

## Avicenna

born 980, Bukhara, Iran

died 1037, Hamadan

*Arabic Ibn Sina, in full Abu 'Ali al-Husayn ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Sina* Iranian physician, the most famous and influential of the philosopher-scientists of Islam. He was particularly noted for his contributions in the fields of Aristotelian philosophy and medicine. He composed the *Kitab ash-shifa'* ("Book of Healing"), a vast philosophical and scientific encyclopaedia, and the *Canon of Medicine*, which is among the most famous books in the history of medicine.

### Early years

Avicenna, an ethnic Persian who spent his whole life in the eastern and central regions of Iran, received his earliest education in Bukhara under the direction of his father. Since the house of his father was a meeting place for learned men, from his earliest childhood Avicenna was able to profit from the company of the outstanding masters of his day. A precocious child with an exceptional memory that he retained throughout his life, he had memorized the Qur'an and much Arabic poetry by the age of 10. Thereafter, he studied logic and metaphysics under teachers whom he soon outgrew and then spent the few years until he reached the age of 18 in his own self-education. He read avidly and mastered Islamic law, then medicine, and finally metaphysics. Particularly helpful in his intellectual development was his gaining access to the rich royal library of the Samanids—the first great native dynasty that arose in Iran after the Arab conquest—as the result of his successful cure of the Samanid prince, Nuh ibn Mansur. By the time he was 21 he was accomplished in all branches of formal learning and had already gained a wide reputation as an outstanding physician. His services were also sought as an administrator, and for a while he even entered government service as a clerk.

But suddenly the whole pattern of his life changed. His father died; the Samanid house was defeated by Mahmud of Ghazna, the Turkish leader and legendary hero who established Ghaznavid rule in Khorasan (northeastern Iran and modern western Afghanistan); and Avicenna began a period of wandering and turmoil, which was to last to the end of his life with the exception of a few unusual intervals of tranquillity. Destiny had plunged Avicenna into one of the tumultuous periods of Iranian history, when new Turkish elements were replacing Iranian

domination in Central Asia and local Iranian dynasties were trying to gain political independence from the 'Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad (in modern Iraq). But the power of concentration and the intellectual prowess of Avicenna was such that he was able to continue his intellectual work with remarkable consistency and continuity and was not at all influenced by the outward disturbances.

Avicenna wandered for a while in different cities of Khorasan and then left for the court of the Buyid princes, who were ruling over central Iran, first going to Rayy (near modern Tehran) and then to Qazvin, where as usual he made his livelihood as a physician. But in these cities also he found neither sufficient social and economic support nor the necessary peace and calm to continue his work. He went, therefore, to Hamadan in west-central Iran, where Shams ad-Dawlah, another Buyid prince, was ruling. This journey marked the beginning of a new phase in Avicenna's life. He became court physician and enjoyed the favour of the ruler to the extent that twice he was appointed vizier. As was the order of the day, he also suffered political reactions and intrigues against him and was forced into hiding for some time; at one time he was even imprisoned.

## Writings

This was the period when he began his two most famous works. *Kitab ash-shifa'* is probably the largest work of its kind ever written by one man. It treats of logic, the natural sciences, including psychology, the *quadrivium* (geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music), and metaphysics, but there is no real exposition of ethics or of politics. His thought in this work owes a great deal to Aristotle but also to other Greek influences and to Neoplatonism. His system rests on the conception of God as the necessary existent: in God alone essence, what he is, and existence, that he is, coincide. There is a gradual multiplication of beings through a timeless emanation from God as a result of his self-knowledge. *The Canon of Medicine (al-Qanun fi at-tibb)* is the most famous single book in the history of medicine in both East and West. It is a systematic encyclopaedia based for the most part on the achievements of Greek physicians of the Roman imperial age and on other Arabic works and, to a lesser extent, on his own experience (his own clinical notes were lost during his journeys). Occupied during the day with his duties at court as both physician and administrator, Avicenna spent almost every night with his students composing these and other works and carrying out general philosophical and scientific discussions related to them. These sessions were often combined with musical performances and gaiety and lasted until late hours of the night. Even in hiding and in prison he continued to write. The great physical strength of Avicenna enabled him to carry out a program that

would have been unimaginable for a person of a feebleness constitution.

The last phase of Avicenna's life began with his move to Esfahan (about 250 miles south of Tehran). In 1022 Shams ad-Dawlah died, and Avicenna, after a period of difficulty that included imprisonment, fled to Esfahan with a small entourage. In Esfahan, Avicenna was to spend the last 14 years of his life in relative peace. He was esteemed highly by 'Ala' ad-Dawlah, the ruler, and his court. Here he finished the two major works he began in Hamadan and wrote most of his nearly 200 treatises; he also composed the first work on Aristotelian philosophy in the Persian language and the masterly summary of his "Book of Healing" called *Kitab an-najat* ("Book of Salvation"), written partly during the military campaigns in which he had to accompany 'Ala' ad-Dawlah to the field of battle. During this time he composed his last major philosophical opus and the most "personal" testament of his thought, *Kitab al-isharat wa at-tanbihat* ("Book of Directives and Remarks"). In this work he described the mystic's spiritual journey from the beginnings of faith to the final stage of direct and uninterrupted vision of God. Also in Esfahan, when an authority on Arabic philology criticized him for his lack of mastery in the subject, he spent three years studying it and composed a vast work called *Lisan al-'arab* ("The Arabic Language"), which remained in rough draft until his death. Accompanying 'Ala' ad-Dawlah on a campaign, Avicenna fell ill and, despite his attempts to treat himself, died from colic and from exhaustion.

Besides fulfilling the role of the master of the Muslim Aristotelians, Avicenna also sought in later life to found an "Oriental philosophy" (*al-hikmat al-mashriqiyah*). Most of his works directly concerning this have been lost, but enough remains in some of his other works to give an indication of the direction he was following. He took the first steps upon a path toward mystical theosophy that marked the direction that Islamic philosophy was to follow in the future, especially in Persia and the other eastern lands of Islam.

### Avicenna's influence

In the Western world, Avicenna's influence was felt, though no distinct school of "Latin Avicennism" can be discerned as can with Averroës, the great Spanish-Arabic philosopher. Avicenna's "Book of Healing" was translated partially into Latin in the 12th century, and the complete *Canon* appeared in the same century. These translations and others spread the thought of Avicenna far and wide in the West. His thought, blended with that of St. Augustine, the Christian philosopher and theologian, was a basic ingredient in the thought of many of the medieval Scholastics, especially in the Franciscan schools. In medicine the *Canon* became *the* medical authority for several centuries, and

Avicenna enjoyed an undisputed place of honour equalled only by the early Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen. In the East his dominating influence in medicine, philosophy, and theology has lasted over the ages and is still alive within the circles of Islamic thought.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

### Additional Reading

Translations and commentaries on Avicenna's works include: M. Agha and H. Masse, *Le Livre de science*, 2 vol. (1955-58); O.C. Gruner, *A Treatise on the Canon of Medicine of Avicenna* (1930); M. Horten (ed.), *Das Buch der Genesung der Seele: Eine philosophische Enzyklopädie Avicennas*, vol. 4, *Die Metaphysik, Theologie, Kosmologie und Ethik* (1908); H. Jahier and A. Nouredine, *Poème de la médecine* (1956); A.F. Mehren, *Traité mystiques d'Avicenne*, 3 vol. (1889-91); F. Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology* (1952).

General studies include: S.M. Afnan, *Avicenna: His Life and Works* (1958); H. Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*, 2nd ed., 2 vol. (1954; *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, 1960); S.H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (1964), and *Three Muslim Sages* (1964), locating Avicenna within the context of Islamic intellectual tradition; M.H. Shah, *The General Principles of Avicenna's Canon of Medicine* (1966), an analysis from the point of view of modern medical theory and practice; G.W. Wickens (ed.), *Avicenna: Scientist and Philosopher* (1952), a collection of essays; Y. Mahdavi, *Bibliographie d'Ibn Sina* (1954).

To cite this page:

MLA style:

" Avicenna ." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2005. Encyclopædia Britannica Online 16 June 2005 <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=514>>.

APA style:

Avicenna . *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved June 16, 2005, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=514>>

Britannica style:

" Avicenna ." *Encyclopædia Britannica* from Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=514>>

[Accessed June 16, 2005].

 [Back to top](#)