

From Warriors to Guardians: The Assyrians and Their Role in the History of Medicine

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Ho, ASSYRIAN.' *The rod of my anger, and the staff in their hand is my indignation (Isaiah 10:5). Their arrows are sharp and their bows are bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind (Isaiah 5:28).*' Those were the Assyrians as pictured in the Old Scripture! With their having ruled the entire Middle East for many centuries Assyrians had excelled not only in war but also in peace. Many of their discoveries and inventions are still alive today, speaking for one of the greatest civilizations ever known. *And the pride of Assyria shall cease (Zechariah 10:11).*' And so the Assyrian star dwindled, and their glory perished as they lost their empire in 612 BC.

Centuries went by before we hear again about the Assyrians. During the first and the second centuries after Christ Assyrians lived in small principalities in northern Mesopotamia. One of them was Osrhoene with "Edessa" being the capital. During his reign, Abgar Oukama sent a letter to Jesus asking him to come to Edessa and cure him, the king, of a fatal disease.² Jesus replied:

*Thou art fortunate, thou who believest in me, not having seen me. For it is written of me that those who see me do not believe in me, but those who do not see me, believe in me. As to your asking me to come to you, the work for which I was sent is about to be accomplished and I am to return to my father who sent me. After I have ascended to him I shall send you one of my disciples who will cure your sickness and will convert you and those about you to life eternal. The city shall be blessed and no enemy shall prevail against it.*²

This legend of Abgar states that Addai, one of the seventy apostles, was sent by the disciple Judas Thomas, who healed Abgar and as a result of this miracle and his preaching converted Edessa to Christianity in 32 AD, and he built a church from the money which king Abgar gave him. This was the era for a new role played by the Assyrians, in religion, medicine, and science, as they accepted Christianity. One may ask, Why the Assyrians? This is not difficult to understand

if we look at some of the attributes the Assyrians had at that time, some of which follow.³

1. The unique geographical location of the Assyrians enabled them to come into contact with several great cultures: the Greeks in the north, the Romans in the west, the Egyptians in the south, and the Persians in the east.

2. The Assyrians played a very active part in the early diffusion of Christianity throughout Asia Minor, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. As a result of the presence of two separate Old Testament canons in Hebrew and Greek—a cause of bitter argument and controversy—the Assyrian scholars applied themselves diligently to the study of Greek so that they could read first hand the Septuagint version of the Old Testament completed in Alexandria in 132 BC by a group of 70 Alexandrian Jews who had forgotten their Aramaic vernacular. The Assyrians were the first who translated the Old Testament from the Hebrew into their own vernacular, the Syriac, in what has ever since been known as the Peshitta version. The Assyrians became familiar with the Greek language and by it Greek science, Greek medicine, and Greek literature; this is an important factor in the role they played in history of medicine.

3. The establishment of the great school of Edessa. The interest of the early Assyrian church fathers in the Greek version of the Scriptures and the resulting contacts with the Greek scholars created an atmosphere of study and investigation in Edessa and Nisibis. When the Romans gave up Nisibis to the Persians a large number of the rich and learned Assyrians migrated to Edessa. They established the school of Edessa in 363-364 AD. In this school theology was the major subject, but medicine was growing as a study and rapidly coming to the fore in the attention it attracted.⁴ A large hospital affiliated with the school was built for clinical instruction.

4. The Catholic Church, through the council of Ephesus in 431, had deposed Nestorios, the patriarch of the Assyrian church, because of what was considered a heretical doctrine consisting in his denial of the complete merger of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. He asserted that Mary, the mother

of Christ, should not be called the mother of God. His followers, the Assyrians, were since called the Nestorians. This Christian sect played a profound role in the history of medicine.

Because of their continuous teachings at the school of Edessa Emperor Zeno at the instigation of Bishop Cyrus of Alexandria abolished the school.⁵ The teachers and disciples were convicted of heresy and expelled from Edessa. Their school was turned into a new orthodox church and given the significant name of Our Lady, Mother of God!

The outcome was tremendous. The Nestorian heresy was one of the great centrifugal forces caused by theological hatred. It pushed Christianity across mountains and deserts as far as China and thus became a very important link between East and West.⁶ The zealots became missionaries, and many of the teachers turned into a more profitable intellectual activity, the study and practice of medicine.

After the closing of the school in Edessa many theologians under the leadership of Bar Soma, the deposed head of the school, went back to Nisibis in Persian territory and established a new school there. Many others accepted the asylum status offered by the Sassanian King Kobad and migrated to Jundi Shapor in southwest Persia, an established See for a Nestorian bishop. They brought with them Syriac translations of the Greek medical works of Hippocrates, Galen, and Aristotle. Thus the first Persian medical school was established under Nestorian inspiration and management.^{3,7-8} The greatest impetus to the school was given by King Nushirwan the Just. He gave the teachers every advantage and encouragement and increased the prestige of the school by welcoming the Greek neoplatonists from the school of Athens when it was closed. During his reign Jundi Shapor became the greatest intellectual center of the time. Within its walls Greek, Jewish, Nestorian, Persian and Hindu thought and experience were freely exchanged. The Nestorian teachers were the most prominent as teaching was done largely in Syriac.³

Opposite the school a famous hospital was built: Bimaristan, a Persian name used subsequently for all the great hospitals in Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo, which the Arabs copied from this model in Jundi Shapor. Describing the school of medicine and its hospital in Jundi Shapor, Ibn-al-Qifti says⁹:

They made rapid progress in the science, developed new methods in the treatment of disease along pharmacological lines, to the point that their therapy was judged superior to that of the Greek and the Hindus. Furthermore these physicians adopted the scientific methods of other oocoles and modified them by their own discov-

eries. They elaborated medical laws and recorded the work that had been developed.

During several centuries the school and Bimaristan of Jundi Shapor held first place in the world of medicine and science. It was from among their students that Persia, Iraq, and Syria recruited their physicians. Pupils from all nationalities gathered in Jundi Shapor for instruction. Furthermore the Islamic conquerors did not hesitate to call into service the physicians trained in this school.

The trust confided in the school of Jundi Shapor and its graduates was deserved primarily for its eminence and the renown of the faculty and the ability of its graduates, who attended the Prophet Muhammed and the subsequent Moslem Caliphs for centuries to come. Nestorians were given a special favor in the eyes of the Prophet and his succeeding Caliphs as they denied Mary being the mother of God in accordance with the Qu'ran, as best depicted in the Sura of "Unity" ... "Lam Yalid Wa Lam Yulad" meaning He (Allah) begets not, nor is he begotten. This Sura, in the eyes of Moslems, separates Nestorians from other Christian infidels.³

From this Assyrian Nestorian community educated and wise in the medical science of that era above all others, the nascent and virile Arabs eagerly sought their earliest and their later training in Greek and Galenic medicine and rekindled their torch of ancient learning with the whirlwind of their newly awakened interest and enthusiasm for learning.³

The school of Jundi Shapor graduated a long line of distinguished physicians,^{3,7} the families of Bakhtishu and the Meshus to mention only two, who moved to Baghdad, to Damascus, and to Cairo where they organized famous hospitals modeled after their hospital in Jundi Shapor. The monograph of Dr. Ahmad Issa Bey on the hospitals of the Islamic period is the most surprising and illuminating exposition and proof that Arabian medicine made full use of the lore handed down through the Nestorians.^{7,10} This is a detailed account of these hospitals, their buildings, and their teaching clinics with inpatient and outpatient departments providing different services, medical, surgical, Orthopedics and Ophthalmology; these are all copies of the famous Nestorian hospital in Jundi Shapor.

No nation in existence today has given so much to the history of humanity yet has received so little as the Assyrians. Driven out of their homeland, more than 4 million Assyrians today live in more than 30 countries around the globe with no hope to redeem their history, identity, and their intellectual achievements, which others claim as their own, but according to the word of God,¹¹ *Whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying,*

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Blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my heritage (Isaiah 19:25).'

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