



Rab'-e Rashidi: One of the Pioneering Educational and Medical Centers in the Islamic World

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Abstract

Rab'-e Rashidi, a historical establishment, emerges as a paramount educational and medical institution in the Islamic world. Founded by Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah Hamadani, this center encompassed a hospital, pharmacy, and provisions for patient families; while maintaining a strong focus on medical education. Historical texts reveal Rab'-e Rashidi's exceptional success during its time, positioning it as a leading educational and therapeutic hub that outperformed European universities in the field. This article delves into the profound impact of Iran's medical education system, with departments such as Dar al-Shafa (hospital), pharmacy, and early forms of drug processing laboratories, during the 8th century AH / 14th AD. This influence, which took root only a century after the peak of the Islamic civilization, left a lasting mark on both Islamic and Western territories. Notably, the presence of a university-hospital structure akin to the historic Jundishapur Scientific Center reflects the efficiency and unique educational approach that Iranians applied to medical education and doctor training. This study highlights Rab'-e Rashidi's pioneering role in shaping the landscape of medical education and its enduring legacy in the realm of healthcare and academia.

Keywords: Rab'-e Rashidi; Islamic civilization; Medical education center; History of medicine; History of pharmacy

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Introduction

According to many historians of science, medical knowledge has a very long history, closely tied to the history of human life. In every society, regardless of its level of civilization, a form of medicine has existed to address diseases and preserve human life. In the early stages of this historical development, medical knowledge and practices were typically transmitted orally from one generation to the next. However, the invention of writing brought about a significant transformation in the way concepts and knowledge were recorded and taught [1]. Looking at the history of human knowledge and its applications, it appears that medical science has held a prominent position, as it has fulfilled the most fundamental human need—physical health and the preservation of life. For this reason, the thorough study of the history of medical science, as well as medical education, is given due attention.

Medical education in Iran

Education and research in ancient Iran were of great importance and received considerable attention. Herodotus (c. 484 BCE – c. 425 BCE) mentions that the training course for children lasted from the ages of five to twenty-five, during which they were taught three key skills: horseback riding, archery, and truthfulness. This constituted the first stage of general education for Persians before they advanced to higher education. During the Achaemenid period (550–330 BCE), the responsibility for organizing and overseeing education rested with the government.

Xenophon (c. 430 BCE – c. 355 BCE) provides further details, explaining that children studied until the age of sixteen or seventeen, after which they entered the juvenile class. Only children who had been educated in a public school were allowed to join this class [2]. During this period, major medical education centers existed in Ray, Hamedan, and Persepolis, where medical facilities operated to treat soldiers. Those who successfully completed the preliminary stages of medical training were awarded a form of medical license [3]. Evidence suggests that medical education centers during the Achaemenid era were located near fire temples. Besides their religious significance, these temples also served as centers for the study of various sciences, including medicine [2].

During the reign of Darius, the Great (550–486 BCE), an order was issued to revive the Sayis Medical School in Egypt, then part of the Persian Empire, so that young Iranians could travel there to learn medical techniques [4].

The expansion of scientific institutions continued during the Sassanid period (224–652 CE), leading to the establishment of larger universities. The most no-

table of these was Jundishapur University, which became the most significant scientific and practical university of ancient times [5]. Other renowned centers of medical education in ancient Iran included institutions in the cities of Ekbatan, Pars, Sayis, Ray, Shahr Jundishapur, Karkhe, Shush, and Siraf [2].

One of the interesting aspects of medical education in ancient Iran was the requirement for clinical examinations at the end of medical training. In the 7th Fargard of the Vendidad (paragraphs 36–40), it is stated that obtaining a medical license required treating three demon worshipers (non-Zoroastrians) using surgical procedures. If the trainee successfully treated all three patients, they were granted the right to practice medicine. However, if the patients died, the trainee was denied the right to practice medicine, and their punishment was death [6].

Arthur Christensen (1875–1945), the renowned Iranologist, also refers to a classification in the Denkard, which mentions the use of those sentenced to death for the training of physicians and medical research. Based on this, he suggests that a form of certification or license was granted to doctors, allowing them to practice medicine [7].

The importance of education and learning in ancient Iran, particularly before the fall of the Sassanid Empire, was significant. The provision of educational resources, the establishment of schools and universities, and the funding of these institutions were among the primary responsibilities of the king. In this regard, Roman Ghirshman (1895–1979) notes that the Achaemenids created a favorable environment for the advancement of science. During the Achaemenid period, Iranians made remarkable progress in fields such as medicine, astronomy, and mathematics [8].

Similarly, during the Sassanid era, substantial funds were allocated to cultural and educational endeavors, enabling the construction of schools and universities. The government actively supported scientific growth and intellectual prosperity. For instance, Shapur I, with his broad vision and inquisitive spirit, ordered the translation of Greek and Indian works on various subjects, including medicine, astronomy, and philosophy, for use in educational centers [2].

With the fall of the Sassanid Empire and the establishment of Islamic rule, the pursuit of scientific education did not decline. On the contrary, inspired by Islamic teachings and following the example set by Iranian educational institutions, Muslims established various scientific centers such as Dar al-'Ilm and Dar al-Tarjomeh. Additionally, institutions like Bayt al-Hikmah were founded throughout the Islamic world. One of the most advanced and successful centers in the field of medicine was the Rab'-e Rashidi Scientific Center, established by Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah Hamed-

ani during the Ilkhanid period (654–750 AH / 1256–1349 CE).

Sheikh Rashiduddin Fazlullah Hamedani

Khwaja Rashiduddin Abul-Fadail Fazlullah bin Imad al-Dawlah Abul-Khair bin Muwafaq al-Dawlah Hamedani was a physician, politician, and historian of the Ilkhanid period. He was born in 648 AH / 1251 CE in Hamedan into a family of doctors [9]. His grandfather, Muwafaq al-Dawlah Abu Faraj Ali bin Abu Shuja Israeli Hamedani, came from a Jewish family and was a physician in Hamedan; while his father, Imad al-Dawlah, was also a doctor. Following in the footsteps of his ancestors, Rashiduddin pursued a career in medicine from a young age, initially practicing in the city of Hamedan. His intelligence and skill quickly earned him widespread recognition, leading to his appointment as the personal physician of Abaqa Khan, the Ilkhanid ruler (663–680 AH / 1265–1282 CE). Through his medical practice and close ties with the Mongol rulers, he eventually rose to the esteemed position of prime minister under Ghazan Khan (670–703 AH / 1271–1304 CE) [9]. Rashiduddin served as a minister in the Ilkhanid court until 717 AH / 1318 CE, when he was executed along with his 16-year-old son. His death resulted from a conspiracy accusing him of involvement in the assassination of Sultan Mohammad Khodabandeh Oljaitu (679–716 AH / 1280–1318 CE) [9].

Rab'-e Rashidi

To organize and sustain research and cultural activities scientifically, Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah initiated the establishment of a large scientific, educational, and research institution called *Rab'-e Rashidi*. This well-equipped center was located in the suburbs of Tabriz. *Rab'-e Rashidi* consisted of two sections: the foundation of the first part was laid earlier and later expanded. Numerous houses were built, enclosed by a wall, and a gate was added over the old wall. It is estimated that the foundation of *Rab'-e Rashidi* was laid before 699 AH / 1300 CE [10].

Within *Rab'-e Rashidi*, there were thirty thousand houses, twenty-four caravanserais, one thousand five hundred shops, and several workshops. Additionally, both sections of the town contained three-story caravanserais, a mosque, a bazaar, a bathhouse, a mint, and a university accommodating seven thousand four hundred and fifty students and professors [11].

There are differing opinions among historians regarding the meaning of the term "Rab'-e." Scholars such as Barthold, Petrushevski, Alizadeh, and Falina have written it as *Roba Rashidi*, interpreting it as "quarter" in Arabic. However, the term *Raba* has also been used to refer to a building, neighborhood, or house established in spring. Prominent Persian poets such as

Sanai, Nizami, Jalaluddin Rumi, and Saadi have employed the word *Raba* in this sense. Russian orientalist Barzin and French orientalist Blochet have also mentioned this institution as *Rab'-e Rashidi*, which appears to be the more accurate name for the establishment founded by Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah [10].

To finance the administration of this vast institution, Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah dedicated substantial assets and properties to *Rab'-e Rashidi*, ensuring it had significant income. He also documented these endowments in handwritten letters. These endowments provide detailed and well-documented information about the center's scientific and educational activities, the cultural landscape of the Ilkhanid era, and the importance of promoting cultural and academic education [11].

According to the provisions of *Rab'-e Rashidi's* endowment letter, as well as Rashiduddin's poetry, correspondence, and other writings, the main organizational structure of *Rab'-e Rashidi* included:

- **Public Schools (*Dar al-Talim*)** – Educational institutions for general learning
- **School Faculty** – Known in old terminology as a *madrasah*
- **Rab'-e Rashidi Central Library** – Divided into two sections: Persian-Arabic books and foreign books
- **Dar al-Shifa** – A medical education and treatment center
- **Bayt al-Advieh** – A pharmacy and medicinal workshop
- **Sharab Khana** – A center for medicinal syrups
- **Observatory** – For astronomical studies
- **Papermaking Workshops** – For producing educational and scientific materials
- **Book Copying and Duplication Stations** – Located in two places for scholars and teachers
- **Student Housing and Facilities** – Dedicated accommodations for students
- **Mosque and Monastery** – Religious and spiritual centers
- **Administrative and Service Units** – Supporting the institution's operations [11].

The endowment letter of *Rab'-e Rashidi* contains crucial details about the building's construction, including precautions taken against the frequent and severe earthquakes in Tabriz. Daulatshah Samarqandi (842–900 AH / 1440–1495 CE) recorded an inscription on one of *Rab'-e Rashidi's* buildings that read:

"Its destruction is more difficult than its reconstruction." This suggests that great care was taken in ensuring the durability and strength of the structures [11].

Education in Rab'-e Rashidi

The training provided at all levels of education in *Rab'-e Rashidi* was based on the inherent talent

and abilities of students in acquiring knowledge. Rashiduddin, in a letter to his son Saaduddin, the ruler of Qansrin, wrote: "We determined that even though some students may be slow in learning science, we have observed that among these few, there are those whose minds are inclined towards scientific pursuits. Since science is composed of branches and principles, both transferable and rational, we ordered that they study these sciences" [9]. Thus, the educational framework of Rab'-e Rashidi was structured into five distinct stages for the teaching and training of students pursuing knowledge (*Taliban-e 'Ilm*), as outlined in table 1 [12].

Medicine and medical education in Rab'-e Rashidi

Medical education

The place of education within *Dar al-Shafa*, specifical-

ly designated for medical students, was called *Rawaq al-Mortabbin*. The professor of medical education was required to be a skilled physician, proficient in teaching, and an eloquent speaker. Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah emphasized that a physician should be capable of instructing and should always teach at least two students at a time. He also stated that medical trainees should study alongside intelligent individuals, be enthusiastic, passionate, religious, and trustworthy. The duration of medical education was set at five years. If, after this period, a student demonstrated sufficient skill and knowledge to practice medicine and treat patients, they were granted a medical license. However, students were not permitted to extend their medical studies beyond this timeframe. If a student failed to obtain a medical license after five years, they were required to leave *Rab'-e Rashidi* to make room for other aspiring scholars [13].

Table 1. Educational courses in Rab'-e Rashidi

Bayt al-Taleem	A type of elementary school for teaching the Quran to resident and orphaned children.
Education professional	Especially for the children of workers, slaves, and maids, who numbered around 200. They were trained in various industries and professions according to their talents and abilities. There was no specific place for their education; rather, it was conducted practically and in the presence of masters of each craft.
Institutes of Higher Education	<p>These schools were founded to promote Iranian and Islamic knowledge and culture, clearly tracing the history of higher education in Tabriz back at least seven hundred years. In general, the features of education were as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The method of selecting teachers and assistants. 2. The process of assessing students' aptitude and determining their field of study. 3. The curriculum. 4. The number of students. 5. The method of evaluating students' aptitude. 6. Setting a specific and limited duration for studies. 7. Providing accommodation for students and covering their educational expenses. 8. The selection and appointment of the head of the school.
Khanqahs	Due to Khwaja Fazlullah's interest in and deep knowledge of Sufism, this khanqah was equipped with comprehensive scientific and welfare facilities, including the payment of salaries and benefits to Sufi sheikhs, as well as provisions for healthcare, housing, and food. This was done both to train Sufis and to hold 24 ceremonies there annually.
Dar al-Shafa	It is a separate complex serving as a hospital and a medical school, as well as a center for patient admission and treatment, the provision of various medicinal substances, medical education, scientific and research activities, and scientific exchanges in the field of medicine with other nations.

In addition to general medical training, specialized courses in fields such as sedation, surgery, and orthopedics were also conducted in *Dar al-Shafa*. Each professor in these fields was responsible for training five students in their respective disciplines. In 715 AH / 1316 CE, Rashiduddin appointed a man named Moeed with a fixed salary to serve as a *repetition instructor*. His role was to repeatedly review the medical lessons taught by the physicians, ensuring that students could better understand the material and resolve any uncertainties [14].

Medicine

Doctors in *Rab'-e Rashidi* had specific responsibilities, as Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah stated:

"The designated physician (a person who has successfully obtained a medical license or a medical professor) must treat all those traveling through or residing in the vicinity of Rab'-e Rashidi, as well as its staff, if they fall ill. He must provide them with syrups, medicines, and mazorah (a type of soup) according to their condition. However, he should not engage in other treatments beyond this scope, as we have appointed him specifically for the care of the neighbors, travelers, and staff of Rab'-e Rashidi." [13]

In *Dar al-Shafa*, doctors were categorized into two groups: full-time and part-time physicians. Part-time doctors were those who came from distant places and lived with their families in a neighborhood known as *Healers' Alley*, located behind *Dar al-Shafa*. Full-time doctors, on the other hand, were provided both a workspace and residential accommodations for their families within *Dar al-Shafa*, in a neighborhood called *Salihieh* [13]. In Rashiduddin's *endowment letter*, specific details were outlined regarding patient visitation schedules. It was stipulated that *Dar al-Shafa* would open every Monday and Thursday. On these days, medicinal supplies and treatments were to be provided to the local community, including residents and associates of *Rab'-e Rashidi*, the city of Rashidi, and those closely connected to the neighborhood. The priority order for receiving medical care was as follows:

1. Neighbors and travelers arriving in *Rab'-e Rashidi*
2. The children of the *waqif* (endower)
3. The *atqiya* (pious followers) of the *waqif*
4. The staff of *Rab'-e Rashidi*
5. Gardeners and caretakers of the *Rab'-e Rashidi* endowments in Tabriz and its surrounding areas
6. Administrators of the city of *Rab'-e Rashidi*
7. Residents of *Rab'-e Rashidi* city

Additionally, medicinal spices were distributed separately from the general treatments for neighbors, travelers, and staff. When dispensing these medicinal substances on Mondays and Thursdays, both the treasurer (*khazen*) and the winemaker (*sharabi*) were required to be present inside *Dar al-Shafa*. The physician would write prescriptions on a piece of paper, which was then recorded and arranged accordingly before being dispensed to the patients (Table 2) [13].

The doctors of *Dar al-Shafa* were obliged to be there during their stay in *Dar al-Shafa* to treat patients and clients unless the patient is unable to due to the severity of the disease. In this case, they should have appeared at the patient's bedside and treated him they would examine and order the Syrupmaker and pharmacist to get the patient's medicine in the pharmacy prepare medicine and take it to the patient and if the patient was a traveler or had traveled to Rashidi city to be treated, if he had the necessary financial ability and ability, he should he was stationed in a place near and outside of *Dar al-Shafa* to be treated, but if he did not have the necessary means, he could use *Rab'-e Rashidi's* guest house and for treatment should go to *Dar al-Shafa* and travel as long as your health he could not live there again. Also, according to Rashid's dedication letter, doctors who were working in *Dar al-Shafa*, could take turns guarding the door all day and night, a doctor with a student and a doctor was present at *Dar al-Shafa* and respond to patients [13].

The conditions of employees of the Dar al-Shafa department and comfort facilities

In *Rab'-e Rashidi* center, special provisions were

Table 2. Names of medicines that were given to people on Mondays and Thursdays

Dosage forms/ interventions	Medicines/ methods of application
Maajin (potions)	Khawarq antidote, Mithridatium, scorpion's ashes, Anush drug, sweet and bitter musk, antidote of the four, Roman Fluonia, Athanasia, common jowar, and various invigorating remedies.
Adhan (oils)	"Violet oil, flower oil, jasmine oil, khayri oil, lily oil, saffron oil, bitter almond oil, and any oil they need, except for balsam oil."
Akhal(Ophthalmic medicine)	Eye medicinal herbs, suppositories, distilled waters, various poultices, especially rose petal suppositories.
Maraham (Ointment) Simple drugs	Any remedy (ointment) that can be beneficial. Anything that can be benefited from.
Instruments	To lease a Zarāqah (a type of syringe) for use and then return it.
Suppositories	Suppository "Khit," which is also called "Zahir suppository." (A type of suppository)

made for those working within it. The *endowment letter of Rab'-e Rashidi* provides detailed information about the roles and status of various personnel, including doctors, pharmacists, and other staff members, as well as their living conditions.

One such individual is the doctor who was both a teacher and a healer. His residence was considered part of the *Rab'-e Rashidi* complex. Another essential role was that of the pharmacist. Rashiduddin Fazlullah initially set special conditions for the pharmacist, emphasizing that the individual should avoid intoxicants, be religious, and act with integrity and trustworthiness. The pharmacist was responsible for brewing medicines and concoctions for the patients under the doctor's orders, and all preparations had to be done in the presence of a doctor. Additionally, the pharmacist was required to ensure that all ointments, syrups, and other medications were properly mixed and kept under constant supervision. The pharmacist was also tasked with safeguarding all supplies and preventing theft.

Regarding housing, the pharmacist's residence was located within *Rab'-e Rashidi*. He would live alone in a cell built atop the pharmacy, unless he was married, in which case, he would be allowed to build a house for himself in the *Salihya* neighborhood, with the land for the construction being donated to the *Diwan* (government office) [13].

Another important group included the sick attendants or caregivers of the patients. There were two attendants, and specific conditions were laid out for them, including being religious, trustworthy, kind, and attentive to the patients. They were required to avoid intoxicants and ensure that patients were cared for according to the instructions of the doctor. They were also tasked with safeguarding the patients' belongings. Their living quarters were within *Rab'-e Rashidi*, specifically in rooms made of stones near the room designated for Tuqli's son. These spaces were to be secure from thieves, and any suspicious activity had to be reported. During holidays, the attendants were expected to provide food and serve water to the patients [13].

Additionally, there was a person known as *Matbakhi*, whose duty was to prepare food and soup for the patients and to boil syrups. Like other workers, the *Matbakhi* was expected to be religious and trustworthy. The pharmacist's storage, which contained essential medicines, was also overseen by the *Matbakhi*, and this person held the key to the pharmacy and its contents. The pharmacy was under strict supervision, and two deputies—one from the guardian, one from the supervisor, and a doctor—were tasked with overseeing the reopening of the pharmacy. No one was allowed to enter the pharmacy without supervision. The *Khazen* (treasurer) prepared the medicines under the doctor's guidance, and when dispensing the medicine, both the *Khazen*, the Syrupmaker, and the doctor were

required to be present. The doctor would sit at the door and hand the prescriptions to the *Khazen*, who would prepare and dispense the medicine. After the work was done, the pharmacy was sealed and locked again by the three-member supervisory board. The *Khazen* lived next to the pharmacy [14].

The ophthalmologists (*khalahs*), who also performed surgeries, had to be pious and act with trustworthiness and compassion. Their duties included preparing eye medications and ointments, storing them in the pharmacy's treasury, from which they would dispense what was suitable for each patient according to the prescribed conditions. They were responsible for attending to patients and treating eye ailments and injuries. Another of their duties was to assist the physician and work alongside them. This applies to the pharmacy and its operations within the *Rubb' Rashidi*.

Conclusion

Rab'-e Rashidi stands as a remarkable example of an ideal and advanced society where science, culture, social justice, and healthcare were seamlessly integrated to enhance human welfare. Established by Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah in the 14th century, this city attracted scholars, doctors, artists, and traders from around the world to collaboratively develop knowledge, culture, and the economy.

The existence of a comprehensive and coherent system to train and test individuals for important and sensitive professions, such as medicine, is one of the key foundations for the flourishing of civilization and the scientific progress of that society [15]. High-level training with scientific precision and insightful understanding can empower doctors to accurately diagnose diseases and treat patients effectively. Such training requires the provision of appropriate facilities and clinically relevant education, which in turn necessitates the existence of universities and medical centers connected to these institutions.

The city's organized architecture included diverse functions, such as schools, libraries, hospitals, and workshops, all designed to create an environment conducive to human growth and flourishing. *Rab'-e Rashidi* was a pioneer in the management and education of medical centers, becoming one of the largest and most influential centers for medical education in Iran. The city boasted various departments, such as *Dar al-Shafa* (hospital), a pharmacy, and buildings that functioned like modern laboratories for drug processing and preparation. These developments had a significant impact on medical education in the 8th century AH / 14th CE, just one century after the golden age of Islamic civilization, influencing both Islamic and Western medical practices.

The presence of the university-hospital structure in *Rab'-e Rashidi* mirrors the structure of the ancient

Jundishapur scientific center in Iran, highlighting the efficiency and innovative educational approach of Iranians toward medical training. Khwaja Rashiduddin Fazlullah, with his comprehensive vision for establishing the center and developing detailed regulations for the education, testing, and management of students, as well as his efforts to secure endowments to finance the scientific center, serves as an exemplary figure in the history of medical education.

In this utopian society, both science and culture contributed to the advancement of the community. The establishment of advanced medical centers and the extensive training of physicians emphasized the importance of health and public well-being.

Rab'-e Rashidi also became a model for peaceful co-existence and global knowledge exchange, integrating medical traditions from Iranian, Greek, Indian, and Chinese cultures. Every aspect of life in this city was designed to foster a healthy, just, and dynamic community, making it a true utopia and a symbol of humanity's aspirations across various fields of life.

Conflict of Interests

None.

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None.

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