

More on the Staff and Serpent of Asclepius

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officer and instructing staff on Naval and Army Reserve medical exercises, and has completed training in aviation medicine and nuclear, chemical, and biological medicine. His civilian work interests have included private general practice and university lecturer in general practice, environmental health and public health. He has retired from full-time teaching but is currently a Visiting Fellow in the School of Safety Science at the University of New South Wales.

Asclepius, the Greek god of healing and the son of Apollo, was revered as a forefather of the art of medicine in the many centuries before and after Hippocrates, and his symbol, the staff and serpent, has come to represent medicine, the healing profession. Asclepian medicine after the fifth century BC took place in an era of change of Greek and Roman medicine from being wholly based on magic and religious rituals to an objective approach with history taking and recording and examination of body parts, and treatment using diet, mineral baths, exercise, and plant and herbal treatments. There are several interpretations of the meaning of both the knotted wooden staff and the serpent, they both represent healing powers, but rational as well as supernatural.

Asclepius and follower physicians

Asclepius is portrayed on ancient statues and reliefs as a bearded, mature, noble and benevolent man, draped in a simple toga, and holding a knotted wooden staff around which is entwined a serpent with magical healing powers – the “staff of Asclepius” (1, 2, 3). Asclepius was probably a historical human figure in 1250 BC and his sons, Machaon and Podalirius, are mentioned as military physicians in Homer’s Iliad of eighth century BC (4, 5). He was worshipped as a cult leader of the art of healing in ancient Greece and Rome for many centuries and deified as the god of medicine in the fifth century BC.

The itinerant practitioners of Asclepian medicine were called ‘periodeutae’ and regarded disease as disharmony between the body (‘corpus’) and nature (‘physis’) (6). Asclepian practitioners would orate and sing and invite people to their ‘iatria’, or offices, where they practiced their art of ‘pronoea’, obtaining from the ill person a detailed account of their symptoms then giving them a diagnosis and prognosis of their ailment. When more rational medicine and therapeutics, such practitioners had professional status practising the art of healing, or ‘physik’, returning a person’s health back to its natural state.



Statue of Asclepius of the Este type. Pentelic marble, Roman period copy of ca. 160 AD after a 4th-century BC original. From the temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus (National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. 263)

Asclepian temples and 'incubation' therapy

People who couldn't afford a physician could have their illnesses, wounds and ailments attended to and cured in Asclepian temples, or 'Asclepieia'. The temples were elaborate sanatoriums and an idyllic and hypnotic environment attended to by Asclepian priests and their magical healing serpents. 'Temple sleep' was a previously known form of ritual treatment practised in ancient Egypt by physician followers of the Egyptian god of healing, Imhotep (2). Asclepieian treatment was not just based on ritual and interpretation of dreams, but also natural forms of therapy such as purgatives, absence from alcohol, dieting, massage, exercise, mineral baths, and herbal and plant medicinal treatments.

An ill person would first have a purifying mineral bath, perhaps a purgative and fasting, and sacrificial offerings were made. Non-venomous 'sacred serpents' which were revered for their magical healing and rejuvenation powers roamed free and would lick the person's wound or lesion or eyes. The patient went to sleep, possibly with the help of snake venom, in the 'abaton', a long colonnade of 'cubicles' which were open to the air, and Asclepius and his daughters, Panacea and Hygiea,

would visit the person in their dreams and prescribe a cure. When they awoke a priest would interpret their dreams and advise on the treatment prescribed by Asclepius. (1, 2, 3).

The magical serpent

The serpent has its origins as a symbol of magic and healing in more ancient times than Asclepius, and was symbolic of medicine in ancient Sumerian, Egyptian, Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. In Asclepian times the serpent came to represent wisdom, rejuvenation, longevity and immortality, perhaps related to its ability to shed skin and grow, as well as health and cure of disease. They were used to discover medicinal herbs and their venom may have been used therapeutically in the Asclepian temples. (7, 8, 9, 10)

The knotted wooden staff

The staff assisted Asclepius in his wanderings from place to place curing illnesses, and it may have also represented sacred trees and plants that had natural and magical healing powers (9, 10). The staff has long been used symbolically as a symbol of wisdom and a mark of profession by priests, prophets, philosophers, scientists and physicians. Medical history references do not say what the Asclepian staff was made of, although in the time the islands of Cos and Delos were abound with olive and orange trees.

Conclusion

Asclepian medicine spanned a long period of history of the ancient Greek-Roman world. It was originally based on sacred religious ritual and the magical healing powers of the serpent, but also developed a rational approach to diagnosis and treatment using treatments such as diet, physical therapies and plant medicinals. The symbol of Asclepius, the staff and serpent, has since come to represent medicine, and wisdom, knowledge, skill and benevolence, and is an apt symbol for practitioners of the art of healing.

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