IBN AL BAITAR
(Abu Muhammad Abdallah Ibn Ahmad Ibn Al Baitar
Dhiya Al Din Al Malaqi)
(Died 1248 AD)

Abu Muhammad Abdallah Ibn Ahmad Ibn Al Baitar Dhiya Al Din Al Malaqi was one of the greatest scientists of Muslim Spain and was the greatest botanist and pharmacist of the Middle Ages. He was born in the Spanish city of Malaqa (Malaga) towards the end of the 12th century. He learned botany from Abu Al Abbas Al Nabati, a learned botanist, with whom he started collecting plants in and around Spain. In 1219 he left Spain on a plant-collecting expedition and travelled along the northern coast of Africa as far as Asia Minor. The exact modes of his travel (whether by land or sea) are not known, but the major stations he visited include Bugia, Qastantunia (Constantinople), Tunis, Tripoli, Barqa and Adalia. After 1224, he entered the service of al-Kamil, the Egyptian Governor, and was appointed chief herbalist. In 1227 Al Kamil extended his domination to Damaseus, and Ibn Al Baitar accompanied him there which provided him an opportunity to collect plants in Syria. His researches on plants extended over a vast area: including Arabia and Palestine, which he either visited or managed to collect plants from stations located there. He died in Damascus in 1248.

Ibn Baitar’s major contribution, *Kitab Al Jami fi Al Adwiya Al Mufrada*, is one of the greatest botanical compilations dealing with medicinal plants in Arabic. It enjoyed a high status among botanists up to the 16th century and is a systematic work that embodies earlier works, with due criticism, and adds a great part of original contribution. The encyclopedia comprises some 1,400 different items, largely medicinal plants and vegetables, of which about 200 plants were not known earlier. The book refers to the work of some 150 authors mostly Arabic, and it also quotes about 20 early Greek scientists. It was translated into Latin and published in 1758.

His second monumental treatise *Kitab Al Mlughni fi Al Adwiya Al Mufrada* is an encyclopedia of medicine. The drugs are listed in accordance with their therapeutical value. Thus, its 20 different chapters deal with the plants bearing significance to diseases of head, ear, eye, etc. On surgical issues he has frequently quoted the famous Muslim surgeon, Abul Qasim Zahrawi. Besides Arabic, Baitar has given Greek and Latin names of the plants, thus facilitating transfer of knowledge.

Ibn Baitar’s contributions are characterized by observation, analysis and classification and have exerted a profound influence on Eastern as well as Western botany and medicine. Though the *Jami* was translated/published late in the western languages as mentioned above, yet many scientists had earlier studied various parts of the book and made several references to it.