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1
Quaderni dei Fondi Manoscritti e Rari

The Collection
of the Islamic
Manuscripts
on **Medicine**
and **Magic**
at L'Orientale



Edited by
Francesca
Bellino



UniorPress

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Chapter 4

Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* in the Sarnelli Collection: A Journey of a Medical Text from the Islamic World to Renaissance Rome—and Back

LUCA BERARDI

The printing press using Arabic script was introduced in the Ottoman Empire only in the first half of the eighteenth century, and the printed publications gained popularity among Islamic audiences only in the centuries that followed. Until then, the transmission of the written word in Islamic lands occurred almost exclusively through manuscripts, thanks to the painstaking work of countless copyists, both professional and amateur. Notwithstanding, it was not uncommon for printed texts published outside the Islamic world to find their way into private libraries—for instance that of a Yemeni physician—where they stood alongside the medical manuscripts described in this catalogue.

Such is the case of a fortuitous discovery made by the doctor and Orientalist Tommaso Sarnelli during his mission in Yemen in the early 1930s (see Chapter 2 by Francesca Bellino in this volume). He described this episode in his diary, recalling it as “the dearest memory” of his experience in South Arabia:

One day, while roaming the alleys of the old town of Sanaa, I saw a voluminous book under the arm of a *ṭabīb* (i.e. physician)—a book that made my Italian heart leap with joy. It was a copy of the *Qānūn fī al-ṭibb*, the “Canon of Medicine”, by Avicenna, printed in Arabic by the Medici Oriental Press in Rome in 1593. ... The book was greasy and worn-out, its corners warped, still impregnated with the scent of spices and drugs, its binding torn and frayed ... It was a tool of the trade for the *ṭabīb* of Sanaa, still bearing the marks of constant consultation throughout its pages ... (Sarnelli 1943, 418-420)

The ongoing use of this sixteenth-century printed edition well into the twentieth century is further documented by a photograph showing Sarnelli himself reading Avicenna's work “alongside physicians and medical practitioners of of Sanaa” (Sarnelli 1934, 36) (Fig. 1). Sarnelli managed to purchase that book, which, in his opinion, vividly attested to both the enduring relevance of the Islamic medical tradition and the pivotal role of the Italian Renaissance in its transmission. In this way, the copy of Avicenna's *Canon* used by the Yemeni physician eventually became part of his book collection, now housed in the library of L'Orientale.



Fig. 1. Tommaso Sarnelli and Yemeni physicians reading the *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* in Sanaa. The picture is in Sarnelli (1934)

1. The *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* of Ibn Sīnā/*Canon of Medicine* of Avicenna between East and West

The *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* (Canon of Medicine) was composed by Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), known in Europe as Avicenna, a philosopher, physician and polymath, born in Afshana in present day's Uzbekistan. The work can be regarded as the most authoritative product of the movement of Islamic rediscovery and revival of the ancient Greek medical tradition, based on the authorities of Galen and Hippocrates. Indeed, the *Canon* is a monumental medical encyclopaedia, which integrates and reinterprets Galenic medicine within the framework of Islamic scientific knowledge. It is structured in five books, each systematically addressing a major domain of medical science: general principles, practical remedies, pathology and diseases, symptoms and diagnostics, and an extensive pharmacopoeia of compound drugs (Musallam 1987). Its clear, hierarchical organization reflects Ibn Sīnā's strong pedagogical sensibility (Vercellin 1991). Thanks to these qualities, the *Canon* remained the most authoritative and influential reference work for the study and practice of medicine for several centuries, not only across the Islamic world, but also throughout medieval and early modern Europe.

From the eleventh century onward, European scholars began translating Arabic books in an effort to recover Greek works that had been lost in the West. In this context, Gerard of Cremona (ca. 1114-1187), a leading figure of the Toledo School of Translators, translated the *Canon* into Latin. Although this version was flawed by textual inaccuracies, it gained wide recognition and became the primary medium through which Avicenna's work was transmitted to medieval Christianity (Siraisi 1987, 19-40; Veit 2006). With the introduction of the printing press, an impressive number of Latin editions of Avicenna's *Canon* were published across Europe (Siraisi 1987, 361-366). In particular, Andrea Alpago (c. 1450-1521), a Venetian physician active in Damascus, prepared a revised and philologically refined edition of Gerard of Cremona's translation. Alpago's version, first published posthumously in Venice in 1527, became the standard for subsequent Latin editions of the *Canon* that appeared in Europe in the following centuries. It was only at the end of the sixteenth century that the first printed edition of the Arabic text of Avicenna's medical encyclopaedia appeared. Published by the Medici Oriental Press in Rome in 1593, this state-of-the-art work was largely the result of the tireless efforts of Giovanni Battista Raimondi, who directed the press for thirty years.

2. The Medici Oriental Press and Giovanni Battista Raimondi's Editorial Project

The Medici Oriental Press (*Typographia Medicea*) was established in Rome in 1584, by Cardinal Fernando de' Medici (1549-1609). The driving force behind this ambitious cultural project was Giovanni Battista Raimondi (ca. 1536-1614), a prominent Orientalist and mathematician. A passionate advocate for Arabic learning, Raimondi's scholarly interests spanned a wide range of scientific disciplines, from botany to astronomy. The press was conceived as a commercial enterprise, whose broader cultural and religious aim was, however, the dissemination of printed texts in the Levant, in order to promote the spread of the Catholic faith among Eastern Christian and Muslim communities (Borbone 2012, 21-22). In authorizing the establishment of the Oriental Press, Pope Gregory XIII

ordered the printing of all available Arabic books on permissible human sciences which had no religious content in order to introduce the art of printing to the Mahomedan community so that by the same means knowledge of the Mahomedans' errors and of the truth of the Christian faith could gradually get through to them (quoted in Jones 1994, 97)

To this end, Raimondi's project involved not only the publication of Christian Arabic texts but also included high-quality editions of scientific works by Muslim scholars, published in their original languages.

In preparation for the publications, Raimondi commissioned skilled travelers—such as the brothers Giovanni Battista Vecchiotti (1552-1619) and Girolamo Vecchiotti (1557-ca. 1640)—to acquire a large collection of valuable Oriental manuscripts from the Levant. Particular attention was recommended for texts that might preserve traces of lost Greek works (Farina 2012, 40-50, 60-65; Richard 1980). Beyond Raimondi’s meticulous concern for the philological accuracy of the editions, the books produced by the Medici Oriental Press also stood out for their exceptional aesthetic quality. The design of the Arabic type was entrusted to the renowned French type-cutter Robert Granjon (d. 1513- 1590), while Raimondi himself took great care in providing high-quality calligraphic models. As a result, the publications of the Medici Oriental Press established a typographic standard for Arabic script whose elegance remained unmatched for centuries.

The books enjoyed rather limited circulation in Europe, where the audience of Arabic readers was quite small. In particular, the Medicean Arabic edition of the *Canon* was read in Northern Europe by several scholar in conjunction with the more common Latin editions of the work (Jones 1994, 95-96). However, the books, especially the ones with scientific content, such as the *Canon*, were primarily intended for the Eastern market. From the outset, Raimondi instructed his envoys in the Levant to conduct “market surveys” to assess the potential receptivity of Muslim audience toward printed books (Farina 2012, 48-49). To make the books more appealing to Muslim readers, who were accustomed exclusively to handwritten texts, and disguise their European provenience, the monolingual publications of the Medici Press carefully imitated the external features—calligraphic style, ruling, headings, triangular-shaped colophons, and pagination—of Arabic manuscripts. In the case of the Medicean *Canon*, the only element that betrayed its Italian origin was a small colophon at the end of the index (Fig. 2).

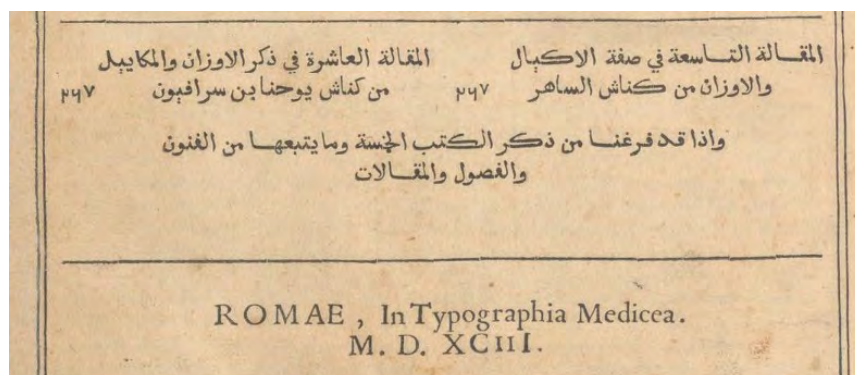


Fig. 2. RARI ARA XVIII
A 3, f. 34r: Detail from
al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb

On several occasions during the 1590s, Giovanni Battista Raimondi sent books from the Medici Oriental Press—including copies of Avicenna's *Canon*—to North Africa, the Middle East and Persia, with the assistance of Catholic priests and Carmelite friars (Jones 1987, 99-100). In 1619, the Italian traveller Pietro Della Valle (1586-1659), reported that, while staying in Isfahan, the capital of Iran, local dis-calded Carmelite friars presented Shah 'Abbās (1571-1629), the Safavid ruler, with Arabic books printed by Raimondi in Rome. According to Della Valle, the shah was so impressed by the books, that he expressed the intention to introduce printing technology in his country (Della Valle 1843, 737-738).

However, events unfolded differently. The famous French Orientalist Antoine Galland (1646-1715) reported having found a beautiful copy of the Medicean edition of Avicenna's *Canon* in a bookseller's shop in Istanbul. He lamented that, despite the low selling price, the book sadly lay unnoticed, because Muslim readers did not appreciate printed texts (Borboni 2012, 19-20). Indeed, the Medici Oriental Press ultimately proved to be an unsuccessful commercial venture. The high editorial and typographical quality of its publication did not guarantee a favourable reception in either Western and Eastern markets, and a substantial portion of the printed volumes remained unsold. In the case of Avicenna's *Canon* nearly half of the 1,750 printed copies failed to find buyers (Fani 2012a, 75).

3. The *Kitāb al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* of the Sarnelli Collection at L'Orientale

The *Kitāb al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb* that Sarnelli found in Sanaa was just one of those books that had made their way from Rome to the Islamic lands. As he noted in his diary, it bore evident signs of continual use. Throughout its pages there are marginal notes in Arabic written by various readers in different hands (Fani 2012b) (Fig. 3). The oldest is dated to Šawwāl 1098/1687, and a more recent one to 17 Ša'ban 1211/15 February 1797. The book was restored, with the addition of a recycled binding. This cover, already old and torn when was bound to the *Qānūn*, evidently came from a less voluminous book. The boards were slightly smaller than the pages of the Medicean edition, and both the spine and the fore-edge flap were integrated with leather inserts to accommodate the thicker text block of the new volume. On the old leather doublure, hidden beneath a piece of printed paper, an anonymous hand had penned a list of the Ottoman sultans along with their respective accession dates, up to Muṣṭafā II (r. 1695-1703) (Fig. 4). These clues suggest that the book likely first arrived in an Arab province of the Ottoman empire, probably Egypt or Siria, where it underwent rebinding. Only later, in the eighteenth century

or afterward, it reached Yemen, where it eventually became part of the library of the *ṭabīb* encountered by Sarnelli.

In brief, this book plastically evokes the fluid circulation of medical knowledge between West and East, and vice versa, that spanned centuries. This intellectual round-trip began with the rediscovery of Greek medical tradition within the Persianate Islamic world, and continued with the Renaissance pursuit of Islamic scientific sources which animated intellectual circles in Rome. Arabic books printed in Europe were then adopted as practical tools by anonymous Muslim physicians, eventually returning to Italy due to the interest for “indigenous medicine” during the colonial period.



Fig. 3. RARI ARA XVIII A 3, f. 1a: ownership notes, partially deleted, on the pages of Ibn Sina's *Qanūn*



Fig. 4. RARI ARA XVIII A 3: doublure (detail)

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