

Lucien Nicolas Leclerc: notes left in the margins of the Yuhanna ibn Sarabiyun treatise “De simplicibus medicinis” (Latin transliterations from Greek and Arabic)

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This article contains the biography of the prominent French medical doctor and historian of medicine Lucien Nicolas Leclerc (1816–1893) as well as interpreted Latin transliterations of Arabic and Greek names of medicinal herbs and proper nouns, left by Leclerc in the margins of his copy of the Latin translation of *De simplicibus medicinis* by Yuhanna ibn Sarabiyun, who lived in the 9th century AD. This interpretation shows the stages of transformation of Greek nouns in the process of transliteration from Greek into Syrian, from Syrian to Arabic and subsequently from Arabic into Latin.

The history of Arabic medicine became a second profession for L. Leclerc. He viewed it, first and foremost, as the history of medical ideas and surgery. Medical doctors and other medical practitioners were his chosen audience while the history of a profession (medicine) constituted his scholarly interests. He didn't want to be associated with historians who didn't have any medical education as well as with specialists in Arabic philology. He thought it to be more important for practitioners to understand what is written in a text than to delve into philological nuances. That is why he consistently adapted the Arabic proper nouns and some of the scientific terms, thus making them more understandable for his compatriots. Nevertheless, in order to identify the proper nouns as well as the medical and botanical terms, he performed a brilliant philological analysis of all the unclarity in the Latin text while preparing this adaptation. The results of this analysis are still in demand even nowadays by various specialists, not just historians of medicine and prove the fact that though the Leclerc's obvious achievements as a doctor are already forgotten, his contribution to the history of Arabic medicine can hardly be over-estimated.

Keywords: *history of medicine, Lucien Leclerc, Yuhanna ibn Sarabiyun, latin transliterations from Greek and Arabic, De simplicibus medicinis, materia medica*

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An old copy of the Latin translation of the Arabic version of the work *On the Simplest Medicines (De simplicibus medicinis¹)* by Yuhanna

ibn Sarabiyun² ended up in the London library of the Wellcome Trust³ by chance. It would have remained in the possession of a bookseller if not for numerous marginal notes that captured the attention of the librarian of this trust.⁴ Written

¹ Cipher: EPB / D 66283/D. In hoc uolumine continentur. Insignium medicorum Ioan / Separionis arabis De simplicibus medicinis opus preclarum et ingens.: averrois arabis de eisdem liber eximius. Rasis filii Zachariae, de eisdem opusculum perutile. Incerti item autoris de centaureo libellus hactenus galeno inscriptus. Dictionum arabicarum iuxta atque Latinarum index ualde necessarius / In quorum emendate excusione, ne quid omnino desyderaretur, Othonis Brunfelsij singulari fide et diligentia cautum est. argentorati: Excudebat georgius Ulricher andlanus, anno M.D. XXXI.

² A Syrian doctor (syr.: Yūḥannā ibn Sarābiyūn) lived around 830 AD. and put together a compendium on medicine. The compendium was translated from Syrian to Arabic and became one of the main manuals on Pharmacognosy among Arabs [2, p. 102].

³ A charity organization that supports research in medical biology around the world, founded on the funds left by Sir Henry Wellcome (1868–1935). It is known for its unique library on the history of medicine.

⁴ The edition was bought by Julianne Simpson, the former Rare Books Curator of the Wellcome Trust.

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in Arabic, Hebrew, French, and Latin, the marginalia constitute eloquent evidence that someone not only carefully read⁵ the Latin text of this book but also systematically compared it to the original Arabic manuscripts. Frequent references to Arabic works are found in the margins,⁶ and on the title page next to the Latin title is an Arabic phrase: “The simplest medicines”.⁷

This translation by Simon Genoese and Abraham of Tortosa⁸ is the only complete document available. The Arabic text of *De simplicibus medicinis* was not fully preserved [1, p. 102] and can only be recovered from quotes by other authors. Thus the notes discovered in the margins of this old translation are even more valuable, as they help us restore the lost Arabic original to some extent. The erudition of the reader who left notes in the margins is evident in his explanations of the “obscure spots”. The magnificently deciphered names of Arab doctors, which were greatly distorted by the medieval Latin scribe, and the corrected names of plants and herbs sometimes endowed with synonyms: these and many other details testify to the reader’s remarkable knowledge not only of Oriental languages but also of Botany, Medicine, and Pharmacognosy.⁹

The usage of the French system for the transliteration of Arabic words, the French writing style, and the owner’s Arabic signature “Laklir Tabib”¹⁰ (*Doctor Leclerc*), on the title page, leave no doubt that two centuries ago, the book belonged to retired military doctor Nicolas Lucien Leclerc (1816–1893).¹¹ Lucien Leclerc served in Algeria for about 20 years and was awarded the rank of Officer of the Legion of Honor. The merits of his doctoral practice have been largely forgotten, but his contribution to the history of Arab medicine cannot be overestimated.

Any specialist who calls himself a historian of medicine claims to be a professional in two non-contiguous areas: medicine and history. However, according to prevailing (and deplorable) tradition, most historians of medicine are either failed or retired physicians, or weak historians who disguise their professional ineptitude by adhering to “easy” subjects such as biographies of medical figures or descriptions of hospital arrangements. The disservice of such scientists is exacerbated by their weak knowledge of foreign languages and the general cultural context of their research subjects. The prevailing negative stereotype has led to the fact that those who want to avoid being reproached for unprofessionalism are forced to stipulate the scope of their expertise when they address topics related to both history and medicine¹².

Owing to these factors, true historians of medicine are scarce. Among such scientists of the past were the physicist E. Wiedemann¹³, the ophthalmologist M. Meyerhof¹⁴, the academician N. Vavilov, and a few others. They were distinguished for their profound erudition within their specialties – Physics, Ophthalmology, and Botany – and, coupled with knowledge of Eastern and Western languages, a thorough acquaintance with the history of their topics, which allowed them to make well-founded conjectures and conclusions. Lucien Leclerc was one such historian.

In 1914, Paul Dorveaux, president of the French Society for the History of Medicine, published a laudatory (as often happens when one writes about deceased colleagues) biography of Lucien Leclerc [2] and a list of his works¹⁵ in the *Communications* of the Society. Various documents of the time were included in the biography, in particular, several letters of L. Leclerc.¹⁶ One of the letters, which (with a copy

⁵ The other owner of the book left only two marginalia.

⁶ See, for example: p. 59 (marg.): اسمق بن عمران المعة شجرة: التفاح ولها تمره جلييلة لها حشب يشبه شجرة البيضا اكبر من الجوز يشبه عيون البقر...
E.Beithar donnent تفاح Saumase a releve ce Loium. Hyles iatrices, 150.

⁷ كتاب الادوية المفردة .

⁸ The 13th century authors [1, p. 283].

⁹ See the publication of these notes in the Appendix.

¹⁰ لكثير طبيب .

¹¹ Nicolas Lucien Leclerc, Médecin-Major de 2e classe.

¹² Manfred Ullmann, author of the classic *History of Islamic Medicine* (“Die Medizin im Islam”), for example, writes that the stories on the history of medicine he analyses and evaluates exclusively as a philologist [1, p. 1–13].

¹³ E. Wiedemann (1852–1928), associate professor of physics at Leipzig University.

¹⁴ M. Meyerhof (1874–1945), professor of medicine at Cairo University.

¹⁵ The list contains 92 titles [2, p. 227–234].

¹⁶ More than 80 years later, other letters of Lucien Leclerc were published as well [4].

of the reply) is taken from his correspondence with Jules (Julius) Mohl,¹⁷ speaks of the publication of L. Leclerc's translation of the "Compendium on Simple Medicaments and Foods" by Ibn al-Baitar¹⁸ into French. Both J. Mohl's letter and L. Leclerc's response reveal the interpreter's temper: the almost contentious adamancy concerning his specialty, and the profound sense of responsibility to his readers. His academic colleagues, as can be seen in the letter, were afraid of him and were not fond of this "upstart" who did not recognize the authorities. J. Mohl politely reproaches L. Leclerc for the non-academic, straightforward, almost military tone of his letter to Baron de Slane,¹⁹ the "commissary" or, in modern terms, the "executive editor" of the publication. Shortly before, the publication of L. Leclerc's translation of the Ibn al-Baitar treatise had been suspended as a result of an altercation between the interpreter and the "commissary".

"I was unpleasantly surprised by the state of affairs," writes J. Mohl, "since I have put a lot of effort into ensuring that your translation will be published. Believe me, it was not at all a simple matter.²⁰ With great arduousness, I was finally able to find for you, as it is dictated by our rules, a commissary from the publication in the person of Mr. de Slane. I was pleased to witness that your relations were developing amicably. However, I see now that even the simplest remarks of Mr. de Slane caused you aggravation and consequently gave rise to answers in an irritated tone. Here is an example. Mr. de Slane truly did not understand a phrase and put a question

mark next to it but only to attract your attention. (The phrase²¹ was constructed correctly, and he did actually misread it.) It was not intended to be reacted to at all, yet you respond to it by saying that even a *fourth-year student*²² could have understood that part. You must agree that this is not the style in which one should respond to a major scientist who is spending his time and energy on proofreading your work, thereby serving as a guarantor to you and the Academy" [2, p. 214].

The obstinate military physician refused to exercise the diplomacy and prudence J. Mohl asked of him. In his response, L. Leclerc speaks harshly²³ of the Baron de Slane's competence in the history of Arabic medicine. "Let us start," he writes, "with the fact that the marginal note that you mention does not exist. To [de Slane's] remark 'What does it mean' I responded that I write for medical professionals, and that even a freshman student would be able to understand it. After all, Botany and medicinal products are taught during the first year of schooling. If at times I expressed myself harshly, it was merely because I wanted to remind Mr. de Slane again ...that he is not ...a medical specialist... When taking upon himself the trouble of overseeing the publication of my translation, Mr. de Slane should have thought through and compared his education to mine... I had lived in Algeria for twenty years and studied like only a few had.²⁴ In my library, I have both Ibn Khaldun and Bakri²⁵ but these books contain nothing about medicine, let alone

¹⁷ Jules Mohl (1800–1876), Franco-German orientalist, and censor of academic publications in Eastern languages since 1852.

¹⁸ Ḍiyā' Al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad 'Abdillāh Ibn Aḥmad (died in 1248 AD), an outstanding 13th-century botanist and doctor.

¹⁹ William McGuckin (also Mac Guckin and MacGuckin), Baron de Slane, 1801–1878) was a French orientalist of Irish descent, a student of Silvestre de Sacy, and the teacher of Jean-François Champollion. A French subject since 1838, he was one of the leading French translators of 19th century, a professor of Arabic, a member of the French Academy, and a Principal Interpreter for the French African army.

²⁰ Even though it was written approximately 150 years ago, these sound painfully familiar. It seems that throughout the centuries, editors, especially academic editors, have thoughts of authors as their insolvents.

²¹ This is a reference to the original Arabic manuscript.

²² Italicised by J. Mohl.

²³ It seems that L. Leclerc was known for his intractability. French historian of medicine C. D'Arembert (1817–1872) wrote this to his colleague the orientalist Gustave Dugat about L. Leclerc: "I could not obtain from Mr. Leclerc the transcription you desire so much. Now you understand what I meant when I wrote that Mr. Leclerc is hard to charm" (*n'est pas facile à manier*) [3, p. 104].

²⁴ Here is an abstract from the report on admitting L. Leclerc on the position of assistant military surgeon for the 3rd sepoy regiment from August 31, 1863. "Mr. Leclerc participated in sixteen campaigns, all of which took place in Africa. The sepoy he was responsible for found in him a man who knew their traditions, customs, habits, superstitions, traditional medicine, and, most importantly, their language." [4, p. 102]

²⁵ Publications of translations from Arabic authors Abū 'Ubayd al-Bakrī and Ibn Khaldun made by de Slane [4, 5].

the history of Arab medicine. In particular, when reading the “Prolegomena”,²⁶ I had noticed that Mr. de Slane confuses the physician al-Rāzī²⁷ with Fakhruddin Razi²⁸, and the surgeon al-Zahrāwī²⁹ [2, p. 15]. De Slane was not the only one who earned Leclerc’s epithet of “illustrious ignoramus”.³⁰ According to the military doctor, many of those considered the elite of European Arabic studies in the 17th to 19th centuries were similar, including B. D’Herbelot [6], M. Casiri [7], and F. Wüstenfeld [8]. In the same letter to J. Mohl he continues, “You write that Mr. de Slane is my guarantor for the purposes of the Academy. I still think that in the field of medicine I could do without his patronage, at least of [the translations of] accurately and dryly stated sections on medicinal potions. In all other areas, I would not be sure that I would be acting reasonably by rejecting his help” [2, p. 218].

When pointing out his merits in the history of Arabic medicine, which became his profession, L. Leclerc emphasizes his position as a historian – not as an Arabic linguist. His intended audience is not university scientists but practicing medical specialists,³¹ and his scientific interest is not philology but the history of his profession, medicine. Medical specialists do not need to know the subtleties of transliteration of Arabic words into French, he believed; reading them correctly is more important. Therefore, in the two-volume *History of Arabic Medicine* [9], written after the translation of Ibn al-Baitar’s treatise [9], he deliberately made personal names, as well as some Arabic scientific terms, more French-like so that they could be more easily comprehended by his compatriots. He brought the process of making the Arabic words more French-like to the limit of its capabilities. All foreign influences, primarily

English and German, were excluded: not even the letter *w* was eradicated [2, p. 216]. Let us also note that L. Leclerc’s focus on his audience, being limited to medical professionals, resulted in a lack of references to specific page numbers of manuscripts and publications, which are crucial for a philologist.³²

Undoubtedly, L. Leclerc had every reason to separate himself from Arabic philologists and historians, the admirers of medicine who had no medical education. After serving almost 20 years in Algeria (which he considered his second homeland) and retiring at the age of 55, he spent the rest of his life as a historian of his own profession. Above all, he saw the history of Arab medicine as the history of ideas and practical applications. The lively style of his book for practicing physicians is from the style of *The History of Arabic Physicians and Scientists* published earlier by F. Wüstenfeld.³³ “Being a doctor myself, I was writing for medical professionals – not for Orientalists with the purpose of collecting material as did the author mentioned above”³⁴, L. Leclerc notes elsewhere. However, it would be impossible to create such a work without careful selection of material, and L. Leclerc conducted this revision with diligence and assiduity. According to his own records, for his *History*, he looked through all the many Arabic manuscripts stored in Paris and a significant number of the manuscripts from the Library of El Escorial. He collected the material for the previously mentioned translation of Ibn al-Baitar with similar, if not greater, thoroughness. L. Leclerc writes that he “searched

²⁶ I.e. the Muqaddimah of Ibn Khaldun.

²⁷ Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, known in Latin transcription as Rhazes (died in 925 or 935 A.D.) [1, p. 218].

²⁸ Muslim theologian Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Umar ibn al-Husayn at-Taymi al-Bakri at-Tabaristani Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (died in 1209 A.D.).

²⁹ Abū al-Qāsim Khalaf ibn al-“Abbās al-Zahrāwī, known in Europe as Abulcasis (died in 1013 AD).

³⁰ In the original, “des illustres prophanes (permettez-moi le mot)” [2, p. 216].

³¹ “You must keep in mind who you are writing for. My readers are French doctors and naturalists” [2, p. 216–217].

³² However, in this sense, L. Leclerc was authentic to the French historiographic tradition where sporadic or insufficient references to the sources are often customary. His colleagues were not always in agreement with that. Here is what G. Dugat writes about it: “Doctor Leclerc, whose book on translations from Greek to Arabic I have studied, notes (without listing a source) that Oxford manuscripts incorrectly assign the translation of the ‘Great Anatomy’ as well as that of the ‘Anatomical Procedures’ to Hunayn” [3, p. 105]. See the edition that mention the Oxford manuscripts: Garofalo I. Galeni anatomicarum administrationum libri qui supersunt novem. Earundem interpretatio arabica Hunaino Isaaci filio ascripta. T. II, Libr. 5–9. Neapoli, 2000.

³³ According to L. Leclerc, “The History of Arabic Doctors and Scientists” by Wüstenfeld was merely a dry “bibliographic list”.

³⁴ He is referring to Baron de Slane.

the Earth and the sky” for the Arab treatises on general medicine, comments, information on the local flora, travelers’ testimonies, and Latin translations. The book covered in his marginalia that was found in the Wellcome Trust library is one of them.³⁵

L. Leclerc’s marginalia in the copy of “De simplicibus medicinis” contradict the way he speaks about himself in his letters; his notes testify eloquently to his modesty. While separating himself from philologists and calling himself “a doctor” and “a historian of Arab medicine”, L. Leclerc nevertheless undertook a detailed philological analysis of all the “obscure spots” of the Latin edition for the purpose of identifying the personal names and the scientific terminology. Such an analysis would do credit to any Arabic philologist.

³⁵ L. Leclerc mentions the level of difficulty of the Latin text of *De simplicibus medicinis* on many occasions in his *History*, comp. [9, vol. II, p. 502]. According to his own notions, the most challenging task was the deciphering of specific vocabulary [9, vol. II, p. 470].

It is no wonder his colleagues in the colonial service called L. Leclerc “an Arab” [2, p. 224]. His explanations of the “obscure spots” even today can serve the purposes of both an Arabic orientalist and a Western medievalist.

L. Leclerc’s marginalia in the “De simplicibus medicinis” have not been in scientific circulation.³⁶ The marginalia testify to the conscientiousness, generous character, and dedication of a retired military physician – qualities that betrayed him neither on the battlefield, nor behind the desk, nor in disputes with his arrogant and questionably competent academic colleagues. It is these qualities of the senior military doctor Lucien Leclerc that the commander of the 81st linear regiment describes in his report on Leclerc’s retirement on November 9, 1871.³⁷

³⁶ The appendix of the original article in Russian contained Lucien Leclerc’s marginalia published with the commentary in Russian.

³⁷ “His generous nature and the absolute devotion to his patients earned him everyone’s respect and love a long time ago” [2, p. 212].

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