

SHORT COMMUNICATION

A Historical-Literary Survey of Medicine in Ancient Iran

Abstract

In this paper the practice of medicine in ancient Iran is studied. Mythology of ancient Iran has many references to how diseases were treated and medicine dispensed. There is even a mention of surgery; presumably the first caesarian section in the history of medicine is performed for the birth of mythological Persian hero, Rostam. This study looks at mythology, ancient Persian religious texts and historical books to discuss the practice of medicine in ancient Iran.

Key words: Ancient Medicine, Persian Mythology, Avesta, *Shahnameh*, *Garshabnameh*

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Introduction

The objective of this paper is to provide an analytical history of medicine in ancient Iran by studying ancient Persian myths and texts and to discuss what kind of medicine was practiced in ancient Iran and how it was carried out.

Medicine, curing diseases and alleviating pain have been the concern of human beings from very ancient times, so it is no wonder that ancient civilizations such as Persians

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had remarkable achievements in this field. It can be said that Persians have played a great role in the history of medicine in the world. However, since the official language of early centuries of Islam had been Arabic and most Persian physicians wrote in Arabic, Orientalists have considered them as Arab physicians.¹ This confusion over language and nationality does not decrease from their eminence; however, it has resulted in ignoring the works of those physicians and pharmacists who wrote in Persian. Moreover, unfamiliarity with Avestan and other ancient Persian languages has led to the obscurity of the tradition and history of Persian medicine before Islam. Clearly it would be impossible to reach such heights of research and discovery in medicine in the early centuries of Islam without a strong academic background in previous ages.^{2,3} In this paper one aspect of Persian medicine before Islam not mentioned in medicine books but in literary texts and myth is discussed.

Medicine in Mythology

In Persian mythology, Jamshid, the mythical king who according to John Hinnells "is the idealistic prototype of all kings",⁴ first introduced medicine and methods of curing the sick to people. The world was in ruins at the beginning of his kingdom and Jamshid helped it flourish. In his reign demons and their cronies, untruth, hunger, disease and death, had no place in his kingdom. In *Shahnameh* he is explicitly considered as the first physician.⁵ As a result, people overcame diseases and death at the time of Jamshid. Considering himself victorious in the face of death, Jamshid claimed divinity for which he was punished by Zahak who forced his cruel rule over the Persians for a thousand years.⁶ It is also mentioned that Jamshid's brother, Spityura, cut him in half.⁷ Thus with Jamshid's death, the golden age of health and no death in ancient Persian mythology ended.

Many times in *Shahnameh* medicine and different remedies are mentioned which help us understand the medical knowledge of the ancient. The birth of the mythological Persian hero, Rostam, is described in detail and seems to be one of the early accounts of a caesarean section in history.⁸ According to *Shahnameh*, Rostam's mother, Rudabeh, was in labor and could not give birth; so with the help of the mythical bird Simorgh, a magus gave her wine to make her drunk and then cut her side to pull out the baby.⁹

Abdolahi mentions¹⁰ that sometimes superstitions are mixed

- 1- Klein-Franke et al, 2033: 977-82.
- 2- As example: Gorji et al, 2001: 455-61.
- 3- As example: Shoja et al, 2007: 359-378.
- 4- Hinnells, 1571/1993: 56.
- 5- Ferdowsi, 1376/1997: 49.
- 6- Ibid: 56.
- 7- Ibid
- 8- Torpin et al, 1961.
- 9- Ibid: 237-8.
- 10- Jahiz, 1969.



with scientific facts and with the help of figurative language of poetry certain non-scientific views are considered as science. For example, beautiful animals which have positive images in literature are considered to have healing powers in medical beliefs. Thus the gall bladder of deer is supposed to cure blindness;¹¹ Arabs believe that a deer never becomes sick unless it is dying (*Hayat al-Hayawan*);¹² strong brave animals were considered instrumental in curing cowardice and increasing bravery.¹³

Ancient Religious Texts

The medicinal properties of many plants were known to ancient people according to Avestan texts. It is mentioned in Avesta that Ahura Mazda put ten thousand health-giving plants at the disposal of Zoroaster, "And I Ahura Mazda sent him [Zoroaster] herbal plants growing in hundreds and thousands and ten thousands around Gaokerena [Gaokerene or white Hom is considered the kings of medicinal plants]".¹⁴ Avesta considers Faridun (Avestan pronunciation is *Thrita*) as the first wise healer who "drove sickness back to sickness and death back to death, and turned away the tip of the sword and the fire of fever from the bodies of mortals".¹⁵ We can also find out from these sources that some of these plants were actually used, for example, in Avesta heavy punishment is accorded for these who used henbane for abortion. Also, with the help of Hom or Soma which is apparently a kind of narcotic, Ardaviraf goes to the world of the dead and after visiting hell and heaven comes back to the land of the living to write of his observations in *Ardavirafnameh*.¹⁶ In *Garshabnameh*, Garshab narrates the killing of a whale and the use of its brain for medicinal purposes. In describing different islands, he also names plants each of which has a certain medicinal value such as making the elderly young, or flowers whose smell will cause laughter or vice versa.¹⁷

In *Bondahishn*, a Pahlavi text, which is mainly about the origins of creation, the basics of anatomy have been described in figurative language. The human body is considered as a picture of the world, the bones being the mountains, the stomach as the ocean, the skin as the sky, the flesh as the earth, veins as rivers, blood circulation as water in rivers, and hairy areas as jungles.¹⁸ In *Bondahishn* a tree is named "tree of many seeds" which contains the seeds of all beneficial and medicinal plants.¹⁹

Besides medicine, public health is another aspect to which

- 11- al-Damiri, 2004.
- 12- Abdollahi, 2012.
- 13- al-Damiri, 2004.
- 14- Avesta, 1375/1997: Vandidad, Fargard 20, 4.
- 15- Ibid: Vandid, Fargard 20, 2.
- 16- Ardaviraf, 1387/1998.
- 17- Asadi Tusi, 1354/1976: 150-6.
- 18- Dadegi, 1390/2011: 123.
- 19- Ibid: 87.



Persians paid attention and we find many instances of this in religious texts. According to Zoroastrian religion, it was forbidden to contaminate water, soil, fire and plants. Chicken coops and cow sheds were supposed to be cleaned regularly. Even throwing away a bone with a bit of fat on it was considered a big crime. Corpses were completely unclean and nobody was allowed to touch them. Every devout Zoroastrian was supposed to destroy insects and harmful animals which were called "*xarfastran*". Cleanliness in the house and in living environments was considered a religious task and at least once every year spring cleaning was considered a public duty before the New Year.²⁰

20- *Avesta*, 1375/1997.

21- Ferdowsi, 1376/1997: 41.

Conclusion

According to historical documents, Egyptian physicians worked at the court of Darius and after the conquest of Macedonia, Greek physicians entered the court as well. As a result Greek medicine came into Iran and this influence was strengthened with Alexander's conquest. In eastern areas of India, Greek knowledge combined with Indian botany helped develop medicine greatly. A reminder of this useful exchange is mentioned in *Shahnameh*; four precious gifts are given to Alexander in India: a girl, a philosopher, a magic cup and a physician. It is emphasized in *Shahnameh* that this physician was aware of the mystery of plants and their uses.²¹ The combination of the two schools of Eastern and Western medicine in Iran resulted in the blossoming of Persian medicine in Jondi Shapur and later in Baghdad.

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