

## Medicine and Health in Medieval Arabic Poetry: An Historical Review

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### ABSTRACT

This review of medieval Arabic medical poetry is based on our study of the two major classical biographical encyclopedias: “*Uyoon Al Anbaa Fi Tabaqaat Al Atibbaa*” (“Essential Information on the Classes of Physicians”), authored by the 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar Ibn Abi Usubiaa, and “*Al-Shier wa Al Shoaraa*” (Poetry and Poets) by the ninth century Ibn Qutaiba. Several other primary medieval sources were also studied. Medically-related verses in all these sources have been collected and classified. Illustrative examples of each category have been translated and are presented here. Pre-Islamic suspended odes that have survived exemplify the Arabs’ mastery in composing and reciting poetry; poetry was their most celebrated literary genre. In addition to their eloquence and artistic value, these odes remain a reliable historical record of the social, political and cultural life of the time. A number of poems refer to health and illness with vivid descriptions of medical examination and treatments. After the advent of Islam, poetry reflected the new faith and its effect on the hearts as well as the minds of the people, urging them to seek and increase their knowledge. The ensuing intense scientific movement entailed no conflict between the humanities and natural sciences. Concurrent with the revival of various sciences during the Islamic Golden Age, a new theme of Arabic poetry flourished with the appearance of a tradition of didactic poems, composed by medical scholars, for use in educating and training medical students. Meanwhile, Arabic poetry also dealt with ethical, social and humanitarian aspects of medical care. *Int. J. Hist. Philos. Med.* 2013; 3: 1-7. ©2013 *Biomedicine International, Inc.*

**Key Words:** Arab; history; medicine; medieval; poetry

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### INTRODUCTION

The history of Arabic poetry has gone through two phases: a pre-Islamic phase starting about the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and an Islamic phase beginning two centuries later. A third category of poets comprises those who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and therefore composed their works during both phases (*Figure 1*).

Pre-Islamic suspended odes that have survived exemplify the Arabs’ mastery in composing and reciting poetry; poetry was their most celebrated literary genre. In addition to their eloquence and artistic value, these poems remain a reliable historical record of the social, political and cultural life of the time. A number of verses refer to health and illness with vivid descriptions of the available medical examination methods and treatments. After the advent of Islam, poetry reflected the new faith and its effect on the hearts as well as the minds of people, urging them to seek and enhance their knowledge. An understanding was established that was both spiritual and material. The resulting intense scientific movement entailed no conflict between the humanities and natural sciences.

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## Methodology

This review is based on the study of the two major classic Arabic biographical encyclopedias, “*Uyoon Al Anbaa Fi Tabaaqat Al Atibbaa*”<sup>1</sup> (“Essential Information on the Classes of Physicians”), authored by the 13<sup>th</sup> century scholar Ibn Abi Usubiaa, and “*Al-Shier wa Al Shoaraa*” (Poetry and Poets) by the ninth century Ibn Qutaiba (828-889 CE)<sup>2,3</sup>, in addition to several other primary medieval sources. Medically-related verses from all these sources have been collected and classified. Illustrative examples of each category have been translated and are presented here.

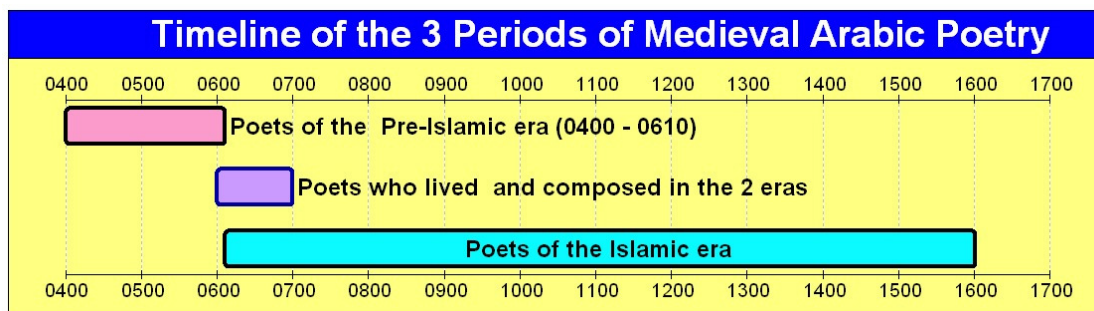


Figure 1: The timeline of the three periods of medieval Arabic poetry (Rabie Abdel-Halim; Created with Timeline Maker, April 2012).

## Poetry by Patients Describing Their Protracted Terminal Illnesses

In addition to expressing their feelings and sufferings and revealing their psychological state and social condition during their illness, the poetry of medieval patients also provides historical documentation about the nature of the disease and the then-available lines of treatment.

As an example, the oral intake and sublingual application of the Fagonia herb (*Figure 2*), known in Arabic as al Shokaa<sup>4-6</sup>, is described in a poem composed by the seventh century octogenarian poet Amro Ibn Al Ahmer<sup>7-11</sup> during his protracted terminal illness. This illness involved ascites, described in some primary sources as the yellow fluid disease.

Before presenting the translation of his vibrant segment of Arabic poetry, it should be pointed out that unless otherwise stated all the translations in this article are modest attempts by the author and are written in a non-professional prose style. Here it is:

*I drank Al Shokaa and kept chewing it under my tongue  
 I brought the ends of my vessels to touch the cautery blades  
 So that I might live little longer; though  
 I see no end for my illness; unless cured by God.  
 So, Oh my two travel-companions,  
 do bring medicine or do not; it makes no difference  
 Year after year you call upon doctors  
 to attend me; Yet they hardly avail  
 And if you do manage to cut off a tributary to my illness  
 you are bound to leave another flowing and active.*

In another part of the poem, while it is clear that he continued to try all available lines of medical treatment for his incurable disease, his verses are influenced by his deep Islamic

faith, expressing peace of mind, supplication and trust in the Creator, with a pleasant anticipation of the hereafter. Movingly, he exclaims:

*Am I still seeking healthy vibrant youth?  
How could it be for a person to long for what he will never get?  
How!! And I am now ninety years old  
How and my stature comprises a bulge... what a bulge!! .....*

Thirteen centuries or more after Ibn Al Ahmer's poetic report of the use of Al-Shokaa herb to relieve his illness<sup>12-14</sup>, researchers are continuing to extract and evaluate its medicinal components.<sup>15-17</sup>

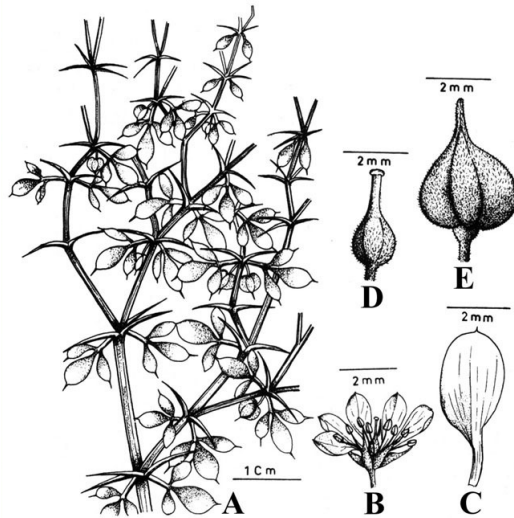


Figure 2: *Fagonia glutinosa*. A, fruiting shoots; B, flower; C, petal; D, ovary; E, fruit. Courtesy of: [www.efloras.org](http://www.efloras.org). Page 20, Credit: Shauket. Retrieved from: [http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora\\_id=5&taxon\\_id=25006444](http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=5&taxon_id=25006444)

### *Patients' Poetry in Praise of the Treating Doctor*

1. According to several 10<sup>th</sup> century biographical and primary literary sources, the 7<sup>th</sup> century poet Utaiba (or Utba) ibn Mirdas Al Tameemy (also nicknamed ibn Faswa)<sup>18-20</sup> was bitten by a rabid dog and contracted rabies. He was successfully treated by a doctor named Ibn Al Mohell, who therefore received from his poet-patient the reward of two verses of praise, still making history 1000 years later. The two panegyric verses also serve as a medical-history document related to rabies. Some introduction is needed to enable us to understand these two intriguing verses.

In a comment on those two verses of Utaiba, the 11<sup>th</sup> century Al Zamakhshari stated the following in his encyclopedic lexicon "Asas Al Balagha" (Principles of Eloquence):

*"It is said that if a rabid dog bites a human being it will inoculate into him minute doggie-like particles. And if this person is successfully treated, he will pass urine containing tiny congealed particles looking like dogs".<sup>21</sup>*

Epistemologically, the use of the passive voice expression "it is said" in this statement indicates that the author had doubts about the validity and authenticity of the stated information. It was one way of requesting his readers not to take the quotation for granted but to investigate and evaluate it further themselves. However, the statement can still be considered a theoretical forerunner of the now proven virus-infection etiology of rabies. It

is also interesting that the verb ‘Alqahu’ in this statement, meaning ‘inoculated into him’, is still in use in contemporary Arabic; it is the root of the word ‘liqah’, meaning vaccine.

After this long introduction, let us now see what the rabid poet said 1000 years ago in praise of his treating doctor, Ibn Al Mohell son of Qudamah son of Al Aswad:

*Had it not been the medicament of Ibnul Mohell and his regimen  
I would have moaned, same as the others moan if rabid  
Consequent on God’s help, he expelled the doggy particles out of me  
Striped on their forefront and sides*

The medicament given to the patient, as stated in the second verse, led him to pass urine containing particles the shape of doggies and ants and consequently cured him. It is also stated in more than one source that this medicine for rabies was a specialty practiced by three generations of the same family. Their fame has also been verified by other medieval Arab poets.

2. According to the medieval medical historian Ibn Abi Usaibia, the 7<sup>th</sup> century Zainab, a lady physician of the Bani Awd tribe, was very skillful in the practice of medicine, being especially experienced in therapeutics for ophthalmic diseases and injuries. She was widely famed among the Arabs. The contemporaneous patient-poet Abu Simak Al Asady documented her reputation in the following touching verse:

*Am I going to die before I visit  
Zainab, the so far away Bani Awd’s doctor?<sup>22-23</sup>*

This rendering illustrates the challenges of translating poetry. Although the easier poetry-to-prose option was taken in this study, it nevertheless often proved difficult to choose the best translation. For example, the above rendering relied primarily on translating the meaning. Yet the following literal translation may sound better:

*Oh! Death are you visiting me before I visit  
Zainab; the so far away Bani Awd’s doctor?*

A still more strictly word-for-word translation could be as follows:

*Oh terminal illness! Are you stabbing me before I visit?  
Zainab; the so far away Bani Awd’s doctor?*

Furthermore, instead of ‘stabbing’, the words ‘penetrating’ or ‘piercing’ may be closer equivalents for the Arabic word ‘mukhtarim’. Which of this selection is the best choice? This is one of the difficulties faced in translating Arabic poetry.

### ***Patients’ Poetry Describing the Moment of Death***

Abu-Nuwas al-Hasan ibn Hani al-Hakami (756–814) is considered one of the greats of classical Arabic literature. He became a master of all the contemporary genres of Arabic poetry and entered the folkloric tradition.

As documented by the 10<sup>th</sup> century Abu Ahmad al Askary in his pioneering literary critique “*Kitab Al Massoon Fi Al Adab*” (The Safe and Sound Book on Literature), Abu Nawas said the following verses shortly prior to his death<sup>24</sup>:

*Decay spread in me low and high  
Organ by organ, I see myself beginning to die  
Not a single hour passes by  
without reducing part of me away.  
In obedience to self-desires all done,  
My youth fortune and strength all gone  
And, only now, when moribund,  
did I remember to obey God!!  
Indeed we did misbehave, totally misbehaved  
Yet, Oh God grant us forgiveness, clemency and pardon*

### ***Patient Poetry: Describing an Attack of Fever***

The 10<sup>th</sup> century Abu Al Tayyeb Al Mutanabbi is considered one of the greatest poets in the Arabic language. He wrote a poem about a fever by which he was attacked; as translated by the late historian Edward G Brown, it left him:

*"...Sick of body, unable to rise up, vehemently intoxicated without wine"<sup>25</sup>*

In addition to an amazing description and astonishing imagery clearly depicting all the symptoms of the feverish attack from which he physically suffered, the 42 verse-long poem contained several verses vividly expressing the psychological, mental and social onslaughts of the relentless bouts. The poem is also replete with proverbial verses decorated with pearls of wisdom.

### ***Old Age Poetry***

This is a very frequent topic with many extant examples. In addition to being popular because of its richness in wisdom and life experiences, it is also significant as a theme of medical poetry reflecting the considerable geriatric suffering faced by this age group. It also genuinely touches on the philosophy of life and death.

### ***Doctors' Poetry and Didactic Poems***

In addition to the above-mentioned themes, medieval Arabic poetry, both by doctors and by patients, also dealt with ethical, social and humanitarian aspects of medical care. The 13<sup>th</sup> century bibliographic encyclopedia of Ibn Abi Usaibia contains abundant quotations covering those themes, together with other themes of doctors' poetry such as poetic dialogues with their patients, general-purpose poetry and poetry describing their senility or illness.

Furthermore, with the flourishing of literary studies and revival of various natural sciences during the Golden Era of Islamic Civilization, a new theme of Arabic poetry flourished with the appearance of a tradition of didactic poems composed by scholars for use in educating and training their students. Poems in that genre are usually composed on the Rajaz meter, a pattern of syllabic repetitions that produces a jingling sound making it particularly easy to remember. The most famed example among the numerous medieval Arabic medical didactic poems is the Avicenna medical poem "Al Urjuzh Fi Al Tibb". It consists of 1326 verses and is considered a poetic summary of Avicenna's major textbook, the Canon of Medicine. Not only were numerous medical treatises rendered into verse to

help students memorize basic concepts, but essays on other topics such as Quranic studies, Arabic grammar, history, oceanography, navigation, astronomy and even mathematics were also turned into poetry.

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