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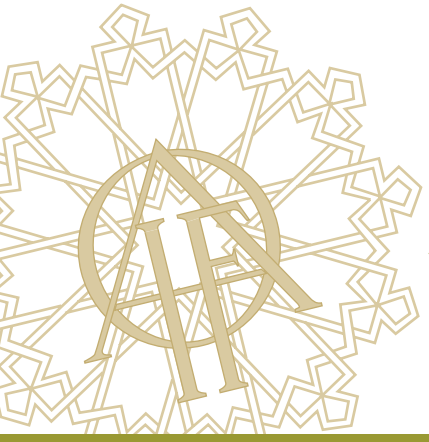

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Paul Ghalioungui

The Legend of Abdullatif Al-Baghdady’s «Spirit».

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THE LEGEND OF ABDULLATIF AL-BAGHDADY'S «SPIRIT»

Paul GHALIOUNGUI

The life and writings of Abdullatif al-Baghdady, the 12th century scholar-physician, are well known both from his writings [1] and from biographies written by personal acquaintances. These agree in all factual details, though in their appraisal of his merits, they range from the high praise of Ibn abi Usaibya [2] to the vilest deprecation of Al-Qifty [3].

The first, who gave the most detailed account of all, knew him well both from personal acquaintance and through his father and uncle who, both, were Abdullatif's pupils. In addition, he declared in his biographical sketch, that most of his statements were drawn from an auto-biography handed down to him personally by Abdullatif. We may add that no historian has doubted these statements.

All these accounts agree with the impression gained from his writings in showing him as an extremely proud and boastful, if not vain, person in whose eyes very few

[1] For example, in : *Kitab al Nassihatein* from the Brousse collection published by Stern, S.M., 1962, A collection of treatises by Abdel-Latif al-Baghdady, *Islamic Studies, Jour. of the Central Institute of Islamic Research,* Karachi, vol. 1. no. 1, pp. 53-70. Summarized by Ghalioungui, P. and S. Abdou in : *Maqalatan fi-l-Hawass wa Masa'il Tabi'ya,* 1972, Kuwait Government Press, pp. 29-32.

[2] Ibn Abi-Usaibya عيون الأنباء فى طبقات الأطباء ، مكتبة الحياة ، بيروت ، طبعة ١٩٦٥ ، ص ٦٨٣ – ٦٩٦ .

This biography has been translated into French by A.I. Sylvestre de Sacy in : *Relation de l'Egypte par Abdallatif,* 1810, Paris : Imprimerie Nationale. Shorter biographies were written also by Al-Qifty (*Inbah al-Ruwat 'ala Anbah el-Nuhat*), and are also to be found in other works that add nothing. For an analysis in Arabic of the life and work of Abdullatif as well as some unedited or little known manuscripts, see Ghalioungui and Abdou, *op. cit.*

[3] Al-Qifty : *Inbah al-Ruwat 'ala Anbah el-Nuhat* إنباء الرواة على أنباء النحاة : تأليف الوزير جمال الدين أبى الحسن على بن يوسف القفطى بتحقيق محمد أبو الفضل ابراهيم ، مطبعة دار الكتب المصرية ، القاهرة ، ١٩٥٢ ، الجزء الثانى ، ص ١٩٣ .

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others merited any consideration. He attacked with the same virulence secondary authors or such giants as Galen, Avicenna [1], or Maimonides. This self-admiring little man, according to Al-Qifty, short, ugly, shrivelled, lean-faced [2], could not stay long in the same town or office. In the odd 45 years of his active life, he moved through no less than 28 cities, practising medicine and teaching it, as well as grammar and theology.

His voluminous writings, apart from a single instance where he contradicted Galen on the number of bones of the mandible and of the sacrum [3] manifest no originality and are far inferior to those that he so violently attacked [4]. Nevertheless, he showed enough sense in his mature years to forsake alchemy and magic that were current in his days, and to which he had early been addicted.

[1] « The more I read the books of the Ancients the more my desire of them increases, except for the books of Avicenna that only increase my reluctance for it is owing to Avicenna's books and alchemy that most people have died ... » and : « The author who deceived me most was Avicenna with his book on alchemy with which he completed his philosophy that by completion, only increased its failings » (Ibn abi-Usaibya, *op. cit.*).

« وكلما أمعنت فى كتب القدماء ازددت فيها رغبة وفى كتب ابن سينا زهادة . . . فانما أكثر الناس انما هلكوا بكتب ابن سينا والكيمياء » .

« وأقوى من ضلّنى ابن سينا بكتابه فى الصنعة الذى تم به فلسفته التى لاتزداد بالتمام إلا نقصاً » .

On Maimonides, see further and our note 2, p. 262.

[2] وكان دميم الخلقة ، قليل لحم الوجه ، قصير الخلقة ، لما رآه زين بن الحسن الكندى لقبه بالمطجن والألقاب تنزل من السماء .

[3] كتاب الافادة والاعتبار فى الأمور المشاهدة والحوادث المعاينة بأرض مصر. English Translation by Hafuth Zand, K. and J.A. and I.E. Videan, *The Eastern Key*, London : George Allen and Unwin, pp. 273-277 = 68 r - 69 l.

[4] Our opinion, based on a study of available texts (Ghalioungui and Abdou, *op. cit.*) agrees with Al-Qifty's : « He pretended writing books containing original matter, but he contented himself with reading others, either summarizing them or adding trivial material; his writings are extremely cold and poor. When he met a man of special learning, he evaded discussing that branch of learning and talked of other things, deviating from the subject; and he never ascertained anything he advanced or pretended ».

وكان يدعى تصانيف كتب فيها ما هو مبتكر ، وإنما يقف على تصانيف غيره فإما أن يختصر أو يزيد ما لاحاجة اليه ، وهى فى غاية البرودة والركاكة ، وكان اذا اجتمع بصاحب علم فرّ من الكلام معه فى ذلك العلم ، وتكلم فى غيره مغربا ، ولم يكن محققا فى شىء مما يقوله ويدعيه (القفطى ، ص ١٦٣) .

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In his ' *Risâla fil Maâden wa Ibtâl el-Kimiâ* ' [1], he distinguished between true chemical operations and the procedures of alchemy that he called pretenses, misrepresentations and fabrications, adding that if a thousand persons like himself spent their whole lives to try and efface the traces of alchemy they could not erase the slightest part of it, for Gaber ibn Hayyan wrote four thousand books, and his followers four times more, that these books are spread in the entire world and stuff bookcases, that a single purge cannot cleanse the impurities of the world, and a lonely peasant cannot uproot the herbs of a thousand gardens, unless he were a prophet. In another epistle, the ' *Risâla fi Mogâdalât el-Hakimain al-Kimiâ'y wal Nazary* ', he called Gaber ' the founder of this false science who duped some scholars like Abu Bakr el-Razi [2], and he placed Shehab el-Dine al-Sahrawardy in the class of children and idiots [3].

But, *post-mortem,* he apparently reverted to his past errors, if we are to believe a legend first propounded, to our knowledge, by Saunders [4]. According to this legend, Abdullatif became a ' spirit ', that at first ministered his pronouncements anonymously, but later condescended, in the course of a spiritist session, to divulge its name (p. 22). This tale, further relates that Abdullatif turned after his death into a great spiritist leader, an inspired teacher heading a group of spirits administering from the higher spheres philosophical and healing advice to a multitude of followers. Believing in the supreme power of thought, in mesmerism, magnetism, and the influence of planets on human health, he was actually able to cure gangrenous bowels by wielding a miracle ' pearl ray ', and treated from his exalted level ' floating brain ', by occultly drawing liquid and

(1) « ... عمليات الكيمياء الصحيحة وهى احتراقات وتكليسات وتليينات وتصليبات وبين ما عـداها وهو ادعاءات وتمويه واختراع » .

. . . . . .

فان شربة واحدة لاتظهر أدناس العـالم وإن فلاحاً واحداً لايقـدر على أن يستأصل ألف بستان الا أن يكون نبياً . . »

(Stern, *loc. cit.* and Ghalioungui and Abdou, *op. cit.*).

(2) « مؤسس هذا العـلم الكاذب هو جابر بن حيان الذى خدع بعض العلماء أمثال أبى بكر الرازى . . » .

(Stern, *loc. cit.* and Ghalioungui and Abdou, *op. cit.*).

(3) *Ibid.* : الصبيان والأغبياء

(4) Saunders, R.H., 1928, *Health, its recovery and maintenance* (*Twelve addresses by Abduhl Latif, The Great Persian Physician and Philosopher,* London : Rider. This is the work from which our quotations are drawn.

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pus away and ‘ plugging ’ the brain to stabilize it (sic!). One wonders whose floating brain needs plugging!

The whole tone of this work is reflected in the following description of one of his manifestations : « ... a steely blue light in the form of a ball, some three inches in diameter, shot at an angle across the room, coming from the ceiling furthest from the medium (and apparently far beyond the ceiling) and alighting on the floor near her [the Medium], addressed us : ‘ I am the guide of your circle, and I am empowered to help you and I am learning your ways and manner of life and language with that object ... We draw from you to the extent of your strength ... We take what the sitters throw off, and mould it to our purpose ».

No less an author than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a keen proselyte of spiritism, prefaced this book in the following terms : « I have been brought in contact more than once with Abduhl and was privileged once to sit for more than hour listening to his own account of his life, with anecdotes of ancient Cairo, Saladin, the Crusaders and many other events which occurred under his own eyes. It was a unique experience to partake of the ripe, gentle wisdom of this great sage, never bitter, never sarcastic, eminently reasonable and courteous, answering through the lips of an unconscious woman every kind of difficult historical, ethnological, or philosophic questions ».

This certainly means a great metamorphosis in Abdullatif's spirit for, in its carnal life it was, even in the judgment of his admirers, full of vanity and invective.

The great admiration of the privileged listeners, likewise, interposed a prism between them and the spirit for, despite what we know of his miserable appearance [1], he appeared to them « a fine standing figure of a man; tall with a striking looking face, of great nobility. He is dressed in ancient Persian costume ... Yes, you can call him a handsome man (p. 43).

Even his voice acquired a new pitch and resonance in the other world for, although his admirer, Ibn abu Usaibya, had to admit that he was better in writing than in speech, and although Al-Qifty accused him of stuttering [2], the listener went on : I have heard his deep and impressive voice from the Spheres ringing out in sonorous tones, though the medium was a lady whose own vocal cords were utterly unable of emitting one quarter of the volume of sound (p. 20).

[1] See, p. 258, note 2. — [2] لكنة.

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The book then records a *verbatim* protocol of twelve conversations couched in usual spiritist phraseology. We are summarizing below some of the more typical utterances after re-arranging them according to subject.

Biographical detail.

The spirit calls himself ' Abduhl Latif ben Ali ben Mahomet ben Youssef ben Said Bashek ' at variance with the usual recorded name ' Mowaffaq ed-Dine abu-Mohammad Abdullatif ebn-Youssef ebn Mohammad ebn Aly ebn Abi-Saad.

In several ' revelations ' our hero claims a Persian descent : « ... although Persia was the matrix of my existence, Egypt was that beautiful mistress » (p. 269). In another context he calls his people the ancient Persian race (p. 58). Even his language is said to have been ' Persian Arabic ' (p. 52), though no indication is given on what this language is. It is further asserted that his works were translated from Persian (p. 53).

Needless to say, contemporary testimonies agree in saying that Abdullatif originated from Mossul and was born in Baghdad, and that he wrote in Arabic. Ibn abi Usaibya utilized many of his Arab manuscripts and some of the extant manuscripts are thought to have been written in his own hand [1], or to have been corrected by him (Stein).

As to pride in his Persian descent, we have Ibn abu Usaibya's contradictory statement that he always attacked Persian scientists and disparaged their writings [2].

The revelations then claim to tell the story of his early life : « I had great advantages over many of the men of my day, inasmuch as my father — may the Great Spirit rest his soul — was a man of literature and learning ... who had, in his early days, studied much of the great civilisations that had been of the

[1] Dietrich, A., 1962, Die arabische Version einer unbekannten Schrift der Alexander von Aphrodisias ueber die Differentia specifica, *Nachr. Akad. Wiss. Goettingen*, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, p. 100 etc.

[2] وكان وقوعه كثيراً جداً فى علمـــاء العجم ومصنفاتهم ، خصوصاً الشيخ الرئيس ابن سينا ونظرائه (ابن أبى أصيبعة ، ص ٦٨٣) .

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East. Especially was he interested in the great Semitic or shall we say, the Hebraic, and in the pre-Babylonian and the Chinese, and also in the older Sumerian » (p. 201).

To call God the ' Great Spirit ' is obviously a spiritist concept and certainly constitutes a post-mortem gain in Abdullatif's vocabulary. On the other hand, Assyrologists and Sinologists would be certainly curious of the sources from which knowledge of Sumerian and ancient Chinese civilisation could be drawn in the 12th century A.D.

As to his great respect of Hebraism, I might quote Ibn abu Usaibya's account of his not too complimentary judgment of Maimonides : « ... I found him a man of great merit, dominated by his love of domineering and of the service of the great of the world. He wrote a book on medicine compiled from the sixteen books of Galen [1] and from five other books, stipulating that not a single letter be changed, save an ' and ' or a ' then ', and only copying without selection. And he wrote a book for the Jews ... cursing whoever would copy it in any script other than Hebrew. I became conversant with it and found it a book of evil, that destroys religious law and dogma with what purports to correct them » [2].

Two other details indicate a misinterpretation of both the spirit's revelations and Abdullatif's biographies. In a first passage (p. 134), the spirit is quoting Aristotle and the author quietly concluded that he knew Aristotle and by implication the Greek language. Abdullatif was indeed a great exponent of Aristotle but the Greek philosopher had since long been translated into Arabic.

In a second passage (p. 49), the spirit is said to have resided in Greece. This is an obvious mis-translation of ' Bilad el-Roum ' (literally the Land of the Roum, i.e. the Romans or Greeks), which was the name given by the Arabs to the countries occupied by Byzantium, where Abdullatif resided several years [3].

[1] The sixteen books that, according to Hunain ebn-Ishaq formed the Galenic collection kept in Alexandria at the time of the Arab conquest.

[2] وجاءنى موسى فوجدته فاضلا فى الغاية قد غلب عليه حب الرياسة ، وخدمة أرباب الدنيا ، وعمل كتابا فى الطب جمعه من الستة عشر لجالينوس ، ومن خمسة كتب أخرى ، وشرط ألا يغير فيه حرفا الا أن يكون واو عطف أو فاء فصل ، وانما ينقل فصولا لا يختارها . وعمل كتابا لليهود سماه كتاب الدلالة ، ولعن من يكتبه بغير القلم العبرانى ووقفت عليه فوجدته كتاب سوء يفسد أصول الشرائع والعقائد بما يظن أنه يصلحها (ابن أبى أصيبعة ، ص ٦٨٧) .

[3] Ibn Abi-Usaibya, *op. cit.*, p. 690, mentions Arzen el Roum, in Turkish Armenia.

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The spirit then described how he became an able and keen horseman, being engaged from his fifteenth to his twenty-eighth year in learning the art of warfare and « going through the Crusades », a statement from which it was concluded that he took part in them (Saunders, p. 262). Again, this information is quite new. Abdullatif lived, of course, through the Crusades, but his only contact with actual warfare was his visit to the outskirts of Acre, then occupied by the Crusaders and beseiged by Saladin, to solicit a recommendation to the authorities in Cairo.

Nothing is said of any military or riding training in his biographies. On the contrary, he said of himself that he lost no time in anything but study, knowing no play or fun [1].

Medical Knowledge.

According to the ' revelations ', the spirit was constantly bringing his knowledge up-to-date-for « as the great doctors of all lands pass over into the spirit realm Abduhl meets them, and checks and enlarges his knowledge of medical matters, until he is as much ' up-to-date ' as the most modern medico » (p. 16). Nevertheless, in his inaugural address next page the spirit claims superior knowledge : « I would wish to give to the world knowledge it does not at present possess. From my position in the Spheres, I view the functions of the body in a way that no earth doctor can, and I will tell you of the action of the heart, of the lungs, of the liver, and of the other organs of the body », ending in asking that seances be organised to enable him to impart this knowledge.

What the knowledge of this great ' Persian physician ' is, and what his work ' at the head of a Medical Mission in the Spheres ' today is supposed to be, is recorded in a rather disorderly array of pompous pronouncements in the twelve addresses he gave on ' the diseases of the human body ... on the functions of the organs of the body, the effect of mind and will-power on those functions, and the play and influence of the subconscious mind on the conscious mind (p. 14).

The system is in fact a smattering of faith healing, suggestion, ' natural ' medicine, spiritism, and a pathology stipulating as a fundamental etiology

[1] (ابن أبي أصيبعة ، ص ٦٨٣) لا أعرف اللهو ولا اللعب .

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constipation and ill-feeding. The latter, of course, offers nothing new. It dates back to the Ancient Egyptians [1], the Arabs [2], the Regimen Salernitanus (*Aphorisms* XX-XCVI); it still forms an important part of ' folk ' therapy, and has contributed through the press and other advertising media to the fortune of manufacturers of laxative ' miracle ' pills.

Pain and Disease.

All pain is mental unless it is chemically produced, or produced by circumstances (p. 33). Above all the value of suggestion, mesmerism, and hypnosis is stressed. We should be able to deal with it through suggestion. Power of thought is supreme. Post-hypnotic suggestion can cure all ailments. The planets affect us.

Role of the Gastro-intestinal Tract.

As in all primitive systems, and probably influenced by the smell of the intestinal contents and its resemblance to that of putrefying tissues [3], the intestinal contents are held to be responsible for most diseases.

The stomach is the principal organ to watch. Ill-health originates in the stomach. Even hereditary trouble can be got at by understanding the laws that govern the stomach.

Acidity is the main cause of disease.

Food is not meant to be boiled and thus to throw all the good away and eat that which has no substance.

[1] Ghalioungui, P., 1968, « La notion de maladie dans les textes égyptiens et ses rapports avec la théologie humorale », *BIFAO*, LXVI, p. 6.

[2] Cf. the Prophet's sayings :

المعدة بيت الداء والحمية الدواء

ما ملأ ابن آدم وعاءً شراً من بطنه

نحن قوم لا نأكل حتى نجـــوع ، واذا أكلنا لا نشبع

يكفى ابن آدم لقمات يقمن صلبه

« The stomach is the seat of disease; diet is its treatment. Man never filled worse a vessel than is stomach. We are a people who do not eat until satiation; and if we eat, we never eat to satiation. Two morsels are sufficient to man to strengthen him ».

[3] See J.B. de C.M. Saunders, *The Transition from Ancient Egyptian to Greek Medicine*, 1963 : Lawrence : University of Kansas Press.

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Overeating and overresting are sources of illness [1].

Drinking with food is not wise. Wines are useful in moderation.

Flushing the colon with pure water is recommended.

Tuberculosis is attributed in page 75 to mis-application of food; in page 186 to venereal disease.

Asthma is purely nervous, produced in the first place by wrong feeding. It pragmatises congestion of the liver and of the kidneys. It is cured by starving the patient, giving the patient a rest.

Many hereditary cases of *blindness, deafness,* and *ulcers* are due to syphilis.

Cancer cannot exist without a costive and congestive condition of the stomach. Cancer is due to constipation. All the faeces become congealed like a thick wall. This is insidiously breeding germs and we go on feeding germs. The germs can only be produced in the faeces which ferments and then congeals in the blood. Cancerous tissue contains little white worms. Early cancer is cured by stomach washing.

THERAPEUTICS.

Drugs do not cure disease. Bromides are warned against, and — paradoxically in a system that attributes disease to constipation — purgatives and aperients are said to be the curse of civilisation.

Nevertheless, potassium citrate is recommended; olive oil is the most splendid thing in the whole world. Onion is the greatest thing we have, the great killer of germs, the one that removes acidity and pips in things like tomatoes. Fruit juices and cooked vegetables are curative [2].

No meat is to be given to patients with high or low blood-pressure.

Epilepsy can be cured by marriage [3] or by talking in darkness (sic!). Sleepy sickness (identified later with lethargic encephalitis) is said to be allied to epilepsy, and to be curable by adrenalin and digitalis that will cause the flushing blood to be pumped.

[1] Regimen Salernitano, *aph.* XCVII, XCVIII.

[2] Cf. previous statement that food should not be boiled.

[3] Many psychic and « nervous » disturbances are thought in many folklores to result from sexual continence and to be curable by marriage.

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HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY.

Man is god, part of the Divine life itself. The soul has free will. It leaves the body at night. Experience is marked upon it. It is re-incarnated after death. A person's belonging may be used to suggest its owner across the ocean.

Life exists on other planets and earth is the lowest standard in creation. Dante's inferno has not been exaggerated. Atlantis is a historical fact.

The great founder of Christianity had knowledge not only of Hebraic laws but also of the laws of Egypt and Persia where he studied.

And it crowns all this by stating that too much learning chokes the blood-stream.

* * *

Such inane hodge-podge would not be worth reading, had it not found a resonant echo in an English translation of Abdullatif's Relation of Egypt. The translation is acceptable, save for several errors of translation or interpretation of which we cite a few examples :

Page 19. *Durra* ذرة is translated maize, whereas maize or Indian corn had not yet been brought from the American continent to the ancient world. At the time, durra was millet (*Sorghum vulgare*).

Page 23. The word *ibliz* إبليز or Nile silt is apparently confused with *ibriz* إبريز gold, and translated accordingly.

Page 31. The expressions فيه لعابية and كثير اللعابية used in the description of *bamia* (*okra, Hibiscus esculentus*), and *melukhiya* (*Corchorus olitorius*) are translated ' makes plenty of saliva ', while they certainly mean that these plants are rich in mucinous material.

Page 257. A hen is stated to have been brought from Syria for 60 dinars during a period of famine. The Arabic text actually uses the plural دجاجاً not the singular دجاجة .

Page 263. أربعة عشر is translated forty instead of fourteen heirs.

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It is the introduction, however, that interests us, in that it repeats practically *verbatim* the legends knit around Abdullatif's spirit.

It starts by relating how, in August 1957, this distinguished mentor spoke to the translator couple through two ' sensitives ' and, in 1960, wished the husband to make a photographic copy of the Bodleian manuscript of the ' Relation ', promising to send a translator from Bagdad. The copy was made and presented to the British Museum.

It then proceeds to tell of Abdullatif becoming an able and keen horseman learning warfare; of his book on the human body that became a standard text-book of Arab schools for centuries; his disregard of some tenets of Islam; and the destruction of his books by fanatics (?) in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Above all, it reiterates the myth of the great soul not only living on, but continuing its work of healing and teaching mankind, as a Universal Master who leads and directs a band of workers on and around the Earth, adding that there are indeed already countless people who know and bless him as the ' Persian doctor '.

We would not have taken the trouble to analyse these works did they not tend to perpetuate a false image of Abdullatif, and some errors of translation.

AnIsl 13 (1977), p. 257-267 Paul Ghalioungui
The Legend of Abdullatif Al-Baghdady's «Spirit».
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