

CHAPTER
10

Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Life of Ibn Sina*

Ibn Sina (980–1037), known in Europe as Avicenna, was a Persian physician and philosopher noted for his Canon of Medicine, a standard medical textbook used in Europe until the 17th century. As you read this excerpt from his autobiography, think about his accomplishments in different fields of scholarship.

I was born [in the village of Afshanah], as was my brother, and then we moved to Bukhara. A teacher of the Qur'an and a teacher of literature were provided for me, and when I reached the age of ten I had finished the Qur'an and many works of literature, so that people were greatly amazed at me. . . .

I devoted myself to studying the texts—the original and commentaries—in the natural sciences and metaphysics, and the gates of knowledge began opening for me. Next I sought to know medicine, and so I read the books written on it. Medicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and therefore I excelled in it in a very short time, to the point that distinguished physicians began to read the science of medicine under me. I cared for the sick and there opened to me some of the doors of medical treatment that are indescribable and can be learned only from practice. In addition I devoted myself to jurisprudence and used to engage in legal disputations, at that time being sixteen years old.

Then, for the next year and a half, I dedicated myself to learning and reading; I returned to reading logic and all the parts of philosophy. During this time I did not sleep completely through a single night nor devote myself to anything else by day. . . .

I used to visit the mosque frequently and worship, praying humbly to the All-Creating until He opened the mystery of it to me and made the difficult seem easy. At night I would return home, set out a lamp before me, and devote myself to reading and writing. Whenever sleep overcame me or I became conscious of weakening, I would turn aside to drink a cup of wine, so that my strength would return to me. Then I would return to reading. And whenever sleep seized me I would see those very problems in my dream; and many questions became clear to me in my sleep. . . .

It happened that the Sultan of that time in Bukhara, Nuh ibn Mansur, had an illness which baffled the doctors. Since my name had become well known among them as a result of my zeal for learning and reading, they brought me to his attention and asked him to summon me. Thus I presented myself and joined with them in treating him, and so became enrolled in his service. One day I asked him to permit me to go into their library, to get to know it and to read its books. He gave me permission and I was admitted to a building which had many rooms; in each room there were chests of books piled one on top of the other. In one of the rooms were books on the Arabic language and poetry, in another, on jurisprudence, and likewise in each room [were books on] a single science. So I looked through the catalogue of books by the ancients and asked for whichever one I needed. . . .

So when I had reached the age of eighteen I was finished with all of these sciences; at that time I had a better memory for learning, but today my knowledge is more mature; otherwise it is the same; nothing new has come to me since. . . .

from William E. Gohlman, The Life of Ibn Sina (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1974), 17–39.

Activity Options

1. **Following Chronological Order** Using information in this excerpt, create a time line listing important milestones in Ibn Sina's life in the order in which these events occurred.
2. **Developing Historical Perspective** Write a diary entry from Ibn Sina's point of view. Record your thoughts about the pursuit of knowledge in general or your scholarly achievements in particular.