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Wisdom

Ibn Sina (Avicenna): the doctor and philosopher who read the Metaphysics forty times

From Bukhara to Hamadan: the autobiography of an eleventh-century genius, the Canon of Medicine taught in Europe for centuries and the thought experiment of the "flying man"

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Abu Ali al-Husayn ibn Abd Allah ibn Sina, known in Europe as **Avicenna**, was born in 980 near Bukhara, in today's Uzbekistan, then part of the Samanid state. He left a short autobiography, later completed by his student al-Juzjani, that tells us of an

extraordinary education.

A childhood of books

According to the autobiography, by the age of ten he had memorised the Quran and much literature. He then studied logic, mathematics, natural sciences and medicine. He called medicine "not difficult", and in his teens began to practise it.

But one book tormented him: **Aristotle's Metaphysics**. He writes that he read it forty times, until he knew it by heart, but did not understand its purpose. One day, in the book market, a seller offered him a cheap book. It was a commentary by the philosopher al-Farabi on the aims of the Metaphysics. Reading it, he says, everything became clear. He was so happy that the next day he gave alms to the poor.

Physician to princes

At around 17 or 18 he helped treat the Samanid emir Nuh ibn Mansur, who was ill. As a reward he was allowed to use the royal library, where he found books he had never seen. He spent the rest of his life moving between the courts of Persia, often in times of war, working as a physician and sometimes as vizier, and writing at night.

His works

- **The Canon of Medicine** (al-Qanun fi al-Tibb), a great encyclopedia of the medical knowledge of the time. It was translated into Latin in the twelfth century and used as a textbook in European universities until the seventeenth century.
- **The Book of Healing** (Kitab al-Shifa), a philosophical encyclopedia covering logic, nature, mathematics and metaphysics.

> *Imagine a man created in the air, with eyes covered, touching nothing, not even his own body. Would he know that he exists? Ibn Sina thought he would.*

The "flying man"

This thought experiment, known as the "flying man", was an argument that awareness of oneself does not depend on the senses or the body. Several centuries later, similar ideas appeared in René Descartes. Ibn Sina died in 1037 in Hamadan, where his tomb still stands today.

Lessons

1. **Do not give up on a difficult book.** Sometimes the right explanation is all it takes.

2. **Knowledge crosses borders:** Ibn Sina read the Greeks, and Europeans read Ibn Sina.
3. **Steady work,** even in hard times, produces works that last for centuries.

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