Ibn Sina was born in 980 C.E. in the village of Afshana near Bukhara which today is located in the far south of Russia. His father, Abdullah, an adherent of the Ismaili sect, was from Balkh and his mother from a village near Bukhara. In any age Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, would have been a giant among giants. He displayed exceptional intellectual prowess as a child and at the age of ten was already proficient in the Qur'an and the Arabic classics. During the next six years he devoted himself to Muslim Jurisprudence, Philosophy and Natural Science and studied Logic, Euclid, and the Almagest.

He turned his attention to Medicine at the age of 17 years and found it, in his own words, "not difficult". However he was greatly troubled by metaphysical problems and in particular the works of Aristotle. By chance, he obtained a manual on this subject by the celebrated philosopher al-Farabi which solved his difficulties.

By the age of 18 he had built up a reputation as a physician and was summoned to attend the Samani ruler Nuh ibn Mansur (reigned 976-997 C.E.), who, in gratitude for Ibn Sina's services, allowed him to make free use of the royal library, which contained many rare and even unique books. Endowed with great powers of absorbing and retaining knowledge, this Muslim scholar devoured the contents of the library and at the age of 21 was in a position to compose his first book.

At about the same time he lost his father and soon afterwards left Bukhara and wandered westwards. He entered the services of Ali ibn Ma'mun, the ruler of Khiva, for a while, but ultimately fled to avoid being kidnapped by the Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. After many wanderings he came to Jurjan, near the Caspian Sea, attracted by the fame of its ruler, Qabus, as a patron of learning. Unfortunately Ibn Sina's arrival almost coincided with the deposition and murder of this ruler. At Jurjan, Ibn Sina lectured on logic and astronomy and wrote the first part of the Qanun, his greatest work.

He then moved to Ray, near modern Teheran and established a busy medical practice. When Ray was besieged, Ibn Sina fled to Hamadan where he cured Amir Shamsud-Dawala of colic and was made Prime Minister. A mutiny of soldiers against him caused his dismissal and imprisonment, but subsequently the Amir, being again attacked by the colic, summoned him back, apologised and reinstated him! His life at this time was very strenuous: during the day he was busy with the Amir's services, while a great deal of the night was passed in lecturing and dictating notes for his books. Students would gather in his home and read parts of his two great books, the Shifa and the Qanun, already composed. Following the death of the Amir, Ibn Sina fled to Isfahan after a few brushes with the law, including a period in prison. He spent his final years in the services of the ruler of the city, Ala al-Daula whom he advised on scientific and literary matters and accompanied on military campaigns.

Friends advised him to slow down and take life in moderation, but this was not in character. "I prefer a short life with width to a narrow one with length", he would reply. Worn out by hard work and hard living, Ibn Sina died in 1036/1 at a comparatively early age of 58 years. He was buried in Hamadan where his grave is still shown.
Al-Qifti states that Ibn Sina completed 21 major and 24 minor works on philosophy, medicine, theology, geometry, astronomy and the like. Another source (Brockelmann) attributes 99 books to Ibn Sina comprising 16 on medicine, 68 on theology and metaphysics 11 on astronomy and four on verse. Most of these were in Arabic; but in his native Persian he wrote a large manual on philosophical science entitled Danish-naama-i-Alai and a small treatise on the pulse.

His most celebrated Arabic poem describes the descent of Soul into the Body from the Higher Sphere. Among his scientific works, the leading two are the Kitab al-Shifa (Book of Healing), a philosophical encyclopaedia based upon Aristotelian traditions and the al-Qanun al-Tibb which represents the final categorization of Greco-Arabian thoughts on Medicine.

Of Ibn Sina's 16 medical works, eight are versified treatises on such matter as the 25 signs indicating the fatal termination of illnesses, hygienic precepts, proved remedies, anatomical memoranda etc. Amongst his prose works, after the great Qanun, the treatise on cardiac drugs, of which the British Museum possesses several fine manuscripts, is probably the most important, but it remains unpublished.

The Qanun is, of course, by far the largest, most famous and most important of Ibn Sina's works. The work contains about one million words and like most Arabic books, is elaborately divided and subdivided. The main division is into five books, of which the first deals with general principles; the second with simple drugs arranged alphabetically; the third with diseases of particular organs and members of the body from the head to the foot; the fourth with diseases which though local in their inception spread to other parts of the body, such as fevers and the fifth with compound medicines.

The Qanun distinguishes mediastinitis from pleurisy and recognises the contagious nature of phthisis (tuberculosis of the lung) and the spread of disease by water and soil. It gives a scientific diagnosis of ankylostomiasis and attributes the condition to an intestinal worm. The Qanun points out the importance of dietetics, the influence of climate and environment on health and the surgical use of oral anesthetics. Ibn Sina advised surgeons to treat cancer in its earliest stages, ensuring the removal of all the diseased tissue. The Qanun's materia medica considers some 760 drugs, with comments on their application and effectiveness. He recommended the testing of a new drug on animals and humans prior to general use.

Ibn Sina noted the close relationship between emotions and the physical condition and felt that music had a definite physical and psychological effect on patients. Of the many psychological disorders that he described in the Qanun, one is of unusual interest: love sickness! Ibn Sina is reputed to have diagnosed this condition in a Prince in Jurjan who lay sick and whose malady had baffled local doctors. Ibn Sina noted a fluttering in the Prince's pulse when the address and name of his beloved were mentioned. The great doctor had a simple remedy: unite the sufferer with the beloved.

The Arabic text of the Qanun was published in Rome in 1593 and was therefore one of the earliest Arabic books to see print. It was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the 12th century. This 'Canon', with its encyclopedic content, its systematic arrangement and philosophical plan, soon worked its way into a position of pre-eminence in the medical literature.
of the age displacing the works of Galen, al-Razi and al-Majusi, and becoming the text book for medical education in the schools of Europe. In the last 30 years of the 15th century it passed through 15 Latin editions and one Hebrew. In recent years, a partial translation into English was made. From the 12th-17th century, the Qanun served as the chief guide to Medical Science in the West and is said to have influenced Leonardo da Vinci. In the words of Dr. William Osler, the Qanun has remained "a medical bible for a longer time than any other work".

Despite such glorious tributes to his work, Ibn Sina is rarely remembered in the West today and his fundamental contributions to Medicine and the European reawakening goes largely unrecognised. However, in the museum at Bukhara, there are displays showing many of his writings, surgical instruments from the period and paintings of patients undergoing treatment. An impressive monument to the life and works of the man who became known as the 'doctor of doctors' still stands outside Bukhara museum and his portrait hangs in the Hall of the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Paris.