

AL-QĀNŪN FI'L-ṬIBB

AL-SHAikh AL-Ra'īs ABŪ 'ALĪ AL-ḤUSAIN
BIN 'ABDULLĀH BIN SĪNĀ

BOOK V

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE CRITICAL ARABIC TEXT



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Al-Qānūn fi'l Ṭibb — Book V

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FOREWORD

Going through world history one comes across the phenomenon of a dazzling efflorescence of creative genius. This has occurred almost as a sudden outburst of talent in different climes and different periods. What strikes a scholar of intellectual history as surprising is the fact that during pre-modern days when communications were rudimentary and when arrangements for translation from one language to another and for transmission were minimal, knowledge somehow managed to transcend geographical and linguistic barriers. Great minds did not recognise any impediments. What they created belonged to all mankind. Sooner or later, sooner rather than later, it spilled over into neighbouring regions. It spread like the rays of the sun. What is equally fascinating is the constellation of great creative minds representing a glorious outflow of cerebral energy.

Great men, however, of the periods of efflorescence in the past, used to have all knowledge as their domain. They left their imprint on various branches of science and philosophy. By a mighty heave these great men pushed knowledge forward. What they created or wrote became human heritage.

Some of the periods of collective creativity that leap to mind are those relating to Egypt, ancient Greece, which is the mother of Western civilization, Rome, Mesopotamia, China and India. Their civilizations produced men who have dominated human thought and changed forever the course of human situation, attitude and endeavour. In our own time we are witness to a scientific and technological revolution which has transformed the world and reduced it to a global village. It has tapped and released unsuspected energies. But each scientist in our period has focused on a limited area and studied it threadbare; for this is an age of specialisation promoted and sustained by team-work.

Such periods in history as we have referred to, are marked by a groundswell of knowledge and characterised by sudden advent of a galaxy of men who claim all knowledge as their own and whose monumental additions to knowledge transcend their age and their country. One of these glorious ages owes its occurrence to the intellectual curiosity and ferment generated by Islam. During the four centuries commencing AD 800, all additions to human knowledge were made by Muslims and Arabs. This statement of George Sarton, the historian of science, appears all the more bafflingly surprising when one thinks of the great civilizations that had preceded Islam and had not petered out. We are

therefore inclined to believe that sudden and simultaneous flowering of genius is as spontaneous as natural forces.

Towering geniuses, such as Avicenna and al-Beruni, like the Greek masters from whose fountains of knowledge they drank deep, epitomised the indivisibility of knowledge. On the one hand this cuts across the ever narrowing specialisation of our own age, on the other it gives the lie to the recent division of learning into religious and secular domains. However, howsoever great and original a genius might be, he would symbolise in sum the culmination and perfection of the efforts made by his predecessors over formative centuries.

It would be appropriate that after giving this background we provide to the reader some details about the life and time of the author of *Al-Qanun fi'l Tibb*.

Al-Shaikh al-Ra'is Abu 'Ali al-Husain Bin 'Abdullah Bin Sina was born (980 AD) in village Kharmaithan near Bukhara, the capital of the Persian Samanid dynasty. He acquired his early education from his father, a learned man of *Isma'ili* persuasion. His father combined scholarship with administrative experience which his son, a prodigy, inherited in varying proportions. The house of his father was the meeting place of learned men. These meetings fanned the precocity of the young perceptive listener from the side lines. Endowed with an incredibly tenacious memory Abu 'Ali before he completed ten years of age had memorised not only the *Qur'an* but all significant Arabic poetry. He learnt logic and mathematics under teachers whom he unceremoniously outgrew. At 18, Ibn Sina mastered all the knowledge of his day. No mean achievement by any standards. Because of the political turmoil in central Asia Ibn Sina crossed the desert to reach Bukhara. As a physician he treated and cured Nuh Ibn Mansur, the Samanid Prince who lay critically ill. This gave him access not only to the royal court and position of power but also, what is even more important, to the well-stocked library of the Samanids. He devoured books on Islamic law, medicine, metaphysics and on all branches of knowledge.

But such a smooth passage through life could not continue for long in that tumultuous age. The mighty empire of the Samanids was toppled by Mahmud of Ghazna whose unquenchable thirst for conquest and plunder was tasted by India in the shape of as many as seventeen invasions. From now on Abu 'Ali was thrown into a cauldron of turmoil and tribulation, fleeing invading hordes sometimes, plagued by intrigue and insecurity, at other times going into hiding to save his life and surfacing again. He reminds one of the Omayyad Prince Abdur Rahman who escaped one danger after another till he reached Andalus and ruled it and of Zaheeruddin Babar, the Prince of Ferghana who left unending battles behind, found refuge in India and founded the mighty Moghul empire. The latter has been in the news over the years for all wrong

reasons. Abdul Rahman preceded Abu 'Ali by more than two centuries. The latter anticipated Babar by about 500 years. All the three shared a life full of adventure, danger and risks. But the similarity ends here. Abu 'Ali founded an intellectual empire which outgrew and outlasted the temporal empires in Spain and India, enlightenment and alleviation of misery flowed from his efforts. Strange as it seems in our age of specialization where among other things no two implements are so far removed from each other as the pen and the sword, Ibn Sina wielded both with felicity. For him the transition from one to the other was fluent and un-obstructed. Many of his notes he dictated from horseback while riding to the battle ground. Once he escaped from prison under cover of siege by donning the attire of a dervish. On the death of his patron *Shams al-Dawla*, he had been thrown into prison for refusal to continue as *Vazir*. Except for a few islands of peace and security Abu 'Ali Sina's life was a tempestuous ocean. The unrest and ferment was caused on the one hand by the losing battle which the Persians waged against Turkish attack and on the other by Persian dynasties breaking away from the Abbaside Caliphate.

It was in Hamadan that he wrote his two great books *Kitab al-Shifa* and *al-Qanun fi'l-Tibb*. The former is reckoned as the largest work of its kind ever written by one man. It comprised logic, natural sciences including psychology, geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, music and metaphysics. The latter is admittedly the most famous book on medicine. It is based on Greek physicians and Arabic works. The author's vast clinical experience is not adequately reflected in *al-Qanun* because some of the relevant notes were lost during his frequent journeys triggered either by escape from danger or by an insatiable quest for knowledge.

"Occupied during the day with his duties at Court as both physician and administrator, Abu 'Ali Sina spent almost every night with his students composing his work and carrying out general, philosophical and scientific discussions relating to them: (amidst) musical performances and gaiety that lasted until small hours" (Encyclopaedia Britannica.)

On the death of *Shams al-Dawla* in 1022, Abu 'Ali Sina fled to Isfahan, a town that Iranians equate with half the world (نصف جهان). In Isfahan he spent the last 14 years of his life in comparative peace. It is here that under the appreciative patronage of 'Ala' al-Daula he gave the finishing touches to his two great books and wrote about 200 tracts. Here he also wrote his work in Persian on Aristotelian philosophy. One is struck here by how the evolution of languages gets tied up with conquests. The Arab conquest of Iran took place in the seventh century AD. Persia accepted Arabic influences liberally. After some time Arabic became the language of scholarship in Iran. That is why we find great Persian scholars, like Avicenna, writing their books in Arabic. The same thing happened here in India when Persian became the language of

scholarship. It was gradually replaced here by Urdu as Arabic was eventually replaced as language of scholarship in Iran by Persian.

Abu 'Ali's intimately personal thought and his mystic quest are reflected in another major work : *Kitab al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat*. Here he has been credited with determining the direction that Islamic philosophy has taken ever since. *Al-Shifa* no less than *Al-Qanun* was a monumental work. It was more comprehensive and even more impressive in the world of ideas. It covered a larger range and variety of knowledge. Its author appears as a natural historian, physicist and mathematician. His treatment of minerals wielded, through its Latin translation, considerable influence not only during the Middle Ages but also the period of Renaissance that followed. He made abiding contributions to geology, minerology and chemistry. He anticipates, to the surprise of modern minds the subsequent theories about formation of sedimentary rocks, the chronological alternation of land and sea over wide spaces, the formation of mountains, the devination of fossils as remains of animals.

Ibn Sina led a full-blooded life, replete with adventure, enterprise and scholarship. His was infinitely more than what is termed as an encyclopaedic mind. It is not only that, he grappled with, assimilated and comprehended all knowledge available in his time; but his additions to knowledge themselves were encyclopaedic in their dimension. He brought to bear upon his natural talent, a diligence, an industry a concentration and a resolve that recognised no impediments. A group once found fault with his Arabic. Avicenna responded by toiling on Arabic philology for three years at a stretch. Almost as unbelievable as the marvels of his tenacious memory and the great products of his broad-based scholarship are his consistency, concentration and focused will power that prompted him to brave all hazards and to produce works of universal benefit and ever-lasting merit while he was fleeing from danger, intrigue and acrimony. His personality was as colourful as his life was productive. One can imagine with admiration the great master surrounded by his pupils moving from one town to another, often fleeing for life, in a clandestine fashion, delivering lectures and dictating notes as if no disturbance could deflect him and his band of devoted disciples from their purpose.

Of a book that became the main source of medical knowledge in the East and the West it was natural that many translations should have been made. *Al-Qanun* was translated into Latin in the 12th century by Gerard of Cremona (AD 1114-1187) and the Book of Healing was partially translated. The Canon (*al-Qanun*) enjoyed for several centuries the status of medical authority. Ibn Sina continued to be bracketed with Hippocrates and Galen as all-time authorities on medicine. *Al-Qanun* is recognised as the most authoritative work in Greco-Arab system of

medicine. As we have seen Ibn Sina assimilated the medical sciences traceable to the Greek philosopher-physicians as adapted and amplified and sharpened by the great Muslim physicians of the two centuries preceding him. His own contribution consisted not only in assimilating and bringing order into a vast mass of medical literature but in the wide use of the observational and experimental method. The Canon describes in detail the human body, "Its constitution, temperament, faculties, its diseases, hygienics and death". It treats of various diseases.

Al-Qanun is divided into five volumes with various Discourses and Sections. The first volume deals with general principles of medicine, physiology, pathology, etiology, hygiene, symptomatology, anatomy and general rules and methods of treatment. The second one is concerned with simple drugs and the third is related to particular diseases. The fourth volume deals with general diseases, while the present volume, the fifth and the last in the series is on formulary of compound medicine. It is in the Section where use of herbs in the treatment of diseases has been discussed, that the author is least indebted to Greek physicians. It is, therefore, in a way the most original and clinically the most important Section of *al-Qanun*.

Al-Qanun exercised tremendous influence on the development of medicine. Its popularity can be inferred from the fact that its translation by Gerard of Cremona (AD 1114-1187) went into thirty editions during the last three decades of the fifteenth century. Parts of the book were translated into German, Italian, French and English. Dr. O.C. Gruner translated its 1st volume from Latin into English (1930). Dr. Col. Mazhar Shah also translated its First volume at Karachi in 1966 (from Urdu).

Hakeem Abdul Hameed (b. Delhi 1908 – d. 1999), a renowned practitioner, reviver and promoter of the *Unani* system of medicine in India, realised that all translations of *al-Qanun* derived their lineage and deficiencies from Gruner's translation and decided to do two things : (1) to prepare an authentic, properly edited version of the original text (2) to translate it into English direct from the authenticated Arabic version.

The Arabic text of *al-Qanun* was first printed at Rome in AD 1593 in a beautiful edition. It was also published in Egypt in 1877, in Tehran in 1878 and in India in 1906. Nearer home, Hakeem Abdul Hameed felt that the twin project of editing and translation should be executed through team work. The work was started in 1972 under the aegis of the Institute of History of Medicine and Medical Research which later merged into Jamia Hamdard (1989). It received the savant's constant and meticulous supervision. He acquired the photocopy of the oldest extant manuscript preserved in Turkey, transcribed in AD 1221, alongwith some other manuscripts and commentaries. He also made available the printed editions of Rome (1593), Egypt (1877), Tehran

(1879) and Lucknow (1905). The Turkish manuscript was made the basis of this critical edition. Thus for five volumes of the edited text were prepared and published in the following sequence:

Volume I in 1981, Volume II in 1987, Volume III in 1989, Volume IV in 1996 and Volume V in 1996.

Out of these, two volumes (I & II) have been translated into English and published respectively in the years 1993 and 1998, Volumes III and IV are in various stages of translation, scheduled to be completed in the year 2002 when thirty years of concerted team work on this worth-while but delayed project would have come to a fruitful end. The latter day sage-physician of Delhi was all the time looking for men in the know whose services could be utilised for achieving the goal. Prominent among those whose services be enlisted was the noted scholar Late Maulana Said Ahmad Akbarabadi. Hakeem Abdul Hameed also consulted some practitioners of modern medicine. Maulana Abdul Hai Farooqi, now Reader in the Deptt. of Islamic Studies, functioned throughout as the translator-in-chief. He is full of interesting lore about how the project took shape and progressed under the vigilant eye of the famous modern day *Tabib* who was appropriately given the Avicenna Award by the Russian Government. Syed Ausaf Ali assisted the project through its various stages and vetted the translation. Part of the vetting was done by Dr. S. B. Vohora. Syed Riaz Ali Perwaz, Research Officer, Deptt. of Islamic Studies, by his tireless efforts in checking the translation meticulously, made a substantial contribution to the project. Arshad Ahmad, Junior Assistant of the Department of Islamic Studies, has been favourably noticed for typing the manuscripts neatly and correctly.

The preparatory steps that Hakeem Abdul Hameed took to facilitate translation included the preparation of an Arabic-English glossary containing the names of simple drugs and medical terms used in *al-Qanun*. He also had a chart prepared listing and converting into their modern equivalents the weights and measures figuring in Avicenna's *Magnum Opus*.

Even making an allowance for the complicated nature of the project and the difficulty in locating the various versions of *al-Qanun* through global search and identifying, deciphering and unravelling obscure words and terms, and for the glitches unavoidable in teamwork of this nature and for the heavy pre-occupations of the prime mover of the project, one feels that its completion is taking longer than it should have done. Having said that one should bestow unstinted praise on the team involved in this monumental work. Vice Chancellor Siraj Hussain's personal interest in the project will ensure its completion according to the revised schedule.

Book V of *al-Qanun fi'l Tibb* is a huge inventory of drugs and diseases indicating at lucid length how drugs are prepared and how

diseases are cured. For the lay reader the most interesting part is the "Theoretical Discourse on the necessity of compound medicines." In the short discourse covering about four pages the writer gives one cogent reason after another why in many cases prescription of compound drugs becomes unavoidable. The pellucid clarity of the reasoning is augmented by the fact that the Master used to dictate his works in response to his pupils' questioning gaze as well as their explicit queries, as he proceeded. There is nothing that he leaves ambiguous or unexplained. It is a real delight to go through the logical exposition, each step leading to the other in almost impeccable sequence. Let me quote "Sometimes we don't have simple drugs which can be effective in complicated diseases. If such simple drugs were available for a particular disease we would prefer them to compound medicine. Sometimes we do not have even compound medicines for complex diseases. In such cases a compound medicine may require an additional potency in one of its ingredients." Then he goes on to give examples to illustrate his point. One realises here how much more cerebral and personal and minute is the *Unani* method of treatment compared to modern medicine where medication comes ready made in synthetic doses. One may also recall here the popular belief regarding differences in the mode of treatment in the schools of Delhi and Lucknow. The Jhavai Tola *tabibs* held aloft the banner of مفردات (simple drugs) and their treatment was none-the-less efficacious for their pronounced avoidance of compound drugs.

We have already noticed that posterity has placed Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna in the same bracket. Was it rivalry in reputation that led Avicenna to make an uncharitable remark about Galen, known to the East as جالينوس while dealing with antidotes (*al-Tiryāq al-Farūq*) writes *Sheikh al-Rais* "The best formula of this antidote is the same which has been actually prescribed by Andromachus. Many physicians like Galen and others have tried to include or exclude certain ingredients. Though it was neither imperative for them to do so nor they had any strong reason to change it, yet they did so merely for the sake of being remembered like Andromachus. It is correct to say that they should not bring any change in this formula which has been experimentally proved useful". One cannot rule out that Galen made the impugned changes in the light of his own clinical experience. Here Ibn Sina, despite all his innovative dynamism, appears for a little while, to be in the company of no-changers and status quoists. Intellectual giants are not necessarily models of generosity.

The great merit of *al-Qanun*, however, is that it makes no claim without following it with proof – clear, lucid, easily comprehensible and irresistible. This explains its uninterrupted popularity as source material over centuries for aspirants to medical knowledge and practice in the Orient and the Occident.

What next? It is acknowledged that *a)* despite its undisputed ascendancy for a thousand years much of *al-Qanun* has not been closely studied. *b)* It has also been stated that its utility and clarity were substantially augmented by its commentaries. Of these the most important was the commentary by Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi. *c)* We also know that a number of translations of the great work have been made.

It seems to the writer of this foreword that flowing from the three facts described above:

- a) a meaningful comparison between some selected translations could be instituted
- b) Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi's commentary should be unearthed and studied
- c) a probe may be conducted to find out why the Greco-Arab system of medicine did not make any notable headway after *Shaikh al-Rais*. The Indian subcontinent itself attracted or produced great practitioners of the system whose contribution to the further evolution of the system was negligible. Is it because of the deadening awe that Ibn Sina's Himalayan genius aroused or it was because of the intellectual sloth that overtook those who followed?

At the dawn of the third millennium one recalls with nostalgic anguish that at the commencement of the second millennium Muslims were the undisputed rulers of the realm of knowledge. A thousand years later they find themselves reduced to abysmal ignorance. Why? If there ever was food for thought it is here.

New Delhi
February 21, 2002

SAIYID HAMID
Chancellor
Jamia Hamdard

CONTENTS

Foreword	xxix
Theoretical Discourse on the Necessity of Compound Medicines	1
Section: Mode of Composition	3

CLAUSE I Consisting of twelve Discourses

On the compound medicines already mentioned in various Pharmacopoeias	5
---	---

DISCOURSE I Antidotes and important electuaries (*Ma'ajin*)

<i>Al-Tiryaq al-Faruq</i>	5
Vipers Tablets	9
Preparation of Squill Tablets	10
Prescription of Box Myrtle Tablets	10
Other prescription	11
Another prescription	11
<i>Al-Mathrudhitus</i>	11
Prescription of <i>Mathrudhitus</i> electuary suggested by a large section of Physicians	12
Preparation of <i>Qufiun</i> Tablets which are used in <i>Mathrudhitus</i> Electuary	12
<i>Tiryaq 'Azira</i>	13
Other prescription of <i>Tiryaq 'Azira</i>	13
Preparation of Box Myrtle Tablets used in it	14
<i>Tiryaq al-arba'a</i>	14
<i>Sutira</i> — The Great Saviour	14
Preparation of <i>Adrama'wa</i> tablets used in <i>al-Mukhallis al-Akbar</i> i.e. a Great Saviour	15
<i>Buzurk Daru</i>	15
<i>Ma'jun al-Falasifa</i> i.e. life elixir	16
<i>Al-Shailtha</i>	16
Ingredients of another prescription	18

<i>Anush Daru</i>	19
Another Indian <i>Ma'jun</i>	20
<i>Ma'jun</i> known as <i>al-Jazai</i>	20
Another electuary	21
<i>Ma'jun Tiryag Kabir</i> as made by us	21
<i>Ma'jun Tiryag Saghir</i> as made by us	21
<i>Ma'jun Qaisar</i>	22
<i>Al-Itrifal al-Kabir</i>	22
<i>Zamahran al-Kabir</i>	23
<i>Al-Zamahran al-Saghir</i>	25
<i>Ma'jun Jalinus</i>	25
Another <i>Ma'jun</i> ascribed to Galen	26
<i>Ma'jun</i> ascribed to Hermes	26
<i>Ma'jun Hermes</i>	27
<i>Alka Sakbinaj</i>	27
Preparation of the <i>Ma'jun al-Kasrata</i> used in this medicine	28
<i>Ma'jun al-misk</i>	28
Another kind of <i>Ma'jun misk</i>	28
<i>Dawa al-misk</i> prepared with absinth	29
Another <i>Dawa al-misk</i>	29
Sweet <i>Dawa al-misk</i>	29
Another prescription of <i>Dawa al-misk</i>	30
Another prescription	30
<i>Shanjarina al-Kabir</i>	30
Another prescription	31
<i>Shanjarina al-Saghir</i>	31
Another formulation	31
<i>Amrusia</i>	31
<i>Anqardia</i>	32
<i>Ma'jun al-baladhur</i>	32
Another kind of <i>Ma'jun baladhuri</i>	33
<i>Aristun al-Kabir</i>	33
<i>Aristun al-Saghir</i>	34
<i>Dahmartha</i>	34
<i>Badhamharaj</i>	34
<i>Ma'jun al-Ghiyathi</i>	35
<i>Ma'jun asfar Salim</i>	35
<i>Ma'jun aswad Salim</i>	36

<i>Ma'jun Abi Muslim</i> named as <i>al-Ghiyath</i>	36
<i>Ma'jun al-thum</i>	37
<i>Al-athanasia al-Kubra</i>	37
<i>Athanasia al-Sughra</i>	38
<i>Dawa al-Kurkum</i>	38
Preparation of <i>Dawa al-Kurkum al-Kabir</i>	
Galen's formulation	38
<i>Dawa al-lak al-Akbar</i>	39
<i>Dawa al-lak al-Asghar</i>	39
Preparation of <i>Qufa</i>	39
<i>Iflunia al-Rumi al-Tarsusi</i>	40
<i>Al-filunia al-Farsi</i>	40
<i>Ma'jun al-kakenj</i>	41
<i>Dawa al-khatatif</i>	41
Ingredients of <i>qarqumaghma</i> used in <i>Dawa al-khatatif</i>	42
<i>Dawa al-kibrit</i>	42
<i>Ma'jun al-hiltit</i>	42
<i>Ma'jun al-milh al-Hindi</i>	43
<i>Dawa al-qust</i>	43
<i>Ma'jun Qabadh al-Malik</i>	43
<i>Al-qaftarghan al-Akbar</i>	44
<i>Al-qaftarghan al-Asghar</i>	45
<i>Al-kalkalanij al-Kabir</i>	46
<i>Al-kalkalanij al-Asghar</i>	47
<i>Ma'jun Firuznush</i>	48
The excellent <i>ma'jun</i> known as <i>Ma'jun al-Kindi</i>	48
<i>Ma'jun al-fudhanj</i> (Mint)	48
<i>Ma'jun al-buzur</i>	49
<i>Ma'jun al-yaqut</i> prepared by us	49
The other <i>ma'jun</i> made with ingredients proposed by Galen	50
Preparation of <i>ma'jun</i> attributed to Aristomachis	50
<i>Ma'jun</i> attributed to <i>Sanitus</i>	51
Preparation of <i>dawa jantiana</i> (Gentian)	51
Preparation of the Medicine called ' <i>Ati'at Allah</i> (God gifted medicine)	51
A <i>ma'jun</i>	53
<i>Ma'jun</i> ascribed to physician <i>Fuyuma</i>	53
<i>Ma'jun</i> known as <i>al-amiri</i>	53

The <i>ma'jun</i> described by Al-Saimari	54
A fattening <i>ma'jun</i> tested by us	54

DISCOURSE II

Aperients

<i>Ayarij Faiqara</i> i.e. bitter aperient	55
<i>Ayarij Lughazia</i> (Lughazia Aperient)	57
<i>Ayarij Lughazia</i> based on Phylagrius's formula	57
<i>Ayarij Lughazia</i> based on Yunus's formula	58
<i>Ayarij Rhupos</i>	58
Another formula	58
<i>Ayarij Archegenes</i>	59
<i>Ayarij Archegenes</i> based on Paulos's formula	60
<i>Ayarij Theodoretos al-Akbar</i>	60
Another formula prepared by Theodoretos	60
Another formula of Theodoretos	61
<i>Ayarij Theodoretos</i> containing nutmeg	61
Next formula of <i>Ayarij Theodoretos</i>	62
General formula of <i>Ayarij Jalinus</i> (Galen's aperient)	62
<i>Ayarij Jalinus</i> based on Paulos formula	62
<i>Ayarij Jalinus</i> based on the formula of Serapion	63
Aperient of Hippocrates	63
Another aperient attributed to Hippocrates	63
Aperient attributed to Andromachus	64
Andarukhus Aperient	64
Phylagrius Aperient	65
<i>Bustus</i> Aperient	65
<i>Ayarij Taghmu al-Antaki</i>	66
Another formula of the aperient	66
An aperient tested by us	66

DISCOURSE III

Purgative and non-purgative *Jawarishnat*

<i>Jawarishn al-Kammuni</i>	67
<i>Jawarishn al-Kammuni</i> based on Galen's formula	67
<i>Jawarishn (al-Kammuni) Disulitus</i> prepared by a group of physicians	68
<i>Jawarishn</i> of water mint based on Galen's formulation	69

<i>Jawarishn al-as</i> (Myrtle)	69
A good <i>jawarishn</i> similar to the formula of Khuzi	69
<i>Jawarishn al-Mutawakkil</i> attributed to Salmawaih	70
Another formula of <i>Jawarish Kammuni</i>	70
Another formula of <i>Jawarish Kammuni</i>	70
<i>Jawarish Falafali</i>	71
<i>Jawarishn al-fandadiqun</i>	71
<i>Jawarishn al-Khuzi</i>	71
Another formula of <i>Jawarishn Khuzi</i>	72
<i>Jawarishn al-Khusrawi</i>	72
<i>Jawarishn al-Shahryaran</i>	73
<i>Jawarishn al-Tamri</i>	73
Other <i>Jawarishn al-Tamri</i>	73
Another formulation of <i>Jawarishn Tamri</i>	74
<i>Jawarishn Firuznush al-Mumassak</i>	74
<i>Jawarishn al-Kundur</i>	75
<i>Jawarishn al-Talisfar</i>	75
<i>Jawarishn al-Usquf</i>	75
<i>Itrifal al-Khabth al-Akbar</i>	75
<i>Al-Itrifal al-Saghir</i>	76
<i>Jawarishn al-baladhur</i>	76
<i>Jawarishn al-fanjanush</i>	76
Another formula of <i>Jawarishn Fanjanush</i> with musk	77
Another formula of <i>Jawarishn Fanjanush</i>	77
Preparation of decocted Iron Rust	78
Another formulation with Iron Rust useful in gastric collapse and piles	79
Next formulation with Iron Rust useful to 'weak' and 'hot' stomach	79
Decocted Iron Rust suitable for weakness of the stomach and hotness of temperament	79
<i>Jawarishn al-Safarjal</i>	79
<i>Jawarishn al-Safarjal</i> – loosening the bowels	80
Another formula of <i>Jawarishn al-Safarjal</i> – the purgative	80
<i>Jawarishn al-Safarjal</i> prepared with the extract of quince	81
<i>Jawarishn Safarjali</i>	81
<i>Jawarishn Hindi</i>	82
<i>Jawarishn al-Muluk</i>	82

<i>Jawarishn Mas-haunia</i>	83
<i>Jawarishn al-Simsim (Sesame)</i>	83
<i>Jawarishn Habba al-Khadra</i>	83
<i>Jawarishn al-Anjudhan</i>	84
Another formula of <i>Jawarishn al-Anjudhan</i>	84
<i>Jawarishn al-Kafur</i>	84
Another formula of <i>Jawarishn al-Kafur</i>	85
<i>Jawarishn Kafur</i> stronger than the previous formula	85
<i>Jawarishn al-'Ud</i>	85
<i>Jawarishn al-Darsini</i>	86
<i>Jawarishn Hindi</i>	86
<i>Jawarishn Zanjabil</i>	86
<i>Jawarishn al-misk</i>	86
<i>Jawarishn al-Utruj</i>	87
<i>Jawarishn Qaisar</i>	87
<i>Jawarishn al-Asqanqur</i>	87
Another formula of the <i>Jawarishn</i>	88
Formula of our tested <i>Jawarishn</i>	88
<i>Al-Itrifal al-Akbar</i>	88
Our formulation of <i>Jawarishn al-'Ud</i>	89

DISCOURSE IV

Safuf, Qamaih and wajur

<i>Maqliatha</i>	89
Another Powder	89
Powder called <i>Kasila</i>	90
Another Powder	90
<i>Safuf 'Abbada</i>	90
<i>Safuf</i>	91
A <i>qamiha</i> made from long water-melon	91
Powder given to children predominantly of moist temperament	91
Powder made by Aristotle	92
<i>Safuf al-Barmaki</i>	92
<i>Safuf</i> of <i>Ishqil</i>	92
A <i>wajur</i> for children	93
Another <i>wajur</i> for children	93
Another <i>wajur</i> for children	93
<i>Qamiha</i>	93

<i>Safuf</i>	94
<i>Safuf</i>	94
<i>Safuf</i>	94
<i>Safuf</i>	94
Salt	95
Another formulation of salt	95

DISCOURSE V

Linctuses

Linctus for dry cough	96
Linctus	96
Linctus	96
Linctus of <i>Khashkhash</i>	96
Linctus of <i>Tabashir</i>	97
Other linctus of <i>Tabashir</i>	97
Linctus of Squill	97
Linctus of <i>thum</i> (Garlic)	98
Another Linctus	98
Linctus of <i>Butm</i>	98

DISCOURSE VI

Drinks and Robs

<i>Afsumali</i>	99
<i>Sikanjabin al-buzuri</i> for general use	99
Preparation of the Oxymel based on Galen's formula	100
Oxymel made by us	101
Oxymel for purging out yellow bile	102
Oxymel for reducing phlegm	102
Oxymel for reducing black bile	102
Oxymel made with squill-vinegar	102
Purgative oxymel made from squill	103
Preparation of <i>Jullab</i> (a purgative)	103
Preparation of oxymel with sugar	104
Another formulation of Honey-water	104
The <i>Jullab</i> prepared from Rose-water	104
Preparation of the Drink made of squill	104
Property of the Drink prepared with sea-water	105
Drink of Quince which is also called <i>maibah</i>	105

Another preparation of quince juice	106
The Drink called <i>Adrumali</i>	106
The Drink called <i>Malumali</i> – a mixture of honey and quince	106
<i>Handiqun</i>	107
Another formulation of <i>Handiqun</i>	107
Drink made by Salmawaih	107
Drink made with myrtle seeds	108
Rob of Myrtle	108
Drink made from myrtle leaves	108
Drink made from mint	108
Drink made from pear	109
Drink made from apple	109
Drink of unripe grapes	109
Another formulation of the Drink made from unripe grapes and especially with honey	109
Fruit juice	110
Drink of citron	110
Drink prepared with poppy seeds	110
Another formula of this Drink	111
Formulation of a Drink	111
Drink made from honey according to Galen's formulation	111
Another formulation of Honey Drink	111
Drink made by absinth	112
Another formulation of the Drink of Absinth	112
Drink of absinth — our formulation	113
Fruit Drink	113
Fruit Drink	113
Drink of Bukhara Plum	113
Democritus's Drink	114
Drink of grapes	114
<i>Rasatun</i>	114
Another formulation of the Drink of Absinth	115
Rob of quince, pomegranate and apple etc.	115
Drink of Screw Pine prepared according to our method	115
Formulation of <i>fuqqa</i> (a kind of frothy drink) made after our method	116
Our formulation of Absinth Drink	117

A medicine prepared by us	117
Another formulation of the Drink of unripe grapes	117
Description and uses of old Drinks	118
Honey Drink	119
Another formulation of Honey Drink	119
Water mead or Honey water	120
Drink made of Carob and Azarole	120
Drink made of the flower of Wild Vine	120
Drink of pomegranate	121
Rose-Drink	121
Myrtle Drink	121
Drink of pine resin	121
Drink made of cedar tree resin	122
Drink made of pitch	122
Drink made of hyssop	122
Drink made of common germander	123
Drink made of wild thyme	123
Drink prepared with aromatic herbs	123
Drink made of elecampane	124
Drink made of Indian valerian	124
Drink made of mountain nard	124
Drink made of doucus	124
Drink made of opoponax galbanum	124
Drink made of celery	125
Drink made of mazerion	125
Drink made of scammony	125

DISCOURSE VII

Preserves and Pickles

Preserve of citron	126
Another formulation	126
Preserve of the quince	127
Another preparation of quince preserve	128
Preserve of carrot	128
Preserve of chebulic myrobalan	128
Another formulation of the preserve of myrobalan	129
Another method of preparation	129
Preserve of secacul	130

Preserve of dried ginger	130
Preserve of Bukhara plum	130
Preserve of turnip	130
Preserve of almond	131
Preserve of the balm of Mecca	131
Preserve of emblic myrobalan	131
Preserve of apple useful in vomiting	131

DISCOURSE VIII

Tablets

Tablet of Talc	131
Common formulation of the tablets of rose	132
Tablets of rose according to the formulation of Aesculapius	132
Tablets of rose with scammony	132
Tablets of rose with bamboo concretion	133
Tablets of rose called <i>dabid al-ward</i>	133
Tablets of rose useful in tertian fever	133
Tablets of rose made with nard	134
Tablets of camphor	134
Another formulation of the tablets of camphor	134
Another formulation of these tablets	135
Yet another formulation	135
Tablets of camphor as prepared by us	135
Tablets of bamboo concretion made of manna	135
Tablets of bamboo concretion made with the seeds of citron	136
Tablets of barberry I	136
Tablets of barberry II	136
Tablets of barberry III	137
Tablets of barberry IV	137
Tablets of barberry V	137
Tablets of barberry VI	138
Tablets of barberry made by us	138
Tablets of absinth	138
Another formulation of the tablets of absinth	138
Tablets of agrimony	139
Tablets of caper	139
Tablets of lac	139
Tablets of <i>al-kakenje</i>	139

Another formulation of the tablets	140
Tablets of Himalayan rhubarb	140
Tablets formulated by Abu Mulis I	140
Tablets No. II	141
Tablets No. III	141
Tablets made by Miun who is known as Tarnifun	141
Tablets of similar ingredients	141
Other Tablets	141
Tablet made by Andrumachus I	142
Formula II	142
Tablet made by Al-Kindi	142
Tablet made by Al-Barmaki	142
Tablet of mazerion	143
Another formulation	143
Tablets of <i>Rudinun</i>	143
Another formulation of these Tablets	144
Tablets of Marubas	144
Tablets of poppy seeds	144
Tablets made with the flowers of pomegranate	145
Tablets of Disiolidas	145
Tablets of Andrun based on the formulation of Asqalibiadis No. I	145
Tablet II	145
Tablet III	146
Tablets of anise	146
Tablets relaxing the bowels	146
Tablets made of seeds	147
Tablets used in the initial stages of accumulating fluids (in abdomen) and in the hardness of liver	147
Tablets made of roses	147
Laxative Tablets of roses	147
Tablets of rose and agrimony	148
Tablets made of lac	148
Tablets of madder	148
Tablets of dodder	148
Tablets made of ten drugs	149
Tablets useful in chronic fevers, burning sensations and vomiting	149

DISCOURSE IX

Decoctions and Pills

Decoction of <i>Ma' al-usul</i> (juice of the roots) I	150
Formulation II	150
Decoction of absinth	150
Decoction of agrimony	150

SECTION ON PILLS

Preparation of a Pill	151
<i>Habb al-muntin al-Kabir</i>	151
<i>Habb al-muntin al-Akbar</i>	151
<i>Habb al-muntin al-Asghar</i>	152
<i>Habb al-muntin</i> ascribed to al-Kindi	152
<i>Habb al-shitraj al-Akbar</i>	153
<i>Habb al-shitraj al-Asghar</i>	153
<i>Habb al-shitraj</i> – another formulation	153
Pills of agrimony	154
<i>Habb al-Najah</i>	154
<i>Habb al-Jathaliq</i>	154
<i>Habb al-Duri</i> derived from the book of al-Fahlaman	155
A Pill	155
Pills of purging croton	155
Purgative salt	156
<i>Habb al-Istamkhiqun li'l Kindi</i>	156
<i>Habb al-Barmaki</i>	157
<i>Habb Ibn al-Harith</i>	157
Pills made by Ibn Hubairah	157
<i>Al-Habb al-Jami'</i> made by Ibn Jaham	158
Pills to be composed of gum euphorbium I	158
Pills No. II	159
Pills for chronic fever	159
Pills useful in chronic fever	159
A pill which removes obstruction	160
Pills of sagapanum	160
Pills of opoponax galbanum prepared by Salmawaih	160
Pills of euphorbium	161
An Indian pill	161

DISCOURSE X

Oils

Nard Oil	162
1st Decoction of the oil	162
2nd Decoction of the oil	162
3rd Decoction of the oil	162
Oil of storax	163
Oil of chamomile	163
Oil of mastic	163
Oil of absinth exposed to the sun	163
Dill Oil	164
Oil of lily	164
Oil of common lily	164
Oil of caltrops	164
Other variety of caltrops oil	164
Another formulation of caltrops oil	165
Snakes oil	165
<i>Ramishdad</i> oil	165
Costus oil No. I	166
Costus oil No. II	167
<i>Narika</i> Oil	167
Oil of <i>Sindi</i> who is called Abu Samad	168
Large formulation of castor oil	168
Plain castor oil	169
Oil of white pumpkin	169
Oil of sweet basil	169
Ladanum oil I	170
Ladanum oil II	170
Oil of <i>falfladh</i>	170
Another prescription	170
The egg oil	171
The oil of <i>kalkalanij</i>	171
Saffron oil	171
Oil of rockmoss	172
Oil of euphorbium made by us	172
The oil called <i>daqamun</i> in the Roman language	172
Oil of red anemone	173
Plain oils	173

Oil of sweet marjorum	173
Preparation of bitter almond oil	173
Preparation of oak oil	174
Henbane oil	174
Nettle oil	174
Preparation of the oil of bay tree	175
Preparation of the oil of bogrush	175
Preparation of rose oil	175
Oil of orris root	176
Oil of bachelor's buttons	177
Preparation of worm wood oil	177
Preparation of the oil of fenugreek	177

DISCOURSE XI

Ointments and plasters

Ointment of zinc oxide	178
Another formula	178
Ointment of <i>basaliqun al-Kabir</i>	178
Ointment of <i>basaliqun al-Saghir</i>	178
Ointment of zinc oxide made with vinegar	179
Ointment of impure oxide of lead prepared with vinegar	179
Ointment of verdigris	179
Ointment of white vitriol	179
Black ointment	180
<i>Dayakhilun</i> ointment	180
Red ointment	180
<i>Marham al-rusul</i>	180
Ointment of cinnabar	181
Ointment of <i>marqun al-qirmiz</i> (Kermes insect)	181
Ointment of cautery	181
Ointment tested by Zarnihi	181
Plaster of Andromachus	182
A unique plaster	182
A plaster for arthralgia and gout	182
Plaster of Phylagrius	183
An ointment	183
Ointment (with the pulp of colocynth)	183
Ointment made with caraway	184

DISCOURSE XII

Diseases of the body from the head to the toe

Coldness of the head	184
Heaviness of the head	185
That which 'cleanses' the head	185
Chronic cold headache	185
Migraine	185
Vertigo	185
Amnesia, memory and the intellect	185
Melancholia and mania	185
The medicine strengthening the senses	185
Epilepsy	185
Apoplexy	185
Paralysis and relaxation of the organs	185
Facial paralysis	185
Chorea	186
Convulsion	186
Ophthalmalgia	186
Hemeralopia and cataract	186
Otalgia	186
Odontalgia	186
Decayed teeth	186
Stammering and relaxation of the tongue	186
Cardiac and cardialgia	186
Cardiac drugs	186
Palpitation	186
Syncope	186
Purifying drugs for trachea and chest	186
Hoarseness and aphonia	186
Dyspnoea	186
Asthma and orthopnoea	187
Difficulty in breathing	187
Pain in lungs, chest and epigastrium	187
Chronic cough	187
Haemoptysis, bleeding, blood and pus vomiting	187
Coldness of the liver	187
Hepatalgia	187

Medicine used in the weakness and strengthening of the liver	187
Hepatitis	187
Sclerosis of liver	187
Sclerosis of the liver and spleen	187
Dropsy and its initial stages	188
Cold dyscrasia	188
Initial stages of dyscrasia	188
Weakness of the stomach	188
Weakness and impairment of the stomach	188
Impairment and relaxation of the stomach	188
Some useful medicines	188
Relaxation of the stomach	188
Hotness of the stomach	188
Coldness of the stomach	188
'Wetness' of the stomach	188
Gastralgia	188
Gastric air	189
Gastritis	189
Hardness of the stomach	189
Loss of appetite	189
Canine appetite	189
Indigestion	189
Hiccough	189
Vomiting and nausea	189
Medicines useful in nausea caused by (severe) thirst	189
Sour eructation	189
Spleen	189
Its deobstruents	189
Coldness of intestine	189
Colic and constipation	189
Colic pain	190
Medicines that loose the bowels	190
Purgatives of thick matters	190
Medicines stopping diarrhoea	190
Dysenteric and purulent diarrhoea	190
Abrasions and ulcers of the intestines	190
Gripes	190

Anal pain	190
Piles	190
Nephralgia and cystalgia	190
Medicines useful against the coldness of kidney and bladder	190
Medicines useful for nephralgia and cystalgia	190
The medicines which purify the kidney and bladder	191
Vesical paralysis	191
Haematuria and pyuria	191
Enuresis and strangury	191
Calculus	191
Coldness of the uterus	191
Uteral emphysema	191
Uteralgia	191
Hysteria	191
Sclerosis of uterus	191
Irregularity of menses	191
The medicines useful for the pregnant	191
The medicines useful in arthralgia, gout and sciatica	191
The medicine useful in sciatica	191
Medicines useful in dorsalgia	192
Useful medicines for the vertebral pain	192

CLAUSE II **Pharmacopoeia**

DISCOURSE I **The Head and its parts**

Snuff No. 1	194
Snuff No. 2	194
Snuff No. 3	194
Snuff No. 4	194
Snuff No. 5	195
Property of an aperient	195
An aperient attributed to Bostus	195
Properties of the aperient attributed to Daryus	196
Properties of <i>Habb Saleem</i>	196
Other pill	196

Properties of another pill	196
Decoction of the roots-water	197
Property of a decoction	197
Migraine	197
Formulation for chronic migraine	198

DISCOURSE II

Eye and its diseases

Conjunctivitis and the matter infiltrating the eye	198
A collyrium called <i>jalib al-naum</i> (somniferous)	198
Properties of <i>dawa Arsastaratis</i>	198
Properties of the <i>tila</i> prepared by Felukasanis	199
Formulation of another medicine called <i>al-lahabi</i>	199
Properties of a <i>shiaf</i> used before bath	199
Another <i>shiaf</i>	200
<i>Shiaf munjih</i>	200
Properties of a <i>shiaf</i> prepared by Galen	200
<i>Shiaf</i>	201
<i>Shiaf</i> called <i>Saifi</i>	201
The <i>shiaf</i> called <i>shiaf al-kaukab</i>	201
<i>Shiaf Baufratis</i>	202
<i>Shiaf</i>	202
Other <i>shiaf wardi</i> called <i>al-Hasan</i>	202
<i>Shiaf wardi</i> – prepared by Tarantinus	202
Another <i>shiaf wardi</i> – prepared by Dayaghuras	203
<i>Shiaf munjih</i>	203
The <i>shiaf</i> called <i>al-tuffahi</i>	203
Other <i>shiaf</i>	203
<i>Shiaf hawai</i>	204
A medicine	204
Another medicine	205
The drug called <i>al-iksirin al-ahmar</i>	205
Ointment applied on the eye	205
Other medicine	206
There is another formulation	206
The collyrium called <i>astatiqun</i>	206
Collyrium	207
Ophthalmic ulcers, pimples and the pus in it	207

<i>Shiaf</i> attributed to <i>Mahur</i>	207
Rupture of cornea	207
Sprinkling powder for filling up the corneal cavity	207
Fistula lachrymalis	208
<i>Shiaf asfar</i>	208
A unique collyrium	208
Another medicine	208
Properties of strewing powder for opacity of the cornea	209
Vascular keratitis	209
Epiphora	210
Thickness of the eye lids and sclerophthalmia	210
<i>Shiaf Qibti Misri</i>	210
<i>Shiaf</i>	210
Yellow <i>shiaf</i>	210
Granulation and pruritis of the eye	211
Collyrium of Faqitun	211
<i>Shiaf</i> Abulunius	212
Cataract and trichiasis	212
The medicine prepared by Bulusius	212
An eye paint prepared by Filukasanis	212
Properties of the <i>shiaf</i> called <i>shiaf Hindi</i> and <i>Maliki</i>	213
Another collyrium	213
Other medicine	213
Amaurosis	214
<i>Shiaf</i> used by Fulus	214
<i>Dawa Basaliqun</i> (Basilicon) i.e. <i>al-Maliki</i>	214
Another formulation of <i>Basaliqun</i> (Basilicon)	214
Another Medicine	215
Eye wash (<i>Barud</i>)	215

DISCOURSE III

Ear and its diseases

Pain, Inflammation, pus and heaviness of the ear	215
Other medicine	216
Medicine formulated by Ghanis	216
One of the medicines for the ear introduced by Ghanis	216
Another medicine	216
The other medicine prepared by the physician Burutanis	217

Medicine for the ear secreting pus	217
Medicine prepared by Antiqatus	217
Medicine to be used in hardness of the hearing, tinnitus and sonitus of the ear	217
Another medicine called <i>Al jalharuni</i>	218
Properties of a medicine useful in all kinds of pain and ulcers of the ear	218
Properties of the medicine prepared with iron rust	218
Ulcers of the nose	219
Properties of <i>Saqarmusus</i>	219

DISCOURSE IV

Teeth

Medicine prepared by Andromachus	219
Medicine useful in shooting pain of teeth	220
Cauterization of the molar	220
Burnishing of the teeth	220
Medicine called <i>Surtijan</i>	221
Tooth Powder	221
A medicine	221
Another medicine	221

DISCOURSE V

Mouth, throat and thoracic cavity

Angina and diphtheria	222
(Diseases of) uvula and tonsils	222
Thoracic cavity – Humoural fluids from chest	222
Medicine for throat and cough	222
Medicine for throat attributed to Balaustus	223
Another medicine mentioned by Galen	223
Pill to be placed under the tongue	224
A <i>natif</i> (a kind of sweetmeat) for cough patient	224
The medicine prepared by al-Kahin	225
Cough pills	225
The medicine useful for all types of cough	225
Medicine used in haemoptysis	225
Another medicine for cough	226
<i>Lauq al-Sanobar</i>	226

A <i>Lauq</i> prepared with <i>nabati</i> gum	226
A medicine useful in cough and severe stiffness of the chest	227
<i>Lauq</i> prepared for the cough caused by cold and viscous chyme	227
<i>Qurs</i> for haemoptysis prepared by a physician of <i>Nabulus</i>	228
Other tablet called <i>al-filfil</i>	228
<i>Ma'jun</i> attributed to Aristumachis	228
A drink prepared by Khariqalais	229
The medicine useful in haemoptysis, pioptysis and the superfluous matter infiltrating towards the chest	229
A medicine useful for haemoptysis	229
Another tablet	230
Another tablet in haemoptysis etc.	230
A medicine useful in the thrombosis	230
Medicine for pthisis and pulmonary ulcers	231
The heart and the cardiac drugs	231
Another medicine	231

DISCOURSE VI

Abdominal cavity

Indigestion	232
An oil useful in indigestion and atony of the stomach	232
A medicine to be useful in the weakness of the stomach and indigestion	232
A <i>Lakhlakha</i> – as a stomach tonic	232
A plaster for indurated swelling of the stomach	233
Medicine for the patient of chronic diseases of stomach	233
<i>Ayarij</i> – attributed to Antiaftarus	233
Tablets – called <i>aqras</i> Amadunis	233
The aperient attributed to Thamisin	233
Plaster prepared by Bulu-arkhis	234
The medicine called <i>Dabid irsa</i>	234
<i>Jawarishn</i> made of caraway	234
<i>Jawarishn</i> prepared with galingale	235
<i>Ma'jun</i> used in geophagia	235
Syrup to be used in nausea and vomiting	235
Hiccough	236
Liver	236

Hepatitis – the ointment made of wild myrtle	236
<i>Ma'jun</i> to be used in sclerosis of the liver	236
Oil of mazerion to be taken in dyscrasia of liver	237
<i>Safuf</i> to be used in initial stage of dropsy	237
Splenic diseases and jaundice	237
Medicine used in splenic diseases	237
Other medicine	238
Strong absorbing medicine	238
Other absorbing medicine	239
Sclerosis of the spleen	239
An ointment useful in chronic hardness of the spleen	239
Enema	239
<i>Safuf</i> used in relaxation of the bowels	240
A <i>Jawarishn</i>	240
Fruits syrup	240
Abrasion and intestinal ulcers	241
The medicine attributed to Lufius al-Tarsusi	241
The enema used by Galen	241
Tablets composed of aromatics	242
The <i>safuf</i> useful in abrasion caused by salty phlegm	242
Enema to be used in abrasion	242
A remarkable medicine for colic	242
Formulation of a medicine prepared for colic	243
Medicine for paralysis and <i>prolapsus ani</i> prepared by Galen	243
Renal calculus	243
A <i>Ma'jun</i>	243
Another successful medicine	244
Vesical calculus	244
Formulation of the medicine prepared with scorpion	244
Lithotriptic tablets	245
A lithotriptic <i>ma'jun</i>	245
Tablets to be used in strangury	245
Lack of libido	246
The medicine useful in the (above mentioned) diseases	246
Formulation of <i>Jawarishn Hindi</i>	246
Formulation of another medicine	246
Formulation of an oil	247

Vaginal suppository applied to cold uterus which dissolves its hard swelling	247
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DISCOURSE VII

Rheumatism, gout and sciatica

Ointment useful in the weakness of legs	248
Formulation of the pills prepared with white bryoni	248
Another pill prepared with henna	249
Sciatica – A medicine for sciatica	249
Gout	249

DISCOURSE VIII

Alopecia

Formulation of an epitheme for alopecia	249
Black hair dye	250
The weights and measures as described in the book <i>Kunnash Sahir</i>	250
The weights and measures described by Yuhanna b. Sarafyun in his <i>Kunnash</i>	250