

News, Notes and Queries

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM FOR THE HISTORY OF ARABIC SCIENCE (ALEPPO, SYRIA, 5 to 12 APRIL 1976)

This meeting was held at the University of Aleppo under the overall patronage of the President of Syria and the Syrian Government. Its instigator and organizer was the President of the university, Professor Ahmad Yusuf al Hassan, assisted by his staff.

The symposium marked the opening of the newly-built Institute for the Study of Arabic Science, attached to Aleppo University. It already has a sizeable library which is expanding actively, with adequate space for staff, and for research facilities, all of which holds out great promise for a successful future.

There were about sixty participants at the symposium, half of them from Arab countries; five were from the United Kingdom. In the papers on Arabic science, all aspects were covered—astronomy and mathematics, which predominated; engineering and technology; architecture; geology; biology; botany; and metallurgy. There were eighteen papers on medicine and several on pharmacy and alchemy. Professor al Hassan contributed a most interesting paper on Arabic mechanical engineering, and the two general papers delivered by Professor Sabra of Harvard and Professor Sezgin of Frankfurt on “The aims and difficulties of research into the history of Arabic science” and “The place of the Arabs in the history of science” respectively, were thought-provoking and controversial.

About half of the papers on medicine, pharmacy and alchemy were given by medical practitioners and were mainly concerned with descriptions of certain clinical practices of the past. Those by full-time historians included interesting papers by Professor Ullmann of Tübingen on the transmission of Rufus’ medical writings through Arabic works; by Dr. Sami Hamarneh of Washington on the twelfth-century physician, Abū Naṣr ibn al ‘Ain-Zarbī, and by Dr. A. Z. Iskandar of the Wellcome Institute, London, on the late Alexandrian medical curriculum. It is hoped that the proceedings of the meeting will be published.

In addition, the symposium had some very promising and exciting results. First, it was decided to begin publishing, from next year, an international journal for the history of Arabic science and medicine in English. Second, work is to start on the compilation of a series of textbooks on the history of Arabic science, medicine, and pharmacy, which will draw on international contributors.

The symposium and the establishment of the Institute are events of very great importance to historians of Arabic science and Arabic medicine. By and large, these subjects have not received great attention as separate specialities, and researchers into them have suffered from a sense of isolation, and perhaps even of eccentricity, in an academic world preoccupied with the study of Western science. This meeting was the first of its kind, and it afforded a much-needed opportunity for contact between scholars in the field and a chance to become better acquainted with each other’s work. Second, the new Institute specifically devoted to the study of the history of Arabic science and medicine should provide a focus, hitherto lacking, for researchers and students. Such an academic focus is essential for the growth and development of a discipline in which so much basic work, such as the classifying and editing of manuscripts, is still to be done.