

Asclepius, Caduceus, and Simurgh as Medical Symbols

Part II

Simurgh

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Abstract:

In part one of this article I reviewed the history of Asclepius and the Caduceus of Hermes as medical symbols and made a tentative suggestion of using the mythical bird Simurgh as an Iranian symbol of medicine. In this, the second part, I shall describe the evolution of the myth of the Simurgh and discuss the medical relevance of this bird in Iranian history.



Introduction

At the present time, the rod of Asclepius, with its entwined single serpent and the Caduceus of Hermes, with the double serpents capped with a wing, are used universally as medical symbols. I intend to suggest that in Iran, at least, we could adopt the image of the mythical Simurgh as a medical symbol due to its relevance in the history of Iranian medicine.

The myth of Simurgh

Simurgh is a mythical Iranian bird whose history goes back to at least 2500 years ago or even longer in the Aryan mythologies and Sanskrit scriptures.

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The evolution of the myth has had three distinct phases:

- The oldest phase belongs to the Zoroastrian holy scriptures including the Avesta, where the bird 'Saëna' is mentioned roosting on the 'vispô-bish' tree which carries the seeds of all medicinal plants and herbs.

- The second phase belongs to the Sassanian period (226 – 651 C.E.) and is retold in the 'Shahnameh' (the Book of Kings) by the epic poet Firdowsi (936 – 1020 C.E.) where the magical bird, Simurgh, raises 'Zal', the albino child, and then later helps his wife, Roodabeh, to give birth to their son, the epic hero Rostam, via a 'caesarian section', and heals her wounds with the magical powers of its feathers.

- And finally the story of Simurgh as told by Atar (1145 – 1221 C.E.) in his mystical poem, 'The Parliament of the Birds', where Simurgh has a metaphorical role as a mystic leader, but has no medical connotations.

In this article I shall give a brief and simple narrative of the first two phases related to Simurgh's medical associations and only mention in passing the third phase relating to his wisdom as a mystical leader.

Simurgh (Saêna) in the Zoroastrian tradition

Avesta, the Zoroastrian holy book, contains sacred texts which were composed at different times and in different linguistic versions. A great part of the original Avesta was lost or destroyed when Alexander invaded Iran (331 B.C.E.) and burnt the libraries at Persepolis and Shush and what remained was later supplemented by interpretations and additions during the Parthian and the Sassanian eras. The oldest part, the Gâthâs, are hymns which may have been composed by Zoroaster himself, where he addresses the supreme god, Ahuramazda, the language resembles that of the Indian Rigveda, going back to 1500 – 1200 B.C.E. The Yashts, which are hymns dedicated to lower deities than Ahuramazda, were probably composed later, and the language resembles the Old Persian of the Achamenid cuneiform texts, which places their composition to somewhere between 521 – 331 B.C.E.¹

According to Poure-Davoud² the bird Saêna (Méréghô Saêna) is mentioned twice in the Avesta in the Yashts. In Bahram Yasht verse 41 the hymn asks Ahuramazda that "...may the deity of victory, wrap *xvarnah* (fortune) round the house of worshippers, for wealth in cattle, like the great bird Saêna, and as the watery clouds cover the great mountains"... referring to the rain giving powers of the bird Saêna. In the second instance that the bird Saêna is mentioned in the Avesta is in the Rashnu Yasht verse 17 where the hymn addresses Rashnu, the deity of justice, as such: "and if you Rashnu, were on the tree that Saêna roosts, the tree that stands in the middle of the Vourukasha 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".

Minooye Kherad (Mênôg î Xrad, in Pahlavi), a book of wisdom and advice, probably written during the late Sassanid era in the 6th century C.E., in the Pahlavi language, about 1000 years later than the Yashts, mentions the bird Sênmurw (Middle Persian or Pahlavi language for Avestan Méréghô Saêna). In this text, the bird Sênmurw roosted on top

of the mythical 'Vispô-bish' (=many seed) tree that grew in the middle of the 'Farakhkart' sea (Avestan 'Vourakasha'). This 'Vispô-bish' tree was known as the mother of all plants and in particular (as mentioned in the Rashnu Yasht of Avesta) contained the seeds of all medicinal plants which cured all diseases. When the bird Sênmurw flew away from the Vispô-bish tree, a thousand new shoots sprouted from the tree and when he landed on that tree again, a thousand branches broke from that tree and their seeds dispersed.

In Zâdspram, a 9th century Pahlavi compilation of excerpts from the Avesta, the sacred plant Haoma, the juice of which was said to have rejuvenating and health restoring powers and was taken during Zoroastrian rituals by the Mobeds (Zoroastrian priests), is said to grow near the 'Vispô-bish' tree on which the bird Sênmurw roosted.

Thus, in Avestan mythology, the bird Saêna (Pahlavi Sênmurw) is clearly associated with medicinal plants as well as the sacred rejuvenating plant Haoma.

The Nature of the Bird Saêna

But what species of bird was this Méréghô Saêna?

The major problem that bedevils the identification of Saêna with a real bird is a lack of correct nomenclature. Various scholars have suggested the eagle (Farsi=oghab), the falcon (Farsi=shahin), or the vulture (Farsi=homay) for this bird, but the confusion remains not only with the Family of the bird but also with its species.^{3,1}

In order to identify the Avestan Saêna with a real bird, I shall attempt to correlate the meager evidence of its characteristics as described in the Avesta with those of the known birds of Iran.⁴

As we can see from the Yashts (see above), the bird Saêna was large and nested on a tree in the middle of a sea.

Etymologically, the name Saêna is identical to the Sanskrit S,yena, which has been translated as an eagle or a falcon.³

According to the book 'The Birds of Iran'⁴ in the family Accipitridae, which includes the eagles, the hawks and the vultures, and the family Falconidae (falcons), the characteristics that coincide with the Avestan descriptions, can be narrowed to the following species:

1. The vultures are the largest of these families with the Bearded Vulture, *Gypatus barbatus* (Farsi=Homay) reaching a size of 100 to 110 cm (from head to tail), with a wing span of 3 meters and lives on very high and isolated mountains (Figure 1).



Figure 1: a) Bearded Vulture (Source: Available from: URL: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/bearded_vulture); b) Wing span⁴

2. The Golden or Royal eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*, (Farsi=Oghabe Talai) is one of the largest eagles with a size of 75 to 83 cm (from head to tail) and a wing span of 2 meters or more. They are powerful birds of prey and very swift in flight, and can dive at speeds of up to 240 kilometers per hour upon their quarry. They build their nests on high mountains, or on rocky cliffs near the sea or sometimes on a tree. Their nests are large, up to 2 meters in diameter and one meter in height, made of large tree branches, and when made on a tree, the supporting branches may break due to the weight of the nest (Figure 2).⁵



Figure 2. a) the golden eagle; b) wing span⁵

3. Both the Golden Eagle and the Bearded Vulture are still common in Iran in the northern mountain ranges of Alborz by the Caspian Sea and the western mountain ranges of Zagros (Figure 3).⁴

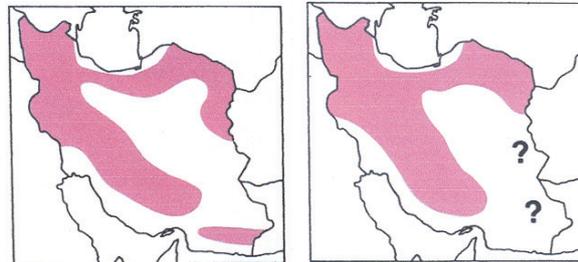


Figure 3. Distribution and habitat in Iran; a) the Homay; b) The golden eagle⁶

4. The Barbary Falcon, *Falco pelegrinoides* (Farsi=Shahin) is a small bird of prey with a length of 35 – 45 cm which builds its nest on dry mountainous regions and cliffs, but is not known to nest on trees.

And so it seems that the Falcon (Shahin) cannot be the bird Saêna although it featured on the royal standard of Cyrus the Great and those of other Achaemenid Kings (figure 4).



Figure 4. The falcon (Shahin), the Standard of Cyrus the Great, the first Achaemenids King (Source: Wikipedia. Available from: URL: <http://en.wikipedia/wiki/flag-of-Iran>)

The Bearded Vulture (Homay) has its own mythology as a harbinger of luck and the bestower of the aura (Farr) to kings. Its image as a column head in Persepolis is well known, but has never been confused with the Saêna bird or Simurgh (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Column head of Homay from Persepolis, the Achaemenids Palace in southern Iran, around 2500 years ago

It thus seems reasonable to assume with some confidence that the Méréghô Saêna or Sênmurw of the Avesta was in fact the Golden Eagle.

There have been attempts to identify the Sênmurw with astrological and astronomical constellations such as the Constellation Aquila (the Eagle) or its most prominent star Altair (the Bird)³ but these remain fanciful at best, as there are no such attestations in Zoroastrian texts. Furthermore, in some recent articles, the terms Haoma (the plant) and Homay (the bird) have been confused due to the similarity of pronunciation and both have been erroneously related to the Sênmurw.

Some late Sassanian pictorial iconography on silver platters, silk robes or coins which depict some mythical bird with the head of a dog, the claws of a lion or a raptor and the tail of a peacock or a rooster have been interpreted as depictions of Sênmurw due to the descriptions of the bird given in Bundahishn. Bundahishn, meaning 'Primal Creation', is a Zoroastrian text, written in the Pahlavi language (middle Persian) concerning cosmology and cosmogony. Most of this book was compiled in the 8th and 9th centuries C.E. and some parts are even younger. In some chapters on the classification of animals, the Sênmurw is classified as a bird yet in other chapters as a bat or a dog. This confusion of the nature of Sênmurw is most probably responsible for the iconographic representation of Sênmurw with the head of a dog, the claws of a raptor and the tail of a peacock or a rooster as well as to the stories describing it as female breastfeeding its young, similar to a bat. This confusion would explain the hybrid creature depicted in late Sassanian illustrations of the Sênmurw (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. Sassanid silver plate of a simurgh (senmurw), 7th – 8th C.E. (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/simurgh>)



Figure 7. Sassanid silk robe depicting Simurgh (senmurw), 6th – 7th century CE (Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/simurgh>)

Before ending this first phase of the Simurgh mythology, it is pertinent to mention that Zoroaster was himself a physician and according to Dinkard (a Zoroastrian text) one hundred years after Zoroaster, there was a physician by the name of Saêna, (the son of Ahüm-Stüd) who lived for a hundred years and it is said that he had one hundred students that he trained as physicians in his long life.

Simurgh in the Shahnameh of Firdowsi

Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) is an Iranian epic poem of over 50,000 couplets, (written in the language of modern Farsi) by the Iranian poet, Firdowsi (936 – 1020 C.E.), one thousand years ago. It is a history of Iran, comprising the mythical past, from origins of creation, through the heroic ages, and blending into historical accounts of the Achaemenid to the ending of the Sassanid Empire by Arab

conquest. In this blend of myth and history, the epic hero, Rostam, has center stage and it is in relation to him that the mythical bird Simurgh plays a crucial role, first during his birth and second when Rostam and his fabled horse, Rakhsh, are fatally wounded by Esfandiar.

During the heroic age, to Sām, the son of Narimān, an only son is born who is an albino. Ashamed of this misfortune, and thinking this to be the work of Ahriman (the devil), Sām abandons the child on the high cliffs of the Alborz mountains to die. The mythical bird, Simurgh, finds the child and Ahuramazda (the supreme deity) gave Simurgh mehr (love) for the child and told the bird to raise the boy whose offspring's will become heroes. Thus Simurgh took the child to his nest and would give him the most succulent pieces of meat so he could suck the blood instead of milk until the child became a young man.

One night Sām has a dream that his son is alive and, repentant; he goes to the Alborz Mountains in search of his son. Simurgh sees Sām and at once knew his purpose and tells the young man that he will return him to his father and that he shall be named Zal (the white haired), and then Simurgh plucks a feather from his wing and gives it to Zal so that should he ever be in distress he should burn the feather and that the Simurgh will come to his aid. And so Zal goes forth with his father Sām and becomes a powerful young hero, and soon falls in love with Roodabeh and marries her. Roodabeh becomes pregnant but has difficulty giving birth to the huge child that she carries and so due to the severe pain becomes moribund. The distraught Zal suddenly recalls Simurgh's feather, which he burns and the bird appears instantly 'like a cloud whose raindrops are like pearls that calm the soul' (c.f. the rain giving Saēna in Bahram Yasht 41 above). Simurgh reassures Zal that his wife shall give birth to a future hero, and that he, Simurgh, shall give instructions for the delivery of this large child.

According to the bird's instructions, Zal finds a mobed (a Zoroastrian priest adept in surgery), who with a sharp knife cuts open the side of Roodabeh's lower abdomen, after having given her a herbal potion mixed with wine to anaesthetize her. The huge child, whom they call Rostam, is delivered, covered with blood, through the incision, which is then sewn up and covered with a healing emulsion of milk, musk and herbs and finally rubbed with the magical

feather of Simurgh to heal. The mother, Roodabeh, regains consciousness the next day and recovers fully from her ordeal and the child, Rostam, grows up to become the central hero of the Shahnameh (Figure 8).

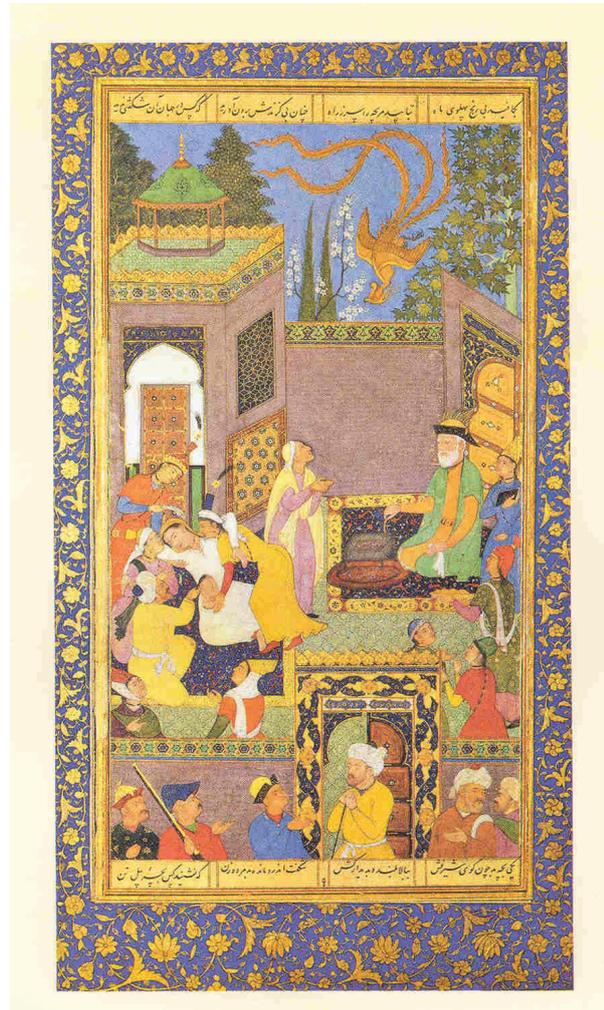


Figure 8. A miniature painting from the Shahnameh depicting delivery of Rostam by 'Caesarian section' and the Simurgh seen hovering over the proceedings [MS.2891; Miniature from Reza Abbasi Museum, Tehran, Iran]

Simurgh's second appearance in the Shahnameh is when Rostam and his trusty steed, Rakhsh, have been mortally wounded by Esfandiar's arrows and Zal, Rostam's father, arrives and again burns one of the bird's feathers and Simurgh appears. The bird proceeds at once to extract the arrows from Rostam's chest as well as the six arrows from the horse's neck and rubs the wounds with potion and his magical feather and the wounds heal and their strength and health are restored.

And so ends Simurgh's medical interventions in the Shahnameh with Rostam's 'caesarian' delivery and later with the healing of his wounds.

It is worthy to mention at this juncture, the origin of the term 'Caesarian Section', which is erroneously attributed to the birth of Julius Caesar by such a procedure. The association derives from the writings of the Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, in the first century C.E., who claimed that one of Julius Caesar's ancestors was delivered in this manner.⁶ During those times no woman survived the operation which was performed to deliver the baby once the mother had died or was dying, as in the myth of Asclepius, "when Apollo rips open Coronis' dead body and snatches his son, Asclepius from the engulfing flames."⁷ In Iran this procedure is known as the 'Rostamineh' operation in regard to Rostam's delivery in the Shahnameh.

Attar and 'The Parliament of the Birds'

The final phase of the Simurgh in Iranian mythology is a mystical poem by Farid- ud-Din Attar written in modern Farsi in the 12th century C.E. wherein Simurgh is an allegorical symbol for the mystical idea of absolute truth embodied in the Godhead. In the story, all the birds of the world seek to journey to the land of Simurgh and choose the bird Hoopoe to lead them there, but on the way, most of the birds find the journey too arduous and refuse to go further. Finally, only thirty birds are left when they reach the abode of Simurgh and when they look upon him they see only a reflection of themselves. In this story Attar uses a clever word play on Simurgh, the mythical bird, and 'si- murgh', meaning thirty birds (si=thirty and murgh=bird in the Farsi language), and thus he conveys the mystical Sufi notion that the 'Truth' is within one's own self and not outside of it (Figure 9).

As mentioned previously, this later phase of the Simurgh myth has no medical connotations except that Attar himself was a pharmacist and had a drug dispensary before he turned to mysticism.

Conclusion

I have briefly reviewed the myth of the bird Simurgh in its main three phases in Iranian history and its relation to medicine. His dispersal of the



Figure 9. A modern depiction of Simurgh
(Source: [http:// www. sokhanma. blogfa. com/](http://www.sokhanma.blogfa.com/))

seeds of medicinal plants, and the proximity of his nest to the sacred Haoma plant, and his life saving role in the Shahnameh where his knowledge of surgery saves the life of the hero Rostam and his mother Roodabeh, as well as healing his mortal wounds in the battle with Esfandiar attest to his important role in Iranian medicine. I have also mentioned that in ancient times, the name Saëna was used by some famous physicians, perhaps to signify a similar relationship. It thus seems reasonable to suggest that since in Iranian history there has been no association between the serpent and the practice of medicine,

as there had been in Greece and Rome, an image of the Simurgh as a medical symbol would be more appropriate.

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The Sources of the first and last pictures are: http://www.Cais-Soas.com/.../simorgh_senmurv.htm
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