



AFTER OFFICE HOURS

THE BIRTH OF MOHAMMED

“**M**EVOLID” is the name of a ritual ceremony performed in most of the Muslim countries. Originally, it was a festival celebrating the birthday of the Prophet of Islam.³

The earliest poem written to be read on this occasion is in Arabic; its author, Ibn-i Hisham, died in 834.⁷ From the 13th Century onwards, the number of poems and essays of this kind increased. The most

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The illustration used in this section is “The Medieval Doctor,” a 15th-century German woodcut. (The Bettmann Archive)

popular poem written to be recited on this ceremony is that of Suleyman Chelibi, who was one of the earliest Ottoman poets. On the overthrow of one of the Ottoman sultans, the Thunderbolt, by Tamerlane, Suleyman is known to have founded an asylum as the Chief Imam (priest) of the Great Mosque at Bursa, at that time the Turkish capital and not far from Istanbul.³ His death took place here in the year 1421, and his tomb is still revered in that city.

The original copy of the poem is said to have been dated at Bursa in the year 1409. It was entitled *Vesilatun Nedjat* (The Means of Deliverance) and consists of a number of sections or cantos, usually separated by couplet and response, which served as chorus. The birth of Mohammed is described in the ninth section.

The English translation of some parts of this poem is given below. It must be remembered, in reading it, that some couplets are given in the first person and as spoken by Lady Amine, the mother of Mohammed, in the form of an introspection, the account of which is given afterwards:

But in that night when he to earth
descended,
A host of herald signs bespoke his coming,
It was the happy month, Rebi-ul-evel,
And of this month, the twelfth, Isneyn,
the Blessed.

“I saw,” said she, “a wondrous light up
springing,
and streaming from my house, with blaze
increasing.
Round it the sun revolved, moth-like and
dazzled,
While earth and sky gave back this
matchless splendour
Heaven’s radiant doors stood wide and
Dark was vanquished.
There came three angels bearing shining
banners.

“So clear before my eyes appeared these
visions,

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That all my heart o'erflowed with glowing wonder."

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Here Amine made ending, for the hour
In which should come that best of men
had sounded.

"I thirst," she cried, "I thirst, I burn with fever!"

A brimming glass to her at once was proffered.

White was this glass, than snow more white, and colder;

No sweetmeat ever made held half such sweetness.

I drank it, and my being filled with glory,
Nor could I longer self from light distinguish.

It is clear from this account that Amine experienced visual aura as well as a sensation of hotness and thirst during her labor. The couplet that follows the last couplet cited above states that she was exhausted and fainted, and that when she recovered, there were no fairies, phantasmagoric birds, etc., to be seen.¹ We also know that some versions of this poem carry references to noises that she had heard that filled all the atmosphere.¹

This tableau, described by the poet can medically be interpreted in a number of ways: (1) It may be the account of eclampsia of pregnancy; (2) it may be the account of an epileptic seizure precipitated by labor; (3) It may be the account of a state of hyperpyrexia secondary to an intrapartum infection.

Clayton and Oram state that the symptoms of idiopathic epilepsy usually appear in the first or second decade, but sometimes not until later. They may, indeed, occur first during or just after a pregnancy and in that event, idiopathic epilepsy would have to be differentiated from eclampsia or from cerebral thrombophlebitis.⁴

Was it eclampsia? There are some points in favor of this possibility. According to Dieckmann, primiparas comprise 63–83% of the patients who have eclampsia and preeclampsia: Amine was a primipara when

she gave birth to Mohammed. On the other hand, the incidence of toxemia among the unmarried women and widows is said to be higher; and we know that Abdulla, the father of Mohammed had died before the latter was born.

But some points are against toxemia. It is widely known that the incidence of eclampsia shows marked variations throughout the world and that changes in climate, diet, and habits of people affect it. According to Dieckmann, Von Konrad has stated that eclampsia is rare in Egypt and in people inhabiting the date-tree oases.⁵ The same is true of the Arabian peninsula. Eclampsia is said to be very rare in the country then inhabited by the Arabian tribe called Quraish, of which Abdulla, the Prophet's father was a member.

Eclampsia is, however, of frequent occurrence in Turkey. The common people know that such a disease exists and this medical term has its synonyms, such as *havale*, in the Turkish language used in everyday life. If, in Suleyman Chelibi's poem, Amine, the Prophet's mother compares the liquid presented to her during her labor to snow, which is practically absent in the district where the birth took place, but ever present on the top of Mount Olympos, at whose feet Bursa, where this poet lived, is situated, why should he not interpret and describe the birth of his Prophet in terms of the phenomena with which he is quite familiar?²

In addition, amnesia usually occurs in the eclamptic patients and they not infrequently have a loss of memory. Hence, it would be difficult for her to remember that "So clear before [her] eyes appeared these visions" and give such a detailed account of them.

There are more points in favor of epilepsy. Visual disturbances attributed to eclampsia are usually described as "spots before eyes," "blurring of vision," or "a partial blackout due to retinal edema;" the use of these terms is insufficient to describe those visions seen by the Prophet's mother, while visual and



Fig. 1. The infant Mohammed surrounded by his mother, Amine, and three angels. The inscriptions on the wall are connected with the event of the nativity. This miniature, taken from the manuscript *Siyer-un-Nebi* (Progress of the Prophet) represents a compromise between the traditions of East and West concerning representation in human form of sacred figures: only the face of the child Mohammed and his mother are veiled, with the rest of the bodies shown. Also noteworthy is the flaming, golden light surrounding the child, a customary substitute for the halo above the heads of the holy figures seen in the religious art of the West.

psychic "aura," a typical symptom of epilepsy seems the right designation for them.

We know that some epileptic patients have within one framework of a very complex seizure that visual hallucination of a threatening figure. Still others see and hear very complicated dreamlike sequences.⁹

Certainly hyperpyrexia, secondary to an intrapartum infection, would be a likely event centuries before Semmelweis was born. It is also clear that one, without overworking one's imagination, can easily attribute the "hotness and the thirst" reported by the parturient to this cause. Certainly this would not be the first nor the last piece of art which describes hallucinations experienced in states of high fever: Goethe's famous

Erkönig may be cited as a well-known example.

Finally, to end this effort at differential diagnosis attempted hundreds of years after the event, I would like to quote a passage from the book *Comparative Religion* by Dr. A. C. Bouquet, about Mohammed's hearing voices during his meditations in the barren deserts around Mecca, for I believe that these words also hold true for Lady Amine in the process of delivery.

"[His] credit was not weakened by these strange events for they were the price which sensitive souls have to pay for the intensity of their vision."²²

These gifted persons enlightened and morally elevated millions of people and yet

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they themselves did suffer from human illnesses.

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