

Asclepius the Healer

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The healing cult of Asclepius was the most popular of its kind in Greek and Roman antiquity. This paper will investigate possible reasons for this popularity. A widespread belief in the god's prowess as a healer could be one reason for the spread of his cult. This paper examines the records of some of Asclepius' treatments in a bid to discover possible explanations for this perceived success rate. An attempt is made to answer the question of whether the recommended cures really cured.

The investigation concentrates on two of the most important of Asclepius' sanctuaries, those at Epidaurus and Pergamon. A number of steles from Epidaurus still survive, with brief descriptions of the various diseases for which suppliants sought help, as well as the treatment provided. These are testimonials from grateful patients but not necessarily first-hand accounts.¹ From the Pergamon 'Asclepieion' comes the first-hand experience of Aelius Aristides who made several trips to the sanctuary, including an extended stay as an 'in-patient'.

The paper begins with a brief sketch of the growth and spread of the cult of Asclepius and is followed by a description of the Epidaurus shrine, accompanied by discussion of some of the treatments carried out there. Then the experience of Aelius Aristides at the Pergamon 'Asclepieion' will be considered.

¹ See Edelstein 1998, II.146-147; Li Donnici 1995, 25, 40, 48, 49.

In the Beginning

The early history of the cult is obscure. A major expansion seems to have begun in the early fifth century B.C. with the earliest evidence from near Epidaurus in the early sixth century. This may not have been the first sanctuary; there are persistent accounts of Asclepius' birthplace as having been Triikka in Thessaly;² and Homer represents his sons as leading men from Triikka.³ But no evidence of a cult centre there has yet been discovered.

In less than a century the cult became perhaps the most popular healing cult in all antiquity both inside and outside Greece.⁴ As many as 200 sanctuaries were supposedly founded in the fourth century B.C.⁵ The Pergamon sanctuary had appeared by the early third century; there were scores of sanctuaries in Greece and the islands, the Greek East and Magna Graecia.⁶ Most sanctuaries served those living in the immediate area, but over time some became large enough and famous enough to attract worshippers and suppliants from all over the Roman Empire – as well as Imperial patronage – especially Epidaurus, Kos and Pergamon.⁷ These grew into large and impressive complexes which advertised Asclepius' power not only as a healer, his primary function, but also as a deity. In the late 290s B.C. Asclepius reached Rome.⁸ According to legend he arrived from Epidaurus by ship, disembarking at Tiber Island in the form of a snake.⁹ A temple to Aesculapius, the Latinised form of his name, was then built there.¹⁰

One reason for Asclepius' popularity was the belief that he had been born a mortal, had practised as a doctor, and had been killed because he was too successful in healing his patients. Asclepius may, or may not, have been a real person, as implied in the preceding sentence. The god Asclepius, not surprisingly, accrued mythical elements. He was said to be the son of Apollo and a mortal mother, raised and trained in medicine by the Centaur, Cheiron. Most versions of his story agree that Zeus killed him with a thunderbolt,¹¹ although the reported events that led to his death differ as to whether he cured patients who had been

² Wickkiser 2008, 35.

³ Homer, *Iliad* 2.729-731.

⁴ Edelstein 1998, II.94; Wickkiser 2008, 41.

⁵ Wickkiser 2008, 37, with n. 36.

⁶ Renberg 2017, I.119, with n. 9.

⁷ Renberg 2017, I.119-120.

⁸ Wickkiser 2008, 37, with n. 36.

⁹ Livy, Summary of Book 11; Risser 1999, 22.

¹⁰ Livy 10.47.7; Summary of Book 11.

¹¹ Edelstein 1998, II.46, 51, 75-76, with nn. 30, 31.

declared incurable or actually brought the dead back to life. In the former instance he might not have invited Zeus' wrath, but in the latter case he could have been considered guilty of transgressing the laws of nature.¹² One variant of the story has Hades complain to Zeus that the underworld kingdom was not increasing in population as it should have done, because Asclepius was saving people who otherwise would have died. Accepting the force of the complaint, Zeus acted on it and executed Asclepius. It has also been suggested that he offended several gods by revivifying individuals whom they had killed and was therefore guilty of meddling in divine affairs.¹³ Yet another explanation is that Zeus feared that Asclepius' skill could give rise to a race of immortal humans who would be in a position to challenge the reign of the gods.¹⁴

The number of people he was believed to have revived and who they were again differs from account to account: some authorities specify one particular individual, others claim he brought many people back to life. They also differ as to his motives. Some report that he was driven by his love for humanity, while others attribute baser motives. In the 1,000 years or more of Asclepius' existence as a healing deity there was ample time for myths to grow up about him and for poets and other authorities to add to and comment on them.¹⁵

Another factor in Asclepius' popular appeal was probably that his chief function was to treat the sick and injured. There were other healing deities, Apollo, to take only one example, but his arrows could also bring disease. He was also the sun god, as well as god of music, poetry, drama, herds and flocks and more. Even a god might be thought to be overstretched and unable to give a sufferer his full attention. Patients might have felt more comfortable in approaching Asclepius, who, they thought, might be able to remember what it is like to be mortal, rather than his Olympian father. Certainly, some of the stories connected with him show a sense of humour and a concern for the under-dog, qualities which must have been especially attractive to poorer groups in Graeco-Roman society.¹⁶

At some time Asclepius came to be worshipped as a god.¹⁷ This must have occurred prior to the foundation of his Epidaurus shrine in the sixth century. It is possible that Asclepius began

¹² Edelstein 1998, II.46.

¹³ Edelstein 1998, II.47.

¹⁴ Edelstein 1998, II.48-49.

¹⁵ See Edelstein 1998, I.37-47, 49-52.

¹⁶ See, for example, Epidaurus, Stele I. 8, 10 (Edelstein 1998, I.223-224; Li Donnici 1995, 92, 93).

¹⁷ See Edelstein 1998, I.110-119, 121-122; II.91-92.

his career at Epidaurus as an associate of Apollo.¹⁸ As Apollo moved away from the healing craft, so his son took over, and with minimal disruption to the operation of the shrine.¹⁹

Asclepius enjoyed a reputation as ‘the poor man’s god’ who prided himself on treating those with limited resources.²⁰ He was satisfied with bloodless, and therefore less expensive, sacrifices: crowns, cakes, eggs.²¹ These would have been within the price range of many, perhaps even most, people. He was also thought to have a soft spot for the under-dog, if a testimonial on Stele A at Epidaurus is anything to go by.²² The story relates how a porter accidentally broke his master’s favourite goblet. As he was vainly trying to fit the pieces together a passer-by laughed at him, saying that not even Asclepius would be able to mend it. This gave the unfortunate man an idea. He immediately replaced the pieces in his bag and continued on to Asclepius’ temple. When he entered the sanctuary and opened the bag, he discovered that the goblet was whole again. This tale not only displays Asclepius’ concern for a lowly slave it also demonstrates another of his favourite actions – the confounding of a sceptic.

The Shrines of Asclepius

Treatment is more likely to be successful if the patient trusts the institution as well as the individual healer or healers. The shrines of Asclepius were constructed to inspire confidence in the abilities of the god, as well as to impress suppliants. If we can believe Herodas the approach appears to have been successful.²³ In his poem he depicts the activities of two women, accompanied by their slaves, at an unidentified ‘Asclepieion’. They are there to pay the fee for a successful treatment for one of them. After sacrificing a rooster they wait until the sacristan checks that the offering is acceptable.²⁴ One of the women is named Kynno; the names of her friend and of the accompanying slaves are subjects of debate.²⁵ Kynno has visited the temple before and it is she who is dedicating the offering to Asclepius. Both women are portrayed as belonging to a lower socio-economic level, although they are clearly

¹⁸ Stele A, heading (Li Donnici, 1995, 84, with n. 1; Edelstein 1998, II.99-101).

¹⁹ Edelstein 1998, II.100-101.

²⁰ Edelstein 1998, II.116, with n. 21; I.164, 204.

²¹ Votive offerings, which often represented the diseased part of the body, were also made.

²² Stele I.10 (Edelstein 1998, I.232; Li Donnici 1995, 92).

²³ Herodas, *Mimiambi* 4.1-95.

²⁴ ὁ νεωκόπος is rendered as ‘sacristan’ by Edelstein and as ‘warden’ by Behr.

²⁵ Cunningham 1971, 127.

not the poorest of the poor. Kynno apologises for her small offering and promises to return at some future date with husband and children – and larger offerings. The women admire the art works in the vicinity of the Temple, exclaiming over the beauty and life-like appearance of the various statues as the former suppliant explains various features to her companion.

Religious symbols bring comfort as well as confidence. Hospitals in the modern world run by various Christian churches display symbols of their faith, ranging from a simple cross to representations of various saints, especially the Virgin Mary, often accompanied by the infant Jesus. Even a secular hospital could boast the occasional sculpture. Modern public hospitals tend to be more austere.

Also important is the matter of ritual. In a modern health setting that might include a clinical space, whether in the doctor's rooms or in a hospital, a white-coated doctor wearing a stethoscope, and other personnel, appropriately clad, like nurses, physiotherapists, phlebotomists and so on. For certain procedures patients are asked to replace their street clothes with a hospital gown. There are practical reasons for this but it also adds to the patient's sense of being in a special place. Asclepius' shrines, not surprisingly, provided ritual which contained both religious and medical elements, especially for suppliants undergoing incubation.

The Rite of Incubation

Patients spent the night (or, less often, part of the day) in a dormitory within the Temple complex hoping that Asclepius would cure their disease by means of a miracle, or appear with a prescription, or provide the details of a therapeutic regimen in a dream. Most supplicants probably hoped for a miraculous and therefore instant cure such as so many of those displayed at the various 'Asclepieia'. These became less frequent with the passage of time, although a priest at the Pergamon shrine in the middle of the second century A.D claimed that they had still occurred in this grandfather's day.²⁶

Patients, assisted by friends or slaves, had a ritual bath. They then entered the Temple precinct and made a burnt offering. According to the Pergamon *lex sacra* the minimum payment for regaining one's health was the sacrifice of an adult animal within a year, plus the

²⁶ Edelstein 1998, I. T 412 (Aristides, *Oratio* 1.64).

immediate payment of money plus anything else asked by the god.²⁷ The ‘anything else’ required could include a testimonial to his healing ability, like that of Marcus Iulius Apellas.²⁸

After sacrificing to the god, incubants typically lay on a straw mat or mattress in a dormitory, the straw mat sometimes serving a ritual purpose.²⁹ The Pergamon *lex sacra* mandates the use of bed of straw or reeds (στειβάς).³⁰ Patients were permitted to bring their own pillows and bed coverings if they wished, for extra comfort.³¹

Supplicants undergoing incubation followed the same route to their sleeping quarters that they had walked along during the day. There were no secret roads,³² underground passages or dark tunnels to add an air of mystery. The Temple warden put out the lights, told the patients to go to sleep, and to keep quiet no matter what they heard.³³ On the following morning, if there was a dream prescription, the patient who received it, other patients, staff, and physicians, would discuss the meaning of the dream and a course of action would be decided.³⁴ This was a communal effort and professional dream interpreters were not required.

Epidaurus

Pausanias has left an eye-witness description of the working ‘Asclepieion’ of Epidaurus.³⁵ He wrote that the sacred grove of Asclepius at Epidaurus was surrounded on all sides by boundary markers. Both birth and death were forbidden within this sacred precinct. A Roman senator named Antoninus had accommodation built outside the grove to house those who were about to give birth and those about to die.³⁶

There was an image of Asclepius made of ivory and gold, half the size of that of Olympian Zeus at Athens. This statue depicted Asclepius seated and holding his signature staff; his

²⁷ Renberg 2016, I.268.

²⁸ Edelstein 1998, I.247.

²⁹ Renberg 2016, I.258.

³⁰ Renberg 2016, I.258.

³¹ Renberg 2016, I.258.

³² Edelstein 1998, II.149.

³³ Behr 1968, 34-35.

³⁴ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.13, 31, 47, 48, 72; 3.14; 416, 46, 86, 45. Israelowich 2014, 291.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/anu/detail.action>

³⁵ Pausanias 2.27.1-6.

³⁶ For identification of this man see Hogan 2018, 164.

other hand is held above a snake, and a dog lies beside him.³⁷ Serpents were regarded as sacred to Asclepius; one particular variety, native to Epidauria, was tame.³⁸ It is unclear whether Pausanias means that such snakes were present at the ‘Asclepieion’ and, if so, whether they were confined or allowed to roam free. It is possible that these ‘tame’ snakes were wild animals that had found a congenial home in the sanctuary because, as the god’s agents, they were left in peace. The steles confirm Pausanias’ account of the presence of serpents at the Epidaurus ‘Asclepieion’ and add dogs and at least one goose. The contexts suggest that at least some of these animals wandered about freely.

Suppliants of the god slept in a building against the temple. Nearby was the tholos – a round white marble building containing paintings by Pausias. Six slabs carved with testimonials on the god’s healing prowess remained within the sacred enclosure in Pausanias’ time; once there had been more. There was also a theatre, a temple of Artemis, an image of Epione, a sanctuary of Aphrodite and Themis, a racecourse and a splendid fountain that is ‘worth a visit’ according to Pausanias’ travel guide.

As well as the accommodation already mentioned, Antoninus also contributed a bath of Asclepius, a sanctuary of the “Bountiful” gods, a temple to Health, Asclepius and Apollo, and restored a portico that had collapsed.

The sanctuary is about 8 km (5 miles) from the polis of Epidaurus. Pausanias provides a brief description of the city, noting a precinct of Asclepius that held statues of Asclepius himself and of his wife, Epione, carved from Parian marble.³⁹ There were benefits to be had for those who lived in the vicinity of an ‘Asclepieion’. Most obvious was the ease of access to the shrine without having to travel long distances. It was actually not essential to visit one of sanctuaries in order to consult Asclepius. He could appear in a vision anywhere.⁴⁰ Nevertheless many suppliants preferred to visit the god at his shrine. Perhaps being at the recognised dwelling place of the god inspired extra confidence. It does appear that many people, at least at Epidaurus, chose to give birth, and to die, at the ‘Asclepieion’. The first group sought medical assistance and religious comfort in an effort to ensure a good outcome for both mother and baby, the dying hoped for an easeful death. Since both birth and death were forbidden within the sacred enclosure, women about to give birth and those who were

³⁷ Pausanias 2.27.2

³⁸ Pausanias 2.27.1.

³⁹ Pausanias 2.29.1.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Stele B5 (Li Donnici 1995, 104); Aristides, *Sacred Tales* 4.14; Edelstein 1998, I.247.

close to death had no shelter until about the middle of the second century A.D. when Antoninus provided a suitable building to house them.⁴¹

No doubt there were other benefits to be had. The surrounding population must have supplied the shrine with various goods and services such as food and wine; there would have been work for local masons to carve steles. Sacrificial animals might also have been provided. If there were stalls selling various goods as suggested below, then they also were likely to have been provided by the Epidaurians.

Modern hospitals (at least in Australia) attract various businesses that offer goods and services to visitors, staff and patients alike: coffee shops, which usually also offer meals to visitors and to patients wanting a change from hospital food, gift shops, bookstores. Often there are volunteers who visit wards to sell newspapers, magazines and sometimes snack food to patients. These all help to raise money for the hospital. When hospitals were built at the edge of a town, as many originally were, a shopping centre tended to grow up around them to cater for staff and visitors, as well as patients eager to escape their beds. There is no reason to suppose that medical shrines in the ancient world did not have the same effect, especially since they combined medical treatment with worship. They would, therefore, have attracted two groups, those seeking medical help, accompanied by their slaves, friends and/or family members, and pilgrims. The characters drawn by Herodas exemplify both groups.⁴² One woman had been a patient at the shrine and has now returned, accompanied by a friend, to pay the expected fee for her cure. Both women vow that they will return at some future date, accompanied by husbands and children.

In all likelihood traders of various sorts hawked their wares close by an 'Asclepieion', especially the large ones which attracted many people whether as supplicants, pilgrims or visitors. This would have applied particularly to one like Epidaurus, located a significant distance from the nearest 'polis'. Food is an obvious commodity, either raw ingredients or cooked meals, possibly both. Food and wine were often required for medication as well as for nutrition. The actual quantities of the ingredients required, or even their proportions, was not always specified.⁴³ This suggests the availability of a physician who could advise the patients or their carers.

⁴¹ Pausanias 2.27.6.

⁴² Herodas, *Mimiambi* 4.

⁴³ See Edelstein 1998, I.247 for a prescription for headache.

Whether patients were responsible for compounding their own drugs or whether this was a service supplied by the 'Asclepieion' is not clear and requires further investigation. It may have varied from shrine to shrine since different shrines operated under different rules. To take just one example, at Epidaurus, and also at Titane, all offerings had to be eaten within the bounds of the sanctuary.⁴⁴ At Herodas' unnamed sanctuary, however, his characters give the warden his portion, leave some for the snake, and take the rest with them.⁴⁵ Shrines like that at Epidaurus might have provided more services on site than those like Pergamon, which is close to the city of Pergamon.

Sacrificial cakes and eggs for those worshippers of humble means, as well as mass produced votive offerings, are other items that were probably available in the neighbourhood of some 'Asclepieia'. At festival time there would have been even more scope for commercial activity, since festivals provided popular entertainment as well as religious observances.⁴⁶ Shops did not need to be permanent structures; temporary stalls would have been adequate.

The Therapies of Asclepius at Epidaurus

The surviving steles at Epidaurus, dated to the second half of the fourth century B.C.,⁴⁷ are inscribed with reports of some of Asclepius' therapeutic methods. These testimonials were promotional material for the god and his sanctuary, but they also acted as an outpatient clinic. People could walk about among them looking for a record of symptoms similar to their own, note the treatment advised by Asclepius, then apply it to themselves,⁴⁸ thus saving the expense of incubation. Such 'clinics' were not unique to the 'Asclepieia'.

Valerius Maximus implies that the temples of 'Dea febris' in Rome were used as healing shrines; methods that had apparently worked would be recorded in the temples for other sufferers to try.⁴⁹ Unfortunately none of these records have survived. Nor is there any information on what, if any, other treatment options were available.

⁴⁴ Pausanias 2.27.1-2.

⁴⁵ Herodas, *Mimiambi* 88-93.

⁴⁶ Edelstein 1998, II.195.

⁴⁷ Edelstein 1998, II.221.

⁴⁸ For a discussion on the accessibility of the steles see Li Donnici 1995, 18-19.

⁴⁹ Valerius Maximus 2.5.6.

It was not only those suffering from disease who had access to the records of Asclepius' remedies. Physicians did also. Hippocrates supposedly consulted the 'iamata' at the Kos 'Asclepieion' for methods of treatment for his patients.⁵⁰ He is said to have copied cures from the sanctuary and continued to use them after the temple had been destroyed by fire.⁵¹ Actually, the sandal was probably on the other foot: Asclepius' treatments seemed to change over time in line with the changes in the practice of mortal physicians, as far as we know them.

Cases 1-10 on stele A present the god as a 'kind and friendly' presence, but still a god and to be treated with respect.⁵² The exchange between Asclepius and the child in A8 is one that could be imagined between a mortal doctor and a young patient. A17 describes an unusual case of treatment by two different agents using two different methods.⁵³ The patient was suffering from a malignant ulceration of the toe. The stele reports that a snake healed the ulcer "with its tongue" while the patient was sleeping outside during the day. The testimonial then goes on to state that when the patient woke up, he said that he had dreamt that a handsome young man had applied medication to the ulcer while he slept. The "young man" was almost certainly Asclepius appearing in human form. This seems to be the only tale of its kind. Perhaps it was meant as a demonstration that the god could appear to different people in two different guises at the same time. Or it could be that originally there were two stories, one involving Asclepius in human form and the other having him appear in the guise of a serpent. Then the two were accidentally conflated during transcription.

There are other stories of treatments by serpent, including two for fertility problems, which were successful.⁵⁴ There is one other where the outcome is uncertain as the patient, a child, was frightened by the animal. Nevertheless, a cure is implied. The girl was mute, presumably the reason for her attending the shrine, yet in her terror at seeing the snake she yelled to her parents for help.⁵⁵ Unfortunately the account does not make it clear whether she actually spoke or merely shrieked wordlessly.

⁵⁰ Strabo 14.2.19; 8.6.15.

⁵¹ Pliny, *NH* 29.4; Wickkiser 2008, 55.

⁵² Li Donnici 1995, 27-28.

⁵³ Edelstein 1998, I.224; Li Donnici 1995, 96.

⁵⁴ Stele B14 (LiDonnici 1995, 110; Edelstein I 1998, 225); B19 (LiDonnici 1995, 112), Edelstein B39 (Edelstein I 1998, 228); B22 (LiDonnici 1995, 115); C2 (LiDonnici 1995, 119). Edelstein numbers the tales consecutively, while LiDonnici numbers the tales on each stele from 1, but includes the Edelstein numeration in parentheses.

⁵⁵ Stele C1; see also LiDonnici 1995, 117, with n. 7.

Two treatments by dogs are recorded, one on stele A, the other on stele B. In A26 a boy's blindness is cured, while he is awake, by one of the dogs in the sanctuary.⁵⁶ The wording suggests that there was more than one dog in the precincts of the shrine. The other patient treated by a dog was a boy suffering from a growth on his neck.⁵⁷ He too was cured while he was awake.

It is not surprising to find snakes and dogs at a shrine of Asclepius. Both animals were closely identified with the god and he was believed to take on the form of a serpent at times.⁵⁸ He is often portrayed accompanied by a snake or by both snake and dog and would appear sometimes in visions accompanied by serpents.⁵⁹

Another animal mentioned at Epidaurus in a therapeutic setting is more surprising: a goose, whose bite cured gout.⁶⁰ Even more surprising is the curative bite of a viper, a venomous snake.⁶¹ It appears that neither of these creatures was resident at the Epidaurus shrine. Stele C is very worn and cannot be completely reconstructed.⁶² Tale C2, however, could be read as suggesting that the viper was accidentally transported to the shrine with the patient. It is probable that Asclepius' power was believed to be so great that he could turn even a dangerous and potentially lethal reptile like a viper into a healing agent, especially within the bounds of his own sanctuary.

In some instances, Asclepius fixes the problem without even appearing (the tale told at A1, for example); sometimes he appears, tells patients that they are cured (tales A2, A5, A8) and they awake well. At other times the sufferer dreams that Asclepius treats the injury in similar fashion to the way a mortal doctor might have done. Stele A4 reports that Ambrosia was blind in one eye. While she slept Asclepius cut the affected eye and poured medicine over it.⁶³ Stele A9 details another successful eye operation.⁶⁴ An unnamed man, one of whose eyes was no more than an empty eye socket appealed to the god. While he was sleeping, he saw a vision of Asclepius who prepared a drug and poured it into the eye socket. Both these patients left well.

⁵⁶ Stele A20 (Edelstein 1998, I.225; LiDonnici 1995, 104).

⁵⁷ Stele B26 (Edelstein 1998, I.226) Stele B6 (LiDonnici 1995, 105).

⁵⁸ See, for example, Stele B13 (LiDonnici 1995,110); Livy, Summary of Book 11.

⁵⁹ Stele B22 (LiDonnici 1995, 114); Pausanias 2.27.2; Behr 1968, 28.

⁶⁰ Stele B43 (Edelstein 1998, I.229); Stele B23 (LiDonnici 1995, 115).

⁶¹ Stele C2 (LiDonnici 1995, 118).

⁶² LiDonnici 1995, 116, with n. 1.

⁶³ Edelstein 1998, I.222; LiDonnici 1995, 88.

⁶⁴ Edelstein 1998, 223, LiDonnici 1995, 92.

Can we infer from these two cases that doctors in this society sometimes used drugs prepared in advance, or sometimes compounded them at the bed-side, if they had to be used immediately for some reason – while hot, for example (but, one would hope, not boiling). On one level it is not surprising that the dream visitation of Asclepius behaves like a mortal doctor – he had, after all, once been a mortal doctor. Moreover, patients’ previous experience with doctors probably spilled over into their dreams. They could perhaps be termed ‘magic realism’, the magic being the vision of the god, the realism lying in the fact that the illusion behaves like a doctor. Instead of healing with a word or gesture, Asclepius uses a drug.

On another level it does seem surprising that Asclepius did not always carry out a miraculous cure. All cures on the early stelae are recorded as both instantaneous and successful so in this way some at least were certainly miracles.

What can be made of the obviously miraculous stories? It is impossible for a human pregnancy to last for three or five years, as claimed in stele A1 and A2.⁶⁵ The ancient sceptics were right about the inability to restore sight to an eye that no longer exists, although the fitting of an artificial and non-functioning eye for cosmetic purposes is a possibility. Some other cases, however, suggest the operation of natural healing processes.⁶⁶ By this I mean the ability of the human body to repair itself without outside interference rather than the “natural remedies” suggested by Edelstein.⁶⁷ Stele A provides possible examples: in case A3 the paralysis of the suppliant’s fingers probably resolved itself.⁶⁸ Ambrosia’s blindness may also have resolved naturally.⁶⁹ No details of her condition are given, just that she was “blind in one eye”. If the blindness were temporary, due to infection, for example, once the infection was overcome by the immune system, then her sight might well have been restored. Stele A8 appears to involve a urinary calculus.⁷⁰ These are certainly very painful. Most are excreted in the urine without the need for medical intervention, as seems to have been the case here. The pain disappears immediately after the stone has been passed.

⁶⁵ Edelstein 1998, I.221, 222; LiDonnici 1995, 84, 86.

⁶⁶ Harris 2016, 23-24.

⁶⁷ Edelstein 1998, II.142.

⁶⁸ Stele A3 (Edelstein 1998, I.222; LiDonnici 1995, 86).

⁶⁹ Stele A4 (Edelstein 1998, I.222; LiDonnici 1995, 88).

⁷⁰ Edelstein 1998, I.223; LiDonnici 1995, 92.

In other examples patients may have been convinced that their condition had improved when in reality nothing had changed.⁷¹ They simply felt better.

And then there is the possibility of spontaneous remission.⁷² Remission occurs when the symptoms of a disease appear to vanish or abate. The condition itself has not improved and may continue to wreak invisible havoc. Symptoms reappear when patients sooner or later suffer a relapse. There may be several remissions and relapses over time. If a remission occurred during a visit to an ‘Asclepieion’ the patient may well return home convinced of a cure.

Then there is the placebo effect.⁷³ It has long been noted that some patients given an inert ‘therapy’, a medication, for example, with no active ingredients (traditionally a ‘sugar pill’) but which resembles the medication expected, experience an improvement in their condition. So important is this effect that in modern clinical trials there must be a control group to whom a placebo is administered to allow for it. Only if the group given the therapy under review shows a clear benefit over the control group can the treatment be considered effective. Ideally neither the participants in the trial nor the physicians should know who receives the active ingredient and who is given a placebo. And a placebo need not be a drug. Various medical procedures can be tested in the same fashion, including surgery.

The Pergamon Sanctuary and the Case of Aelius Aristides

The other major ‘Asclepieion’ for which there is a first-hand report is that of Pergamon. This is the personal account of Aelius Aristides who sought the help of the god for his many and varied ailments, including difficulties in breathing and swallowing, after doctors had been unable to diagnose, let alone treat, what appear to have been chronic health problems.⁷⁴

Asclepius’ sanctuary at Pergamon was founded in about 350 B.C. from the parent temple at Epidaurus.⁷⁵ Unlike its parent shrine that at Pergamon was close to the city. It was approached from the city on east side via a Sacred Way formed by arcades leading into a

⁷¹ Harris 2016, 23, 32-33.

⁷² See, for example, Anderson & Mackay 2014, 23.

⁷³ Harris 2016, 17-22; Braithwaite 2020.

⁷⁴ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.5-6.

⁷⁵ Behr 1968, 27-31.

small paved court, near which stood the Sacred Lamp of Hygieia. At the centre of the shrine was a rectangular court, paved in marble. Various structures lined the periphery of the court; one of the most imposing being the Temple of Zeus Asclepius, a round temple on a monumental foundation.⁷⁶ In the inner sanctum was a statue of Zeus Asclepius (probably) standing and looking straight ahead with his snake on his right. To the south of this temple was a huge rotunda served by terracotta pipes and drains and joined via a subterranean channel to a well in the courtyard and used for medicinal bathing. The Temple of Asclepius was located in middle of the courtyard.⁷⁷ Its sanctuary would have been richly decorated and contained a seated statue of Asclepius. There were other temples nearby, including that of Hygieia, and many statues. Surprisingly, there appears to have been no dormitory dedicated to the rite of incubation; it seems that any of the public buildings were available.⁷⁸

Normally no-one lived within the complex. The entire institution was administered by an hereditary priesthood supposedly descended from the Asclepiadae.⁷⁹ There were lesser officials whose functions are often unclear, plus an army of slaves and/or servants to do all the necessary labouring.⁸⁰

In the summer of A.D. 145 Aristides had a vision in which Asclepius summoned him to his temple at Pergamon.⁸¹ Even before this summons Aristides believed that Asclepius had begun his treatment. At the beginning of the winter of 144 the god told him to go to Smyrna to bathe – but not in the warm springs there.⁸² He was to use the nearby river. After arriving in Pergamon Aristides was still so unwell that he was confined to the house.⁸³ Asclepius ordered him to bathe in the River Caicus.⁸⁴ After this water therapy Aristides reported feeling relaxed and comfortable.⁸⁵ By the winter of 145/6, however, he was still, or again, so weak that he could not even leave his room. He was commanded to another bath, this time in the

⁷⁶ Behr 1968, 27-28.

⁷⁷ Behr 1968, 29.

⁷⁸ Behr 1968, 29-30, with nn. 37, 38.

⁷⁹ Behr 1968, 30.

⁸⁰ Behr 1968, 31.

⁸¹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.14. See also Behr 1968, 43, with n. 9 and 61, with n. 1.

⁸² Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.50

⁸³ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.46.

⁸⁴ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.48.

⁸⁵ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.49.

river flowing through Pergamon.⁸⁶ It was a stormy day and the river was in flood but Aristides persisted and afterwards insisted that he felt warmed.⁸⁷

Such prescriptions were not unique to Aristides.⁸⁸ Bathing in the sea or the river, despite the discomfort in cold weather, was probably safer than using the baths, given the probable poor quality of water that was not chlorinated and not changed often enough. The risk of infection from fellow suppliants is obvious. A river in flood, of course, poses dangers of a different kind.

In obedience to Asclepius' orders, during unseasonably cold weather in spring of 146, Aristides coated himself in freezing mud, then bathed in water from the sacred well.⁸⁹ This mud treatment was repeated in the depths of winter and Aristides washed in freezing water.⁹⁰ He habitually went unshod during the winter, often bathed in rivers, springs or the sea at Asclepius' command and frequently underwent the rite of incubation in the open air.⁹¹

None of these treatments was dangerous and sometimes even appeared to make Aristides feel better, even if only temporarily. Another therapy, however, that he imagined Asclepius recommended, just before he ordered the bathing, would have been lethal had it been performed as Asclepius' supposedly instructed.

Aristides' courses of blood loss

Aristides boasted (the word is no exaggeration) that he had endured uncounted phlebotomies.⁹² Asclepius, he believed, prescribed the withdrawal of 60 pints of blood (approximately 30 litres) from the elbow.⁹³ The average adult blood volume is about 14 pints or five litres. This information was unknown in antiquity, but the risk of killing a patient by exsanguination was known.⁹⁴ It is clear that the temple wardens were concerned.⁹⁵ They were

⁸⁶ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.51.

⁸⁷ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.51-53.

⁸⁸ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.55.

⁸⁹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.74-76. See also Renberg 2016, I.247-248.

⁹⁰ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.77-79.

⁹¹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.80.

⁹² Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 1.79; 2.47-48.

⁹³ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.46-47.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Galen, *On Treatment by Venesection* 12 [K11.289] in Brain 1986, 86.

⁹⁵ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.47.

also in a quandary. On the one hand they were servants of their god and bound to obey his instructions.⁹⁶ On the other hand there can be little doubt that they were aware that any attempt to relieve Aristides of the amount of blood which he maintained Asclepius had ordered, would inevitably cause his death. The fact that he survived is evidence that, somehow, he was persuaded that the recommended volume of blood was being removed. This raises ethical questions that could perhaps have been rationalised by the temple staff's belief that Aristides had misinterpreted, or misheard, the god's command. Usually Asclepius' advice was clear and direct.⁹⁷ There were times, however, when it was open to interpretation.⁹⁸ Asclepius himself would change a treatment he had ordered if were too dire.⁹⁹

Aristides states that the phlebotomies continued.¹⁰⁰ Since he survived it is clear that the blood loss was not catastrophic. Somehow the staff must have convinced him, possibly by some sleight of hand, that they were removing the recommended amount of blood. This could have been achieved by the performance of multiple venesections, small amounts being withdrawn on each occasion.

Aristides was aware that many phlebotomies would be required.¹⁰¹ By this time Asclepius no longer performed the miraculous cures of the past, although a contemporary priest assured Aristides that they had still occurred in his grandfather's time.¹⁰² Now, however, a mortal doctor was required even for such a comparatively simple procedure as venesection.

Fortunately, blood is a dramatic fluid, a little of which appears to be a larger amount than it really is. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that at least part of Aristides' weakness over the next two years was due to anaemia caused by chronic blood loss.¹⁰³ Towards the end of 146 Dr Theodotus expressed his concern over his patient's state of health and consulted Asclepiacus.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.47.

⁹⁷ Edelstein 1998, II.152.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.71-73.

⁹⁹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.27.

¹⁰⁰ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.48.

¹⁰¹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.47.

¹⁰² Edelstein 1998, I.208.

¹⁰³ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.35-36, 51; 3.8.

¹⁰⁴ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 2.34.

In September of the following year the eminent Dr. Satyrus appeared,¹⁰⁵ apparently summoned by the concerned staff of the temple. Satyrus was critical of the number of phlebotomies Aristides had undergone and ordered that they be stopped because they were having an adverse effect on his health.¹⁰⁶ He prescribed instead a ‘light and simple ointment’ to apply to ‘stomach and abdomen’.¹⁰⁷ Aristides insisted that he must obey the god’s instructions on venesection;¹⁰⁸ nevertheless he did use Satyrus’ ointment but was unimpressed by the results.¹⁰⁹ He concluded that it was worse than ineffective, believing that it caused him to develop a stubborn cough which developed into ‘consumption’.¹¹⁰

Not everyone in Aristides’ circle believed in the wisdom of obeying the command of a god as revealed in dreams rather than following medical advice.¹¹¹ Various medical practitioners were also critical, until their doubts were put to rest, according to Aristides, by the god’s medical abilities.¹¹²

Psychological Therapy

There were some patients for whom Asclepius prescribed psychological, rather than physical therapy. This involved the composition of odes, comical mimes and certain songs, in order to lower the temperature of their bodies.¹¹³ Aristides was one such patient, although he had a great deal of physical therapy as well. Asclepius told him in a dream consultation to compose songs and lyric verse and to fund a boys’ choir.¹¹⁴ Obeying this prescription, Theodotus, would often order the choir to sing Aristides’ lyric verses when his patient was suffering from troubling symptoms. Aristides reported that he felt comforted by the boys’ singing and that often the pain stopped.¹¹⁵ This provides a possible example of the placebo effect as described

¹⁰⁵ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 3.8-9.

¹⁰⁶ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 3.8.

¹⁰⁷ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 3.8.

¹⁰⁸ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 3.9.

¹⁰⁹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 3.10-11.

¹¹⁰ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 3.11.

¹¹¹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 1.63.

¹¹² Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 1.62, 67.

¹¹³ Galen, *De sanitate tuenda* 1.8.19-21 in Edelstein 1998, I.208.

¹¹⁴ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.38-45.

¹¹⁵ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.38.

by Braithwaite.¹¹⁶ Music was not the only psychological therapy advised by his dream visitations.

When the first onset of his sickness forced him to abandon the study of rhetoric, Aristides fell into depression.¹¹⁷ After his arrival at the shrine at Pergamon Asclepius appeared in a dream exhorting him not to abandon rhetoric.¹¹⁸ Aristides despaired of his ability to follow the god's prescription, but encouraged by two other suppliants at the shrine who promised their help and support, he resumed the practice of rhetoric.¹¹⁹ It seems that the treatment was successful, and not only for Aristides' psychological well-being.¹²⁰ The breathing control necessary for successful oratory probably also helped alleviate the breathing problems he had been experiencing.

Conclusion

The god's failures were not recorded officially, especially if the suppliant left the shrine apparently well, only to deteriorate on the journey home. This is not surprising. It would have been difficult to admit that the healing deity had failed and it would have done nothing for patients' confidence in Asclepius or his shrine if this information were available. There obviously was some sensitivity about the matter to judge from the number of reports amongst the testimonials about the confounding of various sceptics.

Aelius Aristides did write of his continuing bouts of ill health during and after his stay at the Pergamon shrine. His condition was not helped, of course, by the loss of blood due to the phlebotomies which he believed Asclepius had prescribed. Despite his continued suffering Aristides was convinced that he would have fared worse and indeed that he would have died without the treatment provided by Asclepius. There were occasions when he claimed to feel better immediately after some therapies only to suffer a relapse.

¹¹⁶ Braithwaite 2020.

¹¹⁷ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.14.

¹¹⁸ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.14-15.

¹¹⁹ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.17-19.

¹²⁰ Aristides, *The Sacred Tales* 4.22-30, 47-49, 51.

There were doubtless some suppliants who felt that they had been cured by Asclepius. These include people who would have recovered without treatment as well as those who felt better despite the fact that nothing had changed.

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