

AVICENNA

“The Prince of Physicians”

Nearly 1,000 years have now passed since the life-time of the great Arabian physician and philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Síná, the Son of Síná). Born near Bokhara in 980. A.D., he spent most of his life in Persia where he died in 1037. Although the intervening millenium has witnessed an enormous extension of human knowledge, Avicenna's fame has increased rather than diminished, for his greatness was based not only on his eminence as a physician and on his contributions to medicine, but above all on his universal genius. Like Aristotle and Leonardo da Vinci, Avicenna had a command of the entire range of knowledge of his day.

Even as a child Avicenna attracted attention by his insatiable thirst for knowledge and the early maturity of his mental powers. At the age of 18 he wrote a comprehensive work embracing the whole of the scientific knowledge of his day. By this time, he had already gained a reputation as a successful physician. His writings include nearly 100 books on theology, metaphysics, astronomy, natural philosophy, political questions and medicine. His “Canon of Medicine”, a treatise in 5 volumes, remained a standard work for centuries, and as late as the 17th century it was still used as a text-book at the Universities of Montpellier and Louvain. In this

work, Avicenna did not merely record the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen, as is often disparagingly claimed, but also attempted to reconcile his own experience and ideas with their writings. His personal contributions to the “Canon” show that he was a keen observer and did not shrink from replacing traditional teachings by his own observations. Thus, he recognized that the retina is the part of the eye principally concerned in vision, whereas formerly the lens was held responsible for this function; he also emphasized the connection between emotions and physical symptoms, differentiated between the principal forms of icterus, and drew attention to the transmission of certain infections across the placental barrier.

Although a tireless worker, who devoted himself to his writings even when travelling, Avicenna also valued the lighter side of life and enjoyed good company, poetry and music. He died at the age of fifty-seven in Hamadan, where a large mausoleum was recently erected over his grave in honour of his memory. Avicenna was known during his lifetime as “The Prince of Physicians”, and certainly the universal nature of his genius has earned him a place among the sages in the annals of mankind.