

Disbelief and Weak Belief in the Cult of Asclepius

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Greek and Roman religions are usually considered as essentially concerned with orthopraxy – practical actions (such as participation in rituals and festivals, performing sacrifices, or offering votive objects) are seen as crucial expressions of piety, without requiring any acts or signs of belief as known to other, particularly Christian, religions. This was persuasively argued with regard to the Roman religion by Linder and Scheid (1993) in their famous article “Quand croire c’est faire”, where they emphasise that the place of personal relationship with the divine is not in the foreground of this system:

L’enjeu fondamental d’une telle religion n’est pas la recherche d’une relation intime et personnelle avec la divinité, mais l’exact accomplissement des actes rituelles, le savoir-faire pratique, la connaissance précise des gestes et des paroles, et une parfaite administration du culte dans le cadre qui est le sien, la communauté.¹

According to this view, expressions of individual beliefs were not particularly relevant there as the performance of the ritual itself constituted an expression of *knowledge*, which the ancients regarded as superior to belief:

Les convictions exposées par les rites n’exprimaient pas une croyance au sens propre – car pour les Anciens la croyance était un mode inférieur de connaissance – mais un savoir.²

¹ Linder & Scheid 1993, 49.

² Linder & Scheid 1993, 54.

From this perspective, diligence and proper execution of the ritual can be regarded as equivalent to an expression of belief, as it arose from the faith in its effectiveness – in this context, belief becomes a ‘savoir-faire’, and not a ‘savoir-penser’.³ It has been widely accepted in scholarship that no other declaration or manifestation of belief in gods was necessary in the Greek or Roman religion, as their existence was usually assumed to be unquestionable and obvious.⁴ Overall, functionalism has been an important interpretative tool in the study of ancient religious practices, which is to a large extent due to the prevalence of the model of *polis* religion,⁵ proposed by Sourvinou-Inwood.⁶

However, the fact that the ancients did not feel compelled to express their belief in the existence of gods does not mean that personal convictions and attitude are a matter of indifference to their religious practice. It appears that worshippers were generally expected to approach deities with trust, which is reflected in the vocabulary: the Latin ‘fides’ refers principally to the trust⁷ placed in the deity and/or divine powers, as do the Greek πίστις⁸ and θάρσος,⁹ all often used in religious contexts. Moreover, participation in a ritual was an expression of faith in itself, as it presumed the belief that it will be effective.¹⁰

The cult of Asclepius provides a clear and illustrative example of a religious context where the worshippers are expected to approach the deity with trust in his supernatural healing powers, as such an attitude seems to have been the principal prerequisite for the incubation ritual, which entailed spending a night in a healing sanctuary in expectation of a dream bringing an instantaneous cure or showing a cure to happen in the near future. The evidence for this requirement can be found mainly in the epigraphic material available to us – the cure stories (‘*iamata*’) offered by suppliants as votives in gratitude for the obtained cure and displayed within sacred precincts. However, it appears also in literary texts, including those which mention incubation only very briefly.

³ Linder & Scheid 1993, 50: ‘croire c’était faire, c’était exécuter correctement les obligations cultuelles, ni plus, ni moins’.

⁴ Parker 2011, 3-13 (esp. 3-7) and 32; Price 1999, 3; Evans 2010, 7. For the historical evolution and problematised discussion of this view see Parker 2011, 31-34.

⁵ Kindt 2012, 15, 30-31.

⁶ Sourvinou-Inwood (2000a) and (2000b).

⁷ Linder & Scheid 1993, 54 with n. 39; Scheid 2013, 176-179.

⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of the uses and meanings of πίστις throughout centuries and in a variety of contexts see Morgan (2015), esp. 137-145 for the expectation that deities are approached with trust.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the use of θάρσος and θάρσεν, particularly in religious contexts see Herrero de Jáuregui (2015) *passim*.

¹⁰ Scheid 2013, 188.

Epigraphic evidence – the ‘iamata’

Several of the surviving cure inscriptions refer to people approaching the god with disbelief or faltering belief which resulted in a failure to obtain the cure or even in some form of bodily harm as punishment for their lack of faith. The majority of these cases come from the collection of stories inscribed and displayed in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidauros in the IV century BC.¹¹ On the basis of these testimonies, it is possible to distinguish levels or degrees of disbelief (or at least of its manifestation) and to observe the correspondence of the god’s reaction to them.

One of the most apparent signs of disbelief is the derision of others’ belief. In *iamata* A9, people present in the sanctuary laugh at a man with an eyeball missing who was hoping to regain his eyesight through incubation:

Ἀνὴρ ἀφίκετο ποὶ τὸν θεὸν ἰκέτας ἀτερόπτιλλος οὕτως, ὥστε τὰ βλέφαρα μόνον ἔχειν, ἐνεῖμεν δ’ ἐν αὐτοῖς μηθέν ἀλλὰ κενεὰ εἴ[ι] μὲν ὄλως. ἐ<γ>έ<λ>ων δὴ τινες τῶν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τὰν εὐηθίαν αὐτοῦ, τὸ νομίζειν βλεψεῖσθαι ὄλως μηδεμίαν ὑπαρχάν ἔχοντος ὀπίλλου ἀλλ’ ἢ χάραμ μόνον. ἐγκαθ[εῦδο]ντι οὖν αὐτῷ ὄψις ἐφάνη· ἐδόκει τὸν θεὸν ἐψησαί τι φάρμακον, ἔπε]ι τα διαγαγόντα τὰ βλέφα|ρα ἐγχείαι εἰς αὐτά· ἀμέρ[ας δὲ γενομένη]ας βλέπων ἀμφοῖν ἐξῆλθε.

“A man came to the god as a suppliant so deficient in one eye that he had only eyelids and there was nothing between them but just a quite empty hole. **Some of those in the sanctuary mocked the naivety of the man,** that he should think that he would see when he had none of the makings of an eye but only the place. A dream appeared to him as he slept in the

¹¹ The ‘iamata’ have been published repeatedly since 1883 (Kavvadias), with various numbering systems. The set found in Epidauros, inscribed on ‘stelai’, can be found in *IG IV²* 1.121-124 (for ‘stelai’ 1-4 respectively), where the stories are given numbers on the side (I-XX on the first stele, XXI-XLIII on the second stele, XLIV-XLVIII on the third stele, with the fragmentary stories left unnumbered, as well as the unnumbered stories on the fourth stele). A similar system is assumed by the Edelsteins (1945), with the only difference that they do not include the third and fourth stele at all. A different, although analogical, system is used by LiDonnici (1995): the ‘stelai’ are labelled with letters of the alphabet and the stories are assigned numbers within each stele; all the stories are given numbers, also those most fragmentary. Here, LiDonnici’s system is followed as it is clearer and more complete. For references to other editions see LiDonnici 1995, 15 n. 1 and Longo 1969, 72; a new edition of the first stele has been proposed by Rhodes and Osborne 2003, n° 102. The text of the inscriptions is quoted according to the edition and translation by Rhodes and Osborne (as the most recent) in the case of the first stele, and according to LiDonnici for all the other ‘stelai’. In all the quotations, the emphasis is mine.

sanctuary. It seemed to him that the god prepared some drug and then, pulling the eyelids apart, poured it into them. When day came he departed seeing with both eyes”.

This seems to be a relatively light offence because no punishment is entailed by the laughter at this man’s faith in Asclepius’ healing powers.

However, derision of the god himself and his healing powers has far more serious consequences. In *iama* B16 Cephisias, who laughed at the cure stories and claimed that Asclepius could not heal lame people, was punished with a foot injury while riding a horse:

Καφισί[ας - - - - - τοῖς Ἄσ]||κλαπιῦ θεραπέμασιν ἐπ[ιγελ - - - - -
οὐ φεί]||δεται λέγων ὡς, εἰ δύναμιν ἔ[χοι - - - - -]||τᾶς ὕβριος ποινὰς
λαμβάνω[ν - - - - -]||τοῦ βουκεφάλα ἐν ταῖ ἔδραι [καθίζοντά νιν
καταπατοῦντος τρωθῆ]|| μεν τὸμ πόδα παραχρῆμα καὶ [ἔτι δεινότερος (?)
διακεῖσθαι ἢ τὸ πρίν]|| ὕ[σ]τερον δὲ πολλὰ καθικετεύ[σας τὸν θεὸν ὑγιῆς
ἐγένετο.]

“Kaphisias - - - - - he [laughed] at the treatments of Asklepios - - - - -
- - - - - -he paid no heed, saying that if he had the power, - - - - -
he suffered punishment for this outrage - - - - - [while sitting] on
the back of his bull-headed horse [it trampled him underfoot and wounded
him] in the foot immediately and was [in an even worse condition than
before]. Much later, after he had earnestly prayed to the god (?), he became
well”.

It cannot be stated with certitude whether what was penalised in this case was the ridicule or the open denial of Asclepius’ healing powers. Regardless of which one of these acts was more offensive to the god, both arose from the lack of credence in divine potency. The ensuing punishment was quite severe and it could be argued that its character was directly contradictory to Asclepius’ nature: it involved bodily injury inflicted by the healing deity who otherwise appears as one of the kindest and most favourably disposed towards humans.

A similar situation can be observed in *iama* A11, telling the story of Aeschines, who tried to penetrate into the mystery of Asclepius’ healing by observing the ‘abatons’ with sleeping

suppliants from atop a tree; he fell off the tree and injured his eyes on some stakes below, which rendered him blind:

Αἰσχίνας ἐγκεκομισμένων ἤδη τῶν ἱκετᾶν ἐπὶ δένδρεόν τι ἀμβὰς
ὑπερέκυπτε εἰς τὸ ἄβατον. καταπετῶν οὖν ἀπὸ τοῦ δένδρεος |περὶ
σκόλοπας τινὰς τοὺς ὀπτίλλους ἀμφέπαισε. κακῶς δὲ διακείμενος καὶ
τυφλὸς γεγεννημένος καθικετεύσας τὸν θεὸν ἐνεκᾶθευδε καὶ ὑγιῆς ἐγένετο.

“Aeschines, when the suppliants were already asleep, climbed up a tree and tried to peer into the Abaton. He fell from the tree among some stakes and injured both eyes. In a sorry state and gone blind, he became a suppliant of the god, slept in the sanctuary and became healthy”.

Although it could be attributed to mere curiosity,¹² Aeschines’ desire to see with his own eyes what was happening in the ‘abaton’ can also be interpreted as incredulity in the god’s healing powers, which brought about punishment, again in the form of bodily injury. However, the story can also be regarded as emphasising the jeopardy resulting from breaching the sanctuary behaviour code, which demanded a strict secrecy of the incubation procedure. Thus, it clearly illustrates the inextricable connection between the attitude of faith and trust towards the deity and the observance of the rules according to which the ritual should be performed.

Divine punishment for lack of compliance with the prescribed behaviour in the ritual did not always take the form of bodily harm. In two further cases where individuals reacted to the cure stories with derision the consequences were of a completely different kind. A man with four paralysed fingers from *iama* A3 initially mocked the healing stories, but started to believe in Asclepius’ healing powers after he was cured through incubation; the god reacted with changing his name to Incredulous (Ἄπιστος):

Ἄνῆρ τοὺς τὰς χηρὸς δακτύλους ἀκρατεῖς ἔχων πλὰν |ένος ἀφίκετο ποὶ τὸν
θεὸν ἱκέτας· θεωρῶν δὲ τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἱαρῶι |πίνακας **ἀπίσται τοῖς ἰάμασιν**

¹² For analogical stories about people who entered sanctuaries (or their parts) inappropriately see Hdt. 6.134.1-2 (Miltiades entering Demeter’s ‘thesmophorion’ on Paros), Aelian fr. 44 Hercher = fr. 47b Domingo-Forasté (Battus violating the mysteries). See also the plot of Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae*, with Mnesilochus joining the Thesmophoria disguised as a woman. I would like to thank Dr Karolina Sekita here for bringing these parallels to my attention.

καὶ ὑποδιέσυρε τὰ ἐπιγράμματα. ἐγκαθεύδων δὲ ὄψιν εἶδε· ἐδόκει ὑπὸ τῷ ναῷ ἀστραγαλίζον[τ]ος αὐτοῦ καὶ μέλλοντος βάλλειν τῷ ἀστραγάλῳ, ἐπιφανέντα[τ]ὸν θεὸν ἐφαλέσθαι ἐπὶ τὰν χῆρα καὶ ἐκτεῖναί οὐ τοὺς δακτύλ[ο]υς· ὡς δ' ἀποβαίη, δοκεῖν συγκάμψας τὰν χῆρα καθ' ἓνα ἐκείναι τῶν δακτύλων· ἐπεὶ δὲ πάντας ἐξευθύναι ἐπερωτῆν νιν τὸν θεόν, εἰ ἔτι ἀπιστησοῖ τοῖς ἐπιγράμμασι τοῖς ἐπὶ τῶν πινάκων τῶν| κατὰ τὸ ἱερόν, αὐτὸς δ' οὐ φάμεν. **“Ὅτι τίνυν ἔμπροσθεν ἀπίστεις |αὐτο[ῖ]ς οὐκ ἐοῦσιν ἀπίστοις, τὸ λοιπὸν ἔστω τοι, φάμεν, ‘Ἄπιστος| ὄν[ομα].’** ἀμέρας δὲ γενομένας ὑγιῆς ἐξῆλθε.

“A man who had no strength in any of the fingers of his hand except one came as a suppliant to the god. Contemplating the tablets in the sanctuary **he did not believe the cures and gently mocked the inscriptions.** When he slept in the sanctuary he saw a dream. It seemed to him that as he was playing knucklebones close by the temple and was about to throw the knucklebone, the god appeared to him, seized his hand and stretched out his fingers. When the god moved away, he seemed to bend his hand and then stretch out his fingers one by one. When he had straightened them all out the god asked him if he still did not believe the inscriptions on the memorials in the sanctuary, and he said that he no longer disbelieved. **‘Well, because you once disbelieved things that are not incredible,’ he said ‘in future let your name be Disbeliever (Apidios)’.** When day came he departed healthy”.

It may seem surprising that not only does this man’s behaviour not result in suffering, but he is even granted the cure to his illness. However, the god punished him in a different way: by naming him Incredulous, he pointed out the inadequacy of his attitude and left a permanent (even though only symbolical) mark on his identity as a worshipper.

Similarly, in *iama* A4, Ambrosia of Athens, blind in one eye, who is also reported to have laughed at some of the cures and claimed that they are impossible, left the sanctuary sound. The only compensation for her disbelief she had to provide was a dedication of a silver pig in the sanctuary as a memorial of her ignorance:

Ἀμβροσία ἐξ Ἀθανᾶν [[ἀτερό]πτ[ι]λλος. αὐταῖς ἐκέτις ἦλθε ποιῆσαι τὸν θεὸν περιέρπουσα δὲ [[κατὰ]τὸ ἱερόν τῶν ἰαμάτων τινὰ διεγέλα ὡς ἀπίθανα καὶ ἀδύνα[[τα ἐόν]τα, χωλοὺς καὶ τυφλοὺς] ὑγιεῖς γίνεσθαι ἐνύπνιον ἰδόν[[τας μό]νον. ἐγκαθεύδουσα δὲ ὄψιν εἶδε· ἐδόκει οἱ ὁ θεὸς ἐπιστάς] [εἰπεῖν], ὅτι ὑγιῆ μὲν νιν ποιησοῖ, μισθὸν μάντοι νιν δεησοῖ ἀν[[θέμεν εἰ]ς τὸ ἱερόν ἕν ἀργύρεον ὑπόμναμα τᾶς ἀμαθίας. εἶπαν[[τα δὲ ταῦτ]α ἀσχίσσαι οὐτὸν ὄπιλλον τὸν νοσοῦντα καὶ φάρμακόν τι ἐγγέ[αι· ἀμέρας δὲ γενομένης ὑγιῆς ἐξῆλθε.

“Ambrosia from Athens, blind in one eye. She came as a suppliant to the god. **As she walked around the temple she laughed at some of the records of healing on the grounds that they were unbelievable and impossible**, that lame and blind people should become healthy simply having seen a dream. She went to sleep and saw a dream. The god seemed to her to stand by her and say that he would make her healthy, but that **aspayment** he would require her to dedicate in the sanctuary a silver pig as **a memorial of her ignorance**. Having said this he cut open her sick eye and poured in some drug. When day came she departed healthy”.

Although the consequences of Ambrosia’s inadequate attitude were not exceptionally grave, as they involved financial rather than bodily detriment, the expense she incurred was probably considerable, given the amount of silver required for the requested dedication. However, more importantly, the silver pig – a symbolical alternative to the ordinary sacrifice – was to serve as a lasting testimony of Ambrosia’s incredulity.

The symbolical stigma which is inflicted on these two suppliants as a result of their mistrust towards the healing deity seems to be of particular significance here; otherwise, it would not have been mentioned in texts meant to provide brief accounts of their sanctuary experience. It is clear, therefore, that these stories are meant to emphasise the relevance and importance of belief in divine healing powers for the incubation ritual. Asclepius seems to have granted the cure in these two cases in spite of the inadequacy of the suppliants’ behaviour mainly in order to demonstrate his power and to create a memento for people to bear in mind while approaching the god.

Lack of faith in the deity is not always manifested by a deliberate action – it can also be apparent in people’s emotions: feeling fear, for instance, is a sign of approaching the deity with insufficient trust. As a non-intentional and not entirely controllable reaction, it did not entail punishment by the god. However, it is at the same time clear that such an attitude rendered the incubation procedure ineffective and thus prevented the suppliant from obtaining the cure.

In *iama* B15, a lame suppliant trying to climb a ladder on Asclepius’ orders hesitated at some point, lost his courage and abandoned the task. As a result, he was refused help by the god:

Ἐπιδαύριος χωλός. οὗτος [χωλός ἐὼν φοράδαν εἰς τὸ ἱερόν ἀφίκετο]
|ἐγκαθεύδων δὲ ὄψιν εἶδε· [ἐδόκει οἱ ὁ θεὸς - - - - -]|ποιτάσσειν αὐτῷ
κλίμα[κα ποι φέρειν - - - - - -καὶ ἀναβῆναι ἐ]|πὶ τὸν ναόν· **αὐτὸς δὲ τὸ
με[- - - - - -]| - - - αὐτὸς δὲ τὸ
]][[κ]αὶ τὰ γ κλίμακα μικρὸν κα[τέβα - - - - - -]|πρῶτον ἀγανακτῶν**
τ[ᾶ]ι πρά[ξι - - - - - - - χω]|λῶι ἐόντι· ἀποτολμ[ῆ]ι δὲ ἀμ[έρας γενομένης
καὶ ἐκ τούτου ὑγιῆς ἐ]|ξῆλθε.

“[Someone] from Epidauros, lame. This man came [to the sanctuary carried on a litter]. Sleeping here he saw a vision. [It seemed to him the god ...] and ordered him [to bring out] a ladder [and climb] up on the naos. **He [tried it at first, but later his courage] fell and up on the [(cornice?) he stopped and said he was finished, and came] a little [down] the ladder.** Asklepios at first was angry at these doings [...] (although) being [lame] he boldly tried it when day [came, and from this] he left [well]”.

A similar example can possibly be found also in *iama* B17,¹³ telling the story of Cleimenes of Argus, who was unwilling to bathe in extremely cold water and was not granted the cure as a result:

Κλειμένης Ἀργεῖος ἀκρατῆς [τοῦ σώματος· οὗτος ἐλθὼν εἰς τὸ ἄβα]|τον
ἐνεκάθευδε καὶ ὄψιν εἶδ[ε· ἐδόκει οἱ ὁ θεὸς φοινικίδα ἐρεᾶν πε]|ριελίξαι
περὶ τὸ σῶμα καὶ μικ[ρὸν ἔξω τοῦ ἱεροῦ εἰς λουτρὸν ἄγειν]| **νιν ἐπὶ τινα
λίμναν, ᾗς τὸ ὕδωρ [εἶμεν καθ’ ὑπερβολὰν ψυχρόν· δειλῶς]| δ’ αὐτοῦ**

¹³ This possibility rests on the assumption that the supplementation proposed by Herzog (1931: 22-24) can be trusted. The quotation included here follows his edition of the inscription.

ἔθεν διακειμένου τὸν Ἀσκληπιὸν οὐκ ἰασεῖσθαι τοὺς δειλοὺς τῶν ἀνθρώπων εἰς ταῦτα φάμεν, ἀλλ' ἢ οἵτινές καποτ' αὐτόν νιν ἀφικνῶνται εἰς τὸ τέμενος ἐόντες εὐέλπιδες, ὡς οὐθέν κακὸν τὸν τοῦτον ποιησοῖ, ἀλλ' ὑγιῆ ἀποπ[εμψοῖ· ἐξεγερθεὶς δ' ἐλοῦτο καὶ ἀσκηθῆς ἐξῆλθε.

“Cleimenes of Argus, paralyzed in body. He came to the Abaton and slept there and saw a vision. It seemed to him that the god wound a red woollen fillet around his body and led him for a bath a short distance away from the Temple to a **lake of which the water was exceedingly cold. When he behaved in a cowardly way, Asclepius said he would not heal those people who were too cowardly for that, but those who came to him into his Temple, full of hope that he would do no harm to such a man, but would send him away well.** When he woke up, he took a bath and walked out unhurt”. [transl. Edelstein & Edelstein (1945)]

In both these cases, the suppliants are refused the cure until they succeed to perform the prescribed activity with faith and trust. The accomplishment of the task constitutes proof of their belief in the god's healing powers, which is clearly a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the incubation ritual.

Importantly, as far as can be established on the basis of the inscriptional evidence available to us, an inadequate attitude to the incubation procedure can always be corrected. Its immediate consequence is the lack of the expected effect, but this consequence is not a lasting one. The suppliants always get another chance and if the change of mindset and the completion of the activity is achieved, providing proof of trust being placed in the deity (i.e., if the ritual is performed in the correct way), the reward is granted in the form of a positive outcome: the lame man in *iama* B15 is healed once he bravely climbs the ladder, as is Cleimenes when he eventually finds the courage to bathe in the cold lake. This is consistent with the observations made in scholarship so far with regard to orthopraxy in the ancient ritual: the procedure has to be repeated as many times as is needed until it is performed correctly and the desired result is achieved.¹⁴

¹⁴ Linder & Scheid 1993, 49.

The fact that the injuries and suffering inflicted on the suppliants by the god are always healed in the sanctuary at a later point indicates that they serve the manifestation of power, meant as instruction rather than punishment: they are supposed to encourage the suppliants to change their mindset so that they can undergo the incubation procedure with the right attitude. Thus, the “punitive measures” taken by the god are not connected with any sort of justice, but they are corrective of the suppliants’ approach and behaviour towards the deity.

A parallel expression of the importance of faith in divine power can possibly be found in an inscription from the sanctuary of Amphiaraos at Oropos. Although the very fragmentary preservation state of the text makes its full decipherment impossible, it is usually regarded as an aretalogical praise of a miracle by Amphiaraos:¹⁵

[. . . .] ΝΧΩ [- - - - -]
 πρῶτον αὐτὸς Ε[- - - - - πλ] –
 ἀνηθείς λαθεῖν τὸν [- - - - - πα] –
 ῥήθομεν καὶ εὐθὺ πα[. . . . ντ]εσ Σ[- - - - -]
 [κ]αὶ ἐπιμαρτυρόμενος [. .] ΝΟ [- - - - -]
 [το]λμᾶν αὐτοῦ ἐπειδὴ ΟΓ [. .] ΧΡΓ[. .] ΛΛ [- - -]
 [. .] ἀν **παρασπονδήσ[ας]** καὶ ΛΓΣΕ[.] ΛΟΠΙ [- - -]
[ἀγ]ανακτοῦντος καὶ δεινὰ παθοῦντος κα[ι - - - - -]
 [. .] γὰρ **ἤμελλεν Βοηθήσειν** καὶ ταῦτα [- - - - - ἐπιμ] –
 [αρ]τυρομένου· ὃ δέσποτ’ ἄναξ, ἰσχυρὰ [- - - - -]
 [. .] ἤκουσας **τῶνδε καταγελόντων σου**, σὺ δὲ [- - - - -]
 μένου περυφανῶς, **οὐδεμίαν ἄλλην ἐλπίδα** τ[- - - - -]
 ἐνον μόνου **οὕτως ἐνεδειξάτο τὴν αὐτοῦ δύ[ναμιν - - - - -]**
 [. . . .] Λ[. . . .] Σ ΕΠΙ [. .] **ὁμομένων** τοῦτον εἶ[ναι - - - - -]

¹⁵ SEG XLVII 1997, 498; Petrakos 1997, 209-210 no.301. A slightly different reading of line 11 may be found in Chaniotis & Mylonopoulos 2000, 206. The inscription has been dated to the late 5th century BC (c. 335-322 BC according to Petrakos). Versnel 2011, 414 n. 118 believes that the text refers to a miracle by Amphiaraos. Chaniotis & Mylonopoulos 2000, 205-206 admit that the exact nature and content of the inscription is not clear, but they notice a strong similarity to aretalogies and narratives of miracles.

[. . . . ΩΣΛΙ [.]ενός Σ [.]ΧΟ[. .]ΘΩ[- - - - -]
 [. .] **σῶισαι** χρ[- - - - -] αὐτῶν ΟΓΤ[- - - - -]
 [. .]ησιον [. . . .]ΓΟΝ[.]ΕΣ [- - - - -]ΛΙ[- - - - -]
 [.]ΠΡΑ[- - - - -]ΠΕ[- - - - -]
 [- - - - -] ΣΕ[.]ΩΔΕ[- - - - -]
 [- - - - -] ΠΟΝΕ[.]Λ[- - - - -]

‘vacat’

The elements which can be discerned in the story coincide with the main motifs appearing on the inscriptions from Epidaurus discussed above: a breach of faith (*παρασπονδήσας*), then a state of suffering and vexation (*ἀγανακτοῦντος καὶ δεινὰ παθοῦντος*), the motif of people laughing (*τῶν δε καταγελώντων σου*) and the intention of (presumably) the healing deity to help (*ἤμελλεν βοηθήσειν*), the demonstration of power (*οὕτως ἐνεδείξατο τὴν αὐτοῦ δύναμιν*) when there was no other hope (*οὐδεμίαν ἄλλην ἐλπίδα*),¹⁶ an oath (*ὀμοιμένων*) and the cure (*σῶισαι*). Thus, a certain sequence can be observed here: the god removes the suffering in order to show his power in spite of (or maybe exactly because of) people’s laughter; the oath may refer to a sacrifice or payment for the cure, but it can also be a commitment to compensate for the earlier lack of faith. This sequence of elements is consistent with the pattern emerging from the Epidaurian inscriptions, where the manifestation of Asclepius’ power was the god’s reaction to people’s lack of faith, meant to persuading them of his potency and trustworthiness.

Interestingly, it seems that in some situations what sufficed as an expression of trust towards the deity was the very act of coming to the healing sanctuary with genuine hope that the cure can be obtained. A clear example of this can be found in *iama* A10, describing the case of a porter who broke his master’s drinking-vessel (a *κώθων*): when a passer-by tried to persuade him that his struggle to put the pieces together was futile because even Asclepius of Epidaurus would not be able to do it, the porter immediately reacted with what can be

¹⁶ Or: “having realised that there was no other hope”. It seems possible that the missing fragment in line 11 contained a participle in the genitive, ending in *-μένου* in the following line – the whole phrase beginning with *σὺ δὲ* and ending with *ἐλπίδα* (ll. 11-12) would then mean “but you, having realised without doubt (clearly) that there was no other hope”.

regarded as an act of faith, *i.e.* directed his steps towards the sanctuary of Asclepius. Since this story does not actually concern an illness cured, the words of the passer-by sound proverbial, with the metaphorical use of “healing” with regard to a vessel: τοῦτον γὰρ οὐ δέκα ὁ ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ Ἀσκλαπιὸς ὑγιῆ ποιῆσαι δύναίτο. Thus, this text presents an exemplary case in which a seemingly hopeless matter is entrusted to Asclepius with faith that it is within his power to address it successfully, which results in a positive outcome.

Literary evidence

The mentions of incubation in ancient literature coincide with the epigraphic evidence in their emphasis on trust in the healing powers of the deity as an inherent element of the procedure. In his description of the sanctuary of Sarapis at Kanobos, Strabo speaks about faith and falling asleep in the precinct in one breath, as if one naturally followed from the other: the expression πιστεύειν καὶ ἐγκοιμᾶσθαι sounds almost formulaic:¹⁷

Κάνωβος δ' ἐστὶ πόλις ἐν εἴκοσι καὶ ἑκατὸν σταδίοις ἀπὸ Ἀλεξανδρείας περὶ ἰοῦσιν, ἐπώνυμος Κανώβου τοῦ Μενελάου κυβερνήτου ἀποθανόντος αὐτόθι ἔχουσα τὸ τοῦ Σαράπιδος ἱερὸν πολλῇ ἀγιστεία τιμώμενον καὶ θεραπείας ἐκφέρων, ὥστε καὶ τοὺς ἐλλογιμωτάτους ἄνδρας **πιστεύειν καὶ ἐγκοιμᾶσθαι** αὐτοὺς ὑπὲρ ἑαυτῶν ἢ ἑτεροῦς. συγγράφουσι δέ τινες καὶ τὰς θεραπείας. ἄλλοι δὲ ἀρετὰς τῶν ἐνταῦθα λογίων.

“Canobus is a city situated at a distance of one hundred and twenty stadia from Alexandria, if one goes on foot, and was named after Canobus, the pilot of Menelaüs, who died there. It contains the temple of Sarapis, which is honoured with great reverence and effects such cures that even the most reputable men **believe in it and sleep in it** – themselves on their own behalf or others for them. Some writers go on to record the cures, and others the virtues of the oracles there”.

An appropriate approach to the deity was apparently an essential requirement for the healing to take place also according to one of the passages in the Oxyrhynchus papyrus, containing a praise of Imouthes-Asclepius. It is interesting to observe that in this text the correct attitude

¹⁷ Strab. 17.1.17.1-8, transl. H. L. Jones.

did not necessarily have to be a permanent condition – a momentary disposition could suffice:

έτοιμότε[]ρος γὰρ ὁ θεὸς πρὸς[] ε[ύε]ργεσία[]ν εἶγε καὶ τοὺς αὐτ[ί]κ[α] μόνον εὐ[σ]εβεῖς τῇ προθυμίᾳ πολλά[]κις ἀπηυδηκυῖης τῆς ἰατρικ[]ῆς πρὸς τὰς κατεχούσας αὐτοῦ[]ς νόσους ἔσωσεν.

“For the god is disposed to confer benefits, since **even those whose pious ardour is only for the moment** are repeatedly preserved by him after the healing art has failed against diseases which have overtaken them”.¹⁸

Similarly, Philostratus relates in his *Vita Apollonii* the story of a “false” dedicator, who was expelled from the sanctuary of Asclepius at Aigai by the priest, on Apollonius’ advice and the god’s clear instruction received in a dream, because he intended to erase his guilt of incestuous behaviour by performing lavish sacrifices and offering exceptionally valuable votives. On this occasion, Apollonius expresses the conviction that Asclepius can be approached only with true reverence; he does not allow “the false” (οἱ φαύλοι), who only pretend piety while performing sacrifices, to come near:

Καὶ ἅμα ἐς τὸν Ἀσκληπιὸν βλέψας “φιλοσοφεῖς”, ἔφη, “ὦ Ἀσκληπιέ, τὴν ἀρρητόν τε καὶ συγγενῆσαθ τῷ φιλοσοφίαν μὴ συγχωρῶν τοῖς φαύλοις δεῦρο ἤκειν, μηδ’ ἂν πάντα σοι τὰ ἀπὸ Ἰνδῶν καὶ Σαρδῶν ξυμφέρωσιν, οὐ γὰρ τιμῶντες τὸ θεῖον θύουσι ταῦτα καὶ ἀνάπτουσιν, ἀλλ’ ὠνούμενοι τὴν δίκην, ἣν οὐ συγχωρεῖτε αὐτοῖς δικαιοτάτοι ὄντες”.

“At the same time, turning his eyes to the statue of Asclepius, he [Apollonius] said: ‘It is your ineffable and native wisdom you practice, Asclepius, when you forbid the wicked to come here, even if they amass all the wealth of India and Sardinia for you. They do not make these sacrifices and dedications to honor divinity, but to buy a favorable judgement, which you gods in your great justice do not grant’.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ox. Pap.* XI, 1381, col. III: 51-57; ed. and trans. Edelstein & Edelstein (1945) fr. 331.

¹⁹ Philostr., *VA*, 1.11; ed. and trans. Christopher P. Jones (2005).

Reasons for importance

The question arises why faith and trust played a particularly important role in the incubation procedure, and hence also in the cult of Asclepius in general. The answer to this may be manifold.

The main and most obvious aspect was the actual significance of personal attitude in ancient religious practice. The evidence discussed here clearly shows that belief in the gods' power and trust placed in them was a matter of importance in ritual, which could be regarded as void or even offensive to the gods if performed without this approach. The fact that (as far as can be established on the basis of the extant testimonies) suppliants who fail to show their trust in Asclepius are never punished with a permanent affliction – and indeed any illness or injury inflicted by the god is always healed in the precinct at a later point – indicates that the emphasis is put on improvement and encouragement of the correct attitude rather than on strict enforcement of certain rules. The “punitive measures” encountered in the context of incubation are clearly meant to serve as guidance and as means of creating an image of a powerful deity, well-disposed towards people on the condition that they acknowledge and appreciate the god's potency and good will by placing trust in him. In this system of mutual conditioning, the worshippers' personal attitude becomes the binding factor between the gods and the mortals, which enables interaction and continual synergy.

Another factor contributing to the prominence of faith in incubation could have been the sanctuary policy: the personnel of sacred precincts might have deliberately enhanced the role of faith and trust in the procedure (e.g., through the display of a relatively large number of stories referring to suppliants' disbelief or lack of trust and its consequences) in order to incite belief in the effectiveness of the ritual. Dillon suggested that many of the cure inscriptions (especially those most incredible) testify not to some real events and healings, but rather to certain convictions connected with Asclepius held by people, and to some experiences they had in the sanctuaries. According to him, the miracle inscriptions are a curious mixture of genuine cures, invented cures, and instructional material.²⁰ Even if this interpretation is regarded as going slightly too far, it cannot be denied that inciting or nurturing belief appears at least equally important in the Epidaurian collection as the cures themselves. The sanctuary's influence on the suppliants' attitude was related to the process of framing, in which individuals apply schemata of interpretation (i.e. assume, explicitly or in

²⁰ Dillon 1994, 243, 257 and 259.

effect, sets of rules) in defining a situation; their choice of framework is not entirely arbitrary, but is often “guided” by the actions or standards of the social environment in which a particular event or experience is taking place.²¹ The display of the ‘iamata’ presenting Asclepius as a powerful healing deity, effecting astonishing cures for people who approach him with trust and castigating those who refuse to acknowledge his potency, would lead to the conceptualisation of the procedure as requiring such an attitude. Thus, by exhibiting both the marvellous stories about the god healing even most hopeless illnesses and those describing his unfavourable reaction to people who did not place trust in him, sanctuaries influenced the suppliants’ understanding of the incubation ritual and persuaded them to entrust themselves to Asclepius as a healer. Whether for religious (as described above), psychological (discussed in what follows) or purely materialistic (aiming to increase the sanctuary income) reasons, the personnel of healing precincts seem to have supported and actively enhanced the conviction that trust was essential in approaching the god. The fact that five of the eight stories directly referring to disbelief or weak belief were placed within the first 11 texts in the Epidaurian collection indicates the significance which the sanctuary compilers of this epigraphic set attached to these accounts: they were likely to be read and remembered even by those who did not continue to the end of the set.²²

Finally, personal attitude was significant in incubation also on the psychological level. Many of the suppliants’ conditions involve serious or chronic physical suffering and undergoing an obscure procedure in an unknown environment, in rough conditions, far from home, having overcome the difficulties of the journey and presumably having completed the introductory purification rituals might have exacerbated the already distressful situation. In this context, the strong encouragement to approach the deity with faith and trust would incite the feeling of tranquillity, providing the desirable mental preparation for the ritual. Additionally, in some cases this mindset might have been curative in itself, whether through inducing a placebo effect, or by addressing an actual issue which in reality was of a psychosomatic nature.

²¹ Goffman 1986), 21, 22 and 26. I present a more comprehensive discussion of the application of framing theories in the study of incubation in my recent article “Dream as Framework for Extreme Experience” (*Journal of Ancient Civilizations*, forthcoming).

²² LiDonnici 1995, 27-28.

Conclusions

Although the ancient Greeks and Romans do not appear to have seen the need for any declaration or manifestation of belief in their gods, it is indisputable that they nevertheless deemed necessary for people to express their belief that their gods have certain supernatural powers (which can be trusted), or at least expected this belief not to be undermined or challenged.²³ This attitude seems particularly significant in the incubation procedure, which required the suppliants to approach the deity with trust for several reasons, including religious, pragmatic (sanctuary policy) and psychological. Hence, the extant testimonies regarding incubation, both epigraphic and literary, provide a clear illustration of this importance.

Stories about people showing lack of faith in Asclepius' powers prove that the spectrum of attitudes was broad, ranging from eager reliance on the god (as in the case of the porter with the broken vessel), through confidence allowing a varied degree of doubt (as in the examples of the lame climbing the ladder or of Cleimenes unwilling to bathe in cold water) to a definite disbelief often connected with derision or open mockery and sneering at the god's alleged deeds and at other people's faith. The reasons for disbelief were equally varied: from a simple bewilderment evoked by the most inconceivable cures (such as the one performed on the man without one eyeball) to a logical, even if purely theoretical and rather wilful, reasoning (such as the argument regarding Hephaestus).

At the same time, these texts give us insight into the mechanisms of inciting faith in divine power and the means of encouraging suppliants to place trust in the deity. On the basis of the available sources, it can be observed that this can take the form of punishment for disbelieving or disregarding Asclepius miracles with bodily suffering, refusal to grant a cure, symbolical stigmatisation of the suppliant (as incredulous), as well as, analogically, of an immediate reward for acts of trust performed by suppliants. It is worth considering that this encouragement, regardless of the form it took, must have contributed remarkably to the shaping of people's attitude to ritual and deities in general. Thus, it would impact religious participation in antiquity by emphasising the relevance and importance of personal attitude in religious practice.

²³ This view is accordant with the current opinion in scholarship – see, for instance, Linder & Scheid 1993, 54; Parker 2011, 3-4.

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Abbreviations

AION (archeol) – *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, Dipartimento di Studi del Mondo Classico e del Mediterraneo Antico, Sezione di Archeologia e Storia Antica*