

History of Medicine

Gondeshapur Revisited; What Historical Evidence?

Touraj Nayernouri MD¹**Abstract**

In recent years, in European academic circles, there has been a trend to dismiss Gondeshapur as a myth perpetrated by the Bokhtishu family in early Islamic era, despite many historiographical attestations. The writings of Islamic historians such as Al-Qifti and Ibn Abi Usaibia have been discounted as exaggerations by non-contemporary historians, and the lack of primary Pahlavi sources blamed for historical hyperbole.

In this essay, I have attempted to show through primary Syriac Christian texts, that there was both a medical school and a *bimarestan* in Gondeshapur in pre-Islamic Sassanid era, and that Galenic medical texts had been translated and taught in that institution.

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Introduction

In 2008, I read a review of Noga Arikha's book 'Passion and Tempers: A history of Humours' by Vivian Nutton in the *New England Journal of Medicine* [November 29, 2007]. In that review, Nutton dismissed Gondeshapur as "a provincial backwater" which could not have had a "crucial role in the transmission of humoral medicine to the Arab world".

Having sent a scathing email to Nutton, stating that I had taken "umbrage at this unqualified and historically insensitive statement", and mentioned the writings of several historians of medicine, science and civilization including Edward G. Browne, Cyril Elgood, Richard N. Frye, Donald Hill and S. H. Nasr, attesting to the presence of Gondeshapur as a Sassanid center of cultural and medical scholarship and including a famous hospital and an extensive library.

His reply was that "having read the original sources in Arabic, Syriac and Greek very carefully, I have come to the conclusion that not a single one can be trusted" and he asked for sources written in Pahlavi before 900 C.E. that specifically mention Gondeshapur as a medical center.

After sending a conciliatory email, I enquired on what grounds he had found the sources untrustworthy wherein he mentioned several and ended by stating that "the problem is that few Middle Eastern scholars are now able to read the Syriac texts or, increasingly, the Greek, Latin and German texts that give the earlier evidence, so they simply repeat al-Qifti and Ibn Abi Usaibi's because they tell a good and very cheering story".

This was a humiliating challenge and after these years I have decided to pick up the gauntlet.

After all, Nutton is a distinguished professor of history of medicine at the Wellcome Trust Centre of University College, London.

I have also found that other Western scholars, including Peter E. Porman, E. Savage-Smith and David Lindbergh are also of a similar opinion; that Gondeshapur was a 'myth' perpetrated by

a retrospective historiography initiated by the Bokhtishu family of Nestorian Christian physicians at the court of the Caliphs in Baghdad, who originally hailed from Gondeshapur, and "who forged a narrative which would provide them with a mythical and glorious past to give more weight and depth to their position at the court." [page 20-21]

As an unkind quirk of circumstances, there are very few extant written records of Iranian history, whether from the times of the Achamenids, the Parthians or the Sassanian era; a time span of over a thousand years, such that primary Iranian sources throughout these years is minimal. Iranians have thus had to piece together their history from what others, usually their enemies, have written, or glean tidbits of information from remaining religious texts, including Zoroastrian or Christian sources.

With regard to medicine, its teachings and places of practice, this information is even scantier. Thus recovering information with regard to Gondeshapur is not an easy task. Of course, as the saying goes, absence of evidence is not to be interpreted as evidence of absence.

For the purpose of this essay, I have relied on the inscriptions of the Sassanian stone reliefs, the chronicles of the Christian (Nestorian) Church of the East, as well as some very early Islamic documents before the memories of Gondeshapur and its inhabitants were clouded by the passage of time.

I have therefore decided to disregard the writings of such scholars as Edward G. Browne, Richard Frye, Cyril Elgood, Professor Ullman and others who have written about Gondeshapur and rely mainly on whatever primary sources I could muster.

My aim in this article is to show that Gondeshapur was not a 'provincial backwater', that there was a medical school as well as a hospital of some significance in the city and that the physicians from Gondeshapur were instrumental in the transmission of Galenic doctrines to later Islamic medical knowledge and practice, whose physicians were nevertheless Iranians and not Arabs.

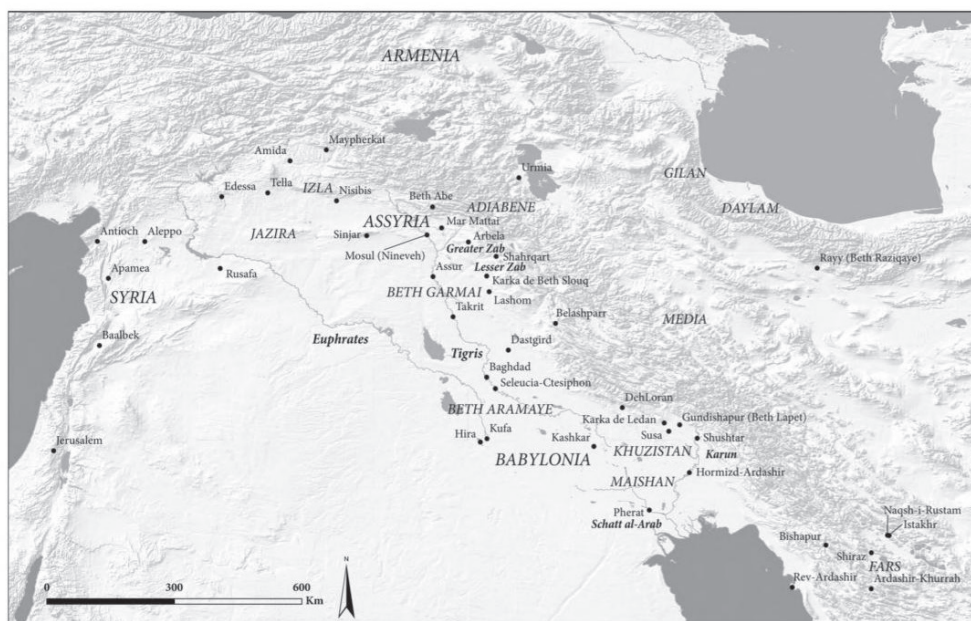
The Sassanian Kings

I will first give a brief history of some of the Sassanian kings and their relationship with the Christians in their empire, interwoven with the history of the Nestorian Christian Church of the East.

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A map of early Sassanian towns and settlements in Mesopotamia and Southwest Iran.²

The relevance of this line of thought will become apparent as we progress as most of the Sassanian court physicians were Nestorian Christians.

Ardeshir (reigned 226–241 C.E.), the son of Papak, was the founder of the Sassanid dynasty. His father Papak was the hereditary great priest of the temple of Anahita in Istakhr, Fars, as was his father Sassan, before him. Ardeshir, having defeated the Parthian king, Artabanus IV, was crowned as the *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) in 226 C.E. at Ctesiphon and went on to expand his empire and founded the town of *Ardeshir-Khawrah* in Fars as his capital city.

His son, Shapur I (reigned 241–272 C.E.) continued the expansion of the empire and came into direct conflict with the Roman Empire wherein he defeated the Roman emperor, Gordian III in 244 C.E. and concluded an advantageous peace treaty with Gordian's successor, Philip the Arab and secured an immediate payment of 500,000 denarii and further annual payments. Shortly afterwards, he resumed the war against the Romans and overran Syria and sacked Antioch in 253 or 256 C.E. Roman counter attacks ended in their defeat at Edessa and the emperor Valerian was captured and remained as Shapur's prisoner for the rest of his life.

Shapur celebrated his victory by carving monumental rock reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur as well as a trilingual inscription at Kabey Zardosht near Persepolis, written in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek languages. It is in this stone carving that he mentions that he brought Romans as captives and settled them in Pars, Parthia and Khuzistan. It is also in this inscription that we first encounter the name Fryg, the satrap of "Weh-Andyk Shabur" whose name comes high in the list of the members of Shapur's court and the satraps were usually of the royal family and thus of the highest rank in Sassanian social order. Lower down in the list, we encounter the name Kartir (Kerdir) as Hirbod, 'attendant of the Sacred Fire' of whom I shall write later.

And so 'Weh-Antioch-Shapur' or Shapur's city better than Antioch, which became known as Gondeshapur in modern Farsi and Jundishapur in Arabic, was established as a Royal city with its district in Khuzistan, where many Roman captives were settled between the years 256–260 C.E.

Weh-Antioch –Shapur had a parallel Syriac/Aramaic name as Beth Lapat (or Bet Lapat). It is stated in the 'Haddad Chronicles' and so quoted in the 'Chronicle of Seert' [pages 87-89] that Shapur had brought Demetrianus, the Christian Bishop of Antioch to Gondeshapur (Beth Lapat) to minister to the Roman deportees. In the Chronicles, it is stated that Demetrianus became the second Patriarch of the Church of the East and was to govern the captives as the Metropolitan of Gondeshapur where the liturgy (celebration of Communion) was held in both Greek and Syriac languages.

The Church of the East

At this juncture, it might be appropriate to give a brief history of the rise of Christianity in Iran.

While the Christians were being persecuted in the Roman Empire prior to 313 C.E., before Constantine decreed tolerance of Christianity at the Edict of Milan, Christianity developed in peace within the Parthian and later in the Sassanian Empires.

By the early third century C.E., as is mentioned in the 'Book of Laws of Countries', written by Philippus, a pupil of the Aramaic philosopher, Bardaisan, mention is made of Christians in Parthia, Kushan, Persia, Media, Edessa and Fars among other places.³ [page 8-9] Christians that migrated eastwards from the regions of Edessa and Nissibis into the Parthian empire spoke an Aramaic dialect (i.e. Syriac) which became the definitive biblical and liturgical language of this branch of Christianity. The deportation of Greek speaking Christians from Antioch by Shapur I, and their resettlement in different parts of the Sassanid Empire, including Khuzistan, swelled the numbers of Christians in the southwest of

the empire, and as mentioned above, Demetrianus was appointed as Bishop of Beth Lapat.

'Bet' or Beth' is an Aramaic/Syriac word meaning 'House' [Said Hyati, personal communications] (Arabic 'Beit' meaning house) and as can be seen from the map [map, page 255] there are several towns and districts starting with 'Beth' including: Beth Abe, Beth Sloug, Beth Garmai, Beth Aramaye and Beth Lapat. This may indicate the areas of settlement of families or tribes of Syriac/Aramaic speaking Christians in the 2nd or early 3rd centuries in the East.

We can surmise with a certain degree of confidence that in the early Sassanian era, there were two groups of Christians in the empire, those speaking Aramaic/Syriac and those speaking Greek, the latter being the deportees from Antioch. This is attested to by the stone inscription of the Magian Mobed, Kartir (mentioned above) at Kabey Zardosht near Persepolis, where he writes of 'Nazarenes' (Nasraye) and 'Christians' (Krestyane).³ [page 9]⁴

The Parthian and the early Sassanian kings practiced a policy of tolerance towards different religious practices and communities within their empires, including Christians, Manicheans, Buddhists and Jews, although the official state religion was Mazdeyasnaism (Zoroastrianism).

The Magian Kartir, who was only a Hirbod during the reign of Shapur I, gradually established himself during the reign of the next five Sassanian kings and was promoted to Mobadan Mobed, the chief Zoroastrian priest as well the head of the judiciary, such that he had stone inscriptions carved in his own name next to those of the kings.

Mani

Mani (c 216–274 C.E.) was an Iranian prophet and founder of Manichean religion. He was born near Seleucia- Ctesiphon during the Parthian era, and travelled widely during the Sassanian era throughout the empire converting many to his religion. Most of his writings were in Syriac/Aramaic language except his 'Shaburagan' that was written in middle Persian (Pahlavi) language which he wrote for Shapur I.

Shapur I had welcomed Mani to his court and had permitted him to spread his religious teachings throughout his empire. Apart from his religious teachings, he was also a painter and calligrapher as well as a physician.

During the reign of Bahram I (reign 273–276 C.E.) Mani was summoned to Gondeshapur (Beth Lapat) to the court of the king at his winter residence, and on the instigations of Kartir, Bahram I confronted Mani with several accusations and ordered his imprisonment, wherein Mani died in the spring of 274 C.E. in Gondeshapur.⁵

Christians in the Sassanid Empire

I must now return to the plight of the Christians in the Sassanid Empire during the 4th Century C.E.

Seleucia-Ctesiphon was the old capital of the Parthians and in 226 C.E. became the Sassanid capital city after Ardeshir I had defeated the Parthians.

By that time Christianity was fairly established in Iran and had an episcopal structure and by the time of Shapur I, Papa was the first Bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. It was this Papa who had welcomed Demetrianus to Gondeshapur (Beth Lapat) as the second Bishop of the Church of the East. This episcopal

organization remained effective throughout the Sassanid era so that the head of the Church of the East, the Catholicos, resided at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the second major Metropolitan See of the church was at Gondeshapur (Beth Lapat).² [page 87]

Once the Roman Emperor, Constantine, had declared himself a Christian Emperor and the true lord of the Church and protector of all Christians by early 4th century; he wrote a very undiplomatic letter to Shapur II (preserved by the historian Eusebius) that all the Christians in his empire should be protected. This was interpreted as a threat and the Christians in the Sassanid Empire were suspected as being a 'fifth column' for the Roman Empire and therefore, several Bishops of the East were persecuted and killed. Two of the famous early martyrs, Miles and Pusai, were from Khuzistan; from Susa and Beth Lapat, respectively.² [page 89]

On the other hand, most of the later Sassanid kings had a close relationship with the Christian Catholicos at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, as the number of the Christians in the Empire was increasing, mostly in the West and the South-West of the Empire. Towards the end of the 4th Century C.E., Yazdgerd I (reign 399–421 C.E.) sought to ease political tensions with the Roman Empire and integrated some of the Iranian Christians in to imperial politics such that there were many diplomatic exchanges between the two empires mediated by Christian Delegates during his reign and in subsequent generations.

During the 5th century C.E. there were several synods of the Church of the East held in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Beth Lapat, from 410–497 C.E. in order to organize the canons and procedures of the Eastern Church. The synod of 484 was convened in Beth Lapat, the Shah's winter capital, by Barsauma, the Bishop of Nisibis, when it is reputed that the Church of the East officially accepted Nestorianism.³ [page 28]² [page 98]

After the Roman Emperor, Zeno, closed the theological Persian School in Edessa in 489 C.E., Narsai and his pupils fled east to Nisibis within the Sassanid Empire where Barsauma was bishop. There Narsai founded the famous school of Nisibis modeled on the Persian School at Edessa which developed into a powerful intellectual and theological center for the East Syriac Church in the Sassanian Empire.

Mar Aba I, an outstanding scholar from the school of Nisibis, became the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (540–552 C.E.). He was a high ranking Zoroastrian who had converted to Christianity, like many other Zoroastrian elites during the 6th century. Khosro I Anoushiravan however replaced him with his own Christian physician, Joseph, as Catholicos (552–567 C.E.).³ [page 33] Aba died in prison having been accused by the Magis of apostasy as well as guilty of converting many Zoroastrian aristocrats to Christianity. He had, however, been a close friend of Khosro I Anoushiravan and had helped him to quell a revolt by his Christian son, Anoshzad, in Gondeshapur around 550 C.E. The Christian Anoshzad, had managed to gather a large army, probably of Christians in Beth Lapat (Gondeshapur), to rebel against and oust his father, Khosro I Anoushiravan, but Aba managed to negotiate with the Bishop of Beth Lapat to dissuade the Christians of the city from rebellion, threatening them with excommunication and so they opened the gates of the city and surrendered.² [page 114]

By the time of Khosro II Parviz (reign 590–628 C.E.) a schism had appeared in the Syriac Church; the west Syriac (Miaphysite) and the East Syriac (Diaphysite) Church with its Catholicos at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, who represented the majority of the Christians in the Sassanid Empire.

During the years 609–628 C.E., the seat of the Catholicos remained unoccupied on the order of Khosro II but during this time, Babai the Great, who had studied medicine and theology at Nisibis, was the administrator of the Catholicate.

Khosro II had a second wife, the Aramaic Christian, Shirin. The court Chief Physician, Drustbed, Gabriel of Sinjar (Siggar) had cured Shirin's barrenness and therefore had great influence at court.

Gabriel of Sinjar, who originally belonged to the Church of the East, had been excommunicated by Gregory of Kashkar on charges of bigamy, turned to the West Syriac Miaphysite Church and so used his influence with Shirin and the court to oppose and obstruct Gregory of Kashkar.

In 612 C.E., at the suggestion of Gabriel of Sinjar, Khosro II arranged a religious disputation between the Diaphysite Church of the East and the Miaphysite Syrian Church of the West.

Hospitals in the Sassanid Empire

Michael W. Dols has written a scholarly article regarding the Origins of the Islamic Hospital.⁶ In this article, he begins by stating that the medical school and the hospital in Gondeshapur are a myth, but as he states in the notes on page one of his article and gives a reference later, he was influenced by Vivian Nutton's opinion and advice in this matter. But, he goes on to give evidence of the existence of medical hospitals in the Sassanian Empire.

Dols first quotes a 'Saint' in the Persian Acts of the Martyrs "who built a house where he gathered the sick and created a fund to cover the cost of the patients and the fee of the doctors". He further mentions a passage in the chronicles of Zachariah the Rhetor, dealing with the years 553–556 C.E., wherein it is written that Khosro I Anoushiravan, on the advice of his Christian physician, "made a hospital (Xenodocheion), and he has given one hundred mules and fifty camels, carrying provision from the Royal stores, twelve physicians, and whatever is needed is provided".⁶ [page 372]

Dols also mentions Mar Babai (Babai the Great) as recorded in the Chronicle of Seert that he "turned to the hospital (*bimarestan*) at Nisibis, where he read the books of medicine" in mid-6th century C.E.

Another Syriac scholar, Gerrit J. Reinink, has written an article 'Theology and Medicine in Jundishapur', wherein he objects to the writings of some recent scholars, including Vivian Nutton and David Lindberg in describing Gondeshapur as a Myth.⁷

Reinink writes that in the middle of the 6th century C.E., the famous theological school of Nisibis had established a hospice for the students who had contracted an illness and that it is possible that this *Xenodocheion* was supported by Khosro I, and is the same as that mentioned in the chronicle of Zachariah the Rhetor (as mentioned above), and that the physicians referred to in that passage were Tribunus, a Byzantine Archiatros and the Nestorian Catholicos Joseph, as well as Qashway, the Christian physician of Khosro I.⁷ [page 166]

It is also mentioned that Khosro I provided a site at Nisibis for the building of the school as well as the *Xenodocheion* and provided the twelve physicians and supplies as mentioned above.

A question that arises is from where in his empire did Khosro find twelve qualified physicians who were fluent in Syriac, Greek and Pahlavi languages to send to Nisibis? Was it from Gondeshapur/Beth Lapat?

Before I delve into the history of a hospital or a medical school in Gondeshapur, I must mention the origins of the *Xenodocheion* and *Bimarestan* in the Sassanid era.

The word *Xenodocheion* was a Greek loan word into Syriac and came to mean an institution for the care of the sick.⁶ [page 372] The Persian equivalent was *Bimarestan* which later entered into the Islamic medical vocabulary.

The word *bimar* or *wemer* is an ancient Iranian word formed from the two words *wé* meaning near and *merg* meaning death and so *wemer* or *bimar* means near death. We have the Parthian word *'w merg* as recorded in the fragments of Mani's confrontation with Bahram I in Gondeshapur, where Mani states that he had cured many who were at the point of death, '*w merg*.'³[pages 950-952] We also have the same word in Middle-Persian Pahlavi as *wē mā̄r* or *wym'r* meaning illness. Thus *Bimarestan* is a Pahlavi word for the place for the sick (those close to death).

As this word existed in Sassanid Pahlavi language and later became a word for hospital in the Islamic medical terminology, then such an institution must have existed in pre-Islamic Iran, besides the *Xenodocheion* in Nisibis.

Medical School

The only extant reference to a medical school as well as a *bimarestan* in Gondeshapur is rather late, that is in the 8th Century C.E. during the Islamic Caliphate, but it can indicate that these institutions may have had a long established history.

There is a letter by the Nestorian Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Timothy I (Patriarch between 780–823 C.E.) addressed to Sergius, the Nestorian Metropolitan of Gondeshapur, a doctor and a good friend of Timothy's, wherein Timothy I informs Sergius that he has sent a student, Gabriel, to him for instruction (*marduta*) since the young man wanted to study medicine.

The Syriac expression *bet marduta* (=House of instruction) is synonymous with the Greek loan- word *eskuli* (school) in Syriac.

Timothy also asks Sergius to recommend Gabriel to Zistaq, the director of the medical school (*bet marduta*), which was supervised by the Metropolitan of Gondeshapur. This letter obviously indicates that the medical school in Gondeshapur must have enjoyed a certain reputation and also that there were no comparable training facilities in Seleucia-Ctesiphon at that time, although a similar institution had been established in Nisibis as mentioned above. Later the same Timothy, the Catholicos, provides funds for the building of a *bimarestan* in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, where there was no such facility previously.⁷ [page 164]

Reinink writes (page 165) that "there was a Nestorian school of theology in Gondeshapur, at least by the end of the 6th century C.E. in which after elementary instructions of reading and writing in the Syriac language, the theological tenets of the church, biblical exegesis and Aristotelian logic could be studied". He further mentions that in Gondeshapur, there were two Christian schools, one for the clergy and the other for the training of medical practitioners and that both were in the charge of the Metropolitan of Gondeshapur as Timothy's letters to Sergius indicate.

There is another letter by the same Timothy also addressed to Sergius, (which can be dated to 790 C.E.) wherein he mentions the building of a '*bimarestan*' at Seleucia –Ctesiphon. It is of significance that he uses the word '*bimarestan*' with which Sergius may have been more familiar as it may have become a

common term by late 8th century, even replacing the Arabic word *dar al-marda* in later Islamic writings.⁶ [page 379]

There is evidence that some Nestorian physicians, including Gabriel bar Bokhtishu had received a theological education in Gondeshapur. The same Gabriel served as the personal physician to Harun al Rashid from 806 C.E. and it is recorded that before 794 C.E. he had studied biblical exegesis and philosophy in the theological school of Gondeshapur.⁷ [page 168]

Besides the Bokhtishu family, there was another family of physicians from Gondeshapur, a member of which was known as Seharbokht in Persian and whose Christian name was Seliba Zeka (=the cross has overcome) who lived in the 9th century C.E.. This Seharbokht was trained as a theologian and as a physician and may have been a teacher in both the theological and the medical school in Gondeshapur. His father was the Christian physician Mesargis from Gondeshapur and therefore in the Arabic tradition he was known as Saharbukt b. Masarjis. He was the author of a commentary on the 'Kunnash', a medical hand book written by Jurjis and his son, Isa b. Saharbukt, who was known for his translation of Hippocratic works from Syriac into Arabic.⁷ [page 168]

The Bokhtishu Family (the name meaning 'Jesus has redeemed' in Syriac)

It is historically well established that in 765 C.E., Jewerjis ibn Bokhtishu, the then head of the Gondeshapur *bimarestan*, was summoned to the court of the Caliph Al-Mansur to attend to his illness which other physicians were unable to cure. He was well remunerated for his services before he eventually returned to Gondeshapur. His grandson, Gabriel (Jebrail ibn Bokhtishu), also the head of the *Bimarestan* in Gondeshapur, later attended the Caliph, Harun al Rashid from 806 C.E. The Bokhtishu family remained in Baghdad for two to three centuries.

I do not intend to dwell on the Bokhtishu family as physicians in the Islamic era, but their significance and influence in the court is well attested in historical accounts. There is no doubt that they had originally been trained at the medical school in Gondeshapur. Whether they later inflated the origins of their institution in Gondeshapur is irrelevant. They were so successful and influential at the Abbasid court, according to all contemporary Islamic documents, that they had no need of inflating their past or Gondeshapur.

Physicians and their social status

In the Greco-Roman world, physicians were generally held in low esteem; the majority of the physicians amongst the Romans were either slaves or freedmen attached to great houses that had acquired their knowledge from experience and practiced as craftsmen and had thus a rather low status comparable to other craftsmen in antiquity. A few, however, studied medicine as part of philosophy and therefore enjoyed a higher status, which usually depended on their social and political connections. In the Byzantine era, a few reached high political careers due to their oratorical skills and as sophists and became ambassadors to the Sassanid court.⁸ They were self-taught as there were no medical schools as such and they learnt their trade as apprentices and supplemented their knowledge by reading medical texts of Hippocrates, Dioscorides and Galen.

There was, however, the school of Alexandria where many

students, including Galen, had studied philosophy and medicine in the 2nd century, and later Galenic medicine became part of the medical curriculum there. One of the students who also studied medicine there was Mar Aba I, the later Catholicos at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and a teacher at the school of Nisibis. Sergius of Res Ayna, who I shall mention later, was also a student there during the mid-6th century C.E.

At the court of the Sassanians, however, physicians enjoyed the Shah's favors and many Shahs had physicians as their companions and advisors. Many of these physicians were Christians, either Syriac Iranians or sent as ambassadors from the Byzantium. Oribasius (325–403 C.E.) had accompanied the Emperor Julian to Iran and was later exiled to the Sassanid court; Stephanus, who had previously cured Kaveh I, Khosro I Anoushiravan's father; Uranius, the Syrian Physician, who had been sent to Khosro I's court as an ambassador who stayed and became the Shah's physician and philosophy teacher; Joseph the Catholicos at Seleucia-Ctesiphon enjoyed Khosro I's favors partly due to his medical skills, and of course the Drustbed, Gabriel of Sinjar at the court of Khosro II Parviz mentioned earlier.^{8,9}

Translations

It would be myopic to assume that throughout the Sassanid era, there were no translations of Greek medical texts into the Pahlavi language.

In the first instance, as is written in the fourth book of Dinkerd, the Zoroastrian cosmological texts, Shapur I, the second Sassanid king, began the process of returning the world's written knowledge to Iran:

"He collected the nonreligious writings on medicine, astronomy, movement, time, space, substance, accident, becoming, decay, transformation, logic and other crafts and skills which were dispersed throughout India, Rome and other lands..." to be translated and copies to be deposited in the royal treasury.¹⁰ It is well attested that during the reign of Khosro I Anoushiravan, there were many translations of Greek philosophical and medical texts into the Pahlavi language.

From about 500 C.E. Greek medical texts were being translated into Syriac and the texts were derived from the books that were being studied in the ancient school in Alexandria. The Syrian Christians arranged these books into what became known as *Summaria Alexandrinorum* which were comprised mainly of selected works of Galen. These later became the Islamic curriculum for medical education.⁶ [page. 373]

Sergius of Reš ayna (died 536 C.E.), was a Syriac physician, priest and translator of Greek writings into the Syriac language. He lived in Reš ayna, a town between the two intellectual centers of Edessa and Nisibis and was educated in Alexandria. He is well known for his translations of Aristotelian philosophy and Galenic medical books. His works were later translated into Arabic by Hunayn ibn Ishaq in the 9th century C.E. during the Abbasid caliphate. His Galenic medical translations were widely circulated in the Sassanian era and one of these texts is addressed to Theodore, Bishop of Merv (in eastern Sassanid Empire) who was a protégé of Mar Aba and who in 540 C.E. became the Catholicos at Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Mar abba was a Persian convert from Zoroastrianism who taught at the school of Nisibis.¹¹ The Byzantine historian, Agathias, mentions a Sergius at the Sassanian court during Khosro I Anoushiravan's reign, as his friend and

interpreter who had access to the Royal Annals, which may be the same Sergius of Reš ayna.⁹

Agathias also mentions the seven Greek philosophers who in 529 C.E., after Emperor Justinian had closed the Athenian academy on religious grounds, fled to Seleucia-Ctesiphon to the court of Khosro I Anoushiravan where they were welcomed and one of them, Priscianus of Lydia, wrote a philosophical treatise in answer to Khosro's questions regarding some of Plato and Aristotle's philosophical works including politics, physics, on the heavens, generation and corruption, dreams, geography, Ptolemy's Almagest etc.; in fact a treatise encompassing the Neoplatonic works on cosmology and natural history.¹²

Within Khosro's court, there was also Paul the Persian, an East Syriac (Nestorian) Christian who converted to Zoroastrianism. He was a theologian philosopher who wrote a treatise on Aristotelian logic and linguistics, originally in Pahlavi (middle Persian) language, dedicated to Khosro I Anoushiravan; a Syriac manuscript of which is extant in the British Museum.¹³ It thus seems evident that during the reign of Khosro I Anoushiravan, many Greek Medical and philosophical as well as Indian Astronomical works were translated into Pahlavi (middle Persian) language. This translation movement became much more intense during the Abbasid caliphate at the 'House of Wisdom' in Baghdad where many other Syriac (Nestorian) Christian translators as well as other Jewish and Iranian translators rendered many classical works into Arabic.

The most famous of the East Syriac translators during the early Islamic period was Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809–877 C.E.) whose biography attests to the transmission of Greek medical texts into Syriac for those Christian physicians who could not read Greek⁶ [page 385]. With regards to his translation of Galenic texts he writes "when I was a young man-twenty years old or a bit younger- I translated from an error-ridden Greek manuscript for a doctor from Gondeshapur.... And a few years later I translated that text from Syriac into Arabic"³ [page 66]

In Paris there is a manuscript (BN, Ms. Ar.2859) from Hunayn's translation of Galen's 'About the directions of medical school for students' which has two comments regarding the ownership of the manuscript: 'acquired from the Christian physician Gabriel ibn Bokhtishu' and 'acquired in the year 407 (1016/1017 C.E.) from Husayn ibn Abdallah ibn Sina'³ [page 65]

Debates and confrontations at the Sassanid court

The late Sassanian court adopted the practice of dialectical disputations wherein competing rival ideas, whether religious or philosophical, were openly presented in a debate at court so that the King, the Sassanian elite and the Magi priests could judge and arbitrate as to the truth of the rival ideologies. This system was adopted by Khosro I Anoushiravan from the Aristotelian logic and dialectics which Paul the Persian had presented to him.

A famous example of such a confrontation is the disputation between the Miaphysite (west Syrian) Christians and the Diaphysite (East Syrian) Christians held at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in the presence of the king, Khosro II Parviz in 612 C.E. at the suggestion of Gabriel of Sinjar as mentioned above.¹⁰ [page 219]

Allegedly, there was a similar medico-philosophical disputation in 610 C.E. held in Gondeshapur where the same Gabriel of Sinjar had participated, but I have found no mention of this in the Syriac literature.

Similar disputations at the Sassanian court have been mentioned between Christians and Zoroastrian mobeds.

Such disputations between Christians, Zoroastrian and Muslim theologians are well attested in the Abbasid courts that were modeled on this Sassanian tradition.¹⁰

Summary

■ The city of Gondeshapur/Beth-Lapat: I have conclusively demonstrated the significance and the prominence of Beth-Lapat from its inception as a Syriac Christian town, perhaps from the 2nd century C.E. and its subsequent declaration as a Royal city by Shapur I and renamed 'Weh-Andyk Shabur' or Gondeshapur. It served as a Royal residence at least from the reign of Bahram I in the late 3rd century C.E. to Peroz in late 5th century C.E. and served as the winter residence for some of the later Sassanian kings such as Balash in 484 C.E. when the synod of the church of the East was held in Beth-Lapat.¹⁴

■ Beth-Lapat remained a major East Syriac Christian city well into the Islamic period. It was the second major See of the church of the East after Seleucia-Ctesiphon and its Metropolitan was the second Bishop of the Church who had a major influence in the episcopal structuring of the church where at the Synod of 484 C.E. held at Beth-Lapat, the church officially accepted the Nestorian doctrines.

■ There is circumstantial evidence that a medical school existed there during Khosro I Anoushiravan's reign from which 12 physicians were dispatched to Nisibis for the establishment of a medical school attached to the *Xenodocheion* there in mid-6th century C.E.

■ I have also mentioned the *Bimarestan* as an Iranian word for the Greek *Xenodocheion* which implies the presence of such an institution in the Sassanid Empire well before the 8th Century C.E.

■ The letters of the Catholicos Timothy I to Sergius attests beyond doubt that in Beth-Lapat/Gondeshapur there existed both a medical school as well as a *bimarestan*.

■ That the Bokhtishu family as well as the Seharbokhts were physicians in Gondeshapur and that the Bokhtishus were the directors of the medical school there in the 8th Century C.E. are beyond question

■ The last known director of the Gondeshapur *Bimarestan* was Sabur ibn Sahl, a Syrian Christian during the 9th century C.E., fragments of whose Judeo-Arabic manuscript, the 'Agrabadin' (pharmacopoeia) have recently been discovered in the Cairo Genzieh.¹⁵

■ During the 9th century C.E., the Syrian Christians from Gondeshapur had monopolized medicine in Baghdad. Al-Jahiz recounts the story of a starving Muslim physician who had no clients because he was not a recognizable Syrian physician from Gondeshapur.⁶ [page 381]

Of course, of the later Islamic physicians, from the 9th–11th centuries C.E., who wrote in Arabic (the *lingua franca* of the Islamic world) and who were responsible for the transmission of Galenic medicine to Europe through the Latin translations of their works, such as Ali ibn Rabban Tabari (838–870 C.E.), Zakaryia Razi (865–925 C.E.), Ali ibn Majoosi Ahwazi (died 982 or 994 C.E.), and Abu Ali Sina (980–1037 C.E.), often erroneously known as Arabs, were all Iranians and some were not even Muslims.

Conclusions

And thus Gondeshapur was certainly not “a provincial back water” as professor Nutton had suggested and certainly not a “myth” as professor Porman has written.

There certainly was a medical school and a *Bimarestan* there which had a certain reputation from which several famous physicians and translators of Galenic medicine eventually went to the Abbasid court.

Despite the dearth of primary sources, the medical facilities in Gondeshapur seem to have been superior to other similar institutions such as in Nisibis. Do we know of any physicians from Nisibis going to Baghdad?

The medical school in Alexandria seems to have lost its vigor centuries before. I am also not aware of a similar medical school in the Byzantine Empire but of course I stand to be corrected.

My challenge to the scholars mentioned at the beginning of this article is to give one example of a medical school that was significantly superior to Gondeshapur during the 7th–9th century C.E.

It is easy to dismiss parts of history according to your presuppositions and prejudices, but hard to prove reality despite rigorous reasoning and research.

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