

Drugs for bodies...and books

Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghāfiqī (d.560/1165), *Kitāb fī al-adwiyah al-mufradah* (*The Book of Simple Drugs*), also popularly known as "The Herbal of al-Ghāfiqī." Manuscript. Baghdad, AH 654 (1256 CE). Bibl. Osl. 7508.

bū Jaʿfar al-Ghāfiqī was a prominent twelfth-century Andalusian pharmacologist and botanist. He compiled his book of simple remedies from various sources, including the works of Dioscorides and Galen. Not infrequently the names of plants are given in other languages, principally Greek, in Arabic transliteration. This manuscript contains the first half of his book, and was made probably by an artist from a Baghdad school. Executed on thick Middle Eastern paper in a clear old *naskh* script, the codex contains 475 entries and 367 coloured illustrations, mainly of plants, but also of animals.

The two illustrations on the verso of fol. 254 represent two varieties of *Ranunculus asiaticus* ("the little Asiatic frog"; Gr. *batrakhion*), known as "the hyena's paw" (*kaff al-ḍabʿ*) and "the lion's paw" (*kaff al-sabʿ*). This toxic plant, previously described (fol. 277 a-b) under the term *kabikaj* ("crooked ape"), and popularly referred to as Persian buttercup or crowfoot, was also known among the Arabs as "the tree of frogs" (*shajarat al-ḍafāḍi*) and "the flower of love" (*ward al-ḥubb*). It is described here as spreading out on the ground, having round leaves (like wild parsley – *karafs*), and being covered with down. It has golden yellow flowers and many radicles issuing from one root. It grows near water or in humid places. To this family also belongs "the cat's paw" (*kaff al-hirr* – *Ranunculus arvensis*), which grows with the coming of the first autumnal rains. It is known as "the polished one" (*madlūkah*) or "the little yellow" (*al-ṣufayrah*) on account of the brilliant polish of its yellow flowers. According to al-Ghāfiqī the root of *Ranunculus* may be used for ulcerations, the removal of warts, and as an aid in conception.

*Kabikaj*, most probably on account of its toxicity (it was thought to repel insects and worms) came to be associated with the preservation of manuscripts. However, as the original knowledge of the toxic properties of



the plant was lost, *kabikaj* in popular culture became a kind of good jinn (jinee), often assuming the mantle of a guardian (*ḥafīz*), and was not infrequently used alongside the word Allah and/or its various epithets. It was even thought to be sufficient to inscribe its name in manuscripts in order to secure their protection.

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