

Electra, volume 5

Editorial

Menelaos Christopoulos

Director of the

Center for the Study of Myth and Religion in Greek and Roman Antiquity

It was in March 2020 when the editorial team of *Electra* was called to choose a theme for the new issue of the journal. Years ago, we had decided that each issue of the journal should have a specific thematic orientation so that the readers could take advantage of the overall information provided on a precise topic. Many interesting ideas were advanced in that March web meeting – the appearance of Covid 19 had already multiplied the occurrence of distance internet encounters. On March 23rd the first general lockdown was implemented in Greece. In everyone’s mind the idea of the pandemic was taking shape. Classicists all over the world recalled Thucydides’ description of 430 BC plague of Athens and, I guess, we all recalled those days that the first book of the first western literary work, namely the *Iliad*, starts with the description of a plague and that, obviously, what was happening in 2020 was a very old human experience, literarily registered approximately 29 centuries ago. As, in that era, the concept of preventing a disease (through vaccines) did not exist, people’s main concern focused exclusively on healing and, consequently, the hope for healing was expressed through the cult of a god who would enable such an outcome, namely the cult of Asclepius. It occurred to us then that, under the current circumstances, there could be no other option for the theme of our journal’s imminent issue than the cult of Asclepius.*

* I would like to express my warmest thanks to Dr Giannis Tsakonas (Director in the Library and Information Center, University of Patras) for his valuable technical support, and to George Charitatos (PhD candidate, Dept of Philology, University of Patras) for his assistance in the editing procedure.

In the following pages many specific aspects of the cult of Asclepius will be developed. As for the myth and the cult of Asclepius in general, I copy below the entry on Asclepius from R. Wrights's *Dictionary of Greek Mythology* hosted in the *Center for the Study of Myth and Religion in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (<http://mythreligion.philology.upatras.gr>).

Asclepius (Ἀσκληπιός). *A son of Apollo by a mortal; he was venerated as a healing god. Apollo fell in love with Coronis, the daughter of Phlegyas, a Thessalian king, but she embarked on a love affair with a fellow-mortal, Ischys, while she was pregnant by the god, and when Apollo learned of it, whether by his own prophetic powers or from a crow, he killed Coronis or asked his sister Artemis to do so. And as her body was burning on the funeral pyre, Apollo (or Hermes) snatched her unborn child from her womb and entrusted him to Chiron to be reared in his cave. There was an alternative tradition that Asclepius was conceived in Messenia by Arsinoe, daughter of Leucippus. According to Pausanias, someone consulted Apollo's oracle at Delphi about the matter and it declared in favour of Coronis. Chiron educated Asclepius in the arts of hunting and healing. There is a reference in the Iliad to some medicinal herbs that he had received from Chiron. He married Epione, daughter of Merops, and she bore him two sons, Machaon and Podalirius, who fought at Troy and served as healers to the Greek warriors. Asclepius himself played no part in heroic myth (although he was sometimes listed amongst the Argonauts and those who hunted the Calydonian boar, as was often the case with fathers of heroes who fought at Troy). In surviving sources, there is only one specific tale of a cure, as opposed to a revivification, achieved by him during his lifetime. When Heracles was wounded in the hip during his first attack on Hippocoon at Sparta, Asclepius healed him, and the hero showed his gratitude by founding a shrine to him near Amylcae. Zeus struck Asclepius with a thunderbolt when he transgressed mortal bounds by raising one or more people from the dead. Athena had given him some blood from this Gorgon which had opposite effects according to whether it came from the veins on the ill-omened left side or the right. For the blood from the left side was lethal, while that from the right could revive the dead. It was said that Asclepius used the latter to revive various persons: Capaneus and Lycurgus, two Argive warriors killed during the Theban war; or Hippolytus after his ill-deserved death; or Glaucus, son of Minos (although it was usually said that the seer Polyidus revived him in a wholly different*

way); or Tyndareus, or Hymenaeus, in unknown circumstances. Later sources suggest that he revived large numbers of people, even to the extent that Hades had to complain to Zeus about the diminution in the numbers of the dead. In any event, Zeus struck him down to prevent him from repeating his fault. This so angered Apollo that he killed the Cyclopes who had provided the thunderbolt, and he was only saved from being hurled into Tartarus because his mother Leto interceded with Zeus, who ordered instead that he should serve Admetus for a year. Although Asclepius may originally have been honoured as a hero, he was worshipped as a god in classical and later times, and specifically as the most important healer amongst the Greek gods and heroes. Epidaurus in the Argolid was the main seat of his worship, and whenever a new shrine was founded, as at Rome in 273 BC, a sacred snake was brought there from Epidaurus. The god's cures were often achieved through the practice known as incubation, in which patients would sleep in the god's temple and he would reveal the appropriate course of action to them in dreams. Asclepius was usually depicted as a mature bearded man with two main attributes, a staff and a snake (which is often coiled around the staff in statues which portray the god in a standing position, hence the familiar medical symbol). In connection with his cult, Asclepius was credited with a number of children whose names refer to the healing process, including Hygeia (Health), Panacea (Cure-all), Iaso (Healing) and the strange hooded child Telesphorus. In astral mythology, Zeus is said to have placed him in the sky as the constellation Ophiuchus (the Serpent-bearer) as compensation to his father Apollo for having killed him. [Apollodorus 3.10.3-4; Diodorus 4.71; Hyginus Astr 2.14; Ovid Met 15.533-46, 626-744; Pausanias 2.26-8, 3.19.7; Pindar Pyth 3.1ff with schol. 59]

When we first launched this call for papers, the pandemic was still an essentially unknown virus. Now that the issue is published, vaccination has already started in several countries. And although everyone hopes that the healing process will eventually meet with success, the truth is that, at the current stage, healing the disease still remains an open issue. Our current anxiety, therefore, indicates how direct and urgent such a problem could appear, individually and collectively, in ancient societies and, consequently, how crucial and important Asclepius's cult practices may then have been.