

Efraim LEV

Jewish Medical Practitioners in Medieval Muslim Territories: A Prosopography

The main aim of the research was to bring together all available biographical data on Jewish medical practitioners (physicians and pharmacists) in the Muslim world during the 9th—16th Centuries. The biographies (617) are based mainly on information gathered from the wealth of primary sources found in the Cairo Geniza (letters, commercial documents, court orders, lists of donors) and Muslim Arabic sources (biographical dictionaries, historical and geographical literature).

The study presents a clearer understanding and a more complete picture of the social, economic and intellectual aspects of medicine during that period in the Jewish communities, as well as their relations with their host societies. The practitioners came from various socio-economic strata and lived in urban as well as rural locations in Muslim countries. Various issues were studied: professional, daily and personal lives; successes and failures; and families; as well as the Jewish communities and inter-religious affairs. Moreover, their life stories teach us about medieval Arabic medicine, as practiced by Jewish physicians and pharmacists.

I approach the topic using the methodology of prosopography, i.e. a study that identifies and relates a group of persons within a particular historical context, or, in other words, a study of individuals belonging to the same field; building a collective biography (or multiple career-lines).

Altogether I was able, with the help of my research team, to build 507 biographies of Jewish physicians, followed by the biographies of 110 Jewish pharmacists (apothecaries, perfumers and druggists). One of the most interesting findings was the data regarding dynasties of Jewish practitioners. This phenomenon will be explained in the presentation, whereby 49 dynasties consisting of 144 Jewish practitioners will be revealed. I will discuss their role in the medieval Mediterranean in general and in the Jewish communities in particular.

Among many issues, I will present some information about the places of medical practice (home, courts, hospitals), the practitioners' professional education, their intellectual workshops (i.e., libraries), and their professional roles, for example: Head of Physicians.

Other findings that will not be discussed in the presentation are: everyday life and activity of Jewish practitioners with respect to moral aspects, fees, religious and inter-religious aspects of Jewish practitioners, their role in the leadership of their communities (Nagids and Head of the Jews), their place and share in charity activities, the high-ranking positions Jewish practitioners held, the issue of conversion to Islam, and famous Jewish scholars, authors, poets and diplomats, who were simultaneously medical practitioners.

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