the 'Abbasid ruling elite (including caliphs, viziers, and provincial Amirs).<sup>5</sup> They also taught medicine to Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809-873 AD / 193-259 AH), who became the chief translator at the Bayt al-Hikma in Baghdad. Several works concerning drugs from the Bukhtishu' family, such as the *Kitab al-Adwiyah* of Yuhanna ibn Bukhtishu', have survived till today.

The 9th century marks the maturation of pharmacy as a discipline in the Muslim world. A specific class of scientists called *saydalab* (pharmacists) emerged, and pharmacy started to be recognised as a discipline distinct from medicine. This is reflected in the titles of manuscripts such as the *Kitab al-Saydanah fi al-Tibb* (Book of Pharmacy in the Healing Art) by Al-Biruni and the *Kitab al-Bahr al-Jawahir fi 'Ilm al-Tibb wa al-Saydalab* (The Sea of Jewels in the Discipline of Medicine and Pharmacy) by Al-Harawi (1492-1542 AD / 898-924 AH).

The number of related manuscripts grew from the 9th century onwards. Prolific writers appeared, such as the 12th-13th century Najib al-Din al-Samarqandi, who wrote a collection of at least 12 texts on medicine,<sup>6</sup> including *Usul al-Tarkib al-Adwiyah* (The Principles of the Preparation of Drugs), *Kitab al-Asbab wa al-'Alamat* (Book of Causes and Symptoms), *Kitab al-Qarabadhin* (Book on Compound Formulations) and *Kitab al-Agdhiya wa al-Ashriba* (Book of Nourishments and Drinks). Four of his works are of outstanding value and are famous as the *Najibiyat al-Samarqandiyah*.



*Left*

*Fig. 89* Muhtasib  
Istanbul, circa 1820 AD / 1235 AH.  
IAMM 2011.7.35

*Fig. 89*

Works such as *Usul Tarkib al-Adwiyah*, Al-Bayan's *Dustur al-Bimaristani* (Hospital Formulary) and Al-Kuhin al-Attari's *Minhaj al-Dukkan* (Management of the Apothecary's Shop)<sup>7</sup> involve the more advanced pharmaceutical science as well as pharmaceutical practice, in which instructions on how to manage a hospital formulary and pharmacy were also included. The increase in the availability of these types of written work led to the rise in demand for drugs and growing professionalism and intellectual responsibility. These changes influenced government policy. In Baghdad, the 'Abbasids formed a special office, called *Al-Muhtasib*,<sup>8</sup> whose job was to do frequent checks on pharmacists and herbal shops, whereas a *Sheikh Saydalani* was appointed in hospitals as the chief pharmacist.<sup>9</sup> In Cairo, the Mamluks created the office of *Amil al-Suq*,<sup>10</sup> whose job was similar to *Al-Muhtasib*.

The texts relating to pharmacy in the Muslim world sometimes involved the listing of simple and single drugs, exemplified by several copies of texts titled the *Kitab al-Mufradat al-Adwiyah*. One that was written by Al-Idrisi (1100-1165 AD / 493-560 AH), contains listings in up to 12 languages, reflecting the breadth of investigative work that the author had supervised with the help of his patron, Roger II of Sicily. Others, such as Al-Ghafiqi (d. 1165 AD / 560 AH), Ibn Baytar (1197-1248 AD / 593-645 AH), and Najib al-Din al-Samarqandi also wrote their own *Kitab al-Mufradat al-Adwiyah*, all containing simple drugs. More complex drug preparations fill up the pages of texts such as *Usul Tarkib al-Adwiyah* by Najib al-Din al-Samarqandi and *Aqarabadhin al-Qalanisi* by Badr al-Din al-Qalanisi (1071-1160 AD / 463-555 AH).

While most Islamic scholars in the field of pharmacy described their drugs in accordance with Galenic humoral principles, a few tried to do away with the theory. Najib al-Din al-Samarqandi, for example, is noted for his attitude towards humoral pathology. Unlike others, he did not consider the theory of humours to be decisive in explaining the effect of the therapeutics that he recommended.

A new paradigm propagated by the Paracelsian school, in which the principles of chemistry are used to challenge the old humoral pathology, also affected the Islamic world. The Paracelsian thoughts were based on earlier alchemical works by Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-815 AD / 102-199 AH)<sup>11</sup> and were controversial as they contradicted Galenic principles of disease and therapeutics. However, many Muslim scholars, particularly Ottoman scientists, were influenced.<sup>12</sup> Ibn Sallum, the Ottoman Chief Physician in Istanbul, was responsible for introducing Paracelsian paradigms to the Ottomans by means of his *Kitab al-Tibb al-Jadid al-Kimiya'i Ta'lif Barakalsus* (Book of the New Chemical Medicine by Paracelsus), which contains translations of works by Paracelsus (1493-1541 AD / 898-947 AH), Oswald Crollius (1560-1609 AD / 967-1018 AH) and Daniel Sennert (1572-1637 AD / 979-1046 AH).<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the techniques to purify and employ metals to preserve health and to treat disease enter Islamic literature and became part of Islamic medical treatises and pharmacopoeia.

Reforms brought about by the Paracelsian school were not the only source of change in Islamic pharmacy. Through major ports and emporiums across the globe, many new plants were introduced. Ibn Sina, for example, mentions *saratan babri* – which he explains as the Chinese sea crab.<sup>14</sup> Ibn Baytar, on the other hand, writes on *dar sini* – cinnamon.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, such examples are the results of contact with Far Eastern countries. A quick glance at the list of *materia medica* and pharmaceutical preparations in medical manuscripts originating from other parts of the Islamic world, namely Africa, India and the Malay world, would reveal a huge number of Arabian, Persian and even European materials. This indicates a process of cross-cultural enrichment that enabled pharmacy to expand dynamically and progressively during a golden age of discovery.—MAMS



Fig. 90

*Above*

Fig. 90 A medicine seller.

*Credit: Un porteur de remèdes. Henry René d'Allemagne, Du Khorassan au pays des Backhtiariis: trois mois de voyage en Perse. Vol. 4. Hachette et cie, 1911.*

*Following page*

Fig. 91 A Persian pharmacist dispenses medicaments.

*Credit: Officine d'un pharmacien persan. Henry René d'Allemagne, Du Khorassan au pays des Backhtiariis: trois mois de voyage en Perse. Vol. 4. Hachette et cie, 1911.*





Fig. 91