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Medical Performance in the Asklepieion of Epidaurus

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Abstract

During ancient times, when there was nothing else available for a physician or a doctor in order to heal the patient and when there was no hope left, the last available option was the Asklepieion. The sanctuary dedicated to the god Asklepius was a place of healing where patients could pray, offer sacrifices to the gods and perform the healing ritual '*enkoimesis*', through which the god healed the sick. In addition to ritual and religious practices, evidence such as surgical instruments have been found at Asklepieion, proving that medical and surgical practices also took place there. This article examines ritual and medical practices and the places where they may have taken place within the Asklepieion.

Keywords: surgical tools, surgical operations, patients, ritual, sanctuary of Asklepios

Asklepieion of Epidaurus

The Asklepieion at Epidaurus comprises two sanctuaries dedicated to two healing gods: the earlier sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas on Mountain Kynortion and the later sanctuary of Asklepius in the plain (Psychogiou, 2012). The sanctuary, named after the god Asklepius, was a place of healing where patients could pray, make offerings to the gods and participate in healing rituals.

Taking care of health and well-being in general are the main attributes of Asclepius. Lambrinouidakis (2020) argues that the god not only cured diseases, but also improved difficult situations in life that tormented people. The god acted mainly through two rituals: *theoxenias* and *enkoimesis*. The *theoxenias* consisted of sacrificing an animal to the god, offering part of the sacrifice and eating the rest in a communal feast. The sacrifice and the offering to the god took place in the altar, while the communal feast after the sacrifice took place in the *estiatorio*, a large building on the edge of the *temenos* of the sanctuary. The second ritual, *enkoimesis*, was the most characteristic of those performed in the sanctuaries

dedicated to Asklepius. “Enkoimesis” is a Greek word meaning 'sleeping in the temple' (Askitopoulou et al., 2000), a ritual in which patients were put to sleep and, while asleep, Asclepius appeared to them and cured them or revealed to them the therapy they should follow (Lambrinoudakis, 2020). This ritual took place in a building within the temenos sanctuary called “Abaton”.

Evidence of Medical Practices in Epidaurus

Asklepieion is the earliest sanatorium in existence and is nearly connected with the early stages of medical practice. Findings in the Asklepieion provide evidence of the period when people stopped believing in divine healing and started using the science of medicine. The Sanctuary of Apollo and Asklepius was developed into the single most important therapeutic center of the ancient world and these practices were subsequently spread to the rest of the Greco-Roman world. The Sanctuary thus became the cradle of medicine.

The practice of surgery in the sanctuaries of Asklepius is directly or indirectly documented throughout Greece. According to Lambrinoudakis (2019), surgical practice is attested by ancient stories of the god's miracles and healings according to his orders given in dreams; associated medical tools and utensils; ancient depictions of related interventions; and associated votive offerings of healed human limbs found in sanctuaries. It should be noted, however, that experience with surgical operations in Greece is attested long before the emergence of the cult of Asklepius, as evidenced by the medical instruments found in a 15th-century BC tomb at Nafplio, not far from Epidaurus. Some of the medical instruments and utensils found included forceps, knives, chisels, catheters, scissors with dilators and scrapers (Deilaki, 1973).

In terms of the types of ailments treated at the Asklepieion at Epidaurus, three large tablets dating from around 350 BC have survived, containing the names, medical histories and treatments of around 70 patients. Treatment focused on the blind, the deaf, the paralysed and the broad group of those suffering from neurophytic problems (Lambrinoudakis, 2011). Several of the therapies described were performed during the *enkoimesis* ritual, i.e. with the patient asleep, such as the opening of an abdominal abscess and the removal of traumatic foreign bodies from the jaw, thorax and eyelid. The descriptions are technically simple and realistic enough to have taken place, but they were undoubtedly aided by soporifics, most likely opium, given to the patients before the act of *enkoimesis*. Basically, it was a form of dream healing consisting of three therapeutic themes: the snake, the god and a drug (Majno, 1991). While the patients were in this induced state of sleep, the god appeared to them in dreams to heal them or provide them with therapy, which the priests then interpreted and explained to the patients.

Some medical procedures were easy to perform. However, others, although technically simple, could not have been performed without the administration of soporific or narcotic substances to the patients prior to the *enkoimesis* process, as they were in great pain and suffering. According to Askitopoulou et al. (2002), an interesting archaeological find that supports this claim is the coffered ceilings decorated with poppy flowers that adorn the Tholos, a circular white marble building within the sanctuary. This particular circular building may have been used as an antechamber for the ritual of preparing the patients to sleep by administering an opiate before entering the Avaton, the place where the patients was put to sleep.

The Avaton is a long stoa-shaped building with an opening in the direction of the south, towards the Tholos. Both buildings are located to the west of the Temple of Asclepius (Błażkiewicz, 2014). At the Avaton, the patient would fall asleep waiting for divine intervention, as all medical actions depended on the god. The crowds that flocked to the temples of Asklepios probably believed that there would be no scalpel or cauterisation (Majno, 1991). We have no written sources of what happened in the Avaton during the patients' sleep, as the priests (or doctors) were obliged to keep the ritual secret as part of the mysteries of the god. The god even punished anyone who tried to find out (Lambrinoudakis, 2019). In the hundreds of inscriptions and votive reliefs preserved in the Asklepieion at Epidaurus and other Asklepieia in Greece, which recount individual healings, only the results of the ritual are described (Aravadinou, 1907). However, the performance of surgical operations at the Asklepieion at Epidaurus is indirectly documented by these accounts. Faith undoubtedly played a role in healing, but human action by the priest-doctors in the name of or with the blessing of the god was, at least in the most serious cases, an essential part of the treatment. Ritual sleep was undoubtedly essential for complicated surgical procedures, but possibly for any intervention. Research concludes that the priest-doctors must have used anesthetics and hypnotics.

Conclusion

Surgical practices were carried out at the Asklepieion in Epidaurus, as evidenced by medical instruments found at the Avaton (Kamarinou, 2016) dating back to the 4th century BC, such as knives, forceps and even a sandfly. Patients sought divine intervention through prayer, sacrifice and ritual. However, medicine itself was also practised there, with human intervention being necessary for the full treatment of patients.

The Asklepieia laid the foundations of medicine: it was one of the first steps in the development of surgery and pharmacology that led to medicine as we know it today. In particular, archaeological evidence suggests that Epidaurus provides a unique example of a concept of healing that considers the body, mind and spirit as an indivisible unit. Activities such as music, theatre, exercise, nature experiences and faith, along with medicine, diet, surgery

and possibly hypnosis and dream healing, may have influenced the healing process and healthy lifestyles of patients. The success of the treatments at the Asklepieion in Epidaurus contributed to its fame and longevity until the end of antiquity in the 5th century BC:

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