

## CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE SEMINAR SERIES 2011-2012 AUTUMN TERM

Tuesday, 1 November 2011 (Week 5)  
5.00 pm – Ramphal Building Room R.014

**Peter E. Pormann  
(Warwick)**

*'Ibn Serapion (9th cent.): A Physician at the Crossroads between East and West'*



Little is known about Ibn Serapion. The information in the so-called bio-bibliographical tradition (i.e., literature by medieval writers listing different physicians) is marred with chronological errors, and we rely mostly on internal evidence from Ibn Serapion's works for dating him. He wrote a *Small* and a *Great Compendium*, both in Syriac, a Christian Aramaic dialect, close to the language which Jesus would have spoken. The Syriac originals are unfortunately lost, but we still have fragments of different Arabic translations, as well as complete Latin and Hebrew versions of the *Small Compendium*. Because of the authors which Ibn Serapion quotes, he probably lived in the second half of the ninth century. His *Small Compendium* is a medical encyclopedia in seven books, the first four dealing with diseases located at a specific part of the body from tip to toe; book five with skin disorders, poisons, and gynaecological matters; book six with fevers; and book seven with compound drugs. For the most part, Ibn Serapion draws on previous Greek medical literature when describing the various illnesses and prescribing medication against them. For instance, the gynaecological chapters contain a lot of material from the *Pragmateia* or *Handbook* by Paul of Aegina (fl. c.650), and Galen (d. 216/7) is an obvious source elsewhere. In that sense, he continues the Greek tradition of humoral pathology, the notion that health and disease are determined by the balance or imbalance of the four humours blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. There is, however, notable innovation in one area of Ibn Serapion's therapy: he includes many recipes with Indian ingredients, or of Indian origin. This reflects the cosmopolitan nature of the Abbasid Empire with its thriving capital Baghdad, where he probably worked.

The fate and fortunes of Ibn Serapion and his *Small Compendium* can best be illustrated through one of the manuscripts that preserve the Arabic version of this work, namely Cod. Or. 2070 in the Leiden's [Universiteitsbibliotheek](#). It tells the fascinating story of the transmission of medical knowledge from East to West, from Syriac via Arabic to Latin.



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