

Mental care and asylums in the past

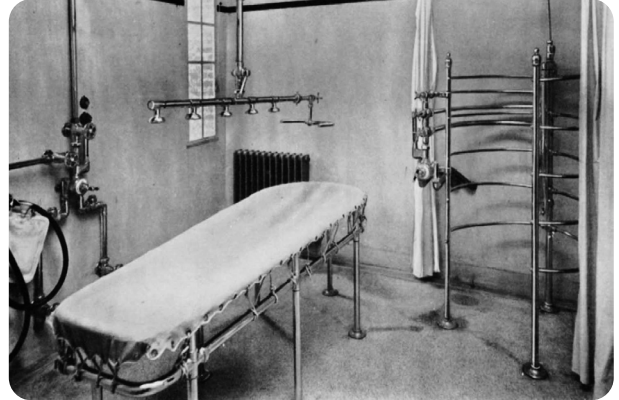
■ Read the passage and answer the questions below.

In the Islamic world, *Bimaristans* (hospitals) were first described by European travellers, who wrote about the care and kindness shown to lunatics. In 872, Ahmad Ibn Tulun built a hospital in Cairo that provided care for the insane which included music therapy.

In Europe during the medieval era, a variety of settings were employed to house people thought to be mentally insane. A few towns had towers where madmen were kept. Other such institutions for the insane were established after the Christian Reconquista in Spain, including hospitals in Valencia (1407), Zaragoza (1425), Seville (1436), Barcelona (1481), and Toledo (1483).

The Priory of Saint Mary of Bethlem in London, which later became known as Bedlam*, was founded in 1247. At the start of the 15th century, it housed just six insane men.

One of Bedlam’s many controversial treatments – rotational therapy – involved sitting a patient in a chair or swing suspended from the ceiling. The chair was then spun, the speed and duration dictated by a doctor. During the 18th and 19th centuries patients were dunked in cold baths, starved, and beaten. Irish physician William Black, in his “Dissertation on Insanity” (1811), described the asylum: “In Bedlam the strait waistcoat, when necessary, and occasional



An interior view of Saint Mary of Bethlem (1938).

purgatives are the principal remedies. Nature, time, regimen, confinement, and seclusion from relations are the principal auxiliaries.”

The level of specialist institutions for the care and control of the insane remained extremely limited at the turn of the 18th century. Madness was seen principally as a domestic problem affecting families and, where family care was not possible, lunatics might be ‘boarded out’ to other members of the local community or committed to private madhouses. Exceptionally, if those believed mad were judged to be disturbing or violent, they were confined in charitable asylums such as Saint Mary of Bethlem, in Houses of Correction or in workhouses.

* The word “bedlam”, meaning uproar and confusion, is derived from the hospital’s prior nickname.

at the turn of: <i>al volgere di</i>	dunked: <i>immerso</i>	<i>alimentare</i>	starved: <i>affamato</i>
beaten: <i>picchiato</i>	to house: <i>ospitare</i>	seclusion: <i>isolamento</i>	strait waistcoat: <i>camicia di forza</i>
to board out: <i>alloggiare</i>	insane: <i>pazzo</i>	setting: <i>ambiente</i>	swing: <i>altalena</i>
ceiling: <i>soffitto</i>	lunatics: <i>pazzo</i>	to spin (spun-spun): <i>far girare su se stesso</i>	workhouse: <i>ospizio</i>
	regimen: <i>regime</i>		

- How were hospitals in the Islamic world first described by European travellers?
- What therapy was also used to cure mental illness in the hospital built by Ahmad Ibn Tulun?
- Where were people with mental illness sometimes kept in the Middle Ages in Europe?
- What was Bedlam?
- What did rotational therapy consist in?
- What other treatments were used in Bedlam?
- How was the care of the insane managed at the beginning of the 18th century?
- When were those believed mad confined in asylums?