

CONFERENCE PAPER


The Architecture of Medical Knowledge: An Analysis of a Post-Avicennan Commentary on Avicenna's Definition of Medicine

Abstract

Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, composed across various cities in Iran, initiated a powerful commentary tradition (*Sharh*) that often adopted a critical stance, particularly within the Persian-speaking intellectual sphere. This article introduces a previously unstudied Ottoman treatise which directly engages with this critical tradition. Authored in Anatolia and dedicated to Sultan Bayezid II, the text offers a robust philosophical defense of Avicenna's definition of medicine, effectively responding to critiques that originated in the East. This treatise serves as a prime example of the entangled intellectual history of Iran and Türkiye, where a philosophical debate spanning centuries and geographical regions created a shared scientific heritage. The analysis highlights the dynamic dialogue between the intellectual centers of the Islamic world and the enduring legacy of Avicenna in the Ottoman medical context.

Key words: History of Medicine, Avicenna, *Canon of Medicine*, Ottoman Empire, Medical Epistemology

Received: 15 Jul 2025; Accepted: 4 Sep 2025; Online published: 1 Oct 2025
Research on History of Medicine/ 2025 Oct; 14(Suppl. 1): S11-S14.

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Citation:

Arezaei, H., and Mirzadeh Vaghefi, M.S., 2025. The Architecture of Medical Knowledge: An Analysis of a Post-Avicennan Commentary on Avicenna's Definition of Medicine. *Res Hist Med*, 14(Suppl. 1), pp. S11-S14. doi: 10.30476/rhm.2025.108995.1379.

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Introduction

The intellectual legacy of Ibn Sīnā's (Avicenna, d. 1037) *al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*) is a cornerstone of global medical history. Composed in major intellectual centers of Iran such as Jurjan, Ray, and Hamadan, the *Canon* established not just a compendium of medical facts, but a philosophical architecture for medical science (Siraisi, 1987). Avicenna's opening definition—"Medicine is a science (*ilm*) from which one learns the states of the human body... to preserve existing health and restore it when it is lost"—became the bedrock of medical epistemology for centuries.

However, this foundational text did not remain unchallenged. A vibrant and critical commentary tradition emerged, spearheaded by thinkers in the eastern Islamic world, particularly in Iran. Scholars like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) initiated a wave of critiques questioning the philosophical underpinnings of Avicennan medicine (Fancy, 2018). This critical current, carried on by figures like Afḍal al-Dīn al-Khūnajī and Najm al-Dīn al-Nakhjawānī, created a long-standing intellectual debate centered in the Persian cultural sphere (Arezaei, and Zargaran, 2021).

This paper sheds light on a crucial, yet overlooked, chapter in this story: the response from the West. It introduces and analyses a previously unstudied Arabic treatise that exemplifies the "entangled history" between Iran and Anatolia. Authored within the Ottoman Empire and dedicated to Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512), this text provides a direct and sophisticated philosophical defense of Avicenna's definition against the very critiques that arose in the East. It thus represents a unique moment of intellectual dialogue, demonstrating the interconnected scientific landscape that linked Iran and Türkiye.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a historical-analytical method based on codicological and textual analysis of a unique primary source. The material under investigation is an anonymous Arabic treatise titled *Risālah fī ta'rīf al-Ṭibb* (*Treatise on the Definition of Medicine*), preserved within a codex at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. The manuscript was copied by a physician, Muṣṭafā Ṣafī, in 1112 AH/1700 CE. The treatise's dedication to Sultan Bayezid II securely places its composition in the late 15th or early 16th-century Ottoman context, most likely Istanbul. The method involves a close reading of the text to deconstruct the author's arguments, identify the philosophical tools used, and contextualize its intellectual contribution within the broader history of the Avicennan commentary tradition.

Results

The treatise is a meticulous philosophical commentary that defends Avicenna's definition of medicine by dissecting its key components and refuting potential objections.

1. The Epistemological Foundation: The author first defends the classification of medicine as a 'science' (*ilm*). He argues that *ilm* here refers to "absolute assent" (*taṣdīq muṭlaq*), which encompasses both certain (*yaqīnī*) and conjectural (*ẓannī*) propositions. This was a critical move to justify medicine's scientific status, as many of its principles are probabilistic. He thereby establishes medicine as a rational discipline, even if it lacks the absolute certainty of mathematics.

2. Delineating the Scientific Domain: The author clarifies that the subject matter of



medicine—the human body—is studied specifically “with respect to what is healthy and what is not.” This clause distinguishes medicine from other sciences like natural philosophy (which studies the body regarding motion and rest) or theology (which studies its createdness). The goal (*ghāya*) of medicine is then identified as twofold: the preservation of health (preventative medicine) and its restoration (therapeutic medicine).

3. Defending Avicenna against Critics: The author shows his scholarly depth by addressing technical philosophical objections. For instance, he tackles the critique that the word ‘lost’ (*zawal*) health implies its prior existence, which would not apply to congenital malformations. He resolves this by interpreting ‘loss’ as an intrinsic privation. More importantly, he contrasts Avicenna’s definition with al-Fārābī’s, arguing that Avicenna’s is superior as it explicitly includes preventative care, whereas al-Fārābī’s focuses only on therapy.

4. From Theory to Practice: The treatise demonstrates how Avicenna’s definition provides the framework for all of medicine. The author shows its alignment with the Aristotelian four causes (Table 1) and uses it to categorize pathologies like fevers and tumors, linking abstract principles directly to clinical knowledge.

Table 1: The Aristotelian Four Causes in Avicenna’s Definition

Cause	Correspondence in the Definition of Medicine
Material	The material constituents of the body (e.g., humors).
Efficient	The agents causing health and disease (e.g., diet, environment).
Formal	The constitution of the body (i.e., its temperament).
Final	The preservation and restoration of health.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of this Ottoman treatise reveals a profound intellectual dialogue spanning centuries and connecting the major cultural centers of Iran and Türkiye. The critical tradition that began in the East with figures like al-Rāzī did not remain a one-sided conversation. This manuscript demonstrates that the intellectual courts of the Ottoman Empire were not only aware of these debates but were active participants, producing sophisticated counter-arguments to defend the Avicennan heritage.

The treatise is a clear testament to an “entangled history.” A philosophical problem, rooted in a text composed in Iran (*The Canon*), was debated for generations by scholars primarily in the Persian sphere, and ultimately received a detailed response in a work dedicated to an Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul. This flow of ideas from East to West highlights a dynamic and integrated scholarly world where a shared intellectual legacy was continuously negotiated.

In conclusion, this anonymous work is more than just another commentary. It is a vital piece of evidence for the interconnectedness of the Iranian and Turkish medical traditions. It underscores the enduring authority of Avicenna and illustrates how the philosophical foundations of medicine were a subject of living, cross-cultural debate, contributing to a rich and shared scientific heritage.



Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed to the drafting of the article, review of the literature, and the final form of the article. All authors read and approved the final version of the work.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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