



The Concept of Old Age in Medieval Arabic Medicine

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Abstract

The 884th Arabic manuscript from the Library of El Escorial contains in the folios 136r., 136v. and 137r. a brief discourse on the four ages of human beings that includes an interesting definition of old age, according to medieval scientific knowledge among the Arabs. These pages, no studied until now, belong to an anonymous treatise written by an unidentified author to date, possibly Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq (Johannitius) or Ibn Rushd (Averroes). This article deals with this subject and encloses an English translation of some fragments from the original text in Arabic.

Keywords: Old Age. Medieval Arabic Science. Geriatrics. Gerontology. History of Medicine. The 884th Arabic manuscript of El Escorial.

INTRODUCTION

The 884th Arabic manuscript from the Library of El Escorial in Madrid [1], cataloged by Michaelis Casiri [2] as Ms DCCCLXXIX, contains in the folios 136r., 136v. and 137r. a brief discourse on the four ages of human beings that includes an interesting definition of old age, according to medieval scientific knowledge among the Arabs [3]. These pages belong to a treatise of medicine written by an unidentified author to date. The manuscript is acephalous and it encloses in the folios 86r. to 163r. the entire treatise about which some partial studies have been undertaken, such as, for example, the study and translation to Spanish of the folios 153r., 153v. and 154r. that deal with etiology and typology of tumors [4].

According to Hartwig Derenbourg, it could have been written by Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq [5][6], known in Latin tradition as Johannitius, due to its similarity to his work titled *Kitāb al-madkhala fī-l-ṭibb* (Book of Introduction to Medicine) that is an introduction to *Ars Medica* by Galen [7]:

Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq (809-873), Johannitius in the Latin tradition, is one of the greatest scholars of the time. He was a Nestorian Christian from Al-Ḥīra, and as a youth studied medicine under the tutelage of the physician Ibn Māsawayh who then was the Director of *Bayt al-Ḥikma* (House of Wisdom). He was the main transmitter of Greek science to the Arab world. It was thanks to his translations of Hippocrates and Galen's writings that the Arab doctors of the Middle Ages were able to become worthy successors of the Greeks. Besides a prolific translator, Johannitius wrote own works on

the most varied topics, highlighting within the medical field a particular interest on ophthalmology. He died in 873 being chief-doctor in the Caliph Al-Mutawakkil's court.

But this is a conjecture without a scientific basic. The oeuvre also could have been drafted by the famous physician and philosopher from Cordova, Ibn Rushd [8][9][10], known in Latin tradition as Averroes, since the remaining texts of the manuscript incorporate works of him:

Ibn Rushd (1126-1198). Abū-l-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rushd, Averroes in the Latin tradition, is the greatest Muslim philosopher, due to his influence in the West, as well as astronomer, physician and Aristotle's commentator. He was born in Cordova in 1126 in a family of theologians and judges. From 1169 to 1171 he was a judge in Seville and two years later in Cordova. In 1182 he was called to Marrakesh by Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf to replace Ibn Ṭufayl as court physician. The Caliph Al-Manṣūr, Yūsuf's son and successor, exiled him on suspicion of heresy because of his studies in philosophy, but later claimed again in Marrakesh court, city in which he died in 1198. Later his remains were transferred to Cordova. Ibn Rushd's main contribution to medicine is an encyclopedic work entitled *al-Kulliyāt fī-l-ṭibb* (Generalities on medicine) which, translated into Latin as *Colliget* in the 13th century and reissued in many cases, greatly influenced medieval Latin times and the Renaissance. His facet as a physician was exceeded, as far as influence is concerned, by that of philosopher and Aristotle's commentator. His major philosophical work, other than his commentaries, is *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence) in which Ibn Rushd replies to attack made by the

Citation: Prof.Dr.Luisa Maria Arvide Cambra, "The Concept of Old Age in Medieval Arabic Medicine", Universal Library of Arts and Humanities, 2026; 3(1): 23-25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulahu.2026.0301004>.

Persian theologian Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) to rationalism in the book *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers) [11].

MEDIEVAL DEFINITION OF OLD AGE

The relevance of Arabic science during the Middle Ages is undisputed [12]. The Arabs studied all the fields of scientific knowledge and, of course, they also took care of gerontology and geriatrics [13]. As I mentioned above, the folios 136r-136v., and 137r. of the 884th Arabic manuscript from the Library of El Escorial in Madrid include some fragments related to this subject and contain a short definition of the old age that is very interesting both from medical and biological view point.

According to the Arab physicians of the Middle Ages [14], there are four ages; and, taking this thought mostly from the Greeks in regards to the theory of the four humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm) and the four natural qualities (cold, hot, dry and wet), the age of old age is basically the one in which weakness is evident. Its predominant component or main humor is phlegm.

For the Arabs in the Middle Ages, like for the Greeks in Antiquity, disease was considered as the body imbalance of the four humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm) and the consequent predominance of any of the four natural qualities (cold, hot, dry and wet).

Taking into account the logical differences arising from scientific advances in both the history of medicine and biology, the medieval conception of old age, included in these pages, is very close to the idea that modern science establishes in the classification of the ages in general and more particularly in old age definition. Effectively, modern science, like the medieval one, also sets the existence of four biological ages (childhood, youth, maturity and old age). What at present is known as the Third Age is the beginning of old age and it starts about sixty-five years, and lasts to the end of life. Physiological changes influence the state of health that is characterized by weakness, illness, a physical deterioration and in some cases a deterioration cognitive, etc [15].

According to the World Health Organization [16], both from a biological and medical point of view, aging is the consequence of the accumulation of a wide variety of molecular and cellular damage over time, which leads to a gradual decline in physical and mental capacities, an increased risk to disease, and finally to death [17]. As we can see, this definition is very similar to that held by medieval Arab science.

The fragments translated to English from the original Arabic text are the following:

[F^o136r.] (...) How many ages are there and which are they? The age of childhood, the age of youth, the age of maturity and the age of old age (...).

[F^o136v.] (...) The age of old age is the one in which weakness is evident. It lasts from about the age of sixty until the end of life (...). If we take into consideration the main organs, old age complexion is cold and dry; and if we take into consideration humidity that is accumulated in the aged body, the complexion is cold and wet (...).

[F^o137r.] (...) The predominant component in this age is phlegm (...).

CONCLUSION

This text is a proof of relevance of Arabic science during the Middle Ages. The Arabs were the heirs of the Greeks and, with their contributions, scientific knowledge reached the highest levels of quality thanks to the important work made by distinguished thinkers, scholars and doctors. Legacy from Islam to history of medicine is very rich.

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