

Evidence for Using Medical Masks Dates Back to Thousands of Years Ago in Ancient Persia

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COVID-19 is affecting many people throughout the world. With its rapid spread, SARS-CoV-2 is highly transmissible¹. It has been suggested that an effective way of preventing transmission of the disease, is using masks.

In the search of history behind the use of masks and one of the most ancient evidences of using this mouth and nose veil, we are led to more than 2500 years ago and its use by Zoroastrian clergymen living in Achaemenid era (700 to 330 BC; one of the most significant Ancient Persian empires)². The territory of this Persian empire was very vast from Greece to India and from Libya to contemporary Afghanistan³. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's most ancient religions and used to be the prominent religion in ancient Persia. Persepolis is a royal palace complex remaining from Achaemenid era in Iran, Shiraz. There are different engravings and carvings on the stones which illustrate gift-bearers of different nations

dedicating presents to the king. Among some of these reliefs, there are figures of some religious clergymen partly covering their face.

One of the oldest carvings of Zoroastrian clergyman (Magi/Mobeds) that shows they covered their nose and mouth, dates back to 520-330 BC (Achaemenid era), and is kept in Istanbul Archaeological Museum now (carved on a relief in Daskyleion, a town in Turkey). It is a carving that illustrates the use of mouth and nose veil by two Zoroastrian clergymen while sacrificing a sheep and a bull in a religious ceremony (figure 1A). This usage of mouth and nose cover is still alive these days, and Zoroastrian clergymen always wear a piece of white cloth over their mouth and nose when they tend the fire or perform some specific ceremonies (figure 1B). This is done in order to prevent their breath or saliva droplets reaching and polluting the holy fire and other ritual implements⁴. Looking at Zoroastrians' sacred book, Avesta, we see that the word Panām (*Paiti-dāna* in Avestan language) is mentioned

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as the name of this mouth and nose cloth veil. Avestan language dates back to about 600 BC⁵.

To put in a nutshell, the ritual of wearing *Panām* has existed among Zoroastrian clergymen since at least 2600 years ago and is still applied today. This may be an example of one of the most ancient applications of medical mask. So, the first use of masks was probably not medical purposes.

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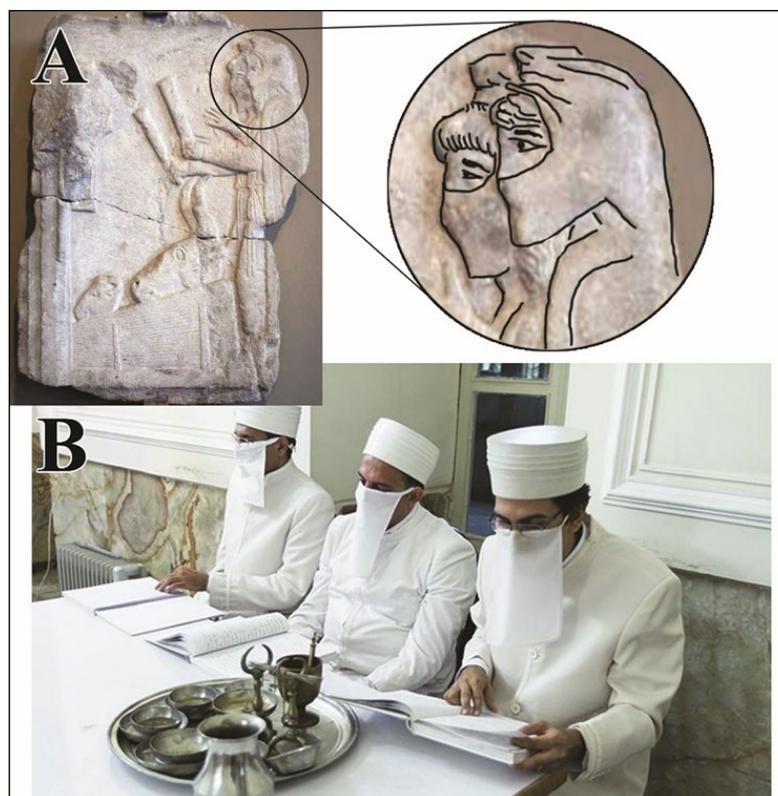


Figure 1. Use of mouth and nose cover among Zoroastrian clergymen from past to present.

Figure 1. A. A relief portraying two magi while doing a ritual of sacrificing a sheep and a bull, pertaining to 520-330 BC (Achaemenid era), being kept in Istanbul Archaeological Museum (in Daskyleion, Turkey). Picture adapted from: P. Canepa, Matthew. "The Transformation of Sacred Space, Topography, and Royal Ritual in Persia and The Ancient Iranian World". in *Heaven on earth: temples, ritual and cosmic symbolism in the ancient world: papers from the Oriental Institute Seminar Heaven on earth*, edited by Deena Ragavan, Chicago, 2012, p 350. B. Contemporary Zoroastrian clergymen performing a liturgical ceremony, Tehran, Iran. Picture adapted from www.berasad.com, accessed at 30-08-2020.

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