

Attention And Care To The Madness During The Islamic Middle Age In Syria: The Example Of The Bimaristan Al-Arghun. From Princely Palace To Bimaristan

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Summary

The term "bimaristan" used to indicate the hospitals throughout the Islamic world comes from the Persian words *bimar* (sick) and *stan* (place). The first Islamic hospitals were built since about the late VIII. century.

The planning and the building of this institution represented, both medically and architecturally, a great achievement of the medical Islamic society.

Many of the bimaristans which sprung up throughout the Islamic world during the Islamic middle age had special isolated places for the insanes. The special care for the insane was an important aspect of the Islamic hospitals which frequently comprised facilities for people affected by mental diseases.

In this paper, the bimaristan al-Arghun in Aleppo, which is one of the most remarkable intact examples of both the Islamic architecture and of the oldest hospitals in the world, will be considered. It has been converted from a princely palace into bimaristan during the XIV. century. Its plan, unlike other bimaristans, is rather asymmetrical and complex.

It seems that the madmen were treated there with humanity and that music, dance, theatrical performances as well as the scent of the flowers, the quiet gurgling of the fountains and an harmonic architecture were considered part of the health care.

Key Words: Madness, Bimaristan, History of Medicine

In the Islamic world a large number of hospitals sprung up from the end of the VIII. and the beginning of the IX. century. These hospitals were not only a place for clinical care of the patients, but also for educating medical students, for interchanging scientific knowledge and developing medicine.

Many of these hospitals, which consisted of different sections, for men and for women, and of specialized wards, dealing with different diseases, such as internal medicine, orthopaedia, surgery and ophthalmology, had special isolated places for patients with mental diseases. In fact facilities for the insanes became an habitual characteristic of the Islamic hospital which devoted considerable attention to the mentally ill, whose help is demanded by Koran from the society.

Some of these hospitals were particularly sumptuous, since they actually were palaces that had been converted into hospital, as was the case of the Bimaristan Al-Arghun in Aleppo.

The site of this bimaristan, situated about halfway between the Great Mosque and the Bab Qinnisrin, was the residence of an emir, which Arghun al-Sagir al-Kamili, a governor of Aleppo converted into a bimaristan on 1344. It is possible to date this bimaristan with accuracy through a commemorative inscription of its foundation on the main portal.

It is an extraordinary and remarkable intact example of Islamic architecture which covered an area of 3900 square metres. We do not know if it was conceived exclusively as a place for the care and the treatment of the insane, but we certainly know that the treatment of the insanity has been one of its aims.

It has been functioning until the sixteenth century. Later on, some of its buildings collapsed and only at the end of the nineteenth century some restoration was carried out.

Its plan, unlike other bimaristans, as for example the bimaristan Nur al-din and the bimaristan al-Qaynari in

Damascus, is rather complex and consists of some buildings asymmetrically placed.

On the west side of the building the main monumental entrance is located, which is characterized by big double wooden doors coppered plates, which lead to a vestibule and on the left to a large room with a grilled window on the street. This room probably served as the pharmacy and as a storeroom for the medical provisions.

In fact frequently associated with the bimaristan there was the pharmacy, called "al Sharabkhana", which could function as dispensary. The pharmacist, or "saydalani", gave out the drugs, according to the physician's prescription. Like the institution of the hospital, the institution of the pharmacy had a great development in the Islamic world.

As reported by the medical medieval texts, the drugs utilised for the mental illness, usually of vegetable origins, comprised purgatives, sedative (especially opium) digestive and emetics. They were used both as simple and as composed products and were used to stimulate the apathetic, to soothe the violent patients and to support the depressed persons. The pharmacy contained precious instruments, glass containers, porcelain and metal vessels.

The medical treatment also included fomentation especially to the head, baths, bloodletting, cupping, bandaging, massages with different oils, compresses.

On the right of the portal there are two smaller rooms with grilled windows on the street. Probably here the waiting room and the outpatients examining room were located.

Generally the outpatients were carefully examined and, if they had serious healthy problems, they were registered as inpatients. Otherwise, if it was necessary, the doctor prescribed medicines for them to be taken at home.

From the main entrance through the vestibule it is possible to enter the main rectangular courtyard. It must be noted that the hospitals had always a central courtyard which, according to W.L. Kump, was modelled on the Prophet's home at Medina.

In the bimaristan al-Arghun this courtyard is flanked by a series of columns whose capitals rest on

a wooden plug that run along the gallery to protect the building from the earthquakes.

At the centre of the courtyard there is a basin with a fountain bubbling outside. The sides of the basin are thick and can support flowerpots and many kinds of basil, which are also placed all around the main courtyard. It seems that the lunatics were calmed down by the quiet gurgling of the fountains gushing water and by the view and the scent of the flowers and of the basil.

Generally it was believed that the scent of the flowers reached the brain and influenced it and, particularly for the basil, researches have suggested that it can act as an antidepressant and a tranquillizer and that its aroma may have beneficial effects on the mind. Pliny the Elder considered the basilicum as an aphrodisiacus able to cure the epileptic fits (epilepsy was considered the prophetic illness).

In the southern and in the northern sides are located two iwans (outdoor vaulted rooms with one side open to the courtyard): the bigger, at the southern side, could be used as stage for musicians and singers who were engaged to entertain the patients and in particular to calm and to cheer the insane with the songs of their voices and the sound of their instruments.

Records in this bimaristan show indeed that musicians salaries were provided as a part of the health care. Many Arab doctors recommended musicotherapy particularly as a treatment for melancholy, and in the Islamic medicine musicotherapy has been utilized during many centuries. The scientist Al-Farabi has described the special effects that different "makamlar" in Turkish classical music have on the soul and the physician Ibn Butlan has written: "the effect of a melody on a disturbed mind is like the effect of the medicines on a sick body".

A salary was also payed to storytellers who used to read the Koran inside the bimaristan, in the morning and in the evening.

It seems that also ergotherapy was largely utilized and that dancing, theatrical performances and recitation were part of the therapy.

Along the eastern and the western sides there is a series of rooms probably used as single rooms for patients use.

In the eastern part of the building there are three more independent and secluded wards, which it is possible to enter by the main entrance through a series of narrow and dark passages. They are completely isolated so that the noise made in their inside could not reach outside and the sound of the traffic could not disturb the patients.

The square ward was full closed and its windows were equipped with strong iron bars: it is possible that the dangerous insanes who were in regular agitation or the patients affected by contagious diseases were sent here.

The octagonal ward was characterized by less caution. It consists of twelve little rooms, with iron bars at the windows. Some of these little cells were utilized at the beginning of the past century to restrain the dangerous madmen. The doors open directly on a courtyard: probably the less dangerous insanes were sent here.

The rectangular ward was more free than others and probably here the not dangerous ills were lodged.

Each of these three wards has a small inner court. The octagonal and the rectangular wards have a basin and a fountain.

All sections were equipped with beds, medications, medical instruments and apparatuses necessary for the patients care, and a staff of qualified doctors, nurses and orderlies was full-time employed in the bimaristan and received a fixed salary.

All the Islamic hospitals were financed by pious donations, called waqfs and the bimaristan al-Arghun was financed by very thriving waqfs among which there was the Binich village in the district of Sarmin. By these waqfs it was possible to pay the salaries to the persons employed in the hospital and to buy all the necessary for the medical treatments and for the patients stay.

On the southern side of the bimaristan the service area was located, whose entrance, open directly on the street, facilitated the access of the medical and food storage. This area comprised, besides the kitchen and the storage room, also the main bathrooms.

Praying five times a day is an important pillar of Islam. It is an Islamic obligation both for ill and for healthy persons. And before praying, where possible,

one must wash face, head, hands and feet. So generally the bimaristans provided the patients and the employees with water reserves and with bathing facilities.

In this bimaristan the treatment reserved to the mentally ills seems to have been particularly human and supported by an architecture devoted to their safety.

However, it seems that the treatment of the insane in the Islamic medieval period was not so human everywhere. Historical reports suggest that in some bimaristans the insane, at least the violent one, was subjected to harsh and unpleasant conditions and to various forms of restraint.

But, what is important to underline is that during the Islamic Middle Age Muslim physicians have been not only forerunners in many aspects of the hospital activity but have also comprehended that mental diseases needed a particular cure and realized that the doctors, to treat a patient, must be acquainted with the cause of the patient's diseases.

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