

## Honoring Avicenna, the Great Persian Physician on the World's Postage Stamps

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### Abstract

Many nations are indebted to Avicenna (Ibn-Sina) for their scientific progressions and civilization. Many countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe have honored Avicenna, the great Persian scientist, by depicting his vignette on their postage stamps. The symbolic value of Avicenna has been chosen to commemorate scientific occasions, achievements and anniversaries, which represents the ultimate performance of conscious honoring.

**Keywords:** Avicenna, Iran, medical history, philately, postage stamps

### Introduction

Medical philately is the collection and study of postage stamps with a medical subject, which might be a person with significant contributions to medicine.<sup>1</sup> Interest for the theme of “Avicenna on stamps” has been previously discussed. Ziai, in 1964, published an article about Avicenna in which a paragraph was devoted to Avicenna on Iranian stamps.<sup>2</sup> Smith, in his article which was entitled “More on Avicenna and Shiraz” commented on Ziai’s article and presented several stamps about Avicenna from different countries including Iran, Lebanon, East Germany, and Poland.<sup>3</sup>

The story of “Avicenna on stamps” has continued in the subsequent years. Some authors have presented stamps with the theme of Avicenna to endorse the historical aspect of their manuscript. O’Rahilly (1997) in his article entitled “Philatelic Introduction to the History of Anatomy” honored Avicenna as a pioneer in anatomy and depicted a stamp with his vignette from Poland.<sup>4</sup> Rugendorff and Wilson (1997)

in their article entitled “The History of Urology on Postage Stamps and Cancellations” presented a stamp with the vignette of Avicenna from Algeria.<sup>5</sup> Rangappa (2008) in his article entitled “History of Analgesia and Regional Anesthesia through Philately” wrote about pain management by Avicenna and presented four stamps with the picture of Avicenna from East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Syria.<sup>6</sup> Nabipour et al. (2009) in their article entitled “Avicenna, the First to Describe Thyroid-related Orbitopathy” presented three stamps with the vignette of Avicenna from Iran, the Soviet Union, and Poland.<sup>7</sup>

International recognition of Avicenna as a great Persian scientist is undisputable. This manuscript presents the honoring of Avicenna on the world’s postage stamps which represents the ultimate performance of conscious honoring.

### A brief biography of Avicenna

Abu-Ali al-Hussain Ibn Abdullah Ibn Sina (980 – 1037 A.D.), best known as Avicenna in the West was born in Afshana, near Bokhara. Bokhara is now located in Uzbekistan, but during that time Bokhara was a part of the vast of territory of the Persian sovereignty.<sup>8,9</sup> He died at the age of 57 and was buried in a mausoleum in Hamadan, Iran.<sup>8</sup>

Avicenna, the most famous Persian physician and best known of all physicians in the Islamic civilization<sup>7</sup> was

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known in the West as “the prince of physicians”.<sup>8,10</sup>

Avicenna was a physician, philosopher, poet, and a statesman. In the political turbulence and rivaling of regional rulers, he endured numerous ups and downs throughout his lifetime. He became a court physician and vizier (a member of cabinet), who escaped several times due to fear for his life and imprisonment.

Avicenna was a prolific author on different subjects. His masterpiece was *Qanon fi-Tebb* (known in the West as: *Canon in Medicine*). The Canon has been translated in different languages and was the core of medical curriculum of European universities in subsequent centuries.<sup>7,8</sup> To this day, the Canon remains the most impressive book in medicine ever written.<sup>11</sup>

Avicenna was one of the pioneers that have described human anatomy.<sup>4</sup> He believed that tendons are different anatomical structures from nerves.<sup>12</sup> Avicenna is credited as the first physician who popularized direct repair of injured tendons and his experiences were followed by European physicians in subsequent centuries.<sup>13,14</sup>

Additionally, Avicenna was a pioneer in endocrinology and the first to describe thyroid-related orbitopathy.<sup>7,15</sup>

Additionally, Avicenna is credited as the first physician who described esophageal cancer.<sup>16</sup>

He also described meningitis and differentiated it from secondary meningism.<sup>17</sup>

Avicenna was the first to use a flexible catheter to irrigate the bladder and relieve urinary retention.<sup>18</sup>

One of his significant contributions to medical sciences was in the field of the philosophy of medicine.<sup>10</sup> Avicenna used a system of management for his patients that combined physical and psychological factors, drugs, and diet. Therefore, he could be considered as a pioneer of holistic medicine.<sup>10</sup>

The above examples are just a few that describe the tremendous contributions of Avicenna to medical science, which lead to the “Golden age of medicine” in Persia.<sup>8</sup>

There are numerous reasons for Avicenna’s international recognition. Many Islamic countries are proud of Avicenna because he is the most renown of all physicians in the Islamic civilization.<sup>7</sup> Some countries have developed from the divided Persian territory; thus they feel an association with the cultural and scientific heritage of ancient Persia. Above

all, many nations are indebted to Avicenna for their scientific progressions and civilization. Avicenna never left Persia,<sup>9</sup> however, his works and thoughts reached as far as France in medieval period and circulated through the ages, influencing nations and civilizations. Through his written heritage, Avicenna’s contributions to the sciences, particularly in the fields of medicine and philosophy are doubtless. With his book *Al-Shifa (The Book of Healing)*, he introduced logic to the dark medieval ages of Europe and contributed to ignite the European Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> Actually, Avicenna’s scientific heritage had universal value and those who were introduced to the works and thoughts of Avicenna felt indebted to him. The Arabic language was the *lingua franca* of the Avicenna era and he wrote the majority of his works in Arabic. Unfortunately, this point has erroneously labeled him as an Arab scientist.<sup>9,19</sup>

#### Avicenna on the world’s commemorative postage stamps

Twenty-five countries located in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe have honored Avicenna on their postage stamps. The symbolic value of Avicenna has been chosen to commemorate scientific occasions, achievements, and anniversaries.

The first stamp was issued by Lebanon for the anniversary of the medical faculty inauguration in 1948 (Figure 1) and depicts Avicenna brewing herbs. In 1951, Afghanistan issued two stamps to commemorate the anniversary of the medical faculty (Figures 2 and 3). In 1966, the Yemen Arab Republic issued two stamps for the inauguration of a new WHO headquarter’s building in Geneva (Figures 4 and 5). Kuwait, in 1969 on the occasion of World Health Day, printed the vignette of Avicenna on two stamps (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 1. Avicenna brewing herbs, issued by Lebanon in 1948



Figures 2 and 3. Avicenna, issued by Afghanistan in 1951



Figure 8. Avicenna, issued by Algeria in 1980



Figures 4 and 5. Avicenna, issued by the Yemen Arab Republic in 1966



Figures 9 and 10. Avicenna, issued by Kuwait in 1980



Figures 6 and 7. Avicenna, issued by Kuwait in 1969

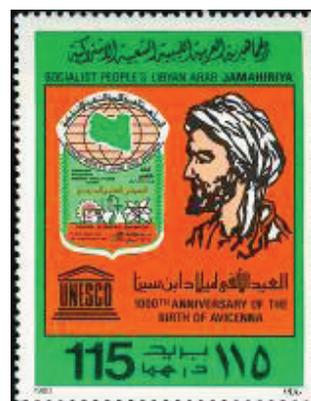


Figure 11. Avicenna, issued by Libya in 1980

In 1980, the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Avicenna's birth was acknowledged worldwide. Algeria (Figure 8), Kuwait (Figures 9 and 10), Libya (Figure 11), Mali (Figures 12 and 13), the Soviet Union (Figure 14), Turkey (Figures 15 and 16), and Tunisia (Figure 17) issued stamps to commemorate this occasion. In one of the two stamps issued by Mali, Avicenna was shown with surgical instruments and in the other he was teaching (Figures 12 and 13).

In some stamps Avicenna and other famous scientists were printed together. In a stamp issued by Syria in 1965, Avicenna was accompanied by Hippocrates (Figure 18). Syria has also honored Avicenna in 1981, again (Figure 19).

In memorial to great scientists, countries issue postage stamps. Some countries have printed Avicenna and other celebrities in a set of stamps. Egypt, in 1968, issued two stamps to honor Avicenna and Imhotep, who was a famous ancient Egyptian physician (Figure 20). In 1952, East Germany issued a

set of four stamps that depicted the vignettes of Avicenna, Leonardo da Vinci, Victor Hugo and Nicolai Gogol (Figure 21). Dubai issued a set of four stamps which depicted Avicenna, Durer, Newton and Voltaire (Figure 22). It is interesting to note that in some of the stamps Avicenna is depicted in native clothing, with the attempt to make him look like the indigenous people of that country.



Figures 12 and 13. Avicenna, issued by Mali in 1980 on the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth



Figure 14. Avicenna, issued by the Soviet Union in 1980



Figures 15 and 16. Avicenna, issued by Turkey in 1980



Figure 17. Avicenna, issued by Tunisia in 1980



Figure 18. Avicenna and Hippocrates, issued by Syria in 1965



Figure 19. Avicenna, issued by Syria in 1981



Figure 20. Avicenna, issued by Egypt in 1968 and paired with a stamp depicting Imhotep

Other countries, including: the Comoros Islands (Figure 23), France (Figure 24), Jordan (Figure 25), Hungary (Figure 26), Pakistan (Figure 27), Poland

(Figure 28), Qatar (Figure 29), Somalia (Figure 30), and Tajikistan (Figure 31) have also issued stamps in memory of Avicenna.



Figure 21. Avicenna, issued by the German Democratic Republic in 1952



Figure 22. Avicenna, issued by Dubai



Figure 23. Avicenna, issued by the Comoros Islands

#### Avicenna on the Iranian postage stamps

Iranian commemorative postage stamps have also given prominence to the theme of Avicenna. The picture of Avicenna has been chosen to announce scientific occasions and anniversaries.

The first Iranian stamp with a picture of Avicenna was issued in 1954 (Figure 32).



Figure 24. Avicenna, issued by France in 2005



Figure 25. Avicenna, issued by Jordan in 1971



Figure 26. Avicenna, issued by Hungary in 1987



Figure 27. Avicenna, issued by Pakistan in 1966

Between 1950 and 1954 Iran issued five series of stamps for the millennium ceremonies of Avicenna. The aim was to raise additional funds to rebuild his

mausoleum. Each series depicted a period of Iran's history. The first was during the Achaemenids, the second was during the Sassanians, the third on the Islamic period, the fourth was about historical places and the fifth was Avicenna, himself.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 28. Avicenna, issued by Poland 1952



Figure 29. Avicenna, issued by Qatar in 1971



Figure 30. Avicenna, issued by Somalia in 2003



Figure 31. Avicenna, issued by Tajikistan in 2005



Figure 32. Avicenna, issued by Iran in 1954



Figure 33. Avicenna and Hippocrates, issued by Iran in 1962



Figure 34. Left) Issued by Iran in 1980, depicting al-Farabi, al-Biruni, and Avicenna together; right) Avicenna, issued by Iran in 1974



Figure 35. Left) Avicenna, issued by Iran in 1983; right) Avicenna alongside Pasteur, issued by Iran in 1989

In some Iranian stamps, Avicenna has been depicted with other great scientists. Figure 33 shows Avicenna with Hippocrates. Figure 34 shows Avicenna, Farabi, and Biruni whereas Figure 35 depicts Avicenna beside Louis Pasteur.

Inauguration of the Middle and Near-East World Health Organization (WHO) Medical Congress in 1962 (Figure 33), the Near-East Medical Congress in Isfahan in 1974 (Figure 34), and the International Medical Seminar in 1983 (Figure 35) have been announced by stamps that depicted the vignettes of Avicenna.

The occasion of Physician's Day in 2004 was commemorated by a stamp depicting the picture of Avicenna and his mausoleum (Figure 36).



**Figure 36.** Avicenna and his mausoleum, issued by Iran in 2004

### Conclusion

Many nations are indebted to Avicenna for their scientific progressions and civilization.<sup>9</sup> The symbolic value of Avicenna has been chosen to commemorate scientific occasions, achievements and anniversaries, which demonstrates the ultimate respect. It is to be expected that Avicenna will continue to be honored on the world's stamps in the future.

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