

# Bukhtishu Family and the Commencement of a New Era in the Islamic Golden Age

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Received: 20 Jul. 2025; Accepted: 24 Sep. 2025

<https://doi.org/10.18502/acta.v63i5.20352>

## A look at the academy of Gondishapur

The Academy of Gondishapur was an Iranian institution established under the Sasanian Empire and was one of the three principal centers of study in the Sasanian realm (Ctesiphon, Ras al-Ayn, Gondishapur) (1). Its

operations persisted throughout the Middle Ages in the Abbasid Caliphate, after which its significance steadily diminished (2,3). It served as the leading medical faculty in the region, and probably the world, throughout the 6th and 7th centuries (4) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Old Jundishapur University archaeological site, Southeast of Dezful city (archive of Jundi-Shapur University of Technology), Adapted from (14). (with permission). Main Source: Archives of Jundi-Shapur University of Technology

It offered education in different subjects, including philosophy, theology, mathematics, science, and medicine. It actively participated in the translation movement in the first centuries of the Islamic period (4,5). At the medical school of Gondishapur and its related training hospital, called "Bimarestaan", medical methods from different parts of the world were integrated, and Gondishapur became a prominent center for medical education (6).

After the breakdown of the Sassanid Empire by Muslims, Gondishapur City was saved, and the Academy of Gondishapur continued its activities (5). It seems that, between the breakdown of the Sasanid Empire and the period of Al-Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph,

Gondishapur continued its activities without Governmental support for about 130 years (5,7,8).

In the medical branch of this Academy, many famous families, especially Iranian ones, were involved in training and practicing medicine. One of the most important of these families was Bukhtishu (8).

It seems that during this period, the Bukhtishu Family ruled this Academy, at least in its medical part, and its related hospital (Bimaarestaan) (5).

In the year 148 Hijri, Al-Mansur suffered from a severe stomachache. It is said that when the special physicians of the court were not able to do anything for his disease, he asked them whether they knew any physician who could treat his disease; and all those

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## Bukhtishu family

physicians introduced Jurjis bin Bukhtishu, the head of the Medical Academy of Gundishapur, as the most expert physician in the world (8,9). Hence, he commanded Jurjis to move to Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasids, for treatment of his disorder (8). Many experts believe that it was the starting point for the settling down of Gundishapur and, on the other hand, for the emergence of Baghdad as a new center of medicine in the world. It was the new era in the life of Gundishapur Academy and the Bukhtishu family that the Caliph recognized the importance of the Academy's medical school and not only transferred Jurjis but also the knowledge and expertise of the Academy of Gundishapur to Baghdad (2).

### The origins of the Bukhtishus

The Bukhtishu family was an Iranian family that believed in Nestorianism, a branch of Christianity. Bukhtishu is a word that consists of two separate parts; the first part comes from the Pahlavi root (بُوختن), "Bukhtan" in the meaning of "to save" or to "rescue", and the 2<sup>nd</sup> part is derived from a Syriac word "Alshuyou" in the meaning of Jesus Christ, so the whole word "Bukhtishu" means a person who be saved or rescued by the Jesus Christ (8,10). The head of the family was the great Bukhtishu; this family adopted his name (10). It is alleged that his grandfather was the personal physician of Khosrow I (Anushiravan), the King of Persia (Iran) from the Sassanian house, but it was Jurjis I, the great Bukhtishu's son, who spread the fame of this family all over the world, as mentioned below.

### Prominent members of the Bukhtishu family

#### *Jurjis I*

During the time of Mansur Abbasi, Jurjis I, the son of Grand Bukhtishu, served as the director of the hospital at Gundishapur. As previously stated, he was summoned to Baghdad in 765AD to cure Caliph Al-Mansur of a gastrointestinal ailment. He was requested to remain in Baghdad after successfully healing the Caliph, or at least to send his son, Bukhtishu II, there, but he declined. Since his son, Bukhtishu II, could not be far from the Gundishapur hospital, Jurjis agreed to send his student, Isa bin Shahla, to the capital when he returned.

#### *Bukhtishu II*

Jibril bin Bukhtishu's father, Bukhtishu II, was the son of Jurjis I. When his father went to Baghdad to heal Caliph Al-Mansur, he stayed at Gundishapur as the leader of Bimaarestaan (8).

During the reign of Al-Mahdi, he moved to Baghdad

to treat the illness of Al-Hadi, the crown prince (8). He succeeded in the treatment of Al-Hadi, but then he returned to Gundishapur until the government of Harun Al-Rashid (8). When Harun al-Rashid became Caliph, Bukhtishu II again went to Baghdad. At that time, the Caliph asked his Vezir, Yahya Barmaki, to test Bukhtishu II in the field of medicine, so Yahya invited some of the expert physicians of Baghdad, and after the examination, they certified Bukhtishu II as an excellent and expert physician (8). Bukhtishu II treated the headache of the Caliph, and the Caliph honored him as the "physician-in-chief" of Baghdad, a title he retained until 801 C.E., when he passed away in that city (8,11).

#### **Jibril bin Bukhtishu**

Jibril was Buthtishu II's son. Like his ancestors, he was the center of attention at the Abbasid court, and had much income for serving the Caliph (8,12). During his time in Baghdad, Jibril provided guidance to Harun al-Rashid on establishing the city's first hospital (6,13,14). The hospital and observatory were designed in the same manner as the one in Gundishapur (13), where Jibril and his family studied medicine and played roles as directors. Jibril act as the dean of this new hospital, which was named in his honor by Harun al-Rashid's rule (13).

#### *Jibrail III*

Jibrail III, who became impoverished after his mother's death, began studying medicine entirely in Baghdad. The Buyid monarch 'Adud al-Dawla summoned him to Shiraz after he had treated an ambassador from Kerman, but he immediately left for Baghdad. He even turned down an invitation from the Fatimid al-Aziz, and he only left Baghdad for a brief discussions. The death date of Jibrail III took place on June 8, 1006 (11).

#### **Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu**

Many believe that Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu was the last famous physician of this family (6). He compiled some medical books, among them *Manafi'-I Al hayavan* (منافع الحیوان), is so important (Figure 2).

#### **Bukhtishu family and translation movement**

The translation movement was a great effort by scientists of the Islamic world to translate academic textbooks from several languages into Arabic in the period from the 8th to the 13th century, which led to a dozen discoveries and inventions in the Islamic period (15,16). Although preliminary efforts were undertaken in the Omavid era, the main part of this movement was

carried out in the Abbasid period with governmental financial support (17,18). Their patrons were Abbasid Caliphs who desired to gather all written knowledge of that time in Arabic. Scholars and scientists from many racial and religious backgrounds participated in this movement. Many academics from Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism joined this movement, along with Muslims. A substantial number of secular Greek works were translated into Arabic through this long-term, well-funded endeavor (17,18).

The movement, frequently referred to as the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, encompassed a substantial number of translations from Syriac, Sanskrit, and Pahlavi (19).

One of the most important members of the translation movement was members of different generations of the Bukhtishu Family, who had a great impression on this academic act (20,21).

### Bukhtishu family's publications

#### Konnash

Konnash is a general term for reference handbooks used in the Middle Ages in Islamic countries; physicians used them when needed for diagnosing diseases or treating their patients (22). There are numerous Konnashes among the famous physicians of the Middle Ages, some of them were written and compiled by members of the Bukhtishu family (22). One of the most important instances of them was written by Jurjis I in the 8th century. Its original language was Syriac, and it was later translated into Arabic by Hunayn ibn Ishaq (22).

Other books on the general term "Konnash" compiled by the Bukhtishu Family are as follows: (22)

- Konnash, by Jurjis Jibril.
- Konnash, by Bukhtishu bin Jibril.
- Konnash e Kabeer, or Great Konnash, by Jibril II.
- Konnash e Sagheer, or Minor Konnash, by Bukhtishu II.

### Manafi'-I Al hayavan ("The benefits of animals") (منافع الحیوان)

It is not possible to write about the Bukhtishu family without mentioning the strange and famous book "Manafi'-I Al hayavan ("The Benefits of Animals"). This book is written by 'Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu', the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of Bukhtishus.

He compiled this book to inform people, especially medical students, about the benefits of different kinds of animals and their usage in medicine.

This book was translated from Arabic into Persian in the early 14th century by "Abd al-Hādī ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Ibrāhīm al-Marāghi" during the rule of Ghazan Khan, the Mongol governor of Iran (ruled 1295-1304).

The book was illustrated with a dozen pictures from the 14th century, and it is one of the prominent instances of visual art from the Ilkhanate period (Figures 3, 4) (23-25).

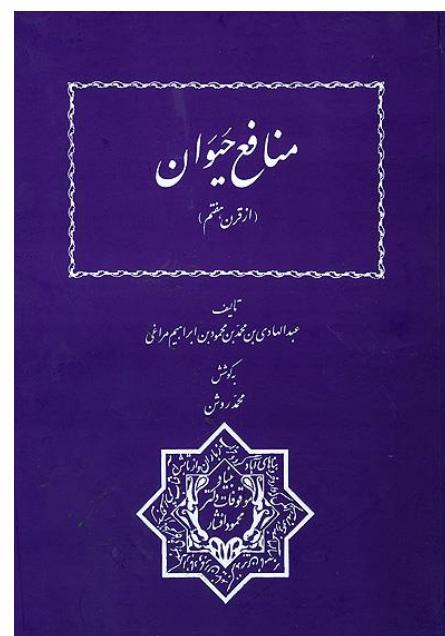


Figure 2. The Front Cover of the Book "Manafi'-i hayavan", by: Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu, Translated to Persian, by: 'Abd al-Hādī ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd ibn Ibrāhīm al-Marāghi. Published by:

Dr. Afshar Foundation; Tehran, 2009



Figure 3. An illustrated page from the book "Manafi'-i hayavan" by: Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu. This page is about the "scorpion" and its benefits. Adapted from Beigbabapour, with permission



**Figure 4.** An illustrated page from the book "Manafi'-i hayavan" by: Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu. This page is about the "partridge" and its benefits. Adapted from Beigbabapour, with permission

The book is divided into four separate parts (25):

- A) About the benefits of the human
- B) About the benefits of sheep and cows
- C) About the benefits of birds
- D) About the benefits of insects

One of its exclusive manuscripts is now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (26).

The Bukhtishu Family belonged to the Islamic golden age, which spanned the 8th to 11th centuries. This period had an undeniable impact on Islamic medicine, the translation movement, and the dissemination of medical knowledge and its practice all over the Islamic world. Additionally, it facilitated the relocation of the center of medical sciences education from Gundishapur to Baghdad. This article briefly reviewed some important points in the history of the Bukhtishis, but further studies on the detailed activities of each member of this family are suggested.

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