

Simurgh as a Medical Symbol for Iran

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Dear Editor

Symbols are powerful images which, in one pictogram, contain a host of associated ideas or cultural myths. Today as a medical symbol, the rod of Asclepius with its entwined single serpent has been universally adopted, although this was originally a symbol representing Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, from around the 6th century B.C.E.

The Caduceus of the Roman god Mercury (the Karykeion of the Greek god Hermes) with double entwined serpents capped with wings is also used today as a medical symbol since its adoption by the U.S. Army Medical Corps (USAMC) in the early twentieth century, although originally, it had no medical association in early Greek or Roman mythology or tradition.¹

In Iranian mythology, however, there is no recorded evidence that the image of the serpent was ever associated with the practice of medicine or pharmacy.

However the mythical Iranian bird, Simurgh, has been famously associated with the practice of surgery and medicinal herbs.

For this reason I wish to suggest that the Simurgh might be a more appropriate symbol for Iranian medicine as opposed to the Greek serpent.

Simurgh in Zoroastrian Mythology

Simurgh is an Iranian mythical bird which is mentioned twice in the Zoroastrian holy book, the Avesta; as Saêna (Mérégô Saêna) in Bahman Yasht, verse 41 and again in Rashnu Yasht, verse 17.²

These Yashts were probably written during the Achaemenid era (521-331 BCE), but the myths contained within them probably go back to 1500-1200 BCE, contemporaneous with the Indian Rigvedas.³

In Bahman Yasht the great bird Saêna brings life-refreshing rain and also wraps Xvarnah (fortune) around the house of worshipers of Ahuramazda. In Rashnu Yasht it is mentioned that the bird Saêna “roosts on the tree that stands in the middle of the ‘Vourakasha’ sea, the tree that has good and potent medicines, the tree that is called ‘all-healing’, and the seeds of all plants are contained within it”.

Again, in ‘Minooye Kherad’, a Zoroastrian book of wisdom and advice which was probably written in the late Sassanid era during the 6th century CE in the Pahlavi language; it is mentioned that the Sênmurw (Pahlavi language for the Avestan Mérégô Saêna) roosted on top of the mythical ‘Vispô-bish’ (many seed) tree that grew in the middle of the ‘Farakhkart’

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sea (Avestan ‘Vourakasha’) which contained the seeds of all medicinal plants that cured all diseases.

Poure-Davoud² writes that in Farvardin Yasht, verses 97 and 126, several physicians have been mentioned bearing the name Saêna and also in Dinkard (a Zoroastrian text) it is mentioned that there was a physician by the name of Saêna (the son of Ahüm-stüd) who was born one hundred years after Zoroaster who, during his long life, trained 100 students to be physicians.

It is thus established that in the Zoroastrian tradition from the Achaemenid (550-331 BCE) to the end of the Sassanid (226-651 CE) era, a period ranging well over 1000 years, the bird Saêna or Sênmurw was firmly associated with medicine and medicinal herbs.

Simurgh in the Shahnameh

In the Shahnameh (The Book of Kings), a book of Iranian epic poetry written over 1000 years ago by Ferdowsi (936-1020 CE) in the modern Iranian language (Farsi), the mythical bird Simurgh (Avestan Saêna; Pahlavi Sênmurw) appears three times.

First in raising Zal the Albino hero abandoned by his father, Sam, on mount Alborz, and twice in relation with the hero Rostam; first in aiding his birth and second in healing his wounds during a battle with Esfandiar.

Simurgh’s surgical and medical prowess are demonstrated when Roodabeh, Zal’s wife, is pregnant with their son Rostam, but due to the child’s large size has great difficulty during delivery and becomes moribund.

At this time Zal burns Simurgh’s magical feather and the bird appears and gives instructions to a mobed (a Zoroastrian priest adept in surgery) on how to cut open Roodabeh’s lower abdomen with a sharp knife, after having given her an herbal potion mixed with wine to anesthetize her. The huge child, Rostam, is delivered safely. The incision is sewn up and covered with a healing emulsion of milk, musk and herbs and finally rubbed with the magical feather of Simurgh to heal.

Roodabeh regains consciousness the next day and recovers fully in due course and Rostam survives to become the central hero of the epic Shahnameh. Simurgh’s next medical episode is when Rostam and his horse, Rakhsh, have been fatally wounded by Esfandiar’s arrows and Simurgh is once again summoned by Zal.

When the bird extracts the arrows from Rostam’s chest and the horse’s neck, and rubs the wounds with herbal potions and his magical feather, they both recover fully to pursue their heroic tasks.⁴

DISCUSSION

Thus it seems that in Iranian cultural heritage, this mythical bird Simurgh has been associated with medicinal herbs and the practice of surgery for over 2,500 years. Therefore it must justly deserve this pride of place in Iranian medical history, perhaps as the medical symbol as opposed to the non-Iranian serpent.

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