

Zoroastrian Priests: Ancient Persian Psychiatrists



Zoroastrian priest in Persepolis sculpture (500 B.C.), Persepolis complex, Fars, Iran. He has holy medicine (*prahaoma* syrup) in his hands. Ancient Persian psychiatrists were selected from priests. (Photograph provided by Dr. Zargaran.)

The official religion of ancient Persia was Zoroastrian, named for its messenger, Zoroaster. The religion flourished during the Achaemenid empire (550–330 B.C.), Parthian empire (247 B.C. to A.D. 224), and Sassanid dynasty (A.D. 224–637), until the Muslims' entrance into Persia (1). The *Vandidad*, the chapter about social conduct in the *Avesta*, the holy book of Zoroastrians, contains the history of medicine, rules governing medical practice, and directions for health care and hygiene. According to this manuscript, physicians were

divided into three groups: surgeons (*kareto baēšaza* in the Avestan language), physicians who worked with herbal medicines (*urvarō baēšaza*), and physicians who treated with holy words (*mānsrspan̄ baēšaza*), which were preferred to other treatments. These physicians, such as the one shown above, were selected from Zoroastrian priests and included some of the first psychiatrists in history (2).

The *Avesta* describes *prahaoma*, the first known use of a stimulant produced from the *haoma* plant (*Ephedra distachya* L.), which was administered as a euphoriant antidepressant (2, 3).

A Pahlavic manuscript from the Sassanid period described the formulation of a “happiness drug,” a psychotherapeutic strategy depicted as a medicinal compound.

The happiness drug is a drug whose dose is 1 measure (0.6 g), administered with a soothing manner and understanding. It contains:

If I don't do this, what should I do? (1 measure)
Tomorrow may be better than today. (1 measure)
It can be worse than now. (1 measure)
It is better to become happy for what happened.
(1 measure)
It is worse to become sad for what occurred.
(1 measure)

These substances should be mixed in the “patience mortar” by the “invocation pestle,” then sifted through the “God-trust sieve.” The drug should be administered in the “refuge-in-God medicine cup” with “competence water” every morning. “Happiness without any bad mentality is beneficial for body and soul” (3).

References

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