

CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING THE BODY
IN THE CULT OF ASKLEPIOS

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary with the development of the revolutionary theories of the body by the Hippocratic doctors in the late fifth century B.C.E., another medical movement was enjoying both increasing popularity and widening geographical distribution throughout the Greek world. This ancient alternative to Hippocratic medicine was the cult of the healing god Asklepios. Suppliants slept in the temples at his sanctuaries, where the god visited them in their dreams and cured their illnesses.

Hundreds of representations of body parts discovered at many of these sanctuaries bear witness to the miraculous cures the god's suppliants experienced. These anatomical votives represent nearly every part of the body and provide a glimpse into the construction of the body, sickness and healing in the context of the cult. A further record of divine healing is preserved in a series of narrative inscriptions at Epidauros, an important early sanctuary.

Considering these two forms of evidence to be complementary parts of the cult's rhetoric of self-representation, I examine the interplay of fragmentation and integration in divine healing and the relationship between representing and healing the body. The cult's objectification and localization of disease and the conception of the body as parts in these two forms of self-representation mark a fascinating and influential moment in the history of the body in the west.

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Over the course of the second half of the fifth century, a revolution in the art of healing took shape. The healers known to us as the Hippocratics developed a medical epistemology based on the natural causation of disease, the investigation of those causes through rational means and a therapeutic practice based on regimen as opposed to surgery and drugs (*pharmaka*).

Comparing the writings of the *Hippocratic Corpus* with other late fifth century discourses, especially Thucydides' *History*, Jacques Jouanna has quite rightly emphasized the significant place occupied by the Hippocratics in the intellectual milieu of that period, characterized by a what we tend to call a 'rationalizing' or 'scientific' world view (Jouanna 1999). Others, especially G.E.R. Lloyd, have focused on the place of the Hippocratics in a narrative of the history of science, a story of steady progress away from myth and superstition towards rationality and enlightenment. Both this diachronic approach and the synchronic view of the Hippocratics in the context of the fifth century 'enlightenment', while making good sense of the *Hippocratic Corpus* on its own, present a one-sided picture of ancient medicine as a whole because their focus excludes the cotemporary and extremely popular cults of various healing gods. Although the kind of medicine represented by these cults does not fit in with a simple narrative of scientific progress and is not easily reconciled with an understanding of the fifth century as a period of enlightenment, these cults comprised a culturally significant alternative understanding of disease, health and the body.

By far the most significant and broadly popular of these cults is that of Asklepios. Like the more rational Hippocratic medicine, this healing cult enjoyed an increasing importance as well as a widening geographical diffusion during the latter half of the fifth century. Epidauros, the most important early center of the cult, was already an international destination for those seeking a divine cure by the middle of the fifth century and a number of other city-states, including Athens, imported the god from its elaborate sanctuary over the course of the second half of the century. Our own rationalist tendencies and our conception of 'scientific progress' should not obscure the fact that the cult was not replaced or overshadowed by Hippocratic medicine but in fact thrived and expanded in precisely the same period and continued to be an extremely popular and important cult into late antiquity.

Although I will focus on the differences between Hippocratic and divine healing, it should be stressed at the outset that even the most virulent of the rhetorical attacks made by the Hippocratics on other theories of medicine and irrational superstitions never criticize the cult of the god to whom they credited the invention of their art. In fact, the invocation of Asklepios in the Hippocratic *Oath*, an early document from the *Corpus*, and the many dedications of medical instruments made by practitioners of rational medicine at the god's sanctuaries provide eloquent testimony to the coexistence of these two different systems.

In order to highlight the characteristics of the cult, a brief sketch of the conception of the body presented by the *Hippocratic Corpus* will first be necessary. Part of the Hippocratic revolution in healing is the specific conception of the body that informs their theories of health and disease. This body is, roughly speaking, a container filled with

various liquids or humors. We cannot speak of a single Hippocratic theory of the humors, since different treatises in the *Corpus* differ with respect to their qualities, functions and even number but in general, the Hippocratics believed that there is a proper proportion, movement and interaction of these humors that constitute health, while corresponding disturbances produce disease. The author of *On the Nature of Humans* offers the following description of the body and definition of health:

The body of man has in itself blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile; these make up the nature of his body, and through these he feels pain or enjoys health. He enjoys the most perfect health when these elements are duly proportioned [*metriôs*] to one another in respect of compounding [*krêsios*], quality [*dunamios*] and quantity [*plêtheos*], and when they are perfectly mixed [*malista memigmena*]. Pain is felt when one of these constituents is in defect or excess, or is isolated in the body without being compounded with all the others [*Nat. Hom.* 4, translated by Jones (1953:11-13) with modifications].

The author posits the necessity of understanding the nature of the human body as a whole and as an integrated system as necessarily prior to any science of healing, which is, in turn, based upon this understanding (see Jouanna [1999:325-327]). The work of the healer is to restore the proper proportion, mixture or movement of the body's humors. This is the reason for the Hippocratics' primary concern with regimen – diet, exercise, and baths – as a means for regulating health.

Furthermore, the highly rhetorical nature of this and other treatises, for example *On Ancient Medicine* and *On the Sacred Disease*, show that the Hippocratics did not concern themselves with theorizing the body for scientific and therapeutic purposes alone, but rather that the specific representation of the body was mobilized as part of a crucial strategy of agonistic, rhetorical self-definition and promotion (see Jouanna [1999]).

It is against this model of the Hippocratic body that I would like to set the discussion of the very different version of the body constructed in the cult of Asklepios. Unlike the Hippocratics, the cult left no treatises or rhetorical pieces as such that outline the principles of divine healing. A consideration of two kinds of evidence does, however, provide insight into the logic of divine healing and the conception of the body upon which it is based. The first type of evidence I wish to consider is the anatomical votives that characterize the cult. The second is the remarkable set of healing narratives or *iamata* from Epidauros. Reading these two types of evidence together I argue both (1) that the underlying conceptions of disease, health and the body that characterize the cult are very different from the systemic model of the Hippocratics and (2) that the cult's specific model of the body as represented in the votives and the inscriptions is mobilized as part of a program of self-definition and promotion that is no less strategic and rhetorical than that found in the *Hippocratic Corpus*.

I begin with the anatomical votives, which have been found in many different sanctuaries all over the Greek world. They are dedicated as thank-offerings to a variety of helper divinities, but especially to those with healing functions. A number of the divine healers who receive such votives remain significant, especially local hero-healers

like the Heros Iatros and Amynos at Athens, and these healers share many features with Asklepios. However, as Asklepios became the most important healing divinity in the Greek world, a great majority of the anatomical votives that have survived or are known from inscribed inventories come from his sanctuaries, known as Asklepieia.

The form and materials vary, but the most common are stone relief tablets, engraved metal plaques, and fully three-dimensional representations in stone or terracotta.¹ There is a particularly rich collection of terra cotta examples from the Asklepieion at Corinth, ranging in date from the last quarter of the fifth to the last quarter of the fourth century B.C.E. (see Figures 1 and 2).²

These votives, whatever their form and material, are designed to be displayed. Many of the terracottas from Corinth preserve holes for hanging either in the temple itself, in other structures, such as stoas, or even from the branches of trees growing in the sanctuary (van Straten [1990]; see Figures 3, 4 and 5). Reliefs of various sizes would have also been hung from sanctuary structures or supported on small columns designed for the purpose and set up throughout the sanctuary (van Straten [1990]; see Figure 6).³

The combined effect of hundreds of these votives would have presented a striking sense of bodily fragmentation to the worshipper upon entering the sanctuary. There is more here than a powerful aesthetic effect, however: this sense of fragmentation created by the accumulation of votive body parts provides an important insight into cult medicine and its self-representation.

First, the representation of the affected part of the body as a fragment suggests that worshippers conceived of their experience of both disease and cure as distinctly localized phenomena. A specific part of the body suffers from disease and is healed by

the god in order to restore the suppliant to health and the specificity of the representation reflects this localization. The prominent display of these votives shows that the cult endorsed this understanding of divine healing. This stands in contrast to the Hippocratic representation of the body as a system and corresponding treatment through regimen of the whole body in order to alleviate symptoms that may manifest themselves in specific parts of the body but are the result of disturbances in the balance of the body's system of humors.

Furthermore, each anatomical votive proclaims the power of the god by representing a successful narrative of healing, just as any object dedicated in a sanctuary has a relationship to narrative, whether it is simply a tablet commemorating the sacrifice it depicts or a famous object that prompts the (re)telling of the story that led to its dedication. Herodotos' history provides many examples of narratives linked to objects in this way, preserving the *kleos*, or fame, both of the god to whom they are dedicated and, in some cases, of the dedicant as well.⁴

As a trace of divine healing activity and the result of a narrative of suffering and salvation through contact with the divine, each votive is both a fragment of biography, as the record of the momentous occasion of that divine contact in the life of a mortal, and a *tekmêrion*, a direct proof of the power of the god himself. The autobiographical component of the representational work of the votive is subordinated, especially as most anatomical votives do not carry inscriptions. Even so much as the name of the dedicant is usually irrecoverable, especially for the modern scholar, as the autobiographical narrative of suffering and cure is subsumed by the rhetoric of the cult. It is only through this rhetorical framework, the grammar of the cult's language of self-representation, that

we have access to these narratives and thus the field of fragmented body parts becomes a manifest record of Asklepios' healing power and the efficacy of the cult.

The votive, moreover, occupies a very specific place in the narrative of cure it represents. Because the suppliant dedicates the votive after he or she has been healed at the end of his or her experience in the sanctuary, it marks the departure from the sanctuary and the return to the everyday world. The dedication of Lysimachos (Figure 7) dramatizes this moment: the scene depicts Lysimachos, now restored to health, dedicating a large votive leg, his final act in the sanctuary. The narrative of cure thus culminates in the dedication of the votive that simultaneously commemorates the act of healing and marks the departure from the sanctuary that healing makes possible. In this way, each votive encodes a play of absence and presence: as a trace – in the fully Derridean sense – the presence of the votive marks the absence of the healed suppliant.

The consequence of calling to mind this absent healed body leads to a consideration of the final rhetorical effect of the votive specifically as a fragment. Its correspondence with a healed body somewhere in the world outside the sanctuary means that it instantiates a species of synecdoche, in which the healthy whole is emphasized by contrast with the fragmentary trace that represents it. This specific kind of part for whole makes the fragmentary status of the votive a crucial element in the representation of divine healing as an example from a much later source makes dramatically clear.

Aelius Aristides, the cult's most famous spokesman, records many of his dream encounters with Asklepios in his *Hieroi Logoi*, written in the second century C.E. Among them he recounts the following:

The god said that it was necessary to cut off part of the body itself in behalf of the safety of the whole. This however, would be too great a demand and from it he would exempt me. Instead, I should take off the ring which I was wearing and offer it to Telesphoros. For this would do the same as if I offered the finger itself. Furthermore, I should inscribe on the band of the ring 'Son of Cronos'. After this there would be salvation [48.27 translation Edelstein and Edelstein (1998:287) with modification].

Here the logic of substitution of the votive for a part of the living body is explicit. The possibility of the literal fragmentation of the body is raised in order to be displaced onto the votive and thereby negated. Aristides' ring thus conflates the salvation of the whole body with the sparing of the individual part from amputation; his body remains whole because the part is spared through substitution.

Despite the lateness of Aristides' account, the strong continuity in both the practice of healing and the representation of the body to which the *Hieroi Logoi* attest in what is an essentially conservative religious context makes it a valuable resource for understanding the way divine cures were experienced and understood. I would in fact argue that Aristides' testimony simply provides an explicit account of the logic that the anatomical votive exploits even more suggestively, if silently, since the votive represents the affected part directly rather than symbolically. The fragmentation in which the votive participates is crucial to the representation of the salvation of the whole, which exists as a healthy whole precisely because of the activity that is concretized in the trace of the votive. In other words, every anatomical votive represents, as it were, a kind of 'non-amputation' underscoring the integrity of the absent, cured dedicant.

In order to develop the themes of localization and fragmentation and their rhetorical significance that I have tried to tease out of the silent *tekmêria* of the anatomical votives in more explicit terms, I turn now to the inscriptions from Epidauros, a body of written evidence contemporary with the classical and late classical votives that are the main focus above. Preserved on four stelai dating to the second half of the fourth century B.C.E., these inscriptions record the experiences of those who came to sleep in the sanctuary in hopes of a cure.⁵ As written testimonia, they may be thought of as representing in a direct way the narrative that the votives suggest in their own dramatic, visual way and as such provide a wealth of information about the cult.

First, the *iamata* make explicit the cult's emphasis on the role of the displayed dedications, including the *iamata* themselves, as rhetorical elements in the construction of belief as *tekmêria* of divine power.⁶ One instance explicitly takes on a direct relationship to a specific object found in the sanctuary, a stone placed outside the area for incubation, providing the repetition of the narrative that led to its dedication. "Hermodicus of Lampsacus was paralyzed in body. This man, when he slept in the temple, the god healed and he ordered him upon coming out to bring to the temple as large a stone as he could. He brought the stone which now lies before the *abaton*" (A.15 translation Edelstein and Edelstein [1998:232-233] with modifications).

Several warning tales of doubting individuals further confirm the rhetorical intention of displaying the dedications. In each one the suppliant tours the sanctuary and examines the dedications and inscriptions and laughs in disbelief at the cures they represent. The skeptical are chastised by the god and healed despite their disbelief,

having learned through experience the proper way to read the dedications. A woman from Athens provides an example:

Ambrosia of Athens, blind in one eye. She came as a suppliant to the god. As she walked around the sanctuary, she laughed at some of the cures as unbelievable and impossible, that the lame and the blind should become well through merely seeing a dream. In her sleep she saw a vision. It seemed to her that the god stood by her and said he would cure her, but that he would ask her in exchange to dedicate to the sanctuary a silver pig as a memorial of her ignorance. After saying this, he cut her diseased eyeball and poured in some *pharmakon*. When day came she walked out healthy [A.4 translation Edelstein and Edelstein (1998:230) with modifications].

The *iamata* also provide us with many practical details about the cult, such as an indication of the range of ailments for which suppliants turned to Asklepios for help as well as the kind of divine treatments the worshipper could expect for such ailments. Again, as we shall see, though we may obtain relatively more insight into the individual experience through these narratives, what comes to the fore is an articulation of the cult's self-representation through the selective representation of narratives in stylized and standardized form.

In general, Asklepios appears as a miraculous surgeon and chemist, specializing in the two branches of medicine considered by the Hippocratics to be secondary to the new therapeutics of regimen. In this respect, Asklepios shows the characteristics of the archaic healer as presented in the *Iliad*, whose function is “to cut out arrows and to

sprinkle soothing drugs” (11.515, translated by the author). Asklepios cuts open the body to remove a number of specific disease-causing agents, including arrows and spearheads but also various parasites. Other kinds of ailments are treated with *pharmaka*, one of the most common being blindness, which is cured with ointments applied to the eyes.

Both of these broadly defined categories of healing activity reinforce the sense of localization suggested by the votives since they are performed directly on the affected part. The language of the *iamata* further emphasizes this through repeatedly referring to the part in question in the description of the ailment and the narrative of the cure. Note, for example, the emphasis on localization in the case of Ambrosia above, where the god specifically “cut her diseased eyeball”.⁷

A consideration of a noteworthy use of formulaic language in the inscriptions returns us to my earlier emphasis on the end of the healing narrative and the departure of the healed suppliant. Many of the narratives end with the phrase “when day came he/she left the sanctuary healthy” or a variation on it.⁸ This formula makes healing and departure virtually simultaneous in a manner parallel to the emphasis on the end of the healing narrative encoded in the votive. Relating the narrative to the priests – if this is how these texts were in fact produced – in order that they be inscribed in stone to glorify the god in much the same way as any other dedication is perhaps an alternative final step in one’s experience at the sanctuary.

Finally, several extreme examples of divine surgery in the *iamata* also suggest a central role for the dynamic of fragmentation and reintegration at play in the example from Aristides adduced above. There are two cases where decapitation leads to the removal of a disease-causing agent and dramatizes the power of the god to restore the

body to wholeness. The case of Aristagora of Troezen repays closer examination. Suffering from a tapeworm, Aristagora slept in her local temple of Asklepios and had a dream that:

the sons of the god, while he [Asklepios] was not present but away in Epidauros, cut off her head, but, being unable to put it back on again, they sent a messenger to Asklepios asking him to come. Meanwhile day breaks and the priest clearly sees her head cut off from the body. When night approached, Aristagora saw a vision. It seemed to her that the god had come from Epidauros and fastened her head onto her neck. Then he cut open her belly, took the tapeworm out, and stitched her up again. And after that she became well [B.23, translation Edelstein and Edelstein (1998:234) with modification].⁹

In addition to asserting two hierarchies – the superiority of the god to his mortal counterparts and the primacy of the Epidaurian sanctuary over its counterpart at Troezen – this account revolves around the ability of Asklepios to make the body whole again after it has been subject to the dramatic violence of decapitation. The fragmented state of the body at dawn, when we would expect the healed body to appear, underscores the miraculous power of the god to heal and make whole in much the same way as the threatened but avoided amputation in Aristides' dream.

This cure also returns us to the importance of localization in the Asklepiian representation of disease and cure, since the initial mistake consists not only in the clumsy inability to reverse the effects of a drastic surgical procedure, but also in performing the surgery on the wrong part of the body in the first place. This amounts to a

kind of misdiagnosis, a failure to find the seat of the disease, which the god corrects by first undoing the damage and then performing a procedure on the correct part of the body. This dramatic narrative, then, brings to an extreme the two central issues of fragmentation and localization suggested by the field of body parts created by the accumulated votives with which we began.

In conclusion, I would emphasize the significance of this version of the body and the cultural currency of its mobilization as part of the rhetorical project of this extremely popular cult. The Asklepiian body, a body susceptible to both physical and symbolic fragmentation and a locus for staging a particular narrative of part to whole, was available as an alternative model that the Greeks found equally good to think with from the fifth century down to late antiquity. The presence of this alternative should caution us against allowing our modern scientific prejudice and our investment in a narrative of progress to posit a singular conception of the ancient body understood exclusively through the *Hippocratic Corpus*.

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NOTES

¹ Plates in Forsén (1996), van Straten (1981) and Lang (1977) present a wide range of examples; see also Aleshire (1989). The practice of dedicating anatomical votives to commemorate divine cures is a point of continuity with modern Christianity, particularly Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy. In Greece, one still sees many such votives in churches connected with the healing powers of saints, especially the Virgin Mary. Christian anatomical votives can be made of a wide range of materials, including wax, wood and other perishable materials; it is possible that ancient practice also embraced other materials that are invisible in the archaeological record. See Bresc-Bautier (1990).

² See Roebuck (1951) for the details of the excavation of the Asklepieion at Corinth; see also Lang (1977).

³ See van Straten (1990) for examples and on the placement of votives in sanctuaries in general.

⁴ E.g., the dedications of Croesus at Delphi described at 1.51 or the bronze statuette of Arion at Taenarum commemorating his landing there on the back of a Dolphin (1.24).

⁵ The four stelai are referred to as A, B, C and D. A and B have large sections of well-preserved text and C and D are more fragmentary. Individual cures are referred to by the letter of the stele and numbered consecutively on all four. Details about the texts and their preservation can be found in LiDonnici (1995).

⁶ On the *iamata* as didactic texts, see Dillon (1994).

⁷ Compare, e.g. A.4, 13; B.23, 30.

⁸ E.g., A.3,4,8,9,12,13,19,20.

⁹ Aelianus provides a similar account with significant differences in his *De Natura Animalium* IX.33.