The Patna Manuscript of Al-Zahrawi’s *Al-Tasrif*

Minaret Research Network

Hundreds of thousands of medical manuscripts, written by Muslim physicians during the medieval period, are to be found in libraries and museums and in private collections in Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Iran, India, Azerbaijan, Morocco, Europe and the United States. The United States National Library of Medicine in Maryland, USA, the world’s largest medical library, has some 300 medical manuscripts in Arabic and Persian.

Folios from Al-Zahrawi’s illustrated work on surgery, Al-Tasrif (Bibliotheque
Abul Qasim al-Zahrawi’s book *Al-tasrif liman ajiza an al-talif* is one of the masterpieces of Islamic medicine and surgery. It comprises 30 treatises that encompass almost the entire spectrum of medical knowledge. A distinctive feature of Al-Tasrif is that it contains about 200 illustrations and drawings of clinical and surgical devices and instruments, most of which were designed by Al-Zahrawi himself. An exhaustive identification and description of the extant manuscripts of Al-Tasrif is provided by Fuat Sezgin in his authoritative work *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden, 1970). Complete or partial manuscripts of Al-Tasrif are to be found in 12 countries, including Morocco, India, Turkey, Egypt and Azerbaijan. More than five manuscripts of Al-Tasrif are preserved at the Royal Library of Morocco at Rabat. Some manuscripts of the book are at the Suleymaniye Omomi Kotophanesi, Istanbul. One of these is dated 1496 CE.
Two pages from a manuscript of Al-Zahrawi’s Al-Tasrif, preserved at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku (Credit: Azerbaijan National Academy of Science)
Two pages from the Baku manuscript of Al-Tasrif, describing surgical instruments with illustrations.
Khuda Bakhsh Library, Patna

Khan Bahadur Khuda Bakhsh (d. 1908) was a bibliophile and an avid collector of manuscripts and art objects. He inherited a collection of rare manuscripts from his father, Maulvi Muhammad Bakhsh, to which he added a substantial collection of his own. In 1891 he opened his private collection with 4,000 manuscripts to the public.

The collection of Khan Bahadur Khuda Bakhsh is now housed at the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library at Patna. The library, which is a treasure trove of Islamic and oriental manuscripts, has 21,000 manuscripts and more than 2,50,000 printed books on a wide variety of subjects. The Government of India declared the Khuda Bakhsh Library an institution of national importance in 1969.
The Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library in Patna (India) has two valuable manuscripts of Al-Tasrif. One of them, which is dated 1710 CE, has 27 (out of 30) treatises of the book in 494 folios, and is written in the Maghrebi script. The other manuscript contains only the last (30th) treatise and has 248 folios. This manuscript, written in the Naskhi script in 1188 CE, has nearly 200 drawings and illustrations of clinical and surgical devices and instruments. This is perhaps the earliest and one of the finest manuscripts of Al-Tasrif.

Dr Ahmad Abdul Hai, former Professor and Head, Department of General Surgery, Patna Medical College Hospital, took a microfilm of the Patna manuscript about 20 years ago. One of his valuable papers ‘Abul Qasim Al-Zahrawi’s Pioneering Contribution to Surgery’ was published in The IOS Minaret in June 2010.
The introductory part of Al-Tasrif

A page from Al-Tasrif, showing the division of the book into three major sections
Cautery for draining a liver abscess. This was a rather unique instrument which, after being heated, was thrust into the abscess cavity for evacuating the abscess. The rounded metal ball in the centre of the device was intended to hold the heat and cautirise the passage through which the instrument was passed to prevent haemorrhage.
This instrument was passing through the natural orifice to break impacted urethral stones—a prototype lithotrite.

This prototype of a “syringe” (zanqua) was used for bladder wash.

Various types of saws used for bone surgery and amputation.
Treatment for various types of fractures and dislocations

Cephalotribe and other instruments for destructive operations on a dead foetus

A description of the surgical steps to be taken to prevent haemorrhage. Even today the basic steps remain the same though the modalities are now far more refined.