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AVICENNA II. BIOGRAPHY

AVICENNA

ii. Biography

Sources. Avicenna's biography presents the paradox that although more material is available for its study than is average for a Muslim scholar of his caliber, it has received little critical attention. The very existence of the autobiography and Jūzjānī's biography, both retold, paraphrased, and elaborated upon, seems to have inhibited from the very beginning further research into additional sources and critical analysis of those available. The assessment first made by Ebn Abī Oṣaybeʿa in the middle of the 7th/13th century has been valid ever since for both Muslim and Western scholars: Avicenna "mentioned his personal circumstances and described his own life in a way that relieves others of describing it again" (*Ketāb ʿoyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭebbāʾ*, ed. A. Müller, Cairo, 1882-84, II, p. 2).

A comprehensive and critical study of Avicenna's life will have to draw on the following four categories of sources:

1. The autobiography/biography complex and its recensions and derivatives. Avicenna's autobiography covers the period from his birth until after his encounter with Abū ʿObayd ʿAbd-al-Wāḥed Jūzjānī, his disciple and constant companion. Jūzjānī wrote down the autobiography (either from dictation, according to Ebn al-Qefṭī, *Taʾrīḵ al-ḥokamāʾ*, ed. J. Lippert, Leipzig, 1903, p. 413, or from a draft originally penned by Avicenna), and appended to it the

biography, covering the rest of Avicenna's life. This combined original document, in Arabic, exists in at least two recensions. One is embedded in the accounts of Avicenna by Ebn al-Qefṭī (pp. 413-26) and Ebn Abī Oṣaybeʿa (II, pp. 2-9), and the other exists independently in various manuscripts, in some of which it is also given the Persian title, *Sargoḏašt*. The relationship of the two recensions to Jūzjānī's text and to each other is not entirely clear. W. E. Gohlman, the editor of the *Sargoḏašt*, tends to think that it is closer to the original (Gohlman, *The Life of Ibn Sina*, p. 6).

Jūzjānī's edition of the autobiography/biography forms the only source for all subsequently narrative accounts of Avicenna's life. There is no indication that there ever was an original rival biography, and all later retellings merely repeat Jūzjānī's account in different degrees of fidelity to his (and Avicenna's) wording. These retellings differ only in the various details they introduce, which, however, have to be proven authentic in each case before they can be accepted. Even during his lifetime Avicenna had achieved great fame or notoriety (depending on the viewer's standpoint), and stories about him with essentially hagiographic or demonographic content doubtless began to circulate soon after his death. The trend continued until later popular tradition made of him either a saint and a mystic or a magician.

The most important retelling of the autobiography/biography, which sometimes is erroneously treated as an independent source, is that by Ẓahīr-al-dīn Abu'l-Ḥasan Bayhaqī in the *Tatemmat ṣewān al-ḥekma*. Bayhaqī recasts the autobiography in the third person, slightly paraphrases the biography, omits certain details, mostly of a bibliographic nature, and adds some others. These additions, which in Šafīʿ's, edition (Lahore, 1935) are conveniently enclosed in double brackets, occur mostly in the autobiography part, and are informative (provide names of personalities mentioned, refer to historical events), bibliographic (report on the fate of some of Avicenna's lost books), calumniatory (blame Avicenna for being the first philosopher to indulge in wine and sex, and to frequent royal courts), and anecdotal (e.g., the story of ʿAlāʾ-al-dawla's sister and the Ghaznavid Sultan Masʿūd, pp. 55-56 and Avicenna and the youth from Ray, pp. 59-61). Except for the bibliographic reports about the survival of some of Avicenna's books, not much of this additional information can be taken at face value. Bayhaqī's gratuitous comments on Avicenna's alleged debauchery, his arbitrary extrapolations from the material at hand, such as the mention that Avicenna used to study the *Rasāʾel Eḵwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, and the anecdotal material merit little credence; but

even the information about the names of certain personalities should be questioned. There is no reason why the names of Avicenna's mother, and of the greengrocer from whom Avicenna learned arithmetic as a young boy, should have survived unaltered, or at all, for more than 150 years until Bayhaqī's time. Such information, even if it had survived orally in the popular tradition, lends itself easily to falsification.

Similar criticism must be applied to all details added in the derivatives of Jūzjānī's edition of the autobiography/biography. These derivatives are the accounts of Avicenna's life by subsequent biographers, from Ebn Ḵallekān (*Wafayāt al-aʿyān*) and Šahrazūrī (*Nozhat al-arwāḥ*) to Ebn al-ʿEmād (*Šaḏarāt al-ḏahab*) and Ḵᵛāndamīr (*Ḥabīb al-sīar* and *Dostūr al-wozarāʾ*).

The manuscript tradition of Jūzjānī's edition also shows accretions and contaminations from various sources. In one instance, the recension in Ebn al-Qefṭī/Ebn Abī Oṣaybeʿa is contaminated with the version of Bayhaqī, in the Vienna MS Ar. Mixt. 866, 8 (H. Loebenstein, *Katalog der arabischen Handschriften der österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Vienna, 1970, p. 212, no. 2430).

2. Private writings by Avicenna and his disciples. These constitute a reliable source about numerous details of Avicenna's life. They consist of his many autobiographical references in the prologues, epilogues, and occasionally even in the body of his own works, of his correspondence, and of similar writings by his disciples, including Jūzjānī's introduction to the *Šefāʾ* (*Madḵal*, Cairo, 1952, pp. 1-4). This material, which has been virtually untapped for Avicenna's life, is preserved partly in the collection of his *Nachlass* known under the title *al-Mobāḥaṯāt*, one recension of which was edited by ʿA. Badawī (*Aresṭū ʿend al-ʿArab*, Cairo, 1947, pp. 119-249), and partly independently in the MSS, and remains mostly unpublished.

3. Historical works. As a rule they have little information to add to Avicenna's life, but they are useful for providing the background for many of the social and political events referred to or hinted at in the autobiography/biography.

4. Legendary and hagiographic stories. These belong not to his biography proper but to a study of the transformation of his image in popular tradition after his death. This played a role in the reception of his authentic works in the Persian- and Turkish-speaking areas of the Islamic world and has to be studied as a separate subject. The pride of place among the legendary material belongs

to Neẓāmī ʿArūżī's *Čahār maqāla* (tr. E. G. Browne, London, index, s.v.). For later material see A. Süheyl Ünver, "Şark folklorun'da İbni Sina hakkında yaşayan ve kaybolan efsaneler," in his *İbni Sina, Hayatı ve Eserleri Hakkında Çalışmalar*, Istanbul, 1955, pp. 62-70.

Analysis of the autobiography. For the first part of Avicenna's life, our sole source of information is the autobiography. The real purpose of this document is philosophical: While purporting to give details about his early life—details which, in the absence of contrary, or any other, evidence, may have to be taken at face value—Avicenna is providing a concrete illustration of his epistemological theory. This centers on the ability of some individuals with powerful souls to acquire intelligible knowledge all by themselves and without the help of a teacher through their propensity to hit spontaneously upon the middle terms of syllogisms, *ḥads* (see below Mysticism: Avicenna and Sufism). The autobiography is written from the perspective of a philosopher who does not belong by training to any school of thought and is therefore not beholden to defending it blindly, who established truth through his independent verification (*ḥads*) and found that for the most part this truth is contained in the philosophical sciences as classified and transmitted in the Aristotelian tradition, and who is therefore in a position both to teach this more accurate version of truth—or revised Aristotelian philosophy—and to judge the attainment in philosophy of others.

For this reason, when the autobiography is reduced to its bare essentials, it appears as a transcript of Aristotelian studies and a model curriculum vitae in a Peripatetic program. Avicenna reports in it basically that he studied the philosophical sciences according to their classification in the Aristotelian tradition, and that he studied them in three successive stages at increasingly advanced levels. Everything else that Avicenna says he studied was studied not for its own sake but for that of the philosophical sciences, in whose terms it is to be seen. The elementary courses in the Qurʾān, literature, and arithmetic are preparatory subjects for the philosophical sciences. Avicenna's rejection of the Ismaʿili teachings is intended to indicate that already at an early age he could refuse, through his own reflection, authoritative knowledge, *taqlīd*. (Bayhaqī's unwarranted addition at this point, that Avicenna would read and reflect on the *Rasāʾel*, as already mentioned, caused many a misunderstanding and generated the myth of the Ismaʿili Avicenna. Avicenna nowhere indicates that he had any interest in the doctrine or in the kind of thinking it involved.) His study of *feqh* with the Hanafite jurist Esmāʿīl

Zāhed (d. 402/1012) is mentioned only to refer to the method of the discipline and to justify his knowledge of and practice in Aristotelian dialectics (as expounded in the *Topics* 8). On this basis is Avicenna then able to analyze the question "What is it?" and amaze his teacher Nātelī. Medicine, finally, though it belongs to the canon of sciences in the Greek Aristotelian tradition, is not a theoretical, but a practical science. Therefore it is easy, i.e., its acquisition does not require the solution of syllogisms by hitting upon middle terms, but merely reading the texts and medical practice. Avicenna then says that he studied the philosophical sciences—logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, in that order—in three stages: first, initially with Nātelī and finally on his own, second, entirely on his own, and third, at a research level, in the physicians' library in the palace of the Samanid ruler.

The systematic nature of Avicenna's presentation of the actual course of his studies, and its close correspondence to the theoretical classification of the philosophical sciences, raise the question whether Avicenna presented a stylized autobiography in which the chronology of events is bent to fit the theoretical classification of the sciences. The issue can not be resolved, insofar as the classification of the sciences in the Aristotelian tradition influenced actual educational practice which in turn is presented in an autobiographical account reproducing that very classification in order to promote it. However, the exact historical sequence of events in Avicenna's studies is not as important as the point which the autobiography intends to make, as discussed in the first paragraph of this section.

Avicenna's life. Bukhara (370/980[?]-389/999[?]). Avicenna was born around the year 370/980 and most likely quite a few years earlier than that. It has not yet been possible to establish the date of his birth with greater precision; there are enough inconsistencies and contradictions in the transmitted chronology, however, to make the traditional date of 370/980 rather untenable (Sellheim, *Oriens*, p. 238). He was born in Afšana, a village near Bukhara. His father, who had moved in from Balḵ a few years previously, was the Samanid governor of nearby Ḵarmayṭan. A few years after his birth, the family moved to Bukhara. The intellectually active capital attracted scholars, and Avicenna had an excellent education. Although for the reasons mentioned in the preceding section Avicenna is reticent about his teachers, it is almost certain that he studied with more scholars than the Nātelī that he mentions in the autobiography; the names of the physicians Abū Manṣūr Qomrī and Abū Sahl Masīḥī are also mentioned among his teachers. Given the availability of

teachers and libraries, his father's high position in the Samanid administration, and his own application and precocity, Avicenna was perfectly schooled in the Greek sciences by the time he was eighteen.

Avicenna began his professional career around the age of seventeen, when he was enrolled as a physician in the service of the Samanid Nūḥ b. Manṣūr (r. 365/976-387/997) whom he was summoned to treat. After the death of his father a few years later—according to the chronological sequence of the events as described in the autobiography, after he was twenty-one—he was also given an administrative post, perhaps a district governorship. The fact that in the autobiography the death of his father and his assumption of administrative duties are mentioned closely together justifies the speculation that he may have succeeded his father as governor of Ḵarmayṯan. By a relatively early age Avicenna was established, in his twin capacity as physician and political administrator, in a profession that he was to practice in the courts of various Iranian rulers, heads of the numerous successor states that emerged during the period of the disintegration of ʿAbbasid authority.

Gorgānj (ca. 389/999[?]-402/1012). Avicenna remained in Bukhara until, as he puts it, "necessity called" him to leave for Gorgānj in Ḵᵛārazm, where he joined the service of the Maʾmunid Abu'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Maʾmūn (see Āl-e Maʾmūn). Since the latter reigned from 387/997 to 399/1009, Avicenna could have moved to Gorgānj any time between these two dates; but the fact that the "necessity" to which he refers can be interpreted in any satisfactory way only in political terms suggests the following. The Samanid state was overthrown by the Turkish Qarakhanids who entered Bukhara in 389/999 and took ʿAbd-al-Malek II, the last amir, prisoner. Avicenna, a high functionary of the fallen state and strongly identified with the Samanid dynasty, may have found his position, to say nothing of his job, difficult to maintain. Furthermore, it may not be entirely fortuitous that soon after the fall of Bukhara to the Qarakhanids, Esmāʿīl Montaṣer, the Samanid prince, also went to Ḵᵛārazm to seek support for a political comeback. Avicenna may or may not have been involved in the undertaking, but it appears that it was the events of 389/999 and those immediately following them that generated the circumstances which made Avicenna's departure from his home town necessary (cf. Lüling, "Ein anderer Avicenna," p. 499).

From Gorgānj to Jorjān (402/1012-403/1013). Avicenna left Gorgānj for the same unspecified reason—"necessity called" him—and traveled south into Khorasan and then west. During the journey he passed through Nasā, Abīvard,

Ṭūs, Samangān, Jājarm, and arrived at Jorjān (Gorgān) only to find that the Ziyarid amir Qābūs b. Vošmgīr, his prospective patron, had died in the meantime (winter months of 403/January-March, 1013). Avicenna's report in the autobiography is too brief to provide any hints about the reasons behind this odyssey, although political considerations would again seem to be the only plausible answer. As for the duration of his travels, Avicenna does not mention that he stayed or worked in any of these locations, so in all likelihood he left Gorgānj in 402/1012. In Jorjān (403/1013-ca. 404/1014) Avicenna met Jūzjānī. He spent little time there, apparently in the employ of Manūčehr b. Qābūs, and lived in the house of a private patron.

Ray (ca. 404/1014-405/1015). From Jorjān Avicenna moved to Ray, where he joined the service of the Buyid Majd-al-dawla Rostam and his mother Sayyeda, the power behind the throne. Although he had with him letters of recommendation for his new employers, it appears that he gained access to the political elite of the Jebāl again through his skill as a physician. He treated Majd-al-dawla who was suffering from a black bile disease.

Hamadān (405/1015-ca. 415/1024). Avicenna remained in Ray until the Buyid Šams-al-dawla, Majd-al-dawla's brother, attacked the city after Ḏu'l-qaʿda, 405/April, 1015. Then he left for Qazvīn, again for reasons unspecified, and finally arrived in Hamadān where he was summoned to treat Šams-al-dawla. Inevitably Avicenna became also Šams-al-dawla's vizier and acted in this capacity (with an occasional conflict with the amir's troops) until the latter's death in 412/1021. The new amir, Samāʾ-al-dawla, asked Avicenna to stay on as vizier, but "Avicenna saw fit not to remain in the same state nor to resume the same duties, and trusted that the prudent thing to do . . . would be to hide in anticipation of an opportunity to leave that region" (Jūzjānī, *Šefāʾ*, *Madḵal*, p. 2). He secretly corresponded with the Kakuyid ʿAlāʾ-al-dawla in Isfahan about this matter. The Buyid court in Hamadān, and especially Tāj-al-molk, the Kurdish vizier, suspected Avicenna of treachery because of these moves, and they arrested and imprisoned him in a castle outside of Hamadān called Fardajān. Avicenna remained in prison for four months until ʿAlāʾ-al-dawla marched toward Hamadān and ended Samāʾ-al-dawla's rule there (414/1023). Released from prison in the wake of these developments, Avicenna was again offered an administrative position in Hamadān, but he declined. Some time later he decided to move to Isfahan and he left Hamadān with his brother, Jūzjānī, and two slaves, dressed like Sufis.

Isfahan (ca. 415/1024-428/1037). ʿAlāʾ-al-dawla received Avicenna with honors,

and gave him, in Jūzjānī's words, "the respect and esteem which someone like him deserved." Avicenna finally settled in Isfahan and remained in ʿAlāʾ-al-dawla's employ until his death. He accompanied his master in most of his campaigns and trips, and indeed it was during one such trip to Hamadān that he died, in 428/1037, of colic, after a protracted series of recoveries and relapses. He was buried in Hamadān.

Apart from his scholarly persona, which is one of unprecedented energy and sharpness, we get almost no glimpse of Avicenna's character. He was a self-conscious boy prodigy, professionally successful at an early age; also at an early age he became a permanent exile from a home that ceased to exist; he was forced to serve petty rulers most of whom not only did not appreciate his special genius but did not even esteem him as an intellectual; and yet he somehow stayed with these rulers and seems to have been determined to avoid, for whatever reasons, the Ghaznavid court. The combination of these factors, among many others, could produce either a hero or a villain: it does not help to speculate before all the available evidence, especially his private writings, is assessed. One thing, though, is certain, and this has again to do with his scholarly self: When it came to intellectual matters, Avicenna could accept no rival and decline no challenge. When he was slighted for his ignorance of Arabic lexicography, he answered the affront by memorizing Azharī's *Tahḏīb al-loḡa*, forging three epistles in the styles of famed authors, and submitting them for identification to the person who had insulted him. That person failed to recognize the forgery. This also, however, depending on the surrounding circumstances, which we do not know, could be interpreted either as extreme arrogance, or proper estimation of self worth, or even as an exaggerated sense of humor. Avicenna the person is hardly distinguishable behind the brilliance of Avicenna the mind. But for Avicenna, who saw the supreme happiness in the contact of the human intellect with the active intellect during the split-second of hitting upon the middle term, perhaps this is just the way it should be.

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Jūzjānī's biography has not yet been subjected to a critical study. Particularly perceptive analyses of the autobiography, on the other hand, are offered by R. Sellheim in his review of Ergin's *Avicenna bibliography*, *Oriens* 11, 1958, pp. 231-39, and by G. Lüling, "Ein anderer Avicenna. Kritik seiner Autobiographie

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D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (forthcoming) contains a translation and an analysis of the autobiography.