

Hunayn bin Ishaq: The Great Translator

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Summary

One of the early keys to the development of an Islamic corpus of medicine was access to the work of Greek, Roman, Indian and other cultures. The Caliph Al-Ma'mun recognized this with the establishment of the *Bayt Al Hikmah* and by continuing the search for manuscripts and books throughout the known world. One, if not the, central figure during this "translation phase" was **Hunayn bin Ishaq**. This brief biographical essay examines the life of this multi-talented man whose translations were worth their weight in gold, and who found time to pioneer the exposition of the secrets of sight.

Key Words: Hunayn bin Ishaq, History of Medicine, Biography

Abu Zayd Hunayn bin Ishaq al Ibadī ranks as the finest medical and scientific mind of the early Abassid era. Born in 809 to an apothecary in Al Hirah, **Hunayn** went to Baghdad to study medicine as a young man. There he enrolled in the earliest known private medical school in Islam under the direction of **Yuhanna bin Masawayh**.

Desiring greater access to the Classical World's knowledge of the healing arts, **Hunayn** intensified his study of Greek. After mastering the available Greek medical texts, **Hunayn** undertook a program of private translation of these works into Arabic. At the same time, the Abassid caliphs, in particular **Al-Ma'mun**, initiated a policy of rendering Greek classics on science, engineering and medicine into Arabic in order to make them available to a wider audience. When word of Hunayn's personal efforts reached Al-Ma'mun in 830, the physician was placed in charge of the *Bayt al Hikmah*, the Abassid supported institution for translation and the promotion and dissemination of classical writings.

Hunayn quickly established himself as a careful, reliable and scholarly translator. Traveling widely, Hunayn gathered a collection of the best preserved Greek manuscripts. Prior to undertaking translations, he would compare these manuscripts to one another to obtain the best reconstruction of the original text.

Once he had what he felt was an authentic version, **Hunayn's** translations were precise but not overly literal. The quality of these translations was such that Hunayn was paid for them by their weight in gold. Within fifty years **Hunayn** and his students completed the monumental task of rendering in Arabic and Syriac all of the most important Greek medical texts written over a millennium -- including all of **Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, Discorides** and their important commentators, from **Oribasius** to **Paul of Aeginata**.

The importance of these translations cannot be overemphasized. **Hunayn** and his associates provided the medieval Muslim world, from Spain to Samarkand, with the knowledge of the ancients and this formed the foundation for the Muslim intellectual ferment of the next century.

It would be a mistake to think of **Hunayn** as merely a sterile translator. A prolific writer, Hunayn penned twenty nine original books on a variety of medical topics and also prepared a valuable index of the Galenic writings available in Arabic and Syriac. Hunayn made significant original contributions and improved and modified existing medical theories and teaching procedures. His *Al Masa'il fi at-Tibb (Introduction to the Healing Arts)* was quickly adopted the principal manual used by examiners in

testing physicians seeking licenses. In addition *Al Masdil* was commented on, summarized and interpreted by authors from the Tenth through Fourteenth Centuries. Translated into Latin, it was a widely consulted medical reference work for Western physicians throughout the Renaissance.

Hunayn also wrote ten treatises on the physiology, anatomy and treatment of the eye. These volumes were the first systematic and organized texts on the subject in Arabic and are the earliest works that include anatomical charts of the eye. The influence of these treatises on the development of ophthalmology was profound, not only in the Islamic world, but in Europe as well. Oculists quoted and consulted them through the Fifteenth Century.

Hunayn was also cited by contemporaries and succeeding generations as the quintessential ethical physician. During the Ninth Century rulers in both Europe and the East were concerned and fearful of being poisoned. Hence they exercised great care in choosing their attendants and in particular their physicians. The latter, after all, possessed knowledge of both drugs and their effect on the human body that could make them highly qualified assassins. While **Hunayn** had an excellent reputation for integrity, the Caliph **Al-Mutawakil** (846-861), according to an often told story, decided to test him.

Al-Mutawakil offered Hunayn enormous riches if the physician would create a poison which the Caliph needed to exterminate an enemy. Hunayn replied that he had spent his life learning about the healing aspects of drugs and would need to spend several years in study to master those with a deleterious effect. Insisting that he needed it immediately, the Caliph doubled his original offer. **Hunayn** restated his original position. The harder the Caliph demanded and the higher he raised the price, the more **Hunayn** stood by his conscience. In a tone of moral indignation, **Hunayn** lectured the Caliph, explaining

that a physician is sworn never to give injurious or deadly medicine and that professional ethics demand that practitioners do all they can to help their clients, not harm them. The Caliph, he said, would do better to look elsewhere for his poison. Thrown into prison and threatened with execution for defiance, **Hunayn** stated that he would rather accept death than violate the ethics of a medical doctor. Al-Mutawakil released **Hunayn** when he heard this response, explaining that he had been only testing the physician. Having stood by his professional ethics and personal integrity, **Hunayn** found himself showered with riches and promoted for defying the Caliph.

Hunayn died in Baghdad in 873 at the age of 64. Not only did he leave behind a rich legacy of translations and original works, but his exemplary life helped establish the ethical standards of behavior for his profession that exist to this day.

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