



The Cult of Asklepios

Asklepios (or Asclepius or Aesculapius), the healing god and patron of physicians, though popular through Greco-Roman times, has his original shrouded in mystery, the stories about him developing after the fact, after he had become popular, especially at Epidaurus, the site of his principle temple and sanctuary. These later stories make him the son of the healer god, Apollo (who can also bring plague with his arrows, as in the opening of the Iliad) and the mortal Coronis.

When Apollo found out Coronis was also playing around with a mortal man, he shot her, but, as she was dying, she told Apollo that his child was in her womb. Apollo rescued the child and gave him to the centaur Chiron to raise; Chiron was also associated with healing and also raised Achilles and Jason. Asklepios became a great healer but went too far when he raised mortals (e.g., Hippolytus) from the dead, so Zeus struck him dead with a lightning bolt and was in consequence sent into exile.

Asklepios then becomes a hero, with a cult, but an unusual hero in that we know little else about him: he has no real exploits. His wife and children are minor figures (two sons who are Greek physicians and fighters at Troy and two daughters who are personifications, Hygieia and Panacea). Epidaurus promoted the story of his birth there, though some alternate myths put his earliest temple at Trikka, in Thessaly.

Medicinal practice in 6th/5th century Greece was fairly primitive, using mainly herbal and folk medicine, though there was some surgery (without anesthesia), but an important source of cures, at healing sites, was faith-healing. The sanctuary area was clearly marked and ritually pure (no one was allowed to give birth or die there). Visitors, on entering, were purified and gave an offering. They saw the famous statue of Asklepios as well as the dedications/thank offerings of those who had been healed, generally in the form of models of the body part that had been healed.

Within the sanctuary area was the abaton, open to all, including (perhaps especially) the poor. People would sleep the night there and would dream of Asklepios. The god would either perform the cure then and there or tell the dreamers what they needed to do to be cured. Dedicatory offerings often give case histories of what happened in individual instances. Most recorded cures do not involve contagious diseases (were they kept anyway?), but are more often lameness, injured limbs and the like. Payment was whatever you could afford. A common payment was a cock, as in Socrates' last words as he lay dying, "Remember, I owe a cock to Asklepios."

As the fame of Asklepios spread, new sanctuaries were founded elsewhere in Greece by having the god, in the form of a serpent, travel to the new site. A snake and a dog were associated with the god and are regularly shown in depictions and in the dreams in the abaton. Snakes are often associated with rebirth (because of their shedding of skins) and Asklepios' staff (now the sign for doctors) has a snake curled about it (similar to the caduceus, which has two). The reason for the dog is unclear. Faithful helper of man? Dogs will lick sores? An alternative tale has Asklepios nursed as an infant by a goat and guarded by a dog.

The priests of Asklepios were not medical practitioners but citizens of the polis who ran the sanctuary so it at least broke even financially. The posts were not hereditary and the priests did not treat you personally. There seemed to be no conflict between the healing shrines and doctors. Regular doctors (who called themselves "Sons of Asklepios") mightwell send to the shrines patients for whom they could no longer do anything. These regular medical practitioners were associated with the work of Hippocrates of Cos, around whom arose a vast medical literature, with a great emphasis on diseases of women. Some think the famous Hippocratic Oath was adhered to only by members of a narrow sect, the Pythagoreans, rather than by all the members of the doctor's guild.

There was a temple to Asklepios at Eleusis, in association with Demeter, and Asklepios' healing shrines were often associated with temples of Apollo. At Epidaurus (excavated this century) the sanctuary was built over the site of a previous Apollo temple. When the sanctuaries were built near mineral springs, these were generally used for the festivals (with games and performances) held there rather than for the cures.

The healing shrines go back to at least the 6th century BC. The first of the three at Athens dates to 420 BC and during the 4th century the sanctuaries spread to the ancient Near East. In 293 BC the god comes to Rome to quell a plague, but the worship eventually lapses in later Roman times. Some of what we know about the cult comes from descriptions of travelers like Pausanias and even from the comic dramatist Aristophanes, who, in his play *Ploutos* (*Wealth*), describes and satirizes that god's trip to the sanctuary of Asklepios to get cured (he does) of his blindness.
