

KING AVICENNA: THE ICONOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF A MISTRANSLATION*

The fame of the Islamic philosopher and physician Avicenna (d. 1037 AD) in the Christian West was such that he was frequently depicted in manuscripts and printed books. Many of these portrayals are not particularly distinctive: they show him as an academic master, a physician or an oriental figure with a turban, using a variation on a stereotypical formula for scholars.¹ But, in addition to these images, there is a fully fledged iconographic tradition which distinguishes Avicenna from almost all other Arabic and Latin scholars (with the exception of Ptolemy): his depiction as a king.²

The first examples of such depictions date from about 1300. They occur in the initials of Books I and II of Gerard of Cremona's translation of Avicenna's *Canon*, in two manuscripts now in Paris. In the first (Fig. 77), we see a richly dressed king with a crown, sitting on a throne. The second (Fig. 78) shows two

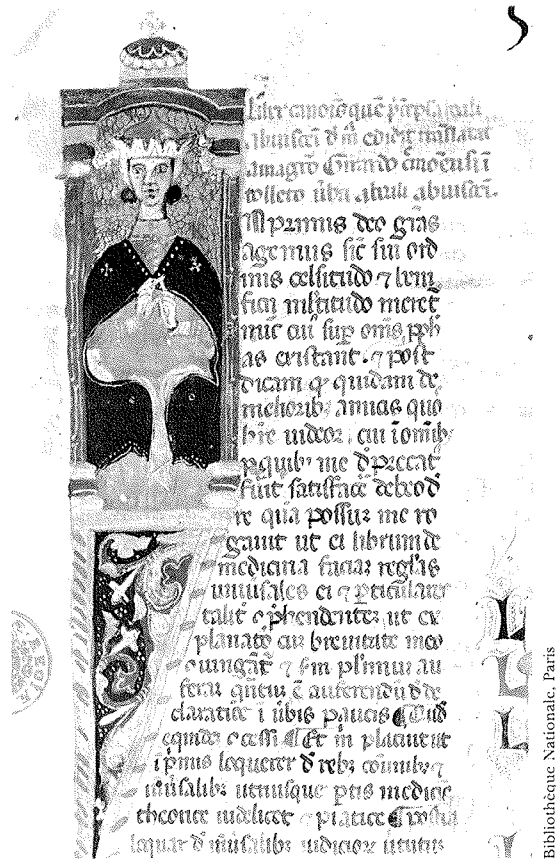


Fig. 77—Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale
MS lat. 6920, fol. 1^r

figures: one, a king with crown and sceptre, addresses the other, evidently a pupil, who has some kind of plant in his hand.

It is likely that the two images of kings we find in the initials were inspired by the appearance of the term *princeps* (the first, the most noble, the leader, ruler, king or prince) which occurs in the text of the *Canon* as Avicenna's title. The exact meaning of this appellation will be discussed below. Book I begins: 'Liber canonis quem princeps aboali abinsceni de medicina edidit'; and the opening line of Book II is 'Incipit liber canonis secundus Avicenne. Verba principis Aboali ...'³

A picture in an early fourteenth-century manuscript of Avicenna's *De animalibus*, now

* I am grateful to Charles Burnett, Dimitri Gutas, Christopher Ligota and Fritz Zimmermann for their advice, and I owe special thanks to Christina Knorr who reread the text several times.

¹ See the Appendix below for a list of these pictures. The earliest image in which Avicenna is identified by name is probably no. 4 (13th century). Of special interest are nos 10 and 11, which are found in two 15th-century *calendaria*, one astrological, one dietetic, both written in Low German; the former depicts him in the dress of a German merchant and makes him an authority on astrological advice, an association which Avicenna would surely have protested against. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny has interpreted two other pictures (nos 3 and 7) as Christianisations of Avicenna (see her 'Survivance et renaissance d'Avicenne à Venise et à Padoue', *Venezia e l'Oriente fra tardo Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Florence 1966, p. 130; repr. in *Avicenne en Occident*, Paris 1993, art. XV, p. 130); in my opinion, however, the images probably point to the divine origin of medicine in general, in the same way as an image in Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 14023, fol. 1 (no. 4), which depicts two physicians pointing to God on a throne above them, accompanied by the phrases 'Ego altissimus de celis creavi medicinam et vir prudens non abhorrebit eam' and 'medici ministri dei'.

² Until now, pictures of Avicenna have mainly served to illustrate books about him. The first to discuss some of these images was d'Alverny (*Avicenne en Occident*, as in n. 1, art. XV, pp. 82, 83 n. 24; art. XVI, pp. 130–1).

³ Quoted from Avicenna, *Liber Canonis*, Venice 1507, facs. repr. Hildesheim 1964, prologue and fol. 81^r.

in Montpellier, clearly relates to the title *princeps* (Fig. 79).⁴ On the top of the initial, which depicts Avicenna dressed in rich clothing, wearing what may be a diadem and gesturing like a teacher, we see the decorated phrase 'Avicenna princeps', which has obviously been borrowed from the text of the *Canon*.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the depiction of Avicenna with regal attributes became a regular phenomenon. In all these representations 'King Avicenna' is also equipped with a book, which points to his erudition. The book and crown are the two features most frequently found in such illustrations; they are his only attributes, for instance, in an illumination in a 1471 humanist manuscript of *De congelatione* (Fig. 80).⁵

The combination of both scholarly and kingly attributes is very apparent in a fifteenth-century manuscript of a medical treatise, now in Vienna.⁶ It depicts Avicenna not only with the now familiar crown, book (with his name inscribed on it) and throne, but also presiding over a council of fourteen famous physicians and philosophers (Fig. 81).⁷ A different way of combining scholarly and regal attributes was used for the title-page of the 1520 Venice edition of Book IV of the *Canon*: in this case the king's feet are resting on books which lie on the ground (Fig. 82). Avicenna's royalty is emphasised by his crown, sceptre and throne, and also by the phrase 'Princeps Abinsceni'—Gerard of Cremona's rendering of the Arabic name Ibn Sīnā—behind the throne. The room is divided into two sections: a palace-like setting on the left, where Avicenna resides, contrasts with the scholarly interior on the right, where

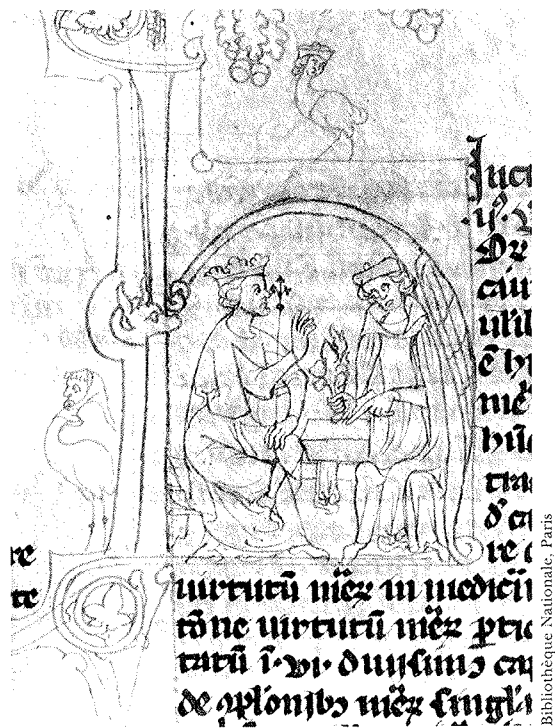


Fig. 78—Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale
MS lat. 6917, fol. 77^r

Gentile da Foligno (d. 1348) writes his commentary on the *Canon* (which is also printed in this Venice edition).⁸

Some artists add a further iconographic attribute: a turban. In an edition of the *Canon* published in Pavia in 1510–12, Avicenna, sitting between Galen and Hippocrates, is equipped with book, sceptre, imperial orb and a crown which seems to rest on a turban (Fig. 83). This attribute occurs again in the monumental Venice 1523 edition, which presents the entire *Canon* along with five major commentaries. The text of the title-page is framed by depictions of ten scholars, all with books in their hands: five physicians and five philosophers. Hippocrates, Galen, Plato and Aristotle wear a type of hat which at that time was thought to be Hellenic, whereas Avicenna, Rasis, Mesuë and, surprisingly, Theophrastus and Diogenes, are

⁴ The manuscript is described by M.-T. d'Alverny, *Avicenna Latinus. Codices*, Leiden 1994, p. 21.

⁵ D'Alverny, *ibid.*, p. 347. I am grateful to Angelo Palma, Director of the Biblioteca Lancisiana, for permission to reproduce the illumination and to Guido Rebecchini for taking the photograph.

⁶ According to *Tabulae codicum manu scriptorum in Bibliotheca Palatina Vindobonensi asservatorum*, 11 vols, Vienna 1870, iv, p. 79, the treatise contained in the manuscript is 'ch. XV. Johannes Cadamosto, Tractatus sermone italico conscripti quattuor de re medica, videlicet: de herbis, de cibus, de venenis et de lapidibus.'

⁷ Clockwise: Avicenna (enthroned), Haly, Iudeus, Galienus, Alkalci(?), Rufus, [not named], Heben(?), Democritus, Ipocras, Alkindi, Johannes Mesuë, Dioscorides, Avenzoar, Serapion.

⁸ Gentile da Foligno's commentary was especially favoured by Renaissance editors of the *Canon*. See N. Siraisi, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy*, Princeton 1987, pp. 59, 131.



Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Montpellier

Fig. 79—Montpellier, Bibliothèque de l'École de médecine MS H 44, fol. 1^r

equipped with turbans.⁹ Perhaps the names got confused, since Averroes does not have a head-dress at all. Avicenna, alone, is distinguished by a crown on his turban (Fig. 84).

This title-page acquired a certain popularity. Eight of the ten images, including that of Avicenna, were reproduced in the *Canon* editions of 1527 (Fig. 85) and 1544. And as late as the first decades of the eighteenth century, the Berlin engraver Georg Paul Busch took the depiction of Avicenna as a model and transformed it into an elaborate portrait with turban and crown (Fig. 86). By this time enthusiasm for Avicenna's work had been in decline for over a century,¹⁰ but Busch produced several engravings of antique and contemporary physicians, perhaps indicating a particular interest in medicine.¹¹

The iconographic tradition of Avicenna with a crown, a turban and a book has been sufficiently documented now to suggest that one of the seven scholars in the famous illumination in the Venice 1483 edition of Aristotle (now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York) can be identified as Avicenna (Fig. 87). In the centre stands Aristotle, pointing upwards; beside him is Averroes, in a turban, recognisable by means of a similar depiction in the same book. Behind Aristotle are three scholars with Greek hats; behind Averroes are a Dominican (Thomas Aquinas) and another figure, wearing a turban and a crown, with a book in his hand. This figure has been compared to 'representations of Solomon and David in Venetian manuscript illumination'.¹² But it seems much more likely that

⁹ See Fig. 85, discussed below. Compare the Greek hats in the picture in the Pierpont Morgan edition of Aristotle's works discussed below (Fig. 87), and the comments on this picture in J. J. G. Alexander et al., *The Painted Page, Italian Renaissance Book Illumination*, Munich and New York 1994, pp. 204–5.

¹⁰ According to Siraisi (as in n. 8), pp. 361–6, there were 44 Latin editions of the *Canon* in the 16th century, contrasting with only ten in the 17th century.

¹¹ The picture may also reflect the growing interest in matters oriental in the first half of the 18th century. For Busch (about whom very little is known) see most recently Saur *allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, xv, Munich and Leipzig 1997, pp. 307–8. For a list of his engravings see C. Le Blanc, *Manuel de l'amateur d'estampes*, 4 vols, Paris 1854–89, i, pp. 552–4. Among them are pictures of Galen, Paracelsus and a Persian king.

¹² L. Armstrong, in *The Painted Page* (as in n. 9), p. 205.

what we have here is yet another example of 'King Avicenna'.

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Two questions may be asked. Are there any other examples of scholars portrayed as kings? And might Avicenna's regal attributes be intended to signal that he was the king of doctors?

As to the first question, Ptolemy is sometimes depicted as a king, notably in Raphael's *School of Athens* in the Vatican. The reason is that he was erroneously identified with one of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt.¹³ Two possible examples of other scholars portrayed as kings appeared in the twelfth-century *Breslau Codex Salernitanus*, which was destroyed in World War II. At the beginning of the *Liber de febribus* by Ferrarius was an illustration of a man wearing a crown; he had a scroll in his left hand and gestured like a teacher with his right. In the same codex there was another picture of a crowned figure, this time examining urine in a glass.¹⁴ Were these pictures simply of kings, or of physicians as kings? The figure with the urine glass definitely suggests the latter.

I am aware of no further examples, and it is unlikely that the image of Avicenna as a king goes back to a twelfth-century tradition. His iconography from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, in fact, had very different roots, as will become clear when we attempt to answer the second question: do the pictures of the royal Avicenna imply that he was the king of doctors, or that he once was the ruler of a country, or indeed both?

Some of the illustrations clearly indicate that the royal attributes were also used metaphorically to express the notion that Avicenna was the first among physicians. The most obvious case is the Vienna manuscript (Fig. 81), which shows him presiding over a council of physicians and philosophers. This interpretation agrees nicely with the fact that



Biblioteca Lancisiana

Fig. 80—Rome, Biblioteca Lancisiana
MS 329, fol. 1^r

Avicenna was occasionally referred to as the *primus* or *princeps medicorum*.¹⁵ Nevertheless, even if in some pictures the royal attributes were used metaphorically, the true reason for this iconography, I believe, is that he was thought to be a real king, the ruler of a country. The first argument in favour of this theory has been mentioned already. In the case of Ptolemy, the crown does not refer to his erudition but rather to his supposed position as the king of Egypt. Secondly, a more likely candidate for depiction as a king in a metaphorical sense would be Aristotle. Yet I am not aware of any representation of him with regal attributes, although he was frequently called 'princeps philosophorum' or 'princeps Peripateticorum'. Instead, there are pictures of Aristotle together with Ptolemy or together with Avicenna in which the other

¹³ P. Kunitzsch, *Der Almagest des Claudius Ptolemäus*, Wiesbaden 1974, p. 98; J. Tezmen-Siegel, *Die Darstellung der septem artes liberales in der Bildenden Kunst als Rezeption der Lehrplangeschichte*, Munich 1985, p. 113 n. 69 and pls 13, 15, 38, 55.

¹⁴ Formerly Breslau, Stadtbibliothek MS 1302, fols 113^r, 156^r. The initials are reproduced in T. Meyer-Steineg and K. Sudhoff, *Geschichte der Medizin im Überblick mit Abbildungen*, Jena 1928, pp. 180, 189.

¹⁵ For example, in the title-pages of three 16th-century editions of his work: Avicenna, *Opera*, Venice 1508, 'Avicenne perhypatetici philosophi ac medicorum facile primi Opera'; *Canon*, Venice 1520, 'Avicenne mediorum principis Canonum liber...'; and *Canon*, Venice 1595, 'Avicennae Arabum medicorum principis Canon Medicinæ' (for the accompanying illustrations of Avicenna in this edition see below, Appendix, nos 18–19).

two wear crowns, but not Aristotle himself.¹⁶ Thirdly, in Avicenna's case, the term *princeps* became firmly attached to his name, as if it were part of it. It often precedes his proper name, as in the opening sentences of Books I and II of the *Canon* quoted above: 'princeps Aboali Abinsceni'.¹⁷ From late antiquity to the twelfth century, the epithet *princeps* is also used for Plato, and from then on for Aristotle, but it is always combined with a noun in the genitive: *princeps philosophorum* or *princeps Peripateticorum*.¹⁸ A reflection of the firm attachment of the title to Avicenna's name is the fact that the phrase 'princeps Avicenna' appears prominently in pictures

¹⁶ In Raphael's *School of Athens* Ptolemy wears a crown, but not Aristotle. See also Tezmen-Siegel (as in n. 13), pp. 113, 122, 126, pl. 15. For Avicenna see the above-mentioned *Canon* edition of 1527 (Fig. 85), where Avicenna has a crown on his turban while Aristotle wears a Greek hat.

¹⁷ Avicenna is not the only Arabic writer whose name was connected to a title in the West: Ibn Umayl was known as the *Senior Sadīch filius Hamil*. The term *senior* is a translation of the Arabic word *šaiḥ*, which plays a role in Avicenna's case too, as we shall see below. See also I. Ronca, "'Senior de chemia": A Reassessment of the Medieval Latin Translation of Ibn Umayl's *Al-mā' al-waraqī wa 'l-ard al-najmiyya'*, *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale*, xxxvii, 1995, pp. 9–31.

¹⁸ Ambrose, *De Abraham*, ed. C. Schenkl, Leipzig 1897, i.1.2, p. 502, 'Plato ipse princeps philosophorum'; Jerome, *Dialogus adversus Pelagianos*, ed. C. Moreschini, Turnholt 1990, p. 18 lines 2–3 (i.15), 'ille enim "scil. Plato" princeps philosophorum'; Adelard of Bath, *De eodem et diverso*, ed. H. Willner, Münster 1903, p. 4 line 2, 'a principe philosophorum "scil. Platone"'; p. 6 line 25, 'summi eorum, si principes dicendi sunt... "scil. Plato et Aristoteles"'; John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. C. C. I. Webb, Oxford 1909, ii, p. 111 (vii.6), 'philosophorum princeps Plato'; idem, *Metalogicon*, ed. J. B. Hall, Turnholt 1991, p. 99, 'Peripateticorum principem Aristotilem'; Peter Abelard, *Theologia Christiana*, ed. E. M. Buytaert, Turnholt 1969, 3.5 line 56, 'princeps Peripateticorum Aristoteles'; Dominicus Gundissalinus, *Liber de anima*, ed. J. T. Muckle, *Mediaeval Studies*, ii, 1940, p. 37, 'philosophorum principes, Plato scilicet et Aristoteles'; Frederick II Hohenstaufen, *De arte venandi cum avibus*, ed. C. A. Willemsen, Leipzig 1942, p. 1, 'principem philosophorum "scil. Aristotelem"'; Albertus Magnus, *Liber de memoria et reminiscencia*, ed. S. Borgnet, Paris 1894, ii.1, p. 108b, 'Aristotelis qui princeps est Peripateticorum'; idem, *Physica*, ed. P. Hossfeld, Münster i.W. 1993, p. 41 line 86, p. 117 line 41, p. 561 line 7, p. 606 line 1, 'princeps Peripateticorum'; p. 510 line 49, 'princeps philosophorum "scil. Aristoteles"'; Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, ed. R. A. Gauthier, Rome 1969, i.16 line 138, 'et Peripateticos quorum princeps fuit Aristoteles'; William of Ockham, *Tractatus de quantitate*, ed. C. A. Grassi, Binghamton NY 1986, p. 4 line 33, 'princeps philosophorum Aristoteles'.

of him as a king (Figs 79, 82) and in bold letters on title-pages (Fig. 85).

A final corroboration that Avicenna was conceived of as a real king comes from the literary tradition. Starting about the same time that the iconography of Avicenna as a king begins to appear, in the manuscripts of Gerard of Cremona's translation of the *Canon*, around 1300, we find legends that he was a prince of Seville.¹⁹ Gentile da Foligno wrote in his commentary on the *Canon* (completed in 1346) that Avicenna was of royal descent ('ex regia stirpe'),²⁰ and Marsilio Ficino, who calls Avicenna 'princeps Arabum', relates that according to some he was the prince of Cordova.²¹ The most fantastic of the many legends is the one published by Franciscus Calphurnius in the introduction to a 1522 edition of the *Canon*. Avicenna, a prince of Cordova, had a hospital built in the town at his own expense, which generously offered medical treatment to all. Averroes, a contemporary and also a physician, envied Avicenna his fame in the world of medicine and even tried to stir up against him his colleagues Algazel and Alfarabi, who lived in the same house as Avicenna. Finally, at the age of only forty-eight, Avicenna was murdered by Averroes, who poisoned his drink.²²

There is a grain of truth in this account. Averroes despised Avicenna's philosophy for breaking with what he thought to be proper Aristotelian teaching, and this hatred comes through in a number of his works which were known to Latin readers. Averroes's influence in the Islamic milieu was very limited, but ironically he went one better on his rival Avicenna in a part of the world where he

¹⁹ These legends have been explored by d'Alverny, *Avicenne en Occident* (as in n. 1), art. XV, pp. 79–87. One of them (of the 16th century), even makes him a king of Bithynia in Asia Minor.

²⁰ See d'Alverny, *ibid.*, art. XVI, p. 125 n. 30.

²¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Epistolarum liber I*, in his *Opera*, 2 vols, Basle 1576, repr. Turin 1962, i, p. 645, 'Volunt nonnulli et Avicennam fuisse Cordubae principem'; i, p. 302 (*Theologia Platonica*), '... Maurorum princeps Avicbron, Arabum Avicenna' (not mentioned by d'Alverny).

²² Avicenna, *Liber Canonis totius medicinae ab Avicenna Arabum doctissimo excussus... Una cum eius vita a domino Franciscus Calphurnio non minus vere quam eleganter excerpta*, Lyons 1522, fol. 1^v; for the illustration see below, Appendix, no. 12. Averroes as a murderer of Avicenna appears already in Jacopo Filippo da Bergamo, *Supplementum chronicarum*, Venice 1486, fol. 220^v.

Facta questo nobilissimo Collegio et studio de tanti Valentissimi circa le nature de herbe de cibi et de veneni de metris et de patole et de loro sustinenti et recipienti et ad romolare le morrosi et fieri et claramente hinc curiosa la meta uerita de questo et de quale parende adiri le anno Cadamofo sparsi in tanti uolumi no con poca fatica usiglio et affari le ha reduce infima con el processo ueritate per Alphabeto per piu facilità truarle ad laude et honore dello incomperito suo el quale tanta ogni l'ingore.



Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

Fig. 81—Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek MS 5264, fol. 4^v

would probably have least expected to: the Latin West of the late thirteenth century. At that time writing commentaries on Aristotle's works became increasingly popular, and it was Averroes who was used as a model. Western interest in Avicenna, who had stopped writing Aristotelian commentaries in his youth, concentrating instead on developing his own philosophical system,²³ dropped considerably. This change in attitude towards Avicenna might also explain why there are very few pictures of him in the company of his philosophical role model, Aristotle: those discussed above are the only examples I am aware of (Figs 84–5, 87). In contrast, there are several pictures of Averroes with Aristotle.²⁴ Thus, in a way Averroes overcame his rival, even if he did not exactly poison him.

As for the meaning of Avicenna's royal attributes, we may now conclude that they refer to his actual kingship, though they were sometimes also employed metaphorically to indicate his supreme position in the world of medical learning (Fig. 81).

The problem with the iconographic representation of Avicenna as a king is that it is based on a mistake: he was not, in fact, a monarch. According to what we know today from Arabic sources such as his autobiography, Avicenna was born about 980 AD near Buḥārā in present-day Uzbekistan. He spent his life in different parts of Persia and, having achieved great fame in his own lifetime, died in 1037 AD at Hamaḍān. His father was not a nobleman but, according to Avicenna's autobiography, 'a governor of a village in one of the royal estates of Buḥārā';²⁵ and Avicenna himself, although for some time the vizier of

a provincial Persian prince, never approached the heights of kingship.

It has been suggested by scholars as widely separated chronologically as Leo Africanus, Moritz Steinscheider and Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny that the legend of 'King Avicenna' has its origin in a misleading translation of an honorary title.²⁶ Leo Africanus was the first, in about 1527, to suggest that the mistake was mainly due to the Latin translator of Avicenna, who 'considered the term *Rahis* to mean nothing other than *Princeps*'.²⁷ I shall argue that the solution to the problem does indeed lie in a faulty translation, but that its exact nature has not been properly understood.

The medieval West knew neither Avicenna's autobiography, which is our main source for his life, nor the partly biographical prefaces to *aš-Šifā'*, his *magnum opus* which covered all the different branches of Peripatetic philosophy. Although these prefaces, written by Avicenna himself and by his pupil and secretary Ġūzġānī, were translated into Latin, they seem to have been known only to Roger Bacon and are extant in no more than two manuscripts.²⁸ Latin authors therefore had very few means to evaluate the biographical material on Avicenna.

The Arabic term at the origin of the misunderstanding is a title employed to refer to Avicenna, which became widely used in Arabic-speaking countries after his death: *aš-šaiḥ ar-ra'īs*.²⁹ Only a few scholars have

²³ See D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, Leiden 1988, pp. 293–4.

²⁴ I know of the following depictions of Averroes together with Aristotle and other philosophers: Francesco Traini(?), panel painting in Santa Caterina, Pisa, c. 1365; Benozzo Gozzoli, panel painting of the Triumph of St Thomas, c. 1470 (for a comparison of these two paintings see P. Guerrini, 'Dentro il dipinto: il Tommaso d'Aquino di Benozzo Gozzoli', *Il ritratto et la memoria, Materiali* 2, ed. A. Gentili, P. Morel and C. Cieri Via, Rome 1993, p. 120); and Figs 84–5, 87. For Averroes with Thomas see Thomas Aquinas, *Commentarium in libros Perihermeneias*, Venice 1526; and Fig. 87. Whether the turbaned scholar on the left of Raphael's *School of Athens* is Averroes is a matter of dispute.

²⁵ See the translation in Gutas (as in n. 23), p. 23 lines 7–8.

²⁶ For Leo Africanus see next note. M. Steinscheider, *Die hebraeischen Uebersetzungen des Mittelalters*, Berlin 1893, pp. 677–8. D'Alverny, *Avicenne en Occident* (as in n. 1), art. XV, p. 80; art. XVI, p. 119.

²⁷ He was probably referring to Gerard of Cremona, the translator of Avicenna's *Canon*. Leo Africanus, *De viris quibusdam illustribus apud Arabes*, written about 1527 but edited much later by J. H. Hottinger, *Bibliothecarius quadrupertitus*, Zurich 1664, pp. 256–61, cited by J. A. Fabricius, *Bibliotheca Graeca*, 14 vols, Hamburg 1726, xiii, p. 269: 'In culpa magis est, qui Librum Avicennae in Latinum transtulit et interpretatus est: quia consideravit hanc dictionem *Rahis* nihil aliud nisi *Principem* significare.' We cannot be absolutely sure that Hottinger's text is what Leo actually wrote.

²⁸ Edited by A. Birkenmajer, 'Avicennas Vorrede zum *Liber Sufficientiae* und Roger Bacon', *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie*, xxxvi, 1936, pp. 308–20. Birkenmajer based his edition on Bruges, Stedelijke Openbare Bibliotheek MS 510, fols 37^v–8^v. The other codex is Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Vat. lat. 4428, fol. 1^{1v}.

²⁹ The term is used, for instance, in many of the Arabic bio-bibliographical dictionaries in the opening line of



Wellcome Institute Library, London

Fig. 82—Avicenna, *Quartus Canonis*, Venice 1520, fol. 1^r



Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel

Fig. 83—Avicenna, *Primus Avicennae Canon*, Pavia 1510–12, fol. 1^r



Fig. 84—Avicenna, *Praesens maximus codex*, Venice 1523, title-page

attempted to interpret this title, and in my view none of them has come up with a convincing solution. Andrea Alpago maintained as early as 1527 that the term referred to Avicenna's standing as a vizier to the king of Persia,³⁰ a thesis revived by Louis Gardet in 1951:

There was a desire to translate this expression as 'chief and prince (of the philosophers)'. But in fact, it is a title of honour which was very common in the fourth and fifth century after the Hijra (and likewise *al-ustād al-ra'īs*, or simply *al-ra'īs*). An official title reserved for viziers or ministers—Avicenna was a vizier for the greater part of his life—a title which might approximatively be rendered as 'His Excellency'.³¹

the chapters on Avicenna; see W. E. Gohlman, *The Life of Ibn Sīnā*, Albany NY 1974, pp. 7–9.

³⁰ *Principis Avicennae Libri Canonis necnon de medicinis cordialibus et Cantica ... ab Andrea Bellunensi ex antiquis Arabum originalibus correcti...*, Venice 1527, reverse of the title-page (for which see Fig. 85): 'Avicenna autem fuit dictus Alraisi idest princeps seu primarius in dignitate et honore non solum, quia fuit excellentissimus in scientiis omnibus, sed etiam, quia fuit Vzir regis Persie, idest primarius, et honoratior secretarius regis Persie.'

This interpretation was adopted by Simone Van Riet in her edition of Avicenna's *De anima*.³² D'Alverny, on the other hand, maintained that *šaiḥ* refers to a wise and outstanding personality and that *ra'īs* means roughly the same, namely 'un chef, un maître, un supérieur'. She did not discuss, however, whether the title was used to address an intellectual or a political leader.³³

In fact, the term *ra'īs* can mean both.³⁴ But the expression *aš-šaiḥ ar-ra'īs* is not found in the standard dictionaries by Lane and Freytag,³⁵ and it is doubtful that its use as a title for viziers was as common as Gardet maintained.³⁶ Even if it was, it is not the case that Avicenna was a vizier for most of his life. He held an administrative post in Gurgāṅḡ (1002–12 AD); in Rayy (1012–14) he served in an unknown position; in Hamaḡān (1015–24) he was vizier to Šams ad-Daula, until the latter lost his power; and finally in Iṣfahān (1024–37) he belonged to the inner circle of 'Alā' ad-Daula, but was not a vizier.³⁷ Moreover, it seems unlikely that Avicenna, who in fact disliked being involved in politics, would have found the title flattering.³⁸

The interpretation of Gardet and Van Riet can also be challenged on the basis of texts by Ġuzġānī, the pupil of Avicenna mentioned

³¹ L. Gardet, *La Pensée religieuse d'Avicenne*, Paris 1951, p. 17, 'On a voulu traduire cette expression par "chef et prince (des philosophes)". En fait, il s'agit là d'un titre d'honneur, fort courant au iv^e-v^e siècle de l'hégire (et de même *al-ustādh al-ra'īs*, ou simplement *al-ra'īs*). Titre officiel réservé aux viziers ou ministres.—Avicenne fut vizier la majeure partie de sa vie,—titre qui pourrait se rendre approximativement par "Excellence".'

³² Avicenna, *Liber de anima seu sextus de naturalibus*, iv–v, ed. S. Van Riet, Louvain 1968, p. 187.

³³ D'Alverny, *Avicenne en Occident* (as in n. 1), art. XV, p. 80.

³⁴ E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8 vols, London 1863–85, iii, p. 996, s.v., '... the head or headman, chief, commander, governor, ruler, lord, master, prince, or king, of a people; a person of authority; ... a person high in rank or condition'. See also G. W. Freytag, *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum*, 4 vols, Halle 1830–7, ii, p. 103, s.v.

³⁵ See n. 34.

³⁶ The title does not appear in D. Sourdel, *Le Vizirat 'abbāsīde de 749 à 936, 132 à 324 de l'Hégire*, 2 vols, Damas 1959.

³⁷ See the biography by Ġuzġānī in Gohlman (as in n. 29), pp. 40–1, 48–9, 52–3, 66–7. For the dates see Gutas (as in n. 23), pp. 80, 145.

³⁸ Cf. Ġuzġānī's words (tr. Gutas, as in n. 23, p. 40): '[In Hamaḡān] he was employed as the minister of King Šams ad-Daula, an occupation that proved distressful to us and a waste of our time'.

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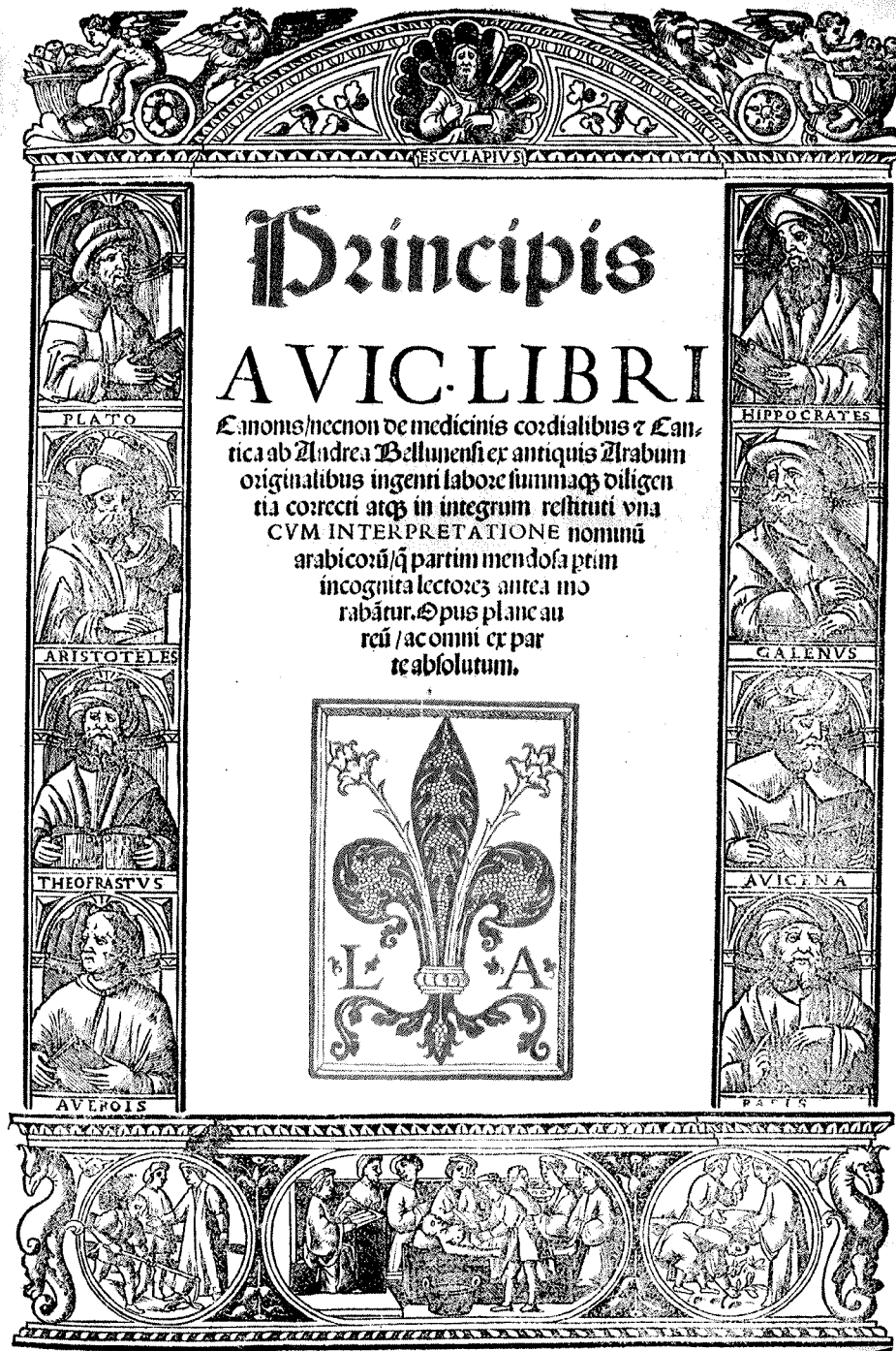


Fig. 85—Avicenna, *Libri canonis*, Venice 1527, title-page



Fig. 86—Georg Paul Busch, engraving, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Portraitsammlung I, 479

above. In the biography of his teacher, which is a continuation of Avicenna's autobiography, he uses the word *šaiḥ* several times to refer to Avicenna, for instance in the opening sentence: 'This has been what the master told me in his own words.' The term *šaiḥ*, here translated by Gohlman as 'master', is regularly used to address a revered scholar, and Ġūzġānī too was called *šaiḥ*.³⁹ But in the preface to *aš-Šifā'*, Ġūzġānī also calls Avicenna the *šaiḥ ar-ra'īs*,⁴⁰ which suggests that the two terms are somehow related and do not derive from the official language of the court, but instead belong to the vocabulary

employed by the pupils and followers of Avicenna.

Another hint in this direction comes from a passage in the *Kitāb al-mīlāl wa-n-niḥāl* by Šahrastānī (twelfth century), where Avicenna is called a *ra'īs* in a sense which is certainly non-political. For Šahrastānī refers to him as the *ra'īs* of the *muta'ahhūrūn*, the leader (or the first) of the philosophers after antiquity, that is, the Muslim philosophers.⁴¹

In sum, it seems most probable that the title used for Avicenna meant something like 'the leading master', which might be rendered in Latin as *magister praecipuus* or *magister primus*. This is not, however, what we find. The Latins of the medieval West, like more recent scholars, had problems with the term. We know about the renderings chosen by three translators (or groups of translators). Avendauth, who translated the prefaces to *aš-Šifā'*, selected *grandaevus princeps*.⁴² The word *grandaevus* ('aged, old') is used because the original meaning of the Arabic *šaiḥ* is 'old, respected man'.⁴³ This translation, however, misses the element of 'master'. The rendering *princeps* for *ra'īs* is not correct either. Avendauth chose a different term for two headings which occur in the same preface: *philosophus rex*.⁴⁴ As regards *philosophus*, the terms *hakīm* and *faiḥasūf* are the more common Arabic words for philosopher at that time, but the term *šaiḥ* can also refer to an old, learned man.⁴⁵ The translation *rex* for *ra'īs*, however, is misleading, and Avendauth probably thought that Avicenna was a king who happened to be a philosopher as well.

Strangely enough, Avendauth, in collaboration with the twelfth-century philosopher Dominicus Gundissalinus, Archdeacon of Segovia and Toledo, hit on a much better rendering. In translating the small medical treatise *De medicinis cordialibus* they (if they

³⁹ Šahrastānī, *Kitāb al-mīlāl wa-n-niḥāl*, ed. W. Cureton, 2 vols, London 1842 and 1846, ii, p. 312 line 5.

⁴² Birkenmajer (as in n. 28), pp. 314, 317.

⁴³ Lane (as in n. 34), iv, p. 1629, '...an old, or elderly, man; an elder, as meaning a man whose age gives him a claim to reverence and respect; a senior'.

⁴⁴ Birkenmajer (as in n. 28), p. 134, 'Verba discipuli Avicenne philosophi regis'; p. 317, 'Verba Avicenne philosophi regis'.

⁴⁵ Freytag (as in n. 34), ii, p. 470, '...senex, annosus, ..., senior, doctor, aut auctoritate, principatu, pietate et arte conspicuus.'

³⁹ Gohlman (as in n. 29), p. 45.

⁴⁰ Avicenna, *Aš-Šifā', al-Mantiq, al-Madhal*, ed. G. C. Anawati et al., Cairo 1952, p. 1 line 9. The term might be a later addition. The editors do not give any variants for this passage.

are indeed the translators) used the phrase 'auctor praecipuus', which is not at all a bad choice considering what we found above.⁴⁶ But neither the *aš-Šifā'* prefaces nor the treatise *De medicinis cordialibus* were well known in the West, and it was not Avicenna's philosophical works that determined the iconographic tradition which represented him as a king, since they do not contain any expressions that point in this direction.⁴⁷ Instead, it was Gerard of Cremona's translation of the *Canon* which proved to be most influential. Not only does he refer to Avicenna as 'princeps' in the opening words of the first and the second books of the *Canon*, but in the final sentence of the entire work he calls him 'senex rex'. The word *senex*, like Avendauth's *grandaevus*, overemphasises one of the connotations of *šaiḥ*, while *rex* and *princeps* are essentially mistranslations.

Why then did Avendauth and Gerard interpret the Arabic term as implying kingship? I know of no Arabic legends concerning Avicenna's royalty which might have influenced them. It seems more likely that they were puzzled by the term and simply made a guess, incorrect, as it happens. Possibly, they were attracted by the idea that the revered master of philosophy and medicine was also a figure of great social standing and political power—a notion similar to Plato's philosopher-king. This theory at least partly accounts for the persistence of the concept of 'King Avicenna' from Gerard of Cremona to Louis Gardet and helps to explain the misguided literary and pictorial tradition which grew out of it.⁴⁸

DAG NIKOLAUS HASSE

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⁴⁶ Avicenna, *Liber de anima* (as in n. 32), p. 187. For the question of the identity of the translators see Van Riet's introduction, p. 99*.

⁴⁷ With the exception of Avicenna's *Physica*, some manuscripts of which refer to Avicenna as 'princeps philosophus' or simply as 'princeps'. See Avicenna, *Liber primus naturalium, tractatus primus de causis et principibus naturalium*, ed. S. Van Riet, Louvain-la-Neuve and Leiden 1992, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Late addition to Appendix D, below (p. 243): 30a. Rhazes, *Continens*, Venice 1529, title-page, second figure from the left at the bottom, half-length, bearded, wearing a crown on top of a turban, holding a book, identified by the caption below. See Bernard Quaritch Catalogue 1186, *Arabic Science and Medicine*, p. 97.

APPENDIX

Preliminary list of manuscripts and printed books containing representations or presumed representations of Avicenna⁴⁹

A) Avicenna as *magister*

1. Pommersfelden, Schloßbibliothek MS 253 (Nachtrag 4), fol. 1^r: mid-13th century, *De animalibus*, initial, full-length, writing in a book on a desk.

2. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Reg. lat. 1958, fol. 1^r: 1220s, *De anima*, initial, half-length, holding a book.

3. Paris, Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne MS 129, fol. 1^r: 13th century, *Canon*, initial, badly damaged, full-length, raising his hands.

4. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 14023, fol. 2^r: 13th century, *Canon*, full-page, full-length, a teacher with a book, three pupils, boxes with Avicenna's name and phrases from the *Canon*; similar full-page illustrations on fols 123^v, 254^v, 602^v, 769^v.

5. Graz, Universitätsbibliothek MS 482, fol. 111^r: end of the 13th century, *Physica*, Avicenna teaching (*Codices*, p. 178).

6. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 6916, fol. 1^r: c. 1300, *Canon*, initial, full-length, four pictures of masters sitting with books or scrolls; fol. 44^v, initial, full-length, sitting, teaching gesture; fol. 250^v, initial, full-length, sitting, with a book in his left hand, teaching a pupil.

7. Rome, Biblioteca Lancisiana MS 121, fol. 1^r: c. 1300, *Canon*, initial, full-length, bearded man, standing, dove(?) above his head.

8. Cesena, Biblioteca Malatestiana MS Plut. XXVI Dextr. 2, fol. 1^r: 1320–1, *De animalibus*, a bearded figure (*Codices*, p. 63).

9. Venice, Biblioteca Marciana MS lat. cl. XIV, 20 (=1960), fol. 54^r: 1310s, *De anima*, Avicenna teaching (*Codices*, p. 109).

10. Vienna, Nationalbibliothek MS 3085, fol. 4^r: 15th century, a calendar in Low German, upper left corner, half-length, teaching gesture (?), identified as Avicenna by adjacent text.

11. London, British Library MS Add. 15697, fol. 37^v: 15th century, a calendar in Low German, full-page, full-length, sitting on a cushion, dressed like a Renaissance merchant, bearded, with a book in his left hand, animals on either side, arch with buildings on top, identified as Avicenna by the adjacent text.

⁴⁹ All works referred to are by Avicenna unless otherwise indicated. Descriptions of pictures I have not seen are taken from d'Alverny, *Codices* (as in n. 4).



The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

Fig. 87—Aristotle, *Opera*, Venice 1483 (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, 21194/21195), ii, fol. 1^r

12. Avicenna, *Liber Canonis*..., Lyons 1522, title-page: upper half, full-length, a master sitting in a chair, writing in a book on a desk, identified as Avicenna by an inscription, scholarly surroundings, pictures of Galen and Hippocrates.

13. André Thevet, *Les Vrais Pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres*, Paris 1584, fol. 620^r: full-page, half-length, bearded, dressed in hood and cloak, with books on a table, identified as Avicenna in the text.

14. Avicenna, *Quarti libri Canonis sen prima de febribus*, Passau 1659, title-page: full-page, full-length, a richly dressed master, sitting at a table with an open book and inkpot, five pupils holding books.

B) Avicenna as a physician

15. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS hebr. 1146, fol. 1^r: 14th century, Book IV of the *Canon*, upper right corner, half-length, figure taking the pulse of a patient, urine-glass.

16. Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria MS hebr. 2197, title-page: 15th century, *Canon*, upper half of page, full-length, sitting in a room with two windows and doors, urine-glass in his left hand, pointing at a group of patients with his right hand (other medical illustrations on fols 402^r, 492^r).

17. Hartmann Schedel, *Das Buch der Cronicken und geschichten*, Nuremberg 1493, fol. 202^r: half-length,

wearing a hat, urine glass in his left hand, identified by the inscription 'Auicenna ein arzt'.

18. Avicenna, *Canon medicinae*..., Venice 1595, title-page: third picture from top in the right column, full-length, with Aëtius and Mesuë at a table, turbaned, bearded, weighing something with scales, identified as Avicenna by an inscription.

C) Avicenna wearing a turban

19. Avicenna, *Canon medicinae*..., Venice 1595, title-page: central picture at the bottom, full-length, with Galen, Hippocrates and Aëtius, standing, turbaned, bearded, holding a scroll (with Aëtius) 'Florente Florescimus'.

20. Hugo Senensis, *Super quarta sen primi Canonis Avicennae*..., Venice 1513, fol. 2^r: initial, half-length, bearded, turbaned.

See also no. 18 above and nos 26–7 and 29–31 below (Figs 83–7).

D) Avicenna as king

21. (Fig. 77) Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 6920, fol. 1^r: c. 1300, *Canon*, initial, full-length, frontal, seated on a throne, wearing a crown and rich clothing.

22. (Fig. 78) Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS lat. 6917, fol. 77^r: mid-14th century, *Canon*, initial, full-length, sitting with his legs crossed, wearing a crown and holding a sceptre, bearded, dressed as a magister and addressing a pupil.

23. (Fig. 79) Montpellier, Bibliothèque de l'École de médecine MS H 44, fol. 1^r: mid-14th century, *De animalibus*, initial, full-length, sitting, wearing rich clothing, teaching gesture, diadem(?), identified as Avicenna by the inscription.

24. (Fig. 80) Rome, Biblioteca Lancisiana MS 329, fol. 1^r: 1471, *De congelatione*, crowned, bearded, holding a book.

25. (Fig. 81) Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek MS 5264, fol. 4^v: 15th century, Johannes Cadamosto, *De re medica*, full-page, full-length, sitting on a throne, wearing a crown, with a book in his left hand, making a teaching gesture with his right, bearded, surrounded by a council of physicians and philosophers, identified by an inscription on the book.

26. (Fig. 87) Aristotle, *Opera*, Venice 1483 (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library 21194/21195), ii, fol. 1^r: top half, full-length, second figure from the left, bearded, wearing a crown on top of a turban, holding a book.

27. (Fig. 83) Avicenna, *Primus Avicennae Canon...*, Pavia 1510–12, fol. 1^r: full-length, sitting between Galen and Hippocrates, wearing a crown on top of a turban, holding a sceptre and an imperial orb, an open book on his knees, identified as Avicenna by the inscription.

28. (Fig. 82) Avicenna, *Quartus Canonis...*, Venice 1520, fol. 1^r: full-length, sitting on a throne, with a crown and sceptre, bearded, books under his feet, identified as Avicenna by an inscription on the wall; on the left is Gentile da Foligno.

29. (Fig. 84) Avicenna, *Praesens maximus codex est totius scientiae medicinae...*, Venice 1523, title-page: third picture from the top in the left margin, half-length, reading a book, wearing a crown on top of a turban, bearded, identified by the caption below.

30. (Fig. 85) Avicenna, *Libri Canonis...*, Venice 1527, title-page: third picture from the top in the right margin, half-length, reading a book, wearing a crown on top of a turban, bearded, identified as Avicenna by the caption below.

30a (late addition): see above, p. 241, n. 48.

31. (Fig. 86) Georg Paul Busch, engraving, copies in Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Portraitsammlung I, 479, and Dresden, Staatliches Kupferstichkabinett, A 203,2: beginning of the 18th century, 14.5 × 8.7 cm, half-length, reading a book, wearing a crown over a turban, bearded, identified as Avicenna by the inscription.

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA'S GIANTS

Words like 'grandeur', 'majesty', and 'monumentality' have often been used in writings on Piero. In this Note we would like to suggest that these words have been considered apt, in part at least, because Piero adopted a low horizon in his perspective constructions.

In *The Flagellation* the horizon line can be established precisely (Fig. 90); it runs just above the knees of the standing protagonists. If the viewer supposes that he or she is situated on the same level as the figures in the painting, thus adopting the viewpoint implied by the perspectival construction of the panel, then he or she must be crouched on all fours with the viewing eye about fifty centimetres above the ground. This is not a natural posture; and most of us, surely, imagine that we are standing upright as we view the scene. If this is so, then, since our eyes only come as high as the lower thighs of Piero's figures, those figures—all of them—must be around three times as tall as we are. The picture is populated by giants.¹

Piero adopts a similarly low horizon in the *Madonna del Parto*, *The Baptism of Christ*, *St Sigismund and Sigismondo Malatesta*, *The Death of Adam*, *The Meeting of Solomon and Sheba*, *The Exaltation of the Cross*, *St Mary Magdalen* and *The Resurrection of Christ*.² In others of his

¹ There is a certain latitude in the positions an actual spectator can adopt before a perspectival picture without destroying the pictorial illusion of three-dimensional figures represented in space (though this does not annul the fact that some paintings, e.g. *The Flagellation*, have a single correct viewing position). On the relation between the point of view implied by linear-perspectival composition and the position of the spectator in the 'world outside' see M. H. Pirenne, *Optics, Painting and Photography*, Cambridge 1970, pp. 73–94; and more recently M. Kubovy, *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 52–65, with an experimental confirmation of Pirenne's analyses of the degree of freedom the actual spectator has in taking up a position without distorting the illusionistic effect created by the painting.

² J. V. Field, among others, has argued that there is an ambiguity about the exact number of horizon lines in *The Resurrection*; see her 'Piero della Francesca and Perspective' in eadem and F. A. J. L. James, *Renaissance and Revolution: Humanists, Scholars, Craftsmen and Natural Philosophers in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1993,