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Avicenna, the great physician



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In the very heart of the city of Hamedan there is an elliptic, beautiful square that holds a magnificent and sky-high mausoleum. The bulk of the square is loaded with colorful flowers and tall trees that stretch up to the heavens.

The mausoleum belongs to Avicenna (Hojjat-ol-Haq Sheikh-ol-Rais) the great Iranian philosopher, scholar and physician (980-1037 CE).

The towering dome of mausoleum that can be seen from every corner of the square is supported by extremely high stony columns. It is a needle tower that shows the scholarly figure of Avicenna.

On the other side of the square, Avicenna's colossal statue is observable that creates a respectful sensation in observers because, as a man of genius, he was the preeminent philosopher and physician of the Muslim world, flourishing during the Islamic Golden Age, serving in the courts of various Iranian rulers, and he is often described as the father of early modern medicine. It is a title bestowed upon him by Europeans, and some historians have likened him to Aristotle.

His most famous works are 'The Book of Healing,' a philosophical and scientific encyclopedia, and 'The Canon of Medicine,' a medical encyclopedia which became a standard medical text at many medieval universities and remained in use as late as 1650 CE.

Avicenna created an extensive body of work during what is commonly known as the Islamic Golden Age, in which the translations of Byzantine Greco-Roman, Persian and Indian texts were studied extensively. He wrote most of his philosophical and scientific works in Arabic, but also wrote several key works in Persian. Besides philosophy and medicine, Avicenna's work includes writings on astronomy, alchemy, geography and geology, psychology, Islamic theology, logic, mathematics, physics and poetry.

In Avicenna's time, the Samanid dynasty in eastern Iran and the Buyid dynasty in western Iran provided a thriving atmosphere for scholarly

and cultural development. Avicenna had access to the great libraries of Balkh, Khwarazm, Gorgan, Rey and Hamedan.

Due to his intelligence, he was first schooled in the Qur'an and literature and, by the age of 10, he had memorized the entire Qur'an. He was later sent by his father to an Indian greengrocer, who taught him arithmetic. Afterwards, he was schooled in jurisprudence and sometime later Avicenna's father invited the physician Abu Abdallah al-Natili to their house to educate Avicenna. After Avicenna had read the *Almagest* of Ptolemy and Euclid's *Elements*, Natili told him to continue his research.

By the time Avicenna was 17, he was well-educated in Greek sciences.

He was employed as the head of the royal library in the Samanid court. At this time, some of his adversaries were concerned about his genius, and an accusing finger was pointed at him constantly, especially when the library caught fire and, unexpectedly, in the dead of night a conflagration consumed the whole library and the flames spread to all parts within minutes of ignition and everything was badly damaged. All of his malevolent rivals imputed this ruination to him because they strongly believed that Avicenna had memorized all of the books, and now he had set a light to the library to prevent other scholars from using it.

His professional status in treating pains and illnesses was so significant that many biographers believe that the emergence of the new medical era began with the nullification of Avicenna's era.

At the age of 17, Avicenna cured Nuh II, a Samanid prince who suffered from hallucination, a form of psychiatric disorder. The prince dreamed up that he had transformed into a bull, mooing like the animal.

All physicians did their best to cure the prince, but it didn't come to anything. Ultimately, they begged Avicenna for help. He examined the mentally-ill prince and noticed that his poor diet had led to his illness. So, by feeding him a good diet, he nursed him back to health.

Among a wide circle of his devotees and students, Avicenna's friendship with

Abu Ubayd al-Juzjani was a significant event in his life because he remained as a constant assistant and a bosom friend. He encouraged Avicenna to write many of his treatises and collected many of his works.

Avicenna lived in continual escape from the hands of cruel sultans during his entire life. Because they were showing open hostility towards his ideas and philosophy.

It is a well-known story regarding Avicenna and his three constant companions escaping from the claws of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni's agents, as he was sentenced to life imprisonment because of his scientific beliefs.

In spite of his perpetual escape, he wrote most of his works on horseback. He drafted 450 books, about 240 of which have survived, including 150 on Islamic philosophy and 40 on medicine.

Avicenna went to the city of Rey, where he entered into the service of Majd al-Dawla, a Buyid ruler to work as a court physician. During this period, he finished his 'Canon of Medicine', and started writing his 'Book of Healing'.

In 1037, while Avicenna was accompanying Ala al-Dawla to a battle near Isfahan, he was hit by a severe colic, from which he had been constantly suffering throughout his life. He died shortly thereafter in Hamedan, where he was buried.

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A turning point for Persianate culture in South Asia

Persian did find itself in transition in the latter days of the Mughal Empire. The political shocks of the eighteenth century, such as Nader Shah's sacking of Delhi in 1739, initiated a breakdown of complex patronage networks and a loosening of the rigid social system of the Mughals, causing literati to leave Delhi and placing Persian literary culture and production in a state of flux.

The arrival of the British on the Indian Subcontinent also played a large part. The impact of the British on informational networks wedded to Persian language and administrative norms is well-known. The way in which the British used and manipulated aspects of Persianate literary culture and reconfigured existing networks to fit with their own political aspirations certainly represents a major

turning point for Persianate culture in South Asia.

In their quest to achieve economic and political inroads into the Indian Subcontinent, the British relied on informants, administrators and secretaries versed in the Persian language and its cultural norms.

One of the many ways in which to capture the larger trends working against Persian's administrative dominance can be gleaned by looking at the figure of the secretary (*munshi*) and how the British relied on this ever-dependable class whose administrative and scribal skills derived from their placement within Mughal governmental structures.

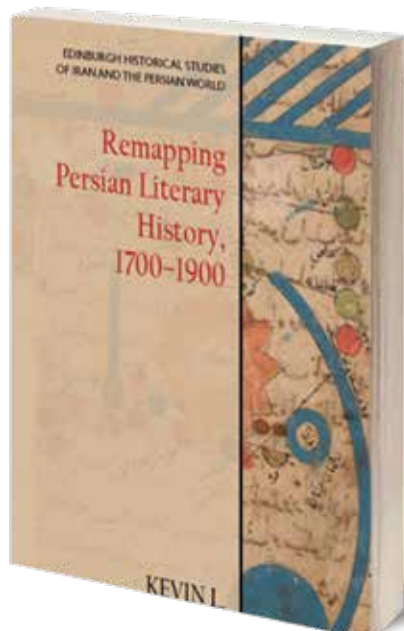
During the early rise of the East India Company (EIC), especially from the mid-eighteenth to the

mid-nineteenth century, *munshis* were crucial in helping the British navigate the established set of cultural norms related to the use of the Persian language. These *munshis*, skilled in the Persian language and Mughal administrative technologies, 'were desperately needed by the British as they maneuvered their way through diplomatic exchanges and political intrigues in their rise to power'.

Before 1830 in particular, the EIC used *munshis* to 'manipulate the information systems of their Hindu and Muslim predecessors' to their political advantage. Approaching the Persian language as a 'pragmatic vehicle of communication with Indian officials and rulers through which ... they could express their requests, queries, and thoughts, and through

which they could get things done', the *munshi* proved indispensable to British political and economic activity.

The British tasked these individuals with a variety of roles, ranging from administrator and secretary to language instructor and author. They served as administrative and cultural interpreters between the EIC and Mughal successor states, accompanied British diplomatic missions abroad and composed works on various aspects of South Asian history and culture at the behest of their British employers. Though no comprehensive work exists on the variety of roles occupied by the *munshi* class, a variety of studies have been devoted to individual *munshis* and their role within British residencies and language training colleges.



The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter, 'Persian Literary Historiography of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', from a book entitled, 'Remapping Persian Literary History, 1700-1900', written by Kevin L. Schwartz, published by Edinburgh University Press.