

Iran: Land of Science, Arts and Culture: The Unrivalled Legacy of Avicenna

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Historically, Iran has been a land of prominent, influential figures in science, letters, arts and literature whose impact on the global civilization will remain in place forever.

Throughout its ancient history, Iran has introduced numerous people to the world who have been among the most impressive, notable and valuable figures in their own field of expertise.

Although the European nations usually boast of being the foremost pioneers and harbingers in various fields of science and arts, they know well that they owe to the Persians the achievement of many peaks and breakthroughs which they introduce as being theirs. Persians have been traditionally skilful and dexterous in different branches of astronomy, mathematics, physics, medicine, psychiatry, architecture, philosophy, theology and literature and the unparalleled names of Ferdowsi, Rumi, Rhazes, Rudaki, Biruni, Al-Farabi, Al-Khawrizmi and Avicenna attest to the fact that Iran has been perpetually a land of science, knowledge and conscience in which cleverness grows and talent develops.

Although we are customarily grappling with our daily concerns and rarely find the opportunity to study about the figures who have shaped our civilization and our knowledge of the external world, it's vitally necessary to have a basic acquaintance with these great men and know the reasons why they did become eternal and everlasting in the annals of history.

Avicenna is one out of hundreds of Iranian intellectuals whose contributions to science and literature has made him an unforgettable name in the memory of the world and there are millions of people around the globe who admire and respect him for what he achieved and what he was.

Avicenna was an 11th century Persian polymath, physician, philosopher and scientist, born in the ancient Iranian province of Bukhara in 980. He has written more than 450 books on various subjects, particularly in physics, medicine and philosophy.

He always considered himself a student whose knowledge is incomplete and imperfect. In a famous distich, he described himself this way:

My knowledge reached to the point that / I can know that I know nothing

Avicenna's exceptional talents emerged since his early childhood and by the age of ten he was proficient in memorizing and reciting the Holy Quran. In his adolescence years, he studied Islamic jurisprudence, philosophy and natural sciences. He started studying

medicine when he was 17 and described the field as “not difficult” to study. By the age of 18, he had become a prominent physician and the Samanid ruler Nuh ibn Mansur, in gratitude to his services, invited him to attend the royal library where the young Avicenna could access to a number of rare and unique books. Avicenna set out to write his first book by the age of 21.

After the death of his father, Avicenna left Bukhara and went to Khiva and then to Gorgan at the southern coastline of Caspian Sea. He was attracted by the prominence of Gorgan’s ruler as a science-loving emperor; however, his arrival in Gorgan coincided with the overthrow and killing of King Qabus. He consequently went to Ray near the modern Tehran and carried out a set of concentrated researches on medicine. Following the blockade of Ray city, he set out to Hamedan and treated Amir Shamsud-Dawla’s colic. He was then appointed as the Hamedan’s Prime Minister by Amir. While serving as the Prime Minister, he wrote the “Book of Healing”. Following the demise of Shamsud-Dawla, a number of vicious soldiers planned a conspiracy against Avicenna and compelled Amir’s successor to imprison him. He spent 4 months in prison where he compiled the mystic treatise of “Hayy ibn Yaqdhan”.

Following his release, Avicenna spent a few times in seclusion and isolation. Consequently, he went to Isfahan along with his brother and one of his students where they were warmly welcomed by the regional ruler, Ala al-Daula. Avicenna spent 14 tranquil years in Isfahan and this gave him the opportunity to complete his unfinished books. He advised Ala al-Dula in scientific and literary matters and accompanied him in war campaigns. In 1037 and while he was en route to Hamedan accompanying the king, he got sick and passed away in 58.

Avicenna is the first Iranian philosopher who has compiled organized and structured books on philosophy and medicine. He was influenced by Prophet Muhammad, Plotinus, al-Kindi, Al-Farabi and Biruni. His enormous book the “Canon of Medicine” was used as a textbook in the universities of Montpellier and Louvain by 1650s.

Avicenna was astoundingly versatile in his skills and abilities. He was an astronomer, chemist, geologist, Quran memorizer (Hafiz), Islamic psychologist, theologian, logician, paleontologist, physicist, poet and mathematician.

The Arab scholar and researcher Soheil Muhsin Afnan who has written on the works and life of Avicenna extensively describes him as “the most provocative figure in the history of thought in the East.”

On the profoundness and authoritativeness of Avicenna’s works, Afnan writes: “with a wideness of range, a vigor of thought, and a unity of conception unequalled among the philosophers, his thoughts extended far beyond the Eastern lands, giving rise to the most complete philosophical system that the Islamic world was to have.”

Avicenna’s “Danish-naama-i-Alai” is the first Persian-written dissertation on philosophy. It’s consisted of five main categories: logic, natural sciences, astronomy, music and theology. In this treatise, he has proposed new Persian equivalents for the Arabic philosophical terms.

Many scientific organizations around the world are named after Avicenna. A lunar crater lying on the far side of the Moon, just beyond the western limb on the northern rim of the Lorentz basin is named in honor of Avicenna.

Avicenna's Canon of Medicine is actually his most well-known book. The book starts with a definition of the science of medicine. Then, he goes on to say that the human's health cannot be restored unless the causes of both health and illness are found out.

He consequently gives a definition of the material cause which is the physical body, the primary constituents of the human body which are elements and the humors which are the vital essences of the body including the sanguineous humor, the phlegm humor, the bilious humor and the atrabilious humor. Subsequently, he describes the variability of the humors, the temperaments, the psychic faculties, the vital force, the organs, the efficient causes, the formal causes, the vital faculties and the final causes.

Avicenna's works have influenced a number of Western scholars and researchers and it's widely believed that his works, specially his Cannon of Medicine, are until now the most remarkable works ever written by an Eastern scientist.

Writing about Avicenna should not be limited to a single article which cannot surpass more than a few hundred words. It demands thousands of pages to explain the realities of Avicenna, his works, his dexterities and his innovations; however, it may suffice for a rudimentary introduction that Avicenna was a man who seems to remain unrivaled at least throughout the 21st century.

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