



# Some Beneficial Remedies for the Asthma by Abulcasis (c.936-c.1013)

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## Abstract

*The 22nd treatise of the Kitāb al-Taṣrīf (Book of medical arrangement) by the eminent physician and surgeon from Al-Andalus, Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī (c.936.c.1013), is about pneumology, and contains many recipes for beneficial remedies to lung and chest, with reference to preparation way and the diseases that cure. This article includes the translation from Arabic to English of five of these recipes that are beneficial to asthma treatment, although they are also valid for other lung and chest illness. The translation is done taking as basis the 5774th Arabic manuscript of the National Library at Paris, as well as the 502nd Arabic manuscript of the Süleymaniye Umūmī Kütüphanesi at Istanbul.*

**Keywords:** Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī, Kitāb al-Taṣrīf, Medieval Arab Medicine, Medieval Arab Pharmacology, Pneumology, Asthma

## INTRODUCTION

The *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* (Book of medical arrangement) [1] is the masterpiece of the Andalusian remarkable and illustrious physician and first surgeon of the medieval islam [2], besides a famous author, Abū l-Qāsim Khalaf Ibn ‘Abbās Al-Zahrāwī, known among other names as Abulcasis, Al-Zahrāwī and Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī [3].

This encyclopaedic work is collected in thirty-nine manuscripts [4] around the world and it is divided into thirty treatises each of which is preceded by a title summarizing its content. Abulcasis cites in his book other important authors and works, and takes many of the recipes from these sources, so *Al-Taṣrīf* is full of enriching quotes [5].

The 30<sup>th</sup> treatise on surgery is the most famous of all, reaching its influence as far as Renaissance Europe [6]. Furthermore, in pharmacology, which this article mainly is about, Abulcasis is a very representative figure due to his important achievements [7].

The 22nd treatise of *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf*'s [8], which is inedit, deals with pneumology, and contains many recipes for beneficial remedies to lung and chest, with reference to preparation way and the diseases that cure. It is, therefore, a very interesting treatise for the field of medieval pharmacology.

Below this article includes the translation from Arabic to English of five of these recipes that are beneficial for asthma treatment, although they are also valid for other lung and chest illness. The translation is done taking as basis the 5774th Arabic manuscript of the National Library at Paris, as well as the 502nd Arabic manuscript of the Süleymaniye Umūmī Kütüphanesi at Istanbul.

## RECIPES FOR ASTHMA TREATMENT

### Recipe for an Opium Poppy Electuary by Ibn Māsawayh[9] [f.122r<sup>o</sup>-f.122v<sup>o</sup>]

Recipe for an opium poppy electuary by Ibn Māsawayh that has been tested for all diseases affecting the chest along with fever and asthma: You take 30 *dirhems* of white opium poppy; marshmallow seed, tragacanth, gum arabic, cucumber and quince seed, from each, 7 *dirhems*[f.122v<sup>o</sup>]; 2 *dirhems* of licorice root, debarked and crushed; and 5 *dirhems* of plantago psyllium. Next, macerate the whole thing in 5 pounds of rainwater for a day and a night, and then simmer it until half of it is reduced and then strained. After that, take what has been strained, add 1 pound of grape syrup and 1/3 pound of alfeñique and put it back on the heat to boil. When it has condensed, set it aside and let it cool. It is kept in a flat clay container and used as much as you need.

### Recipe for a Remedy by Ishāq Ibn ‘Imrān[10] [f.124r<sup>o</sup>-f.124v<sup>o</sup>]

Recipe for a remedy by Ishāq Ibn ‘Imrān that is beneficial for asthma and dry cough: You take peeled and crushed licorice root, peeled cucumber seed, sesame, sweet almond and white tragacanth, from each, 10 *dirhems*; 5 *dirhems* of peeled quince seed; 1 *dirhem* of saffron; and 80 *dirhems* of white opium poppy. Everything is crushed, sifted, mixed with 100 *dirhems* of fresh grape rice, and, with this, some pills the size of the hazelnuts are made, the weight of each of them being 3 *dirhems*. One tablet should be swallowed in the morning, and another when lying down to sleep, placing it under the tongue and sucking the liquid. And then you have to take starch broth with sweet almond oil and alfeñique; and, in the evening, grape sorbet with almond oil, small cooked poultry,

roasted eggs, or noodles with sesame oil and sugar. The drink will be sweet pomegranate water, apple and green almond; and the food, heart of young lettuce, pulp of pumpkin and cucumber. All this is good for those who have fever and suffer from tuberculosis[f.124v<sup>o</sup>]; and it also cools and turns off the heat.

### Recipe for an Opium Poppy Syrup from the *Kitāb al-aqrābādīn*[11][f.125r<sup>o</sup>]

Recipe for an opium poppy syrup from *Kitāb al-aqrābādīn* (Book of compound medicines) by Al-Rāzī [12] beneficial for dry cough, tuberculosis, labored breathing and asthma, as well as colds and coughs that keep you awake at night: Take white and black opium poppy, from each, 100 *dirhems*; and lettuce seed and henbane seed, from each, 30 *dirhems*. Mix all that and cook it with 500 *dirhems* of water until there are 200 *dirhems* left. Then, strain the water, add 30 *dirhems* of lettuce seed and psyllium mucilage, and 100 *dirhems* of concentrated must, boil until thick and use.

### Recipe for a Remedy from Aaron's Book [13] [f.133r<sup>o</sup>]

Recipe for a remedy from the *Kitāb kunnāš Ahrun* (Aaron's Book of Medical Compendiums of Medicine) that is beneficial for children's coughs and asthma: Take river basil leaves and rue leaves, beat them with women's milk or sheep's milk until everything is well mixed and gets consistency of honey, and give this to the child to suck. It is certainly beneficial.

### Recipe for Some Medicinal Powders by Yaḥyà Ibn Sarafyūn[14] [f.135r<sup>o</sup>]

Recipe for some powders belonging to Yaḥyà Ibn Sarafyūn, which have been tested for asthma, cough and respiratory difficulty: Take 3 *dirhems* of agaric; 1 *dirhem* of lily; 1 *dirhem* of horehound; 5 *dirhems* of grated white turbit; 4 *dirhems* of *hiera picra*; fat and sarcocolla, from each, 2 *dirhems*; and 1 *dirhem* of myrrh. Crush the remedies, sift them with a piece of silk, knead with concentrated must and, with that, make some pills. The dose is 2 *dirhems* with hot water.

## APPENDIX

### Glossary

#### Weights & Measures

-1 *Dirham*= 3,12 grams

- 1 Pound (*raṭl*)= 453,59 grams

#### Medical Terms

-Electuary (*la'ūq*): The electuary is a pharmaceutical preparation of liquid, paste, or solid consistency, made with various ingredients, almost always vegetables, and a certain amount of honey, syrup, or sugar.

-*Hiera picra* (*iyāraj fiqrā*): The *hiera picra* is a medicine that belongs to the group of electuaries, which are usually very

thick liquids with a honeyed consistency, in which honey is a fundamental ingredient.

-Syrup (*sharāb*): The syrup is a viscous liquid that usually contains concentrated solutions of sugars, such as sucrose, in water or another liquid. Syrups have been used for a long time, and before sugar was discovered, they were prepared with honey. The liquids that usually make up the syrup are distilled water, solutions, juices, and others.

### Aaron (*Ahrun*)

Physician monk from Alexandria who lived in late antiquity, at an uncertain date, since there are several theories about it, which place him indistinctly in the fifth, sixth and seventh Centuries. Author of *Kitāb kunnāš Ahrun* (Book of Aaron's Compendiums of Medicine) or *Kitāb al-kunnāš* (Book of Compendiums of Medicine), *Pandectae Medicinae*, an encyclopaedic work, incomplete, which is divided into thirty treatises and is said to have been translated from Greek into Syriac by Gesios of Petra and later from Syriac into Arabic by the Jewish physician of Baṣra Ibn Māsawayh.

### Al-Rāzī

Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Zakariyā' Al-Rāzī (865-925) known among the Latins as Rhazes, was born in Rayy near Tehran. Persian by birth, he has undoubtedly been the greatest and most original of all Muslim physicians and one of the most prolific authors in the Arabic language. He was chief physician at the Baghdad hospital and considered the inventor of the fishing line in surgery. His biographers attribute to him some one hundred and thirteen major works and some twenty-eight smaller works, twelve of which are on alchemy. His main work and the most important is the entitled one *Al-Ḥāwī* (The Continent), translated for the first time into Latin, under the auspices of Charles I of Anjou, by the Sicilian Jewish doctor Faraḥ Ibn Sālīm, in the year 1279, with the name of *Continens*; subsequently, five other Latin editions were made. This encyclopaedic book collects the entire medical concept of the Greeks, Persians and Hindus, and adds its own contributions. *Al-Ḥāwī* is in short a masterpiece that for centuries had a notable influence on the scientific thought of the Christian West.

### Ibn Māsawayh

Abū Zakariyā Yūḥannā ibn Māsawayh (c.777-857) is one of the main authors of science from the Middle Ages. His knowledge involves a mixture of Hellenistic elements, Christian ideas and recipes from Orient, the result of which was to unite alchemy, medicine and astrology. He translated many Greek scientific works and belonged to the famous *Bayt al-Ḥikma* (House of Wisdom) in Bagdad, which he became the director. Failing to obtain human subjects for dissection, a practice never encouraged by Islam, had recourse to apes. At this time, few advances could be achieved in anatomy, except studying the anatomical structure of the eye. He

wrote the oldest systematic treatise on ophthalmology in Arabic, entitled *Al-Ashr maqālāt fī l-ʿayn* (The ten treatises on the eye). According to the Arabic sources, Ibn Māsawayh wrote over forty works, but only ten remain. Latin versions are more numerous.

### *Ishāq Ibn ʿImrān*

Born in Baghdad, Ishāq ibn ʿImrān lived in the 10th century and died in Kairouan, Tunisia. He practiced medicine in North Africa, was also an instructor and teacher of doctors and had a very prominent role in the exercise of his profession. He stood out among the rest of colleagues for his books on botany, and his treatise on melancholy (*Al-Maqāla fī l-mālikhūliyā*) achieved great influence and fame even after his death.

### *Yahyà Ibn Sarafyūn (Johannes Serapion)*

Yahyà Ibn Sarafyūn (9th century) was a Syrian physician, known in Europe as Johannes Serapion. Commonly was named Serapion the Older to distinguish him from Serapion the Younger, with whom he is often confused. Very little is known of his life, except that he was a Christian physician and lived in the second half of the ninth century. His works include the *Aphorismi Magni Momenti Practica de Medicina*, and the book entitled in Arabic *Al-Kunnāš* (Compendium of Medicine), which has been published under various names; *Pandectae*, *Aggregator*, *Breviarium*, *Practica*, and *Therapeutica Methodus*, whose aims were to collect and assemble in abbreviated form the opinions of Greek and Arabic physicians on diseases and their treatments. He also translated some writings of Alexander of Tralles.

### CONCLUSION

The masterpiece of Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī entitled *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* (Book of medical arrangement) is in a very high-ranking place within surgery, medicine and pharmacology of Al-Andalus; and his author exemplifies the noted level achieved by Arab scientific knowledge in the Middle Ages. Due to his influence in Europe until the late 16th century and the early 17th century, among other reasons, Abulcasis has a very prominent position in the history of universal science; and, in particular, the pages translated and studied in this article attest to his relevance in the history of Islamic science.

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