

Book Reviews

*Il trattato aureo sulla medicina attribuito all'imama 'Ali al-Rida* ed. Speziale Fabrizio & Giorgio Giurini, preface by Andrew Newman, 2009. (Testi e studi dalle culture euromediterranee, vol. 16.) Palermo: Officina di Studi Medievali, 180 pp., €19. ISBN: 88-88615-90-3 (pbk). [AC]

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This is the first translation in a European language (Italian) of the *al-Risalat al-Dhababiyyah fi Usul al-Tibb wa Furu'ih*, better known as *Tibb al-Rida* and commonly attributed to the eighth Imam, 'Ali al-Rida (770-818). The treatise, remarkably edited by Fabrizio Speziale and Giorgio Giurini, belongs to the rich tradition of the so called 'Prophetic medicine', that is, the collections of medical wisdom ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad and later to the Imams, containing useful advice for the *ummah's* good health.

The reading of this text confutes the unfortunately still diffuse school of thought that remains rather skeptical about the scientific bases of Islamic medical tradition, and in particular negates the validity of the Shi'a version of Islamic medicine. Islamic medicine in its Shi'a version constituted a nexus between the Greek system and Western medicine. As Speziale affirms in his accurate and carefully documented introduction, *Tibb al-Rida* was the first among the treatises of the Prophet and the Imams 'to constitute a wide and thorough synthesis of Galenic medical knowledge' (17).

Although *Tibb al-Rida* is a short text, it contains a whole health program, giving instruction especially about foods which improve man's body and protects it from maladies. It is to underline that although the treatise is the only medical text attributed to the eighth Imam, his medical learning is also attested by some narrations in which he treated such constituent issues as the four humors and essential medical prescriptions (see 22-23).

Naturally, *Tibb al-Rida* is also based on the humours theory (which the text explicitly refers to), but its discourse is arranged in harmony with and determined by the context in which it was written, namely, the Abbasid court.

According to tradition, the genesis of *Tibb al-Rida* dates from the time when the eighth Imam was in Marw, at the presence of the Caliph al-Ma'mun, who was discussing medical issues with his Christian and Hindu physicians. At the end of the gathering, the Caliph addressed the Imam, who had so far remained silent, asking for his opinion. The Imam promised the sovereign to provide him with a compendium containing full prescriptions in matters not only of food and drinks and how to consume them; but also including a list of activities to perform (such as phlebotomy, cupping, etc.) in order to preserve the state of health. The Imam fulfilled the promise and the Caliph was so impressed by the sagacity of the treatise that he ordered for it to be copied with gold ink: therefore, its title became *al-Risalat al-Dhababiyyah* (*The Golden Treatise*).

Thus, the kingly entourage deeply influenced the structure of the treatise that took the shape of a political metaphor. For instance, the disquisition begins by taking into consideration the human body constitution: it openly declares that the body and the reign are similarly regulated, with the king/heart at the vertex of the system. Every organ is at the king's disposal, so much so that the ears can take in only the sounds inspired by the ruler; the hands are two assistants who act according to the king's order; and so on.

As a matter of fact, while the *Tibb al-Rida* is essentially a text of medicine, it can be considered at the same time as a 'mirror for princes', in that it shows deep concern with just government and the nature of kingship. The didactic tone maintained by the Imam along the book is reinforced by his continuous addressing the Sultan: here and there the illustrious author openly draws his royal addressee into the discourse, almost asking for his attention, by saying: 'You should know, O Prince of the Believers [...] '.

Though the core of the present book is the *Tibb al-Rida* translation (with the original text included), the publication is enriched by lengthy and exhaustive analysis of some crucial issues pertaining to the history of Islamic medicine, such as: (a) the similarities and differences between the *Tibb al-Rida* and other texts of Prophetic medicine (11-20); (b) the life of the eighth Imam and the medical knowledge attributed to him by Shi'a sources (20-25); and (c) the traditions on the composition and the transmissions of the *Tibb al-Rida* (26-34). This section is very important because Speziale addresses the question of the *Tibb al-Rida* authorship. In fact, though several authoritative scholars, such as the Safavid theologian Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, attributed the treatise to

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the eighth Imam, other prestigious scholars, such as Abu Ja'far al-Tusi, included the *Tibb al-Rida* in the list of works composed by Ibn Jumhur, one of the Imam's companions, thus implying that the treatise was not personally written by Imam al-Rida. Furthermore, we find a comprehensive discussion of the main themes exposed in the *Tibb al-Rida* (35-42) and an overview of the translations and commentaries of *Tibb al-Rida* and the medical traditions of the Imams (43-58).

This interesting and valuable book is commendable to everyone who is interested in the history of Islamic/Shi'a Medicine and in the evolution of Shi'a political thought. It counteracts some stereotypes regarding scientific knowledge in Islam, opening new paths of exploration in the field of Shi'a medical tradition.

