

Book Review

Ibn Buṭlān. *The Doctors' Dinner Party*. Edited and translated by Philip F. Kennedy and Jeremy Farrell. The Library of Arabic Literature. New York: New York University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9781479818778. xxxiii + 161 pp. \$32 cloth.

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Ibn Buṭlān's eleventh-century *The Doctors' Dinner Party* tells the satirical story of a young Baghdādī transplant who, on his way to try his luck as a physician in the Dayr al-Za'farān monastery (near Mardin in modern southeast Turkey), is invited to dinner by an aged, miserly physician. Once there he is subjected, if not to a lot of food, to extensive questioning by a range of physician, surgeon, and pharmacist guests. "Using humor as the path to seriousness" (p. 119), the work provides exceptional insight into eleventh-century medical disciplinary concerns and issues, including the tension between old and new medical traditions, the importance of rational empiricism, and the dangers of charlatanism, all the while showing remarkable literary skill. Written in the format of the *maqāmāt*, the short stories in rhymed prose (*sajʿ*) first composed by al-Hamadhānī a little over half a century before, *The Doctors' Dinner Party* not only provides medical insight, but is also a valuable exemplar of this genre of classical Arabic literature.

After the previous German and French translations by Felix Klein-Franke (1984) and Joseph Dagher and Gerard Troupeau (2008), respectively, and an abridged French translation by Mahmoud Sedky Bey in 1928, Philip Kennedy and Jeremy Farrell have now made this work available in English for the first time.¹ Kennedy and Farrell also present, for the sixth time, an edition of the Arabic text. As will be discussed below, this edition, although

1. Mahmoud Sedky Bey, trans., *Un banquet de médecins au temps de l'Émir Nasr El-Dawla Ibn Marwan* (Cairo: Imprimerie Misr, 1928); Felix Klein-Franke, *Ibn Buṭlān: Das Ärztebankett* (Stuttgart: Hippokrates Verlag, 1984); Joseph Dagher and Gérard Troupeau, trans., *Le banquet des médecins: Une maqāma médicale du XIe siècle* (Paris: Geuthner, 2007).

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readable and beautifully typeset alongside the translation, does not match previous efforts in academic rigor.

Yawānīs al-Mukhtār b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAbdūn Ibn Buṭlān (d. ca. 458/1066) is perhaps most famous for his influential medical handbook the *Taqwīm al-ṣiḥḥa*, translated into Latin as the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, and likewise well known for his polemic with the Egyptian physician Ibn Riḍwān (d. ca. 453/1061). He was born and raised in Baghdad, where he studied with Ibn al-Ṭayyib, another Eastern Christian and renowned commentator of Aristotle and Galen. In 440/1049, Ibn Buṭlān left Baghdad for Egypt, first traveling to Aleppo and Antioch.² During or before his time in Aleppo he wrote his first *maqāma*, “The Banquet of the Priests,” in which he satirizes the Jacobite Christians of Mardin.³ After his arguments with the Egyptian physician Ibn Riḍwān in Cairo in the year 441/1050, Ibn Buṭlān again set out eastwards, this time to Constantinople, where he arrived in the summer of 446/1054 and stayed for one year, after which he settled in a (probably) Melkite monastery outside Antioch.⁴

Although the translators suggest that Ibn Buṭlān wrote *The Doctors’ Dinner Party* during or before his time in Cairo (p. xiv), he in fact wrote his second *maqāma* during his brief stay in Constantinople. One argument Kennedy and Farrell give for their dating is that a plague took place in 445–46/1054, and since there is no plague at the time of the story, it must precede it. However, the elder physician in the work repeatedly mentions a plague that has just occurred, making it possible for the book to have been written at the conclusion of the plague of 1054. There is no need for speculation, fortunately, as the date of the book is known, and was already given as 446/1054 by Klein-Franke at least three times in his introduction, which the authors do not mention. This dating is based on Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, who quoted Ibn Buṭlān’s colophon of his autograph copy:⁵ “I quote from Ibn Buṭlān’s own hand where he says at the end of it, ‘I the compiler, being Yawānīs the physician known as al-Mukhtār ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAbdūn, at the monastery of the Munificent King Constantine on the outskirts of Constantinople, completed copying this at the end of September of the year 1365.’ These are his words, and according to the Islamic calendar, this was in the year

2. For translations of the Arabic biographies of Ibn Buṭlān in Ibn al-Qiftī and Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, see Joseph Schacht and Max Meyerhof, *The Medico-Philosophical Controversy between Ibn Buṭlān of Baghdad and Ibn Riḍwān of Cairo: A Contribution to the History of Greek Learning among the Arabs* (Cairo: Maktabat Būl Bar Bīh, 1937), 51–66 (for the date 440, see p. 53).

3. I.-A. Khalifé, ed., “Ibn Buṭlān, The Priests’ Dinner Party,” *Al-Machriq* 53 (1959): 3–36; Ibn Buṭlān, *Le banquet des prêtres: Une maqāma chrétienne du XIe siècle*, trans. J. Dagher and G. Troupeau (Paris: Geuthner, 2004).

4. J. Schacht, “Ibn Buṭlān,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill Online, 2012); Daniel Oltean, “From Baghdad to Antioch and Constantinople: Ibn Buṭlān and the Byzantines,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 114, no. 1 (2021): 1–22. Lawrence Conrad, “Ibn Buṭlān in Bilād al-Shām: The Career of a Travelling Christian Physician,” in *Syrian Christians under Islam, the First Thousand Years*, ed. David Thomas, 131–58 (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

5. Klein-Franke, *Das Ärztebankett*, 7, 17, and 25; and idem, ed., *The Physicians’ Dinner Party* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1985), 1. Also mentioned in Lawrence Conrad, “Scholarship and Social Context: A Medical Case from the Eleventh-Century Middle East,” in *Knowledge and the Scholarly Medical Traditions*, ed. Donald G. Bates, 84–100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85, and no. 8. See also G. Troupeau, “Review of Félix Klein-Franke, Ibn Buṭlān, *Das Ärztebankett*,” *Arabica*, 32, no. 3 (1985): 365–66, at 365.

450/1058.”⁶ Although some, such as Troupeau, have accepted the date 450/1058, in the Seleucid calendar, a Greek calendar still used by Syriac Christians at least up to the twelfth century AD, 1365 actually comes to 1054 AD, which was the year Ibn Buṭlān was indeed in Constantinople.⁷

Scholars have long recognized in the story autobiographical elements; besides the *riḥla* of the young protagonist, his subsequent maltreatment by his elderly host is often interpreted to represent the author's encounter with Ibn Riḍwān.⁸ Kennedy and Farrell, too, believe the work partly reflects Ibn Buṭlān's "contretemps with the irascible Ibn Riḍwān" (p. xiv). This is a quite plausible interpretation, but it should not be sought too literally in the dynamic between the host and his young guest. Ibn Riḍwān and Ibn Buṭlān were peers, and the latter was already an established physician who had completed his *Taqwīm* when he came to Cairo. Although the young protagonist shares biographical features with the Baghdad-educated emigrant physician Ibn Buṭlān, the "ancient" verses recited by the elderly physician during the last part of the evening—"I recalled who grieved for me and remembered/only fellow physicians and my books shedding a tear" (p. 113)—resemble the lamentations of the aged author himself at the end of his studious, childless life, as quoted by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a: "If I die no one will lament my death, weeping, except my medicine class and books."⁹ In *The Dinner Party*, Ibn Buṭlān is as critical of the intransigence of the medical establishment, represented by the host and the other guests, as he is of the young protagonist's lack of knowledge. His own views and experiences, including the encounter with Ibn Riḍwān, are subtly interwoven throughout the work rather than being tied to a single character.

Ibn Buṭlān's work survives in at least nineteen known manuscripts, as discussed in detail by the editors (pp. xxv-xxvi). The text has been edited five times before. The oldest edition was made by Bishāra Zalzal in 1901, based on a manuscript held in his private collection in Beirut,¹⁰ and in the same year by Iskandar al-Bārūdī, who edited the text based on a manuscript from the Ḥaddād holdings of the Wellcome Collection (hereafter MS Ḥaddād), as well as, probably, an eighteenth-century manuscript held at the Université Saint Joseph.¹¹ In 1985, Klein-Franke made his edition based on four manuscripts, including an illuminated, thirteenth-century manuscript from the Ambrosiana Collection (hereafter MS Ambrosiana),

6. E. Savage-Smith, S. Swain, and G. J. van Gelder, eds., *A Literary History of Medicine: The 'Uyūn al-anbā' fi ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā' of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah* (Leiden: Brill 2020), 10.38.6. See also Schacht and Meyerhof, *Medico-Philosophical Controversy*, 66.

7. Troupeau, "Review," 365; Schacht and Meyerhof, *Medico-Philosophical Controversy*, 64, n. 38; and Conrad, "Ibn Buṭlān in Bilād al-Shām," 144.

8. Thus also, for instance, Conrad, "Ibn Buṭlān in Bilād al-Shām."

9. Savage-Smith et al., eds., *A Literary History*, 10.38.5. The second bayt is the same in both versions: *siwā majlistī fi al-ṭibb wa-l-kutub bākiyan*.

10. Bishāra Zalzal, ed., *Kitāb Da'wat al-aṭibbā' 'alā madhhab kalīla wa-dimna* (Alexandria: Maṭba'at al-Khadīwiya, 1901). The manuscript Zalzal used was identified by al-Bakrī: 'Ādil al-Bakrī, ed., *Kitāb Da'wat al-aṭibbā'* (Baghdad: al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī al-Islāmī, 2002), 6.

11. Iskandar al-Bārūdī, "Da'wat al-aṭibbā'," *Al-Ṭabīb* 13, no. 1 (June 1901): 27–31; 13, no. 2 (July 1901): 35–39; 13, no. 3 (August 1901): 89–93; 13, no. 4 (September 1901): 119–23; 13, no. 5 (October 1901): 151–54; 13, no. 6 (November 1901): 180–88; 13, no. 7 (December 1901): 217–18.

and checked it against the older Arabic editions by Zalzal (1901) and al-Bārūdī (1901), providing an extensive critical apparatus.¹² The most recent editions include the one by ʿĀdil al-Bakrī (2002), who used a privately owned manuscript, which he collated with the Zalzal manuscript and MS 66/24 from al-Maktaba al-Ahmediyya (Mosul),¹³ and ʿIzzat ʿUmar’s version (2003) based on MS Ambrosiana and a manuscript from al-Maktaba al-Mārūniyya (Aleppo).¹⁴

The present editors used, as did al-Barūdī, the eighteenth-century MS Ḥaddād as the base text for their edition, touting its “unambiguous superiority” (p. xxix) in view of its completeness and reliability in terms of poetry. They have additionally consulted MS Ambrosiana (they reference this as Arabic 471 on p. xxix, but it is actually 477, as on p. xxvi), which they sometimes prefer to MS Ḥaddād based on the requirements of poetic meter or *sajʿ*.

Unfortunately, the authors have not collated their edition with any of the earlier editions, which would have been especially useful in the case of Klein-Franke’s critical version. Although Kennedy and Farrell claim the latter’s edition, together with the more recent edition by ʿIzzat ʿUmar, “contains a number of readings that can be improved” (p. xxviii), they do not point out which these are, even when they have indeed corrected errors in Klein-Franke’s edition. In some cases where MS Ḥaddād is unclear or MS Ambrosiana incomplete, the editors have supplemented the text apparently based on older editions, sometimes without stating the source; see, for instance, p. 10/n. 2, where the editors’ choice follows that of older editions such as Zalzal,¹⁵ while in other places, such as p. 90/n. 1, they acknowledge having adopted al-Bakrī’s version.

Kennedy and Farrell frequently make their editorial resolutions quietly, as they do not consistently document variant readings in the critical apparatus, not even departures from the chosen base text. For instance, the first *bayt* of the poem on MS Ḥaddād fol. 8v (l.3) reads *kānat* instead of the edition’s *innahu* (p. 90), and *li-annā* for *fa-innā* at the beginning of the next, neither of which is given in the apparatus. In the same line of poetry, both MS Ambrosiana and MS Ḥaddād read *yanquṣu*, yet the edition reads *yanfiru* without giving justification. Further down on the same page, the editors follow MS Ḥaddād’s *ataghāḍā* (fol. 8v) without mentioning the variant *ataʿāmā* in MS Ambrosiana fol. 27v.¹⁶ More omissions include *dabarat* as in MS Ḥaddād fol. 10r, a variant for *datharat* (p. 108, indeed the better reading); *ka-l-yufq* (p. 108) for *yufq* as in MS Ḥaddād fol. 10r, not in the apparatus; and again *kāna qad* (p. 110), which appears in MS Ḥaddād fol. 10r as *qad kāna*, quietly altered.

The editorial choices are, moreover, not always correct: *li-l-safāʾih* (p. 8), for instance, should read *li-l-safāʾij* (MS Ḥaddād fol. 1v). Nor are they always the most sensible: *mawāṭīnhā* (p. 50) reads *mawāḍiʿhā* in MS Ḥaddād fol. 5v, as well as other manuscripts,

12. The unnamed edition that he used was probably an alternate publication of al-Bārūdī’s “*Daʿwat al-aṭibbāʾ*”; see Klein-Franke, *The Physician’s Dinner Party*, 9.

13. Al-Bakrī, *Kitāb Daʿwat al-aṭibbāʾ*, 6.

14. ʿIzzat ʿUmar, ed., *Daʿwat al-aṭibbāʾ* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2003).

15. Zalzal, *Kitāb Daʿwat al-aṭibbāʾ*, 11.

16. See Klein-Franke, *The Physicians’ Dinner Party*, 14, 68.

including MS Ambrosiana, and previous editions, which is not given in the apparatus.¹⁷ The translation does, moreover, not always follow the chosen variants. For instance, the edition follows MS Ḥaddād with *‘ājiz*, “incapable” (p. 74), but the translation renders the MS Ambrosiana variant *ḥādīr* “present” (p. 75). Likewise, the translation has “action” (p. 53) where the edition reads *‘aql* (p. 52), as in MS Ḥaddād fol. 5v,¹⁸ which should probably be read as *fi’l*, in line with the correctly given translation and as chosen by Klein-Franke, to make the word pair “action and effect.”¹⁹ Many other instances can be found, making the apparatus appear unreliable and ad hoc, seemingly only including some remarks the editors deemed important.

As for the translation, the translators aimed to imitate “the streamlined style of Ḥunayn” (p. xxx), referring to the ninth-century translator Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq, and do so at least in copying the latter’s habit of hendiadys, as when they translate *‘ilm* as “science and knowledge” (p. 53) and *burhān* as “evidence or proof” (p. 75). Elsewhere they translate *burhān* as “empirical evidence,” not precisely in accordance with the meaning of the term (p. 53). Translating one Arabic word with various words throughout the text is another strategy in which they resemble Ḥunayn, as with *fāṣid*, which they translate as “bloodletter,” “phlebotomist,” and even, less accurately, “cupper” (p. 39). Although a cupper (*ḥajjām*) could also bring out blood through a patient’s skin with his small needle and glass cups, his methods and purposes were not quite the same as that of the phlebotomist who cuts open veins. Seasonal *khawāniq* (p. 10) are not cases of dropsy (p. 11) but various forms of throat afflictions. The plural *ṭabā’i’* is sometimes translated as “natures,” and in other instances as “humors” (p. 39), although the latter is technically less appropriate. The repeated phrase *wa-anshad*, “and he recited,” is sometimes rendered in English (p. 23) and other times omitted (p. 21) without obvious reason.

The goal of accessible prose sometimes comes at the cost of precision. The sentence “the intelligent man is not made proud by the rank he reaches, however great,” for instance, is rendered as “the intelligent man should be immovable in demeanor” (p. 73). And rather than “prescribed medical practice” (p. 45), the phrase *taḥrīr al-adwiya mujīb al-qawānīn* (p. 44) could be more accurately translated as “drugs developed based on principles,” i.e., those developed and explained rationally as opposed to unexplained experience-based treatments, regardless of whether they were prescribed by a physician or not.

These issues aside, the translators have done an excellent job in preparing a translation that is enjoyable and reliable. Just as Ibn Buṭlān in his epilogue expressed the hope that what he “produced in prose and verse has the power to please” (p. 119), the translators have produced a translation of his text that will be able to please its readers. The prose, if not rhymed like the Arabic, flows rhythmically and pleasantly, and the poems are translated in a clear and poetic manner. Thus, the translators have made accessible to an English audience a work that is of great value for historians of medicine and Arabic literature alike, and it will make for a great addition to syllabi for classes on either subject.

17. See Klein-Franke, *The Physicians' Dinner Party*, 38; Zalzal, *Kitāb Da‘wat al-aṭibbā’*, 47; Bakrī, *Kitāb Da‘wat al-aṭibbā’*, 27.

18. Zalzal, *Kitāb Da‘wat al-aṭibbā’*, 47; Bakrī, *Kitāb Da‘wat al-aṭibbā’*, 48.

19. Klein-Franke, *The Physicians' Dinner Party*, 38.