Disbelief and Weak Belief in the Cult of Asclepius

Lidia Ożarowska

(Brasenose College, University of Oxford)

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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 parfait 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.

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³ Linder & Scheid 1993, 50: ‘croire c’était faire, c’était executer 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.
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 used of θάρσος and θάρσειν, 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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{iamata} A9, people present in the sanctuary laugh at a man with an eyeball missing who was hoping to regain his eyesight through incubation:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

“\textit{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

\textsuperscript{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 IV\textsuperscript{2} 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:

Kaφιςιας [- - - - - - - - - -] Κλαπιον θεραπεύμασιν ἐπ[γελ] - - - - - - - - - - - - οὐ φείδεται λέγον ὡς, εἰ ὄνομιν ἔχοι - - - - - - - - - - Τάκε ὑβριως ποιής λαμβάνον[ν - - - - - - - - - - - - -] τοῦ Βουκεφάλα ἐν ταῖ ἔδραι [καθίζοντά νυν καταποτοῦντος τρωθῆ] μεν τῶν πόδων παραχήμα καὶ [ἐτι δεινοτέρως (?) διακεῖσθαι ἃ τὸ πρίν] ὑ[σ]τερον δὲ πολλά καθικεύ[σας τὸν θεόν ύγιῆς 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 Asklepius’ 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 Asklepius’ 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 Asklepius’ healing by observing the ‘abaton’ with sleeping
suppliants from atop a tree; he fell off the tree and injured his eyes on some stakes below, which rendered him blind:

Aισχίνας ἐγκεκοιμισμένον ἦδη τῶν ἱκετῶν ἐπὶ δένδρων τι ἀμβής ύπερέκπυτε εἰς τὸ ἄβατον. καταιπετών οὖν ἀπὸ τοῦ δένδρου περί σκόλοπάς τινας τοὺς ὄπτιλλους ἀμφέπαισε. κακῶς δὲ διακεϊμένος καὶ τυφλὸς γεγενημένος καθικετεύσας τὸν θεόν ἐνεκάθευδε 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, 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 (Ἀπιστος):

Ἀνὴρ τοὺς τὰς χηρὸς δακτύλους ἀκρατεῖς ἔχον πλὰν ἐνὸς ἀφίκετο ποι τὸν θεόν ἱκέτας θεωρῶν δὲ τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἱαρῷ πίνακας ἀπίστει 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’ Thesmophoriazusae, 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. ἔγκαθευδὼν δὲ ὅψιν εἶδε: ἐδόκει ὑπὸ
tοῦ ναὸς ἀστραγαλίζων τός αὐτός καὶ μέλλοντος βάλλειν τῶν ἀστραγάλων, ἐπιφανεντα | 
τὸν θεόν ἔφαλεσθαι ἐπὶ τὰν χήρα καὶ ἐκτείνα ὅτ' ὅτι δ' ἀποβαίνῃ, δοκεῖν συγκάμψας τῶν χήρα καθ᾽ ἔνα ἐκείνεν | τῶν δακτύλων: ἐπεὶ δὲ πάντας ἐξευθύνα ἐπερωτήν νιν τὸν θεόν, | ἐτι ἐτὶ ἀπιστησοὶ τοῖς ἐπιγράμμασι τοῖς ἐπὶ τῶν πινάκων τῶν | κατὰ τὸ ἱερὸν, αὐτὸς δ' εἴ ὑμεῖς. Ὁτι τίνων ἐμπροσθεν ἀπίστευς | ἀποῆν ἀπίστοις, τὸ λοιπὸν ἐστο τοι, ὑπάμεν, Ἀπιστος | ὅν ὄμοι, ἀμέρας δὲ γενομένας ύπηρε ἔξηλθε.

"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 (Apistos)'. 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 Ἀθηνῶν [[άτερόπτερ]] ἦλθε ποι τὸν θεόν· περιέρπουσα δὲ [[κατάτικ]] ἱαρὸν τὸν ἱαμάτων τινὰ διεγέλα ὡς ἀπίθανα καὶ ἀδόνα[[τα ἑόν]]τα. χαλοῦχος καὶ τυφλοῦ[[ς]] ὑγιεὶς γίνεσθαι ἐνύπνιον ἰόν[[τας μόνον]]. ἔγκαθεύδουσα δὲ διὸν εἰδὲ· ἔδοκεν οἱ θεοὶ ἐπιστᾶτε[[ς]] [ἐπεὶ], ὅτι ύπή μὲν νὶν ποιησοὶ, μισθόμι μάντοι τὸν νῦν δεσοὶ ἀν[[θέμεν ἐ]]ῖς τὸ ἱαρόν ὑν ἄργυρον ὑπόμνημα τὰς ἀμαθίας. εἰπαν[[τα δὲ ταύτα ἄν σχίσσαι οὐτὸν διπτίλλον τὸν νοσοῦντα καὶ φάρμακον τὸ ἐγχέιατι ἀμέρας δὲ γενομένας ὑγιῆς ἔξηλθε.

“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 as payment 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 *iamā* B15, a lame supplicant 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, οὗτος [χολός ἐὼν φοράδαν εἰς τὸ ιαρόν ἄφικεν] ἐγκαθεύδων δὲ ὅσιν εἰδει [ἐδόκει οἱ ο θεὸς -. - - - - - - ] ποιήσασιν αὐτὸι κλίμα[κα] ποι φέρειν - - - - - - - καὶ ἀναβηναι ἔτι τὸν ναόν ἀυτὸς δὲ τὸ με[ - - - - - - - - - - - - - ] - - - αλέν καὶ ἄνω ἐπὶ τοῦ θο [ῥηγκοῦ - - - - - - - - ] ||[κ]αὶ τὰ γ κλίμακα μικρόν κα[τέβα - - - - - - ]] πράτον ἄγανακτῶν τ[α] ἁ ὀρε [α] ἀποτομ[ῆ] δὲ ἀμ[έρας γενομένας καὶ ἐκ τοῦ τοῦ πότοις ἡμιλθε.

“[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 *iamā* 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:


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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.
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 inscriptive 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.\footnote{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.\(^{15}\)

\[\ldots\ldots\] ΝΧΩ \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]

πρότον αὐτόςΕ\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]πλ] –

ανηθείς λαθείν τόν \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]πα] –

ρήθομεν καὶ εὐθὺ πα[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldotsες Σ\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\

\[κ\]αι ἐπιμαρτυρόμενος \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]ΝΟ \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\

\[το\]λμαν αὐτοῦ ἐπειδῆ ΟΓ \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\]

\[\ldots\ldots\] παρασπονδής\[ας\] καὶ ΛΓΣΕ\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\]

\[\ldots\ldots\] ΛΟΠ \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\

\[\ldots\ldots\] αγ\[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\] ανακτοντὸς καὶ δεινὰ παθοῦντος κα[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots]\

\[\ldots\ldots\] γὰρ ἡμέλλει Βοηθήσειν καὶ ταῦτα \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\] ἐπιμ] –

\[\ldots\ldots\] τυρομένου ὁ δέσποτ’ ἀναξ, ἵσχυρα \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\

\[\ldots\ldots\] ἡκουσας τῶνδε καταγελώντων σου, σὺ δὲ \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\

μένου περιφανῶς, οὐδεμίαν ἄλλην ἐλπίδα \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\]\

ἐνον μόνου οὕτως ἐνεδείξατο τὴν αὐτοῦ δύ[ναμιν \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots]\

\[\ldots\ldots\] Λ[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\] Σ ΕΠΠ \[\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\] ὀμοιμένον τοῦτον εἶ[ναι \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots]

\(^{15}\) 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 5\(^{\text{th}}\) 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.
The elements which can be discerned in the story coincide with the main motifs appearing on the inscriptions from Epidauros discussed above: a breach of faith (παρασπονδήσας), then a state of suffering and vexation (ἀγανακτοῦντος καὶ δεινά παθοῦντος), the motif of people laughing (τῶν δὲ 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 (οὐδέμισιν ἔλλην ἐλπίδα), an oath (ὁμομεμένων) and the cure (σώσατι). 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 (αὐτῶν κώθων): when a passer-by tried to persuade him that his struggle to put the pieces together was futile because even Asclepius of Epidauros 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 σοῦ 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 Ασκλαπίος ὑγίῃ ποίησαι δύνατο. 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:

"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

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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:


“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” dedicatory, 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 ἂμα ἐς τὸν Ἀσκληπιὸν βλέψας “φιλοσοφεῖς”, ἔφη, “ὅ Ασκληπεῖ, τὴν ἄρρητὸν τε καὶ συγγενῆσαθ τῷ φιλοσοφίαν μὴ συγχωρῶν τοῖς φαύλοις δεύτερο ἢκειν, μηδ’ ἄν πάντα σοι τὰ ἀπὸ Ἰνδόν καὶ Σαρδῶν ξυμφέρωσιν, οὐ γὰρ τιμῶντες τὸ θείον θύσουσι ταῦτα καὶ ἀνάπτουσιν, ἀλλ’ ὄνομανοι τὴν δίκην, ἵνα οὐ συγχωρεῖτε αὐτοῖς δικαίωται δόντες”.

“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

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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. 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.

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.

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