RAZI AND HIS BOOK ON AL- TIN 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 Razi, have arisen from there. The most important among these is Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn-i Zakariyap, who is known in Latin as Rhazes (251/865-320/932). Rāzī, in accordance with the tradition of his time, was a physician 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-Mansūri), Smallpox and Measles (al-Hasbalz wa al-Jādari) and other works. As a philosopher 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 Nishabur and exported to other places, similar to Terra sigillata in Europe. Scholars who have compiled bibliographies of Rāzī, such as Ibn-al-Nadim (d. 392/1002), Ghiyath (d. 560/1165), and Ibn al Baitir (d. 646/1248) in their respective books on simple drugs refer to the earth from Nishabur that is prepared as tablets al-Mutanaqqal under the heading of edible earth (Tin al- akl). They quote in this connection passages from the above-mentioned book by Rāzī and also from one of his other works.

1. Ibn Samajun (d. 392/1002), Ghiyath (d. 560/1165), and Ibn al Baitir (d. 646/1248) in their respective books on simple drugs refer to the earth from Nishabur that is prepared as tablets al-Mutanaqqal under the heading of edible earth (Tin al- akl). They quote in this connection passages from the above-mentioned book by Rāzī and also from one of his other works.

2. Thaālibī (d. 429/1037) who was from Nishābūr, in a work about the attributes of cities, persons or things, says under the heading “Earth of Nishabur” (Tim Nisabur) 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 Zakariyā has described the benefits of this earth in one of his books. Finally, Tha‘ālibī quotes a piece of poetry by a certain Ma‘āmūn which starts with this line:

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

3. Nuwalri (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 rhubarb, 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‘ālibī.

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

Butlân (d. 456/1063) in Taqwâm al-Sihha22, Ibn Jazla (d. 493/1099) in Minhâj al-Bayân23 and Ibn-al-Hasâbaṭîn a commentary upon the medical terms used in Liber al-Mansoîs24. As for the location of this earth Muslim geographical works contain some indications, for example Maqâdisî, while mentioning the mines of Khârâsân, states that edible earth comes from the city of Zâzan25.

Ibn Rusta says that the Najâhi earth which is exported to many parts of the world comes from a place between Nîshabûr and Qâ’ân26. The term Najâhi is another expression used for edible earth27. Ali Ibn-i-Rabban-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 Rabban-i-Tabâri in Paradise of Wisdom (Firdaus al-Hikma)30, Râzi in Continens (al-Hâvî)31 and Ibn Sina (d. 428/1037) in the Qânîn.32 Of the pharmacologists Ibn Samâjûn, Ghañqî, Ma’mûnîd33 (d. 601/1204) and Ibn al-Baitâr in their book on simple drugs and also al-Birunî in Kitâb al-abilîyâ al-saydâna34 can be noted. Among Persian books the oldest to list different kinds of earths is Kitâb al-abilîyâ by Muwaffaq al-Din Harawî, 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 example, 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 Nîshabûr, 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 stomach38.

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 Khurâsân a soldier who suffered from indigestion, used to prepare a tablet from a yellowish earth and what in Persian is called Jawz-i-Findih (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 antacids39.

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 Nîshabûr. It is my hope that this may serve as an introduction to further research.

REFERENCES

1. In old Persian Faghi, 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 Beitrage zur islamischen Atomlehre, Berlin, 1936, in which the author has dealt with the concept of Râzi about matter, space, and time.
M. Mohaghegh

in his 'Āthar al-Bīlād (Beirut, 1380 A.H.) has quoted this story but he was mistaken in bringing the word 'al-Bag̱' instead of 'al-Nuql.

33. Ibn-i-Maymūm: Sharh l'asma'. Al-Uqqār, Cairo, 1940, no. 172, PP. 238, 49.
34. Al-Birūnī: Al-Saidana, MS.no. 149 Kursunlu, Turkey, and Microfilm no. 363. Tehran University Central Library.
37. See, for example, Nās Ir-I-Khusrāw: Divān, Tehran, 1305-7, A.H., P.
40. From a letter by Dr. N. Sharqi to Dr. M. Iqbal, President of the Iranian Medical Council, dated 19 June 1972.