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
An Early Report of Midwifery in Ancient Persia

Abstract

Midwifery, one of the most ancient healthcare professions, is central to the history of medicine and the protection of maternal and neonatal health. Studying its historical trajectory reveals the interplay between cultural beliefs, religious practices, and medical care. This research examines maternal healthcare in ancient Persia through the *Shāyest nē-Shāyest*, a Middle Persian (Pahlavi) text from the Sasanian era. Although primarily a religious and ritual guide, the text preserves remarkable detail on the organization of childbirth. It also prescribes ritual practices such as maintaining the sacred household fire to safeguard pregnancy, linking spiritual observance with maternal health. These findings demonstrate that, even in non-medical sources, ancient Persia displayed a sophisticated and organized midwifery system, underscoring the integration of cultural-religious traditions with practical, structured care for pregnant women in the Sasanian society.

Key words: Midwifery, Maternal, Ancient Persia, Persian Medicine, History of Medicine

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Introduction

Midwifery is among the oldest healthcare professions, playing a critical role in safeguarding maternal and neonatal health across history. The scope of midwifery extends beyond childbirth to include prenatal care, postnatal support, and community health advocacy. Historically, midwives have played an essential role in reducing maternal and infant mortality, transmitting generational knowledge, and shaping early medical practices (Donnison, 1988, pp. 3-25). The roots of the profession span diverse civilizations, with archaeological and textual evidence demonstrating advanced obstetric knowledge in ancient cultures such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia (Nunn, 1996, pp. 115-120). Persia, in particular, has a rich midwifery heritage, as reflected in the medical writings of scholars like Avicenna and in Zoroastrian-era texts, which emphasize maternal care, hygiene, and women's health rights (Elgood, 1951, pp. 180-190). Today, understanding the historical trajectory of midwifery not only affirms its cultural and scientific significance but also strengthens contemporary health systems by drawing upon centuries of accumulated knowledge. This perspective is particularly valuable for countries such as Persia, whose medical traditions continue to offer insights into holistic maternal care. This study refers to the practice of childbirth conducted by midwives in ancient Persia, as described in a report found within Middle Persian (Pahlavi) texts surviving from the Sasanian era.

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study was conducted via historical-textual analysis of the *Shāyest nē-Shāyest*, a Middle Persian text from the Sasanian period, using critical editions and scholarly translations. Relevant passages concerning maternal health, ritual practice, and childbirth were identified and contextualized through comparison with secondary literature on Zoroastrianism and Sasanian medical culture, enabling an integrated interpretation of religious and health-related directives.

Findings

Ancient Persians placed remarkable emphasis on personal hygiene and overall health, regarding them not only as matters of physical well-being but also as integral to moral and religious life. Within this framework, the care of pregnant women held a special place. Numerous ritual considerations, deeply rooted in Zoroastrian doctrine, shaped the approach to maternal health, reflecting an inseparable bond between spiritual beliefs and practical healthcare measures aimed at safeguarding both mother and child.

One of the most illustrative sources for understanding these attitudes is the *Shāyest nē-Shāyest*, a Middle Persian (Pahlavi) text that survives from the Sasanian era. The work is concerned primarily with religious duties and prohibitions, but also includes passages that clearly reveal health-related concerns embedded within ritual law. A striking example addresses the need to ensure the proper maintenance of fire in the household during pregnancy. The text emphasizes that: “*when a woman is pregnant, she must be able to keep the sacred fire burning in her home, observing the correct ritual precautions. This is not an abstract injunction: it is tied to a foundational episode in Zoroastrian tradition, recorded in the Sepand Nask, in which Dughdō, the mother of Zarathustra, faced supernatural threats during her pregnancy. According to the narrative, on three consecutive nights, 150 demons attacked in an attempt to harm the unborn prophet. Their efforts*



failed because the presence of the sacred fire rendered them powerless.” (Shayest Nashayest, 1990, p. 122)

The *Shāyest nē-Shāyest* explains further that neglecting the fire is not a trivial error; inadequate care of the household fire was believed to lead to reduced fertility among women, as well as physical harm and economic loss within the household. These statements show that fire, as one of the central symbols in Zoroastrian worship, was simultaneously perceived as a guardian of physical health and as an essential element in ensuring the safe continuation of family and community lineages. The act of tending the fire effectively bridged the ritual and the biomedical: it fulfilled a religious duty while functioning, within the cultural logic of the period, as a maternal health safeguard.

This dual significance of fire underscores how maternal care in ancient Persia was informed by an integrated worldview. Health prescriptions were not isolated from religion; rather, they were embedded within it. For pregnant women, preserving the sacred fire symbolized not only piety but also active participation in a collective protective strategy against both spiritual and material harm. By attending to such ritual duties, the expectant mother was thought to promote the well-being of her unborn child and, by extension, the prosperity of her household and community (Farokhzad A., and Omid, 2017, p. 80).

In addition to these ritual-ethical precautions, the *Shāyest nē-Shāyest* contains one of the clearest surviving accounts of the organization of childbirth assistance in the Sasanian period. The text specifies that:

“When a woman is to give birth, ten women should be present to provide assistance. Their roles were carefully allocated: five women were to attend to the cradle and its preparation; one woman was to stand at the mother’s left shoulder, another at her right shoulder, and one was to place her hands around the laboring woman’s neck” (Shayest Nashayest, 1990, p. 126).

Conclusion

The evidence demonstrates that in ancient Persia, significant attention was given to the care of pregnant women, supported by an organized and clearly defined midwifery system. Remarkably, the *Shāyest nē-Shāyest*, a text not primarily medical but religious and ritual in nature, contains detailed descriptions of childbirth practices conducted by midwives. Such specificity highlights the depth of maternal care within Sasanian society and reflects how practical healthcare knowledge was preserved and transmitted even through sources rooted in spiritual and ceremonial traditions.

This passage is remarkable for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that childbirth in late antique Persia could be a highly coordinated event, involving multiple attendants with clearly defined functions. Second, it reflects an appreciation of both the physical and moral support required for safe delivery. The presence of numerous assistants suggests a recognition of the unpredictability and potential risks of childbirth, where experienced women might be essential not only for technical skill but also for psychological reassurance. Third, its placement within a religious-legal text underlines that such organization was not simply practical; it was informed by, and reinforced through, Zoroastrian values.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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