



Dermatology Prescriptions by Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī (C.936-C.1013)

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Abstract

Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī (c.936-c.1013) is one of the most important physicians of Al-Andalus, besides an eminent surgeon, the first one of Medieval Islam. The 19th treatise of his main work, titled *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* (Book of medical arrangement), deals with cosmetics and drugs for embellishment of body; and, among other things, it contains interesting recipes for health and skin care of a great value to both the field of pharmacology and dermatology. This paper is an approach to this treatise, and includes the translation to English from some of its fragments, according to the 5774th Arabic manuscript of the National Library at Paris.

Keywords: Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī; *Kitāb Al-Taṣrīf*; Medieval Arabic Science; Dermatology; Aesthetic Medicine; Cosmetics

Introduction

Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī (c.936-c.1013) from Cordova is one of the most important physicians of Al-Andalus, besides an eminent pharmacist and surgeon, the first one of Medieval Islam, and increased the rank of surgery to the same level as medicine [1,2].

The importance of Abulcasis is restricted not only to the history of Arabic science [3], but also to the history of the universal scientific knowledge, due to his influence in the European scientists until early Modern Age in the 17th century [4].

In the field of pharmacology, which this article mainly is about, Abulcasis is certainly, along with Al-Ghāfiqī (d.1165) and Ibn Al-Bayṭār (d.1248), one of the most outstanding representatives of Islamic science for his achievements in pharmacy and pharmacopoeia [5].

The 19th treatise of his main work, titled *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* (Book of medical arrangement) [6], deals with cosmetics and drugs for embellishment of body [7]; and, among other things, it contains in the 4th chapter interesting recipes for

health and skin care of a great value to both the field of pharmacology and dermatology.

The 19th Treatise from the *Kitāb Al-Taṣrīf*

The *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf*'s 19th treatise is contained in folios 74v^o - 92r^o of the 5774th Arabic manuscript from the National Library at Paris. It is an interesting manual of both aesthetic medicine and cosmetics about perfumes, drugs and remedies for the body health as well as for its improvement and embellishment.

Reading this handbook allows to reconstruct the canons and the aesthetic concerns of Arab society in the late 10th and early 11th centuries, as well as indicates the interest showed by this society in hygiene, beauty, ornament and perfume, and how these factors are closely connected to body health, characteristics all of them still in force in today's society, eleven centuries later. For example, then the harmful nature of sun is recognized, when it is taken in excess, and so excellent sun protectors are described.

This treatise has great pharmacological value and is divided into two sections:

Section I: About perfumes. It is divided into ten chapters.

Section II: About drugs and remedies for the body health as well as for its improvement and embellishment. It is also divided into ten chapters.

The 4th chapter of the section II (folios 82v^o-f^o86r^o) is about drugs and remedies for health and skin care, and includes forty-seven medieval recipes, valuable for history of pharmacology and dermatology. This chapter, as the rest of the book, incorporates many quotes to other outstanding authors, such as Galen [8-12].

Some of the recipes described in this chapter are translated to English below, according to the 5774th Arabic manuscript of the National Library at Paris.

Recipes for Health and Skin Care

Recipe of A Beneficial Gel for Eliminating Dark Patches on the Face [F^o83r^o]

You take pale blue lily root, barley flour and fava beans, from each, 2 ounces; 1 ounce of salt; and burnt deer horn and ammonia, from each one, 4 *dirhams*. You crush everything and mix it, and make tablets that will be applied on the face in case of need; later, after three hours, wash the face.

Recipe of an Exfoliating Face Mask Written by Al-Rāzī [F^o83v^o]

You take peeled almond, starch and tragacanth, mix everything with safflower water, and apply it on the face. Let the medicament act all night long, and in the morning wash the face with boiled water made from chamomile and dried violet.

Recipe of a Remedy for Recent Stains on the Face [F^o83v^o-F^o84r^o]

You crush cumin [f^o84r^o] with water and apply it in bandages. It is beneficial, God, The Almighty, willing.

Recipe of a Remedy for Eliminating the Facial Stains from “Book of the Compound Medicines” by Galen [F^o84r^o]

You take hyssop, root of Egyptian Alcea (*bamia*) and castoreum, from each, 1 *mithqāl*; 2 *mithqāls* of wax; and 2 *mithqāls* of terebinth resin. You dissolve the soluble remedies, and add that to the dried ones after crushing them. Then, you mix everything, and apply on the face with a towel. And, in order to avoid the appearance of ulcers on the skin, it is advisable to remove the towel every day for one hour.

Recipe of a Remedy Composed by Dioscorides for Removing Impurities from the Skin, and Cleansing Body [F^o84r^o]

You take peeled melon seed, and mash with melon pulp and a bit of wheat flour. Then, you make with this mass some pills, let them dry and use them with gels and lotions.

Recipe of a Powerful Sunscreen [F^o84v^o]

This sunscreen even prevents travelers from burning their skin. You take black nightshade juice and a bit of rose oil, and apply on the face; later, you wash it with hot water. You can also take egg white, beat it very well with rose oil, and apply it on the face; and, when you like, wash it. This treatment is beneficial, God willing.

Recipe of a Remedy Mentioned by Paulos for Eliminating Pimples and Other Skin Impurities [F^o84v^o]

You take 10 *dirhams* of common mugwort, 1 *dirham* of terebinth resin, and 2 *dirhams* of basil; crush everything with olive oil, and apply it on the face. Let it act for an hour, and then, remove it.

Recipe of Powerful Face Cream to Eliminating Marks and Scars [F^o85v^o]

You take 5 *dirhams* of bean flour; 2,5 *dirhams* of radish seed and rocket seed; and 2 *dirhams* of bleaching litharge, watercress and sweet costus. You mash everything, and apply it on the face.

Recipe of a Remedy for the Facial Marks, Stains and Wrinkles [F^o85v^o]

This remedy involves applying on the face bitter almond oil mixed with honey, or lily oil, wax and rose oil. This cream eliminates marks and stains, as well as also smoothes and softens facial wrinkles

Recipe of a Remedy for the Facial Wrinkles [F^o86r^o]

You take myrtle leaves and black vetch flour, mash both things with water, until get the honey texture; and then, apply this on the face. It is excellent.

Recipe of a Sunscreen for the Face [F^o86r^o]

The remedy involves applying on the face acacia gum dissolved in water. This can also be made with tragacanth. You can also apply starch diluted in acacia gum water. It is beneficial, God, The Almighty, willing.

Weights and Measures

- 1 Dirham: 3,12 grams
 1 Mithqāl: 4,68 grams
 1 Ounce (ūqiyya): 37 grams

Conclusion

The pages translated and studied in this article certify the relevance of Abulcasis Al-Zahrāwī in the history of Islamic science. The *Kitāb al-Taṣrīf* is in a high-ranking place within surgery, medicine and pharmacology of Al-Andalus; and it also exemplifies the high level achieved by Arab scientific knowledge in the Middle Ages. Due to his influence in Europe until the late 16th century and the early 17th century, among other reasons, Abulcasis has a very prominent position in the history of universal science.

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