

CONFERENCE PAPER

Dissemination of Medical Knowledge: The Role of *al-Qanun* Abridgements in the Muslim East

Abstract

Avicenna's monumental medical encyclopedia "*The Canon of Medicine*" was a hugely influential work but its sheer size consisting of five extensive books were too large for daily use by physicians and students. To solve this problem, a crucial tradition of writing abridgements began in the mid-eleventh century. This practice was vital in making the vast knowledge contained within "The Canon" more accessible to a wider audience, thereby ensuring its ideas could be applied more easily in medical practice and education. The abridgements were not simply summaries. They were often enriched with the authors' own new ideas and clinical observations, transforming them into new, dynamic texts. This shows that Avicenna's influence was not static; it led to a living body of knowledge that was continually adapted and expanded upon. This article highlights key abridgements such as *al-Fusūl al-Ilāqiyya fī kulliyāt at-ṭibb* by al-Īlāqī (d. 1068), *Mu'jaz al-Qānūn* by Ibn al-Nafīs (1207–1288) and *Qānūncha fī-ṭibb* by Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad al-Chaghmaynī (fourteenth century).

Key words: Avicenna, Canon of Medicine, Medical Abridgments, al-Īlāqī, Ibn al-Nafīs, al-Chaghmaynī, Medical Literature, History of Medicine, Medical Manuscripts, Knowledge Transfer

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Introduction

In the Middle Ages, Abu Ali ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) work, *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* ("The Canon of Medicine") was highly renowned in the Muslim East and West. However, the sheer size of this five-volume encyclopedia made it too cumbersome for daily use in medical practice. As a result, starting in the mid-11th century, the tradition of creating abridgements of *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* emerged to make it more accessible. These abridgements were not mere summaries; they often became independent works, enriched with the authors' new ideas and insights.

The abridgements based on *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* gained widespread popularity among physicians and students. This was because they concisely summarized the core principles of medicine, making the information easy to learn and memorize. Due to this high demand, scribes produced numerous copies. These abridgements were created and circulated across a vast geographical area, from Central Asia to Khorasan, Iran, India, Egypt, and the Syria.

To date, more than ten abridgements of *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* have been identified, yet systematic studies on them are still scarce. A thorough examination of these abridgements could reveal the full extent of the *Canon's* influence on later medical traditions. This article provides a general overview of the abridgements and analyzes three of the most famous ones and their authors in chronological order. While some medieval sources offer extensive biographical details on certain authors, information on the lives and works of others is very limited. Therefore, dedicated future research on these figures is essential.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the article's objective, two main methods were used. The first method involved studying all the major abridgements of Avicenna's *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* and their authors. This approach utilized historical, chronological, and analysis-synthesis methods to determine how the original work was disseminated through its abridgements.

The second method focused on analyzing these abridgements to identify historical facts regarding the role and significance of *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* in the Middle Ages. The abridgements themselves served as the primary source material for this study. These methods made it possible to collect evidence confirming the widespread dissemination of the *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* and its crucial role in the educational system.

Muḥammad ibn al-Ilāqī: A scholar who wrote commentaries on *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb*

Although there is limited information about Sharafiddin as-Sayyid Muḥammad ibn al-Ilāqī in historical sources, various opinions suggest he was a direct disciple of Avicenna. Al-Ilāqī passed away in 1068, and according to al-Bayhaqī, he was a master of both theoretical and practical sciences. His works include *Kitāb al-Lawāḥiq* ("Book of Annexes") and *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* ("Book of Animals") (Al-Baykhaki, 1987). Al-Ilāqī's main claim to fame is his abridgements of *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb*. Based on selected sections from the *al-Qānun's* first book, he created the work *al-Fusūl al-Ilāqiyya fī kulliyāt aṭ-ṭibb* ("al-Ilāqī's Chapters from the Compendium of Medicine") (Zillur Rahman, S., 2014, pp. 36-37).

Al-Fusūl al-Ilāqiyya summarized the theoretical foundations of medicine, the causes of diseases, and general treatment methods. The work's concise and clear style made it easy



for students and physicians to learn and memorize. Numerous copies of this work have been preserved and can be found in libraries across many countries, including Turkey, Iran, India, the United States, and Germany.

Ibn an-Nafis and His Work *Mu'jaz al-Qānūn*

Alā' ad-Dīn Abū al-'Alā' 'Alī ibn Abī al-Ḥaram al-Qurayshī ad-Dimashqī ibn an-Nafīs (1207–1288) was a famous physician born in Damascus who worked in Cairo. He is known in the history of medicine for discovering the lesser circulatory system. Ibn al-Nafīs played a key role in popularizing Avicenna's scientific legacy by introducing his works as textbooks in madrasas across the Muslim East.

Mu'jaz al-Qānūn ("Abridgement of the Canon") is a famous summary that includes all parts of *al-Qānūn fī-ṭ-ṭibb* except for anatomy. The work is divided into four sections: the first covers the theory and practice of medicine; the second focuses on foods and medicines; the third deals with diseases of specific organs; and the fourth addresses diseases related to the human body as a whole.

The popularity of *Mu'jaz al-Qānūn* was so great that more than a dozen commentaries were written on it, and it was translated into other languages, including Turkish and Hebrew. Numerous manuscripts of the work are preserved in libraries around the world (Avicenna, 2014, p. 37).

Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad al-Chaghmaynī and his Work *al-Qānūncha fī- ṭibb* ("The Small Canon of Medicine")

Sharaf al-Din Maḥmūd ibn Muḥammad ibn Umar al-Chaghmaynī was a 14th-century scholar and physician from Khwarazm. Born in the village of Chagmin near Old Urgench, he is primarily known in the history of medicine for his work *al-Qānūncha fī-ṭibb*. Some researchers believe this work was not based on Avicenna's *al-Qānūn fī-ṭ-ṭibb* but rather on the writings of earlier scholars. Information about *al-Chaghmaynī* is scarce in historical sources.

Al-Qānūncha fī- ṭibb covers the theory and practice of medicine, consisting of ten chapters. The work provides detailed information on topics such as nature, human anatomy, physiology, the causes and treatments of diseases, and the properties of foods and drinks.

In the Middle Ages, *al-Qānūncha* was extremely popular, and many manuscript copies have survived to the present day (Haji Khalfah, 1865). Numerous commentaries were written on the work, and some physicians even memorized it after it was put into verse. Al-Biruni Institute of Oriental Studies holds several copies of the work in Arabic, Persian (Xikmatullayev, and Karimova, 2000) and old Uzbek, along with its printed editions and commentaries. The Tashkent scholar Muhammad Shohkhuja Toshkandiy translated it into Old Uzbek in the 19th century.

Al-Qānūncha was used as a key textbook in madrasahs not only in Central Asia but also in India, Pakistan, and Iran until the early 20th century. Today, scholars continue to conduct research on this work. For example, the Iranian scholar Ismail Nazim created a critical edition of the text and provided a scientific, annotated translation into Persian. Works like *al-Qānūncha* played a crucial role in the widespread dissemination of medical knowledge during the Middle Ages.



Conclusion

The fact that numerous copies of the abridgements of Avicenna's *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* were made and spread across vast territories indicates the high regard in which these works were held. Specifically, abridgements like *al-Fusūl al-Ilāqiyya fī kulliyāt aṭ-ṭibb*, *Mu'jaz al-Qānūn*, and *al-Qānūncha* served to widely disseminate the core content of the *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* preserving its scientific legacy.

These types of works were created from the 11th to the 21st century across a vast geographic area, including modern-day Uzbekistan, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Egypt. They demonstrate the great scientific and practical significance of *al-Qānun fi-t-ṭibb* and its notable influence on the development of medical science in these regions.

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Conflict of Interest

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