RAZI AND HIS BOOK ON AL-ṬIN
AL NISHABURI

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A few miles from the present city of Tehran, capital
of Iran, lie the ruins of the ancient city of Rayy. Many
scholars in different fields of learning, called Rāzī,
have arisen from there. The most important among
these is Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn-i Zakariyyā, who is
known in Latin as Rhazes (251/865-320/932). Rāzī, in
accordance with the tradition of his time, was a phy-
sician and a philosopher. He gained medical fame in
Europe at the beginning of the thirteenth century
with works such as: Continens (al-Hāvi), Liber Almansoris
(al-Tibb al-Mansūrī), Smallpox and Measles (al-
Hasbah wa al-Judari) and other works. As a phi-
losopher however, he has become better known only
during this century through the efforts of the late Paul
Kraus and Suleiman Pines of the Hebrew University
in Jerusalem. My interest in the philosophical writings
of Rāzī led me to several years of research and the
publication, in 1970, of a comprehensive work on his
philosophical thought. Inevitably, I came across
medical information, some of which had not been
previously studied; for example, Rāzī’s book which
concerned a certain kind of earth prepared in
Nishābūr and exported to other places, similar to
Terra sigillata in Europe. Scholars who have compiled
bibliographies of Rāzī, such as Ibn-al-Nadim (d.
377/987), al-Birūnī (d. 440/1078), Ibn Abī Usaibā (d.
668/1269) have all attributed a book to Rāzī called:
Fanna il-tin al-Muntaqīl bihih manafi.

In the translation of Ibn-i-Nadim this title has been
recorded as: A section concerning that clay in which
one is beneficially immersed12. In the translation of al
Birūnī, Julius Ruska has translated the title in the
following way: Darüber, das in dem von ihm [sc. Gaien]
eignebraten Tom nutritzliche Eigenschaften enthalten
Sind13. G.S.A. Rankin translated the title from Ibn
Ali Usaibī’s as follows: Disseratioquod lutum trans-
latum continet14 utilitates. In certain Persian books on
the works of Rāzī the following translation is made of
this title: a book concerning a kind of earth which would
contain benefits if transferred15. None of these titles,
however, is correct; the confusion arises from the word
Muntaqīl, derived from Naqīl, meaning to transfer,
which in this case is not correct. The correct form is
Mutanaqqal from Naqīl meaning tablet. In order to
clarify the above statement I would like to present the
following evidence:

1. Ibn Samajūn (d. 392/1002), Ghāfqi (d. 560/
1165), and Ibn al-Baṭār (d. 646/1248) in their respective
books on simple drugs refer to the earth from
Nishābūr that is prepared as tablets al-Mutanaqqal bihih
under the heading of edible earth (Ṭin al-
akī). They quote in this connection passages from the above-
mentioned book by Rāzī and also from one of his other
works19.

2. Tha‘alibī (d. 429/1037) who was from Nishābūr,
in a work about the attributes of cities, persons or things,
says under the heading “Earth of Nishābūr” (Ṭim
Nisabūr) that this earth is edible and that its like is not
found anywhere else in the world, that it is imported
near and far and presented to Kings. He further adds
that Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā has described the be-
nifits of this earth in one of his books. Finally, Tha‘alibī
quotes a piece of poetry by a certain Ma’mūn which starts
with this line:

“Bestow upon me that Nuql [tablet of earth] from
which we were created and to which we return.”20

3. Nuwalī (d. 733/1332), when mentioning Nishābūr
and its products says that ‘Amr ibn Laith, the
Safavid King (265/878) said: ‘I have to defend this city,
for its plant is rubarb, its earth is Nuql [Tablet of
Earth] and its stone is turquoise’. In explaining the
‘Earth Tablet’ he makes the same remarks about it as
Tha‘alibī1.

Also some scholars have used the term al-ṭīn al-
Khurāsānī to denote this earth, as for example, Ibn
Razi and Al-Tin Al Nishaburi

Butlân (d. 456/1023) in Taqwil al Sihâb22, Ibn Jazla (d. 493/1009) in Minhaj al-Bayân23 and Ibn al-Hashâhî in a commentary upon the medical terms used in Liber al-Mansoiso24. As for the location of this earth Muslim geographical works contain some indications, for example Maqrîzî, while mentioning the mines of Khorassân, states that edible earth comes from the city of Züzan25.

Ibn Rusta says that the Najâh earth which is exported to many parts of the world comes from a place between Nishâbûr and Qâşâr26. The term Najâh is another expression used for edible earth27. Ali Ibn-i-Rabbânî-i-Tabâri (fl. 236/850)28 and Ibn Baitâr29 have used the term Habb al-Najâh (Najâh tablet).

It should be noted that Muslim physicians and pharmacologists were familiar with different kinds of earth; mostly due to Arabic translations of the works of Dioscorides (40 B.C) and Galen (d. A.D. 201). Among the physicians who listed different kinds of earth, we can mention Ali Ibn Rabbânî-i-Tabâri in Paradise of Wisdom (Firdaus al-Hikma)30, Râzi in Continens (al-Hâfî)31 and Ibn Sina (d. 428/1037) in the Qânûn.32 Of the pharmacologists Ibn Samâjûn, Ghafqi, Maimonides33 (d. 601/1204) and Ibn al-Baitûr in their book on simple drugs and also al-Birûni in Kitâb al-saydana34 can be noted. Among Persian books the oldest to list different kinds of earths is Kitâb al-abinaya by Muwaffaq al-Din Harawi, which is written in the second half of the tenth century.35

Apart from works of medicine, mention is found of the eating of various kinds of earth in books relating to other fields. For instance, a tradition had been related from the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) in which it is said that since God created Adam from the earth it is forbidden for his descendants to eat the earth36. Also in Persian literature it is often mentioned that whoever eats the earth is thin and has a yellowish complexion.37 These are probably allusions to the habit of eating earth rather than the use of earth for medical purposes.

Let us return to the earth of Nishâbûr, and its medical qualities. It is said to be good against nausea and vomiting and to combat the effects of greasy and sweet foods, and also that it causes contraction of the stomach.38 At present there is no trace of this earth. However, it was related to me by a physician that before World War II in a village of Khurasân a soldier who suffered from indigestion, used to prepare a tablet from a yellowish earth and what in Persian is called Jawz-i-Hindi, (Indian walnut). He used to eat this and speak of its great benefits.

The physician brought some of this to Tehran and according to him the analysis showed a high content of the substances which are now used as antacids.39 My aim has been to correct the title of the book of Râzi which had been for long misunderstood. Also I have tried to introduce different materials that throw light on the earth of Nishâbûr. It is my hope that this may serve as an introduction to further research.

REFERENCES

1. In old Persian Fagâ, in Greek, see Kent, R.G., Old Persian, New Haven, 1953, PP. 122-205.
2. For example, Fakhr-al-Din Râzi, the great Muslim theologian.
4. His most important work is Opera Philosophica, Cairo, 1939, in which are published the philosophical treatises of Râzi.
5. The most important work being Beiträge zur islamischen Atonlehre, Berlin, 1936, in which the author has dealt with the concept of Râzi about matter, space, and time.
7. Located in the East of Iran, Birthplace of many famous men including Umar Khayyâm.
in his ‘Āthar al-Bilād (Beirut, 1380 A.H.) has quoted this story but he was mistaken in bringing the word ‘al-Baqi’ instead of ‘al-Nuqī.’

34. Al-Bīrūnī: Al-Saidana, MS no. 149 Karsunlu, Turkey and Microfilm no. 363. Tehran University Central Library.
37. See, for example, Nās Ir-I-Khusraw: Divān, Tehran, 1305-7, A.H., P.
39. From a letter by Dr. N. Sharqi to Dr. M. Iqbal, President of the Iranian Medical Council, dated 19 June 1972.