The Religion in Medicine: an exploration of healing through the examination of Asclepius and the Epidaurian lamata

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The Religion in Medicine: an exploration of healing through the examination of Asclepius and the Epidaurian *iamata*

By Ongelle-Lise Burnett

For many Ancient Greeks, Asclepius was the god usually sought after to assist in the recovery process. As the evidence presented in the Epidaurian inscriptions indicate, patients praised Asclepius because he not only answered their prayer requests in a timely manner, but also cured their diseases, typically, in one nightly visit. His healing-cult, dedicated to “curative and protective powers,” created a different, yet acceptable, form of worship that spread from existing shrines in Tricca, Epidaurus, Athens and the Piraeus to the Aegan, Asia Minor and Egypt. This paper will use examples from the Asclepieion sanctuary at Epidaurus, which welcomed patients from different parts of ancient Greece. This sanctuary was special because patients participated in an incubation practice where dreaming allowed the god(s) to heal and give advice on further courses of action. Thus, at Epidaurus, a patient found counsel and prophecies through a different form of healing: nightly dream-filled visions.

This paper explores the belief of the people in Asclepius, through the examination of the *iamata* (the erected physical testimonies of healings) and the events at Epidaurus. The relationship between a god and his followers will be defined in order to understand how the power of one’s belief in divine

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assistance and medical knowledge influenced the healing of the body and the mind. First, I will briefly introduce the *iamata* and discuss the events of the *abaton* (the sleeping place) that resulted in the healing of the patients. This description forms the basis needed to define faith healing in order to understand the relationship that was needed for the servants who believed in Asclepius to take the first steps to their cure. Afterwards, Asclepius and his power will be compared to the limitations of the priest in order to examine the place of the gods in the lives of ancient Greeks. This will uncover the roles of priests in the *abaton’s* healings and, finally, establish Asclepius’s presence in the sanctuary, in medicine and in the lives of his believers.

According to Hart and Forrest, authors of *Asclepius – the God of Medicine*, the highlight of the treatment of the sick at the Epidaurian sanctuary was conducted in the *abaton*–the sleeping place. During this time, as stated in the *iamata*–the erected physical testimonies of healings–the patients either experienced Asclepius’s healing power by surgery or it was dictated in a prescription. As the remains of the *iamata* read, individuals visited the sanctuary for various ailments. For instance, unusually long pregnancies, paralyzed limbs, blindness, gallstones, and speech difficulties were amongst the most common stories documented in the *iamata*. For example, Cleo and Ithmonica both visited the temple for their five and three year long pregnancies, respectively. In addition, the crippled man, Hermodicus and the lame man, Nicanor, also, testified to Asclepius’s healing abilities.

Scholars such as Edelstein and Edelstein, argue that stories of unrealistic cures were created by the priests to encourage visitors to come to the sanctuary for healing. In “The Didactic Nature of the Epidaurian Lamata,” Dillon argues that priests did not purposely create stories when writing the *iamata*, but they did record “semi-mythical deeds” of Asclepius that supported the works of his cult in the hope of encouraging new followers. It is interesting to note that in encouraging the patients to believe in their recovery, miracles were more likely to become possible. This allowed the patients to concentrate on taking the necessary steps to their recovery and, more so, allowed the god and his priests to secure the patient’s confidence in their abilities.

All together, this introduces another important step in receiving the cure: faith healing—the importance of believing Asclepius and in his abilities. Faith healing was encouraged and visitors were told to present themselves to Asclepius with a mind and body that was prepared with an acceptance of the healing methods of the god. Additionally, the *iamata* by describing the healings conducted in the secret place of the *abaton* became a documented source of the beliefs in Asclepius’s power. In the following paragraphs, I intend to examine the origin of Asclepius and highlight the roles of the priests to give some

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8 Dillon, 242.
9 Rhodes and Osborne (henceforth, R.O.) 102, 3-21.
10 R.O. 102, 107-112.
11 Edelstein and Edelstein, 143.
12 Dillon, 258-259.
background against which one addresses the question of the divine power in healings, as opposed to a man’s healing abilities.

In Ancient Greece, good health was always accredited to the gods and, therefore, being cured of one’s illnesses was believed, in all circumstances, to be a gift of mercy from the gods. After performing the required rituals at the sanctuary, the ill went to bed in hope that Asclepius would appear to them during the night to answer their prayer request. Asclepius was a hero-god, one of the twelve Olympians and was the god of medicine. According to Greek mythology, Chiron being the father of the medical art, taught Asclepius his medical skills and with Athena’s gift of Gorgon’s blood, Asclepius, a surgeon, was able to master medicine by delaying death and in some cases bring some back from death until, being later forbidden to do so, Asclepius subsequently retired to become a divine consulting physician; in oracles and through dreams he advised treatments and prescribed drugs to be taken by his patients or to be administered by doctors. Asclepius’s myth and the Asclepieia served to provide an alternative to home remedies and self and family care to those who were burdened by their illness and suffered in pain.

Another important aspect to the Asclepieia was the priests. They were the highest authority at the Asclepieia, directed the sequence of the sacrifices and worship and the rituals that needed to be closely followed in order to receive the cure. Some of their duties included administering ‘mind-therapy’ to those who had successfully completed the preliminary preparation for the final step in receiving the cure. They were comparable to present-day hospital administrators as they conducted the financial affairs of the temple, collected and recorded gifts. The priests, also, had to have some amount of medical knowledge in order to supervise the patients, so, their skills were comparable to that of trained medical professions. It is, however, difficult to determine the exact duties of the priests. Priests were probably assigned specific tasks, with one or two being in charge of preparing the overnight guests for the stay in their abaton. Also, it is difficult to determine what skills were necessary to work in the abaton and to help with the healings, not is it easy to determine how much knowledge a priest needed to have to be allowed to write the healing stories on the iamata.

It is clear that the priests had to have the skill of interpreting the dreams of the ill in order to arrive at the cure, which they accredited the cure to the god’s power. The priests believed that Asclepius

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15 Nutton, 109.
16 Dillon, 241.
17 Edelstein Testimonies (Henceforth ET.) 244 Celsius, De Medicina, Prooemium, 2; Edelstein and Edelstein, 112; Hart and Forrest, 3.
18 ET. 243. Xenophon Cynegeticus, I, 6.
19 ET. 268. Cornutus, Theologiae Graecae Compendium, Cp 33; ET. 236 Minucius Felix. Octavius, XXIII, 7; Edelstein and Edelstein, 110, 112, 124; Hart and Forrest, 8-10.
20 Edelstein and Edelstein, 101. Asclepius sometimes gave instructions to patients that were to be administered by a doctor.
21 Hart and Forrest, 71.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid; Dillon, 243.
24 Dillon, 243.
worked through them and gave them the ability and wisdom to deal with various patient cases. Asclepius’s miracles were of some medical nature as they were administered by both the physicians and priests. For example, the man from Torone, who had swallowed leeches in a cocktail given to him by his step-mother, dreamt that the god cut open his chest with a knife, removed the leeches and stitched his chest. This story supports the argument that the priests were medically trained and that Asclepius used healing methods that required medical skills.

The story of blind Ambrosia from Athens demonstrates Asclepius’s surgical abilities. Ambrosia came to the god in disbelief that the lame and blind could be made well by having a dream. Whilst in the sanctuary, she experienced a dream where the god cut open her eye and treated it with a drug. This story not only demonstrated Asclepius’s surgical ability but, also, gives testimony to one of the many successful healings that, also, proved his medical knowledge. Furthermore, priests were allowed to perform some surgeries and, sometimes, undertook tasks that were beyond their experience. This can be demonstrated in the story of the woman who went to Epidaurus, after seeking the help of other physicians, begging the god to free her from a parasite. At that moment, the god was not in the sanctuary but the attendants began to treat her by removing her head in order to recover the worm. The priests were unable to reattach the head and the god was consequently angry with them for attempting a procedure beyond their skills. He then completed the surgery and revived the cured patient.

This decapitation episode suggests that some of the priests were specialized doctors: cardiac surgeons, gynecologists and so forth. The myths indicate that some priests were doctors who had begun their practice but were under the supervision of more senior doctors and, therefore, limited in their abilities. Also, this story indicates that the patients described every touch during the process of the cure to be that of Asclepius, though in reality, this could not have been the case. Taking into consideration that there were many Asclepieia that functioned throughout ancient Greece, it was impossible for Asclepius to be present at every sanctuary, every night, carrying out the treatments solely to heal every patient. This belief indicates that for the ancient Greeks, their worship of the gods was the basis of their existence. As documented in all the recordings, the people believed that only Asclepius could help them, as he held the knowledge to perform all miracles. The people believed a god could do everything as only good or what was right could be made perfect by the gods.

Asclepius’s miracles through dreams were a means of enhancing the patient’s confidence in restoring his or her health. This implies that the priest had his own personal motivations in recording the healings. However, I am inclined to think that the stories were designed to comfort the patients. Ancient Greeks

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25 Edelstein and Edelstein, 158.
26 R.O., 537; R.O. 102. 98-103.
27 R.O. 102. 33-40.
28 Ibid.
29 Longrigg, 12; 1.23 Aelian, Nature of animals IX.33.1.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Edelstein and Edelstein, 158.
believed that the gods were in control of everything and were responsible for their bad and good fortunes and similarly people believed that disease, life, harvest and death were each the will of the gods. Therefore, I would argue that the priests ensured that the image and presence of Asclepius was abundantly evident in the sanctuary to bring comfort to the sick. This not only allowed the ill to believe they could be healed but, only, to trust that their healing would come in the morning after their stay at Epidaurus.

To continue with the argument of the gods being responsible for one’s health, delaying death was, therefore, seen as the god’s doing. Thus, it might be reasonable to think, the ancient Greeks would have found it difficult to accept that humans could be solely responsible for or play a greater part in the maintenance of their health. The public speaker, Aeschines, who bluntly stated lost confidence in human medical skills, but felt more comfortable in Asclepius’s hands, said: “no longer counting upon mortal skills, I placed all my hope in divinity. I left Athens... I came, Asclepius, into your sacred wood and I was cured in three <nights> of a wound that I had in my head of a year.” Thus, it was acceptable for the people to believe that the priests were mere assistants in the healing process and that one’s healing should be credited for the most part to a god to who was all praises were expected to be given.

Asclepius was an Olympian demi-god: a child born to one parent being a god–the Greek god Apollo and the other parent being human—the mortal, Coronis. He was sometimes referred to as a hero god, an idolized mortal, who already deceased, was worshipped as a powerful individual who existed in a state between that of a god and a man. Only gods were portrayed as perfect and all-knowing. Therefore, it was understood that Asclepius, on very rare occasions, might be unable to heal a patient. The mythical stories serve to explain why Asclepius could heal many but not all: “Asclepius was a man who was rewarded for his deeds, he became the god of medicine, the surgeon who was able to delay the death of many and in previous cases, allowed to bring others back from their death.” If Asclepius was unable to heal a patient or made a mistake of some sort that resulted in a patient’s treatment needing to be revised, it was understood that it was the human part of him that made those mistakes. The divine part of him was always accredited with the miracles because gods were above the works of any human. His healings were seen as miracles beyond human comprehension and his divine being manifestations occurred in a world where such events were usual and were, therefore, accepted as a natural result of being a god. As a result, many became devoted to Asclepius after experiencing his touch of healing. In the end, if the sick were healed, they were contented and they believed in the divine power of Asclepius.

Asclepius and his healings must be interpreted in relation to Greek life and religion rather than just to medicine. Asclepius used dreams as a means of communication in which gods and men allowed their

33 Longrigg, 13.
34 Hart and Forrest, 4.
35 Ibid., 3-10.
36 Edelstein and Edelstein, 154-155; 1.26 Palatine Anthology VI.330.
37 The example reads: “the ancestral god Asclepius of whom I declared myself to be a servant since he saved me when I had the deadly condition of an abscess.” Edelstein and Edelstein, 263; ET 458. Galenus, De Libris Propriis, Cp. 2 [II, p. 99M.]
souls to interact in a way that could not be achieved in their conscious state. This was seen as the usual practice in the ancient world and Asclepius acted as any other Greek god would. Temple medicine showed the close relationship between medicine and religious healing whilst Asclepius symbolized a god’s power to heal and the art of medicine: the medical skills, talents and attributes needed to be a good human doctor. To the people, the healings were most important, and far more important than the image of Asclepius as they knew he was responsible for the healings regardless of his appearance: “just as it is of no advantage to know the name and appearance of any man who is a physician, it is of no advantage to know that Asclepius is a god.”

The priests were the link between the deity and his servants. The Asclepieia can be compared to a hospital which was run by priests as nurses, general and specialized doctors. Whilst Asclepius can be seen as the respected head of healing from which inspiration and knowledge were derived. Although, it is not clear if the iamata recorded stories that occurred as actual events, the document does illustrate that in the ancient world when one was sick, healing sanctuaries such as that at Epidaurus were consulted for healing. Ancient Greeks believed in the power of the divine over their own capabilities. Therefore the Epidaurian recordings indicate that the Asclepieia was an environment that encouraged healing in a relaxing way, supported the works of the priests and Asclepius, and allowed ancient Greeks to believe that they could be cured of their sickness and cheat death.

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38 Edelstein and Edelstein, 157.
39 Ibid., 157-158, 162.
40 King, 6; Nutton, 114.
41 The example reads: “Just as it is of no advantage, he [sc. Varro] says, “to know the name and appearance of any man who is a physician and not to know what a physician is so,” he says, “it is of no advantage to know that Asclepius is a god, if you are of no aware that he bestows the gift of health and consequently do not know why you ought to supplicate to him.” Edelstein and Edelstein, 320; ET. 576 Augustinus, De Civitate Dei, IV, 22.