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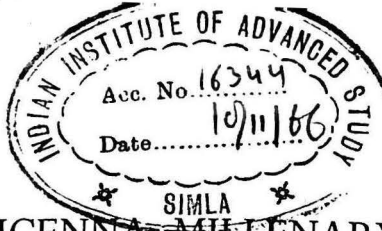
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## THE AVICENNA MILLENNARY CELEBRATIONS IN PERSIA

By LAURENCE LOCKHART

IT is not possible within the compass of this article to give a detailed biography of Avicenna or a full description of his works, but it will not be out of place to include in it a brief account of his birth, parentage and principal achievements.

Avicenna, or Ibn Sina as he is known in the East,\* was born at Afshana, a small village near Bukhara, the capital of Transoxiana, in 370 A.H. (A.D. 980-81); there has been some dispute as to this date, but it is the one which is now usually regarded as correct. The fact that Transoxiana was a land which had repeatedly been overrun by Arabs, Turks and Persians, and had therefore a very mixed population, explains why these three peoples have each claimed him as one of their countrymen.

'Abdullah, Avicenna's father, was a native of Balkh, and it has not been definitely established that he was a Persian; on the other hand, no convincing evidence has ever been produced to show that he was of Arab or Turkish stock. Avicenna's mother, whose name was Sitara, was almost certainly of Persian race. Moreover, the fact that the family was Shi'i and not Sunni in its religious views tends to support the Persian claim, though this in itself cannot be regarded as conclusive evidence. But apart altogether from this question of the nationality of his parents, the fact that Avicenna spent so many years of his life in Persia, and composed his greatest works in that country, is in itself a strong reason why the Persians of today should take a special pride in his wonderful achievements and why they decided to pay a fitting tribute to his memory on the occasion of the thousandth anniversary (according to the lunar reckoning) of his birth.

The young Avicenna was educated in Bukhara, where the Samanid Nuh II, the ruler of Transoxiana, had his court. By the age of ten he had learnt the Qu'ran by heart. He then applied himself to the study of arithmetic, geometry, Muslim jurisprudence, logic and metaphysics; in all these studies he showed an extraordinary precocity and aptitude for learning. Here we may quote a few lines from his autobiography:

"I now occupied myself with mastering the various texts and commentaries on natural science and metaphysics, until all the gates of knowledge were open to me. Next I desired to study medicine, and proceeded to read all the books that have been written on this subject. Medicine is not a difficult science, and naturally I excelled in it in a very short time, so that qualified physicians began to read medicine with me. I also undertook to treat the sick, and methods

\* His full name was Abu 'Ali al-Husain ibn 'Abdullah ibn 'Ali, called Ibn Sina. Avicenna, the Latin version of his name, was derived from a mutilation of the Hebrew form Bin Sina.

of treatment derived from practical experience revealed themselves to me such as baffle description. At the same time I continued between whiles to study and dispute on law, being now 16 years of age."

Not long afterwards, Avicenna was called in to treat Nuh ibn Mansur, the ruler of Transoxiana, for an illness which the other physicians had failed to cure. He succeeded, and was rewarded by the grateful ruler with a post at the court and was also given leave to use the royal library; there he found a large collection of books and was thereby enabled to extend his knowledge still further.

It was fortunate for him that he had these educational advantages at an early age, because in 999 the Samanid dynasty came to an abrupt end when Mahmud of Ghazna invaded and overran Transoxiana. Avicenna could doubtless have obtained employment at Mahmud's court, but he preferred to seek his fortune in lands that were under Persian rule. After residing for a time in Khwarazm, he went to Gurgan, in north-eastern Persia, where he began the *Qanun fi'l-Tibb*, the "Canon of Medicine," the first of his two major works. He also wrote many other books there.

From Gurgan he went to Rayy, and thence, after an interval, to Hamadan, where he entered the service of the Buwayhid ruler Shams al-Daula, and rose to be his Vizier. At Hamadan he had to devote his days to his official duties, but at night-time he wrote his books, discussed metaphysical and other problems with his friends and often caroused with them. It was at this time that he began his other great work, the *Kitab al-Shifa*, the "Book of the Remedy," a treatise on Aristotelian philosophy and science.

After the death of Shams al-Daula in 1022, Avicenna found it expedient to leave Hamadan and enter the service of the Kakuyid ruler Ala al-Daula at Isfahan. In that city he completed the *Qanun fi'l-Tibb* and the *Kitab al-Shifa*, as well as a number of works on various other scientific subjects. All these books were in Arabic, but when Avicenna wrote poetry, as he sometimes did, he used the Persian language.

Avicenna had been endowed with an excellent constitution, but in his later years he overtaxed his strength and fell into ill-health. In 1037, although very ill, he accompanied Ala al-Daula to Hamadan, but died there almost immediately after his arrival.\*

Such in brief was Avicenna's remarkable career. There can be no doubt that he was one of the greatest thinkers in the Islamic world. His fame, indeed, soon spread far beyond its limits. Although he was, in reality, even more eminent as a philosopher than as a physician, it was his great medical work the *Qanun* which, in a Latin translation, was by far the most widely read of his works in the West. It was, in fact, used there for several centuries as the chief textbook on medicine.

Several years before the millenary of Avicenna's birth was due,

\* Here it must be pointed out that Ibn al-Athir, in his book *al-Kamil fi'l-Tarikh*, Cairo, 1301 (1883-84), vol. ix, p. 190, stated categorically that Avicenna died in Isfahan. For this reason the Isfahanis felt strongly that the celebrations that were held at Hamadan should have taken place in their city.

elaborate plans were drawn up in Persia for its celebration. In the drawing up of these plans and in the vast amount of work to which they subsequently gave rise, a number of ministries and other organizations were involved, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Seven-Year Plan Organization, the Society for National Monuments, the Society for the Preservation of National Monuments and the Red Lion and Sun Society. Finance was to be arranged by grants from the Government and various bodies and by a special Avicenna lottery.

The plans referred to above included the following projects: (i) the replacement of the then existing tomb of Avicenna at Hamadan by an impressive mausoleum, (ii) the inauguration of a special library in the mausoleum building, (iii) the erection of a statue of Avicenna in Hamadan close to the mausoleum, (iv) the preparation and publication of a set of Avicenna's works in Persian, (v) the striking of an Avicenna medal, and (vi) the issue of a special set of postage stamps. It was, furthermore, decided to convene an Avicenna Congress in Persia in 1370 (1950-51), the year of the millenary, to which Orientalists from all parts of the world would be invited to attend and to contribute papers on Avicenna. To this Congress H.I.M. the Shah graciously agreed to extend his patronage.

Work was started on the new mausoleum on the site of Avicenna's tomb at Hamadan in 1949, and the construction was also begun of a lecture hall for the Congress in the grounds of Tehran University.

Unfortunately, when the date for the celebrations drew near, circumstances arose in Persia which necessitated their postponement until April, 1954 (some celebrations, however, did take place in October, 1952, at Tehran and Hamadan, but they were on a very small scale and there were no foreign participants).

Early in 1954 invitations to the foreign Orientalists to attend the Congress were sent out, and the date fixed for its opening was April 21. H.E. 'Ali Asghar Hekmat, the Iranian Ambassador at Delhi, who had played an active part in the planning of the celebrations, was given special leave of absence from his post in order that he might assist in the final preparations and preside at the meetings of the Congress.

Soon after the middle of April, over eighty Orientalists, from twenty-seven different countries, arrived in Tehran; in addition there were between thirty and forty Persian delegates. All the foreign delegates came as the guests of the Persian Government, and the arrangements made for their accommodation, comfort and transport were excellent. Nothing could have been friendlier than the reception accorded to the foreign delegates when they arrived.

On the morning of April 21 the delegates went to the royal palace to pay their respects to H.I.M. the Shah by signing the book; they afterwards went to Ray to see the mausoleum of the late Reza Shah (it adjoins the shrine of Shah 'Abdu'l-'Azim, a ninth-century saint).

At 3 p.m. on the same day the Prime Minister formally opened the Congress in the new Avicenna lecture hall by giving the inaugural address. Speeches were then made by the President of the Society for National Monuments, the Minister of Education, the Chancellor of Tehran University and certain of the foreign delegates.

The reading of papers on Avicenna by the delegates began on April 22 and continued until April 27. The sessions were from 8.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., with a break of half an hour; on some days there was an evening session from 6 to 8 p.m. Each delegate was allowed to speak for fifteen minutes, and there was no limitation as to what languages could be used; consequently, there were papers in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, English, French, German and Russian.

The activities of the delegates were by no means confined to the reading of and listening to these papers.

On Friday, April 23 (when there were no congressional meetings), a visit was paid to the Gulistan Palace. In the afternoon the delegates had the honour of being received by H.I.M. the Shah and H.M. the Queen at the Marble Palace. They were introduced by H.E. 'Ali Asghar Hekmat, who, it was noticed, did so without a single note.

On other days visits were paid to the National Library to see the Avicenna collection of books there, the Sepah-Salar College of Islamic Studies, the Majlis Library, the Farhangistan (the Iranian Academy), the Archæological Museum and the Institutes of National Arts. On April 23 the delegates were entertained to dinner by the Chancellor of Tehran University, and on April 26 there was a state banquet followed by a concert at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The scene of activities was changed from Tehran to Hamadan on April 28. On arrival at the latter town the delegates were most comfortably accommodated in the luxurious Abu Ali Hotel, which had been specially built for the occasion.

At 5 p.m. the statue of Avicenna, which is in the Abu Ali Avenue close to its upper end, was unveiled in the presence of a large crowd. This statue, which is of Qum marble, is the work of M. Abu'l-Hasan Sadiqi.

On the following morning all the delegates assembled outside the new Avicenna mausoleum to await the arrival of the Shah, who was to perform the opening ceremony. As His Majesty drove through the streets on his way to the mausoleum he received a great ovation from the crowds lining the streets.

After the Shah had delivered the inaugural address, speeches were made by H.E. Ali Asghar Hekmat and others, and an ode to commemorate the event was recited by Sadiq Sarmad, the Malik al-Shu'ara (Poet Laureate).

The new mausoleum, which stands on the site of the former one, is situated on the west side of the Abu 'Ali Avenue, midway between the Avicenna statue and the Pahlavi square in the centre of the town. M. Seyhoun, who had recently completed his studies in Paris, was responsible for the design of the building, in which he endeavoured to combine both ancient and modern styles of architecture. The mausoleum, which is substantially built of stone, has a row of twelve granite columns in front. In the passage leading to the tomb-chamber at the back of the building are doors giving access, on the right, to the library and, on the left, to a conference room. The tomb-chamber is square in shape, the tomb itself being in the centre. On the roof of the building, immediately over the tomb-chamber, is a tower 76 feet in height. It has a conical top,

like the famous tomb-tower of Qabus ibn Washmhir, a contemporary of Avicenna, but there the resemblance ends, for the top rests upon an open-work structure consisting of twelve ferro-concrete supports.

After the conclusion of the opening ceremony the delegates were free to visit the ancient monuments of Hamadan, such as the Parthian lion, the Gunbad-i-'Alavian, with its beautiful twelfth-century stucco work, the building containing the so-called tombs of Esther and Mordecai (in reality, the last resting-place of Queen Shushan-Dukht, the Jewish consort of the Sasanian king Yezdigird I), the tomb of the mystical poet Baba Tahir, etc. In the afternoon an excursion was made to a ravine high up on Mount Alvand to see the Ganj-Nameh ("Treasure Book"), the name given to two Achæmenian rock inscriptions, one dating from the reign of Darius and the other from that of his successor Xerxes.

On Friday, April 30, the delegates returned to Tehran, where, in the afternoon, they attended the final session of the Congress. In the evening the Minister of Education gave a farewell dinner at the Officers' Club, thus bringing the celebrations to a close.

Before the delegates left Tehran on their homeward journeys they were each given a number of books on Avicenna, a complete set of the commemorative stamps and a bronze medal. On the obverse of this medal was the portrait of Avicenna by M. Abu'l-Hasan Sadiqi, the sculptor of the statue at Hamadan; on the reverse was a representation of the Avicenna mausoleum.

Looking back on the Avicenna Congress, one can say without hesitation that it was a great success. Its proceedings, under the admirable chairmanship of H.E. 'Ali Asghar Hekmat, were conducted in a most friendly atmosphere, and it was most stimulating to meet, and to listen to, specialists from so many different lands. When, in due course, the contributions of all these savants are published it will be found that the subject of Avicenna and his works, in all its various aspects, has been most adequately covered.

