

## ASCLEPIUS AND EPIDAUROS: THE SAPIENTIAL MEDICINE AS DIVINATORY ART. BETWEEN THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPES AND HEALING DREAMS

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**ABSTRACT:** Epidaurus was in the antiquity a therapeutic complex which included several buildings to which people came from every part of Greece to be cured by the god Asclepius, a deity venerated from 500 before Christ to the fourth-fifth century *anno Domini*, when many other pagan cults had already ceased to exist. Epidaurus was a very complex structure, a sort of city-state or sovereign state, able to host thousands of adepts. Here, patients were subject to ablution, purification and sporadic fasting. Asclepius appeared in a dream, in a sort a practice of magic-ritual and sapiential medicine.

**KEYWORDS:** Asclepius; Epidaurus; Sapiential medicine; Templar medicine; Incubation sanctuary

Originally, medicine was a divinatory art. However, the term "divination" has lost its original meaning throughout the centuries, with respect to the ancient times and, in particular, to the Greek archaic world, in which it held an enormous value. Divination, in fact, was the most genuine form of knowledge, a sort of half-closed door or bridge that connected the human world with the divine one.

Apollo, a plague-dealer with a silver bow, is considered the father of medicine. We see him at the beginning of the Iliad with his poisoned arrows and darts disseminating illness and destruction to the Achaeans. The death inflicted by the divinity is terribly long and painful. The myth tells us that the pestilence is linked to a serious fault, committed by Agamemnon, the head of the Achaean army, who refused to give back to his father the beautiful prisoner Chryseis. The effect of this act of *ὑβρις* is the insurgence of the plague.

Apollo can be defined as a two-fold entity; if, on the one hand, the god is able to cause and disseminate diseases, on the other hand, he can cure and heal them (*paion, alexikakos, epikourios, akesios, iatros, iatromantis, soter*).

In the northern and central plains of Asia there is evidence of a long persistence of shamanism and of the practice of a particular technique. The shamans achieve mystical exaltation, an ecstatic condition, in which they are able to perform miraculous healings, to see the future and to utter prophecies. The founding father of the divination art, that method of forecasting the future shared by all the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean basin, is, therefore, in the Greek conception of the divine Apollo.

The phenomenon of shamanism has aroused the interest of many contemporary scholars, including McKenna: «*Shamanism [...] is an experiential science that deals with an area where we know nothing [...]. So the important part of the Human Potential Movement and the New Age, I believe, is the re-empowerment of ritual, the rediscovery of shamanism, the recognition of psychedelics and the importance of the Goddess*».

Apollo is prophetic: Apollo is, at the same time, the guardian and the annihilator of life. The shape of Apollo's bow could remind of a semicircular object, a "crescent moon". Apollo, solar deity, is the brother of Artemis, one of the three forms of the lunar deity in the Greek world. Apollo is the sun and the moon, at the same time.

Connected with Apollo, there is the figure of his son, Asclepius, who, according to some later traditions, would have not been a semi-divine creature, but rather a human being. Suspended between the divine and the human, between myth and reality, the emergence of the figure of Asclepius corresponds to the persistence of the practice occurred in pre-Hellenic age, in the Greek mainland and in the Peloponnese, of a pre-existing sacred healing tradition, managed by the so-called priestesses of the moon.

Asclepius received from Athena two small vials as a gift, containing the blood of the Gorgon Medusa: with blood extracted from the left vial could resurrect the dead people, with that extracted from the right vial could cause, instead, an instantaneous death. But Asclepius learned the true faculty of healing, without harming, from his father Apollo and his mentor Chiron.

An emblematic and multi-faceted figure, Asclepius is the god of the "sapiential medicine" or "templar medicine", with Epidaurus (*Epidaurus Hiera*, in Ancient Greek, meaning "Epidaurus the Holy") being the most important center. The *asclepeion*, a healing temple devoted to Asclepius, is what is called "therapeutic landscape" or "healing place" (Aldridge, 2000; Perriam, 2015;

Williams, 1998).

Epidaurus in the antiquity was a complex comprising several buildings to which people came from all over the Greece to be healed by the god Asclepius. In reality, Epidaurus was a much more complex structure, a sort of city-state or a sovereign state, able to host thousands of adepts. Epidaurus was a complex made up of several structures, each with its own specific function. The common thread that connected these structures was a rite that accompanied the adept during his staying inside the structures, from its entrance to its exit. People who came to Epidaurus to regain health, moved away from their daily world, travelling hundreds of kilometres with the awareness of being directed to the world of the "sacred".

Asclepius was represented as a mature man with a beard (but beardless and young according to other traditions), seated on the throne, holding a staff in his hand and with his other hand resting on the head of a snake; crouched at his feet, a dog. Dogs and snakes, with oracular owls and goats, were considered sacred animals: their tongue was thought to be able to lick, soothe and heal sores.

Asclepius is *zoophoros* (life-bringing) and *pyrphoros* (fire-bearing), and he sends only true and authentic dreams (*oneirata telesphora*). Zeus became envious of the skills and powers of Asclepius to decide to punish him by striking him dead with a bolt of lightning. However, Zeus had to recognize that human mankind was particularly devote to Asclepius and was forced to give him immortality by raising him to the stars, putting him in the constellation of *Ophiocus*, depicting a man with a snake (Bulkeley, 2008).

In the arcades in front of the temple there was the *abaton*, a place of hospitalization and half-sleep, where the sick passed the nights immersed in a sort of "incubatory sleep". The rite of the "incubation" is the practice of those who sleep in order to have responses from Asclepius and to be healed. The ill "incubating in the *asclepeion*" sleeps to receive advice on how to behave to regain his health (Meier, 2012).

The cult of Asclepius was generally associated with that of the members of his family, among whom perhaps the most important and most frequently represented was his daughter Hygieia, personification of health and sanitation. Women, as a sign of devotion, used to offer their hair to the goddess, adorning them with her sacred image. Statues and *pinax*/votive offerings to the divinity were scattered everywhere in every sanctuary; numerous inscriptions, also present as a votive testimony of the eventual healing, which allowed the "patient" to become aware of the sufferings and the healing of other patients.

When the patients arrives at the temple, he stands outside for a preparatory period, dedicated almost entirely to the hygiene of the body and to a particular diet. Once purified he is admitted into the sacred enclosure where even stricter sanitary and dietary rules are in force. At this point he is allowed to sleep in the *abaton*, under the porticoes of the temple, and in this enclosure the incubation takes place, that is to say the prophetic dream. The patient is lying on goatskins, during the sleep, probably induced by psychoactive substances.

In reality, the priests-doctors disguising themselves as deities wander among the sleeping patients in the *abaton* practicing real therapeutic acts, and, sometimes, even small surgical operations.

Using the words of Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis (2010), “*each time pilgrims performed the ritual perambulation of the sanctuary [...] they animated the religious topography. Through their participation in sacrifices and incubation in the Asklepieion they became part of the community of the sanctuary which spanned the human-divine spectrum. They interacted with the divinities by viewing their images and offering them sacrifices, and some experienced the presence and revelation of Asklepios in dream visions*”.

Asclepius' art is like that of his father Apollo, a divine art that presupposes a healing ritual. The birth of the so-called “technical medicine” will result in the progressive detachment from this form of initiatory knowledge. The technique - *téchne* - in fact it is a Homeric word, of ionic derivation that indicates an art, a craft, a trade, historically grown up in the geographical area of the Ionian and Aegean, between Magna Graecia and Greece and between this and *Asia Minor*, in the fifth century before Christ: an art in the medical field, linked to the name of Hippocrates.

*Téchne* is a multi-comprehensive term. It includes the craft of the artisan, the skills of the mathematician who discovers the theorems, of the musician that finds and produces harmonies, and of the doctor who cares for and restores the health of men, among others. It is a trade that, in any case, includes a theory and a practice, present in different proportions, and requires the application of wise man-made intellectual procedures.

In the case of the doctor, practicing the art of caring with the intellect and with the hand, the powerful procedures of this knowledge are based, on the one hand, on forms of sophisticated and refined intellectual knowledge, and, on the other hand, on practices with a substantial content of manual skills.

Medicine is an activity of human reasoning that takes place requiring both the intellectuality of knowing and the dexterity of doing, combining the *praxis* and the *logos*. The formation of this kind of medicine called “technical

medicine” occurs through a progressive, complex process of "desacralization". The *iatrèia*, i.e. the art of healing through the use of remedies, gradually acquires its physiognomy and autonomy through a technique that has matured with Hippocrates.

This does not contradict what has been previously said about the existence of another different kind of medicine, the hieratic medicine of the temples and sanctuaries, partially anterior and coeval.

Thus, in the classical Greece, two traditions coexisted (Malatesta, 2015):

- the **Hippocratic medicine** carried out by doctors engaged in the prognosis and the therapy, and
- the **sapiential medicine** of the Asclepiads engaged in the propitiatory prayer, in the prophecy and in the miraculous healing.

According to some traditions, Hippocrates, the undisputed father of modern medicine, is credited with an almost centennial longevity that spans over half of the fifth century and a good part of the fourth. According to his first biographer, the "old man of Kos" is mythologized as descendant of Asclepius, to symbolize a sort of continuity between the Asclepiads and the "technicians" of healthcare.

Despite this divine descent, we can consider Hippocrates as the first "rationalist" *ante litteram*, demystifier of the magical *aura* that had covered healing rituals until his advent. The body becomes flesh for technique and spirit, soul for religion.

However, even Hippocrates, being the founding father of the technical medicine, speaks of art ("*vita brevis, ars longa, occasio praeceps, experimentum periculosum, iudicium difficile*"), which in Latin means "life is short, and art long, opportunity fleeting, experimentations perilous, and judgement difficult"), and art is the thread commonly shared by the Asclepius' sapiential and templar medicine and the Hippocratic medicine.

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