

A Cock to Asclepius

*Emelia-Louise Kilby**

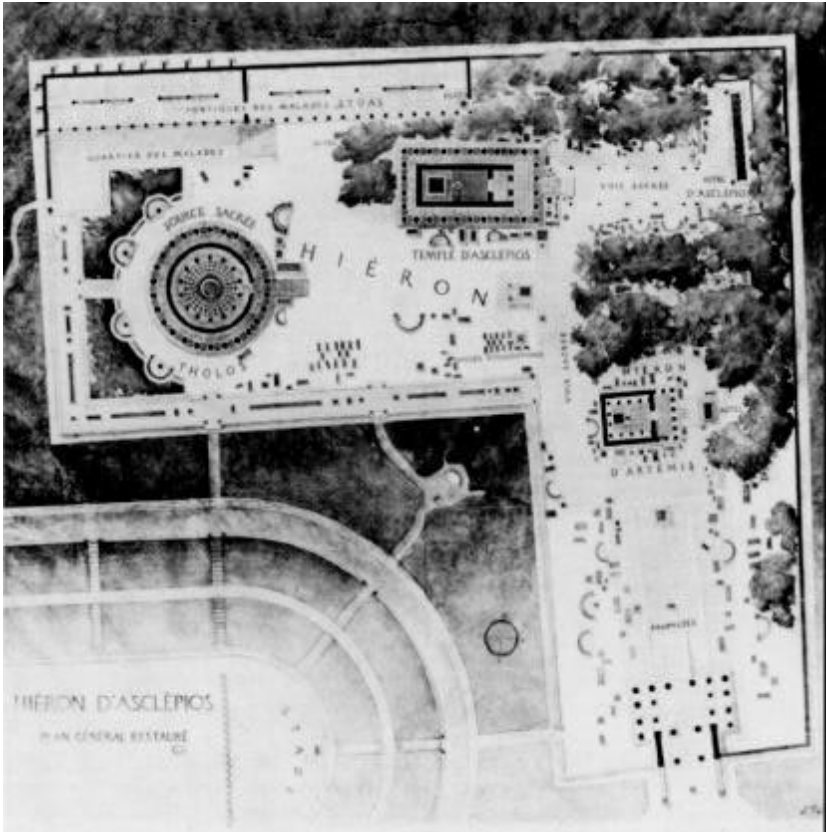
“A cock to Asclepius,” the sick man muttered as they neared the hieron, the sanctuary, of Epidauros. Hagestratus had traveled slowly, wearily, from his village near Nemea following dirt tracks through forested mountains down into the wooded, peaceful valley to Epidauros. Friends had helped him, sometimes even carrying him on their backs; other times he walked carefully, leaning heavily on his staff. They had been traveling for hours. At night, wrapped only in their cloaks, they had slept under the stars. He could never repay the kindness of his friends, unless, of course, he was cured of the pounding ache in his head.

He hopes his prayers would be heard and his sacrifice accepted so that Asclepius would rid him of this miserable affliction. The ache in his head even kept him from sleeping at night. Salt water, potions, all the usual remedies had not helped. His only hope was Asclepius. Had not the great poet, Pindar, written:

All then who came to him, some plagued with sores
Of festering growths, some wounded by the strokes
Of weapons of bright bronze,
Or by the slinger's shot of stones, other with limbs
Ravaged by summer's fiery heat or by the winter's cold,
To each for every various ill
He made the remedy
And gave deliverance from pain,
Some with the gentle songs of incantation
Others he cured with soothing draughts of medicines,
Or wrapped their limbs around with doctored salves,
And some he made whole with the surgeon's knife.¹

He must remember to ask his friends to buy a cock for him in the village; his friends had assured him that that was the most desirable tribute. “Even Socrates,” he thought, “urged his friend, Crito, to sacrifice a cock in his behalf before the hemlock took his life. For was it not recorded by Plato that Socrates' very last words were ‘Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius, pay it and do not neglect it.’ ”

**Ms. Kilby is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health and Physical Education at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.*



Sanctuary of Asclepius showing location of the stadium. Source: Alphonse DeFrasse and Henri Lechat, *Epidaure: Restauration et Description Des Principaux Monuments du Sanctuaire D'Asclépios* (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, 1895, Plate X.) Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.

Hagestratus knew that he must abstain from food and drink before entering the sanctuary. As dawn approached he rose aching in every limb and especially aware of the pounding in his head. He awakened his friends, who after wishing him well left for the village to buy the cock for his sacrifice. Hagestratus started along the path by the stadium where some men were running early, perhaps before the heat of the mid-day sun. Soon to his left he noted a beautiful marble building encircled by columns. Then a long porticoed building caught his eye. “It must be the abaton where I’ll sleep tonight.” Columns of the abaton stretched the length of the large quadrangle. “The temple must be at the far end,” he thought. His pace slowed; he marveled at the beauty and significance of it all. Then hesitantly he walked to the steps of the temple. A bearded man with a wreath encircling his head, and clad in a white robe stood between two columns at the entrance to the temple. A young woman was smiling at his side. “Can this be Asclepius himself with his daughter Hygeia?”



Temple of Asclepius with statue of the god. Source: Alphonse DeFraser and Henri Lechat, *Épidaure: Restauration et Description Des Principaux Monuments du Sanctuaire D'Asclépios* (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, 1895, Plate IV.) Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.

No, no, of course not, but it must be the priest and an assistant.” He just barely had time to notice the inscriptions carved on the stelae near the temple. One had caught his eye. It told of Euphanes, a young boy of Epidauros, who was cured after offering his dice to the god. “Ten in all,” it said. The priest began to speak of miraculous cures which had taken place in this very sanctuary. He gestured toward the stelae as if to reinforce his words.

Listening intently Hagestratus peered through the columns of the temple. His gaze fixed on the wondrous statue of Asclepius. It was magnificent. There was Asclepius, in gold and ivory, seated, looking benevolent and fatherly. Hagestratus felt a moment of peace, then his heart beat faster, his imagination stimulated by the words of the priest. “What is he saying now? Cleansing, purification? Yes.” He bowed toward the priest. It was time to perform the ritual of purification and then to make his sacrifice.

He turned, stepped carefully down to the ground, and started toward the fountains and bathing pools located near the gymnasium. He knew as did all



Facade showing the abaton in the center and the temple on the right. Source: Alphonse DeFrasse and Henri Lechat, *Épidaure: Restauration et Description Des Principaux Monuments du Sanctuaire D'Asclépios* (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries Réunies, 1895, Plate XI.) Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.

Greeks that bathing would have a purifying effect on his soul as well as cleanse his body. It would free his soul for communion with god. His ablutions complete, he was suddenly aware that the pounding in his head had eased. Then turning towards his companions who had been waiting quietly in the shadow of the circular building he called for the cock. “A cock to Asclepius!” Grasping the cock, he started to cross the large square toward the open altar in front of the temple. The blood offering of the cock and the roasted flesh would please both the god, Asclepius, and his priests. The altar fire burned brightly as he made his preparations. Following old-age procedures he sacrificed the cock, letting its blood drip on the altar and placing a portion of it directly over the flames. Knowing the priests would accept it as a gift, he left the rest of the meat on the altar. Then he raised his arms to the sky and prayed.

Turning towards the abaton, he waved farewell to his faithful friends. Wearily, yet with a sense of elation, he looked forward to his last phase—to sleep and dream in the abaton with other pilgrims. It had been a long day following a strenuous journey. Now he felt prepared for the most important part. As Hagestratus lay down beside the others, he thought, “The gods have caused this illness from which I suffer; only they can cure it. I must put my faith in Asclepius.” The priest’s stories of how Asclepius had appeared or how the sacred snake had cured a man’s wound by licking it or restored the sight in a blind eye stimulated the imagination. Perhaps the sacred snake or the temple dog or even Asclepius himself would come to his aid. Asclepius might suggest a treatment to him in a vision. With these thoughts foremost in his mind, Hagestratus fell asleep and soon began to dream.

In his dream, Asclepius did appear and called to him to stand up. He stood naked, not waiting to wrap his cloak, the himation, around him. The god was describing a movement sequence and urging him to try it. It was a lunge and Hagestratus recognized it as a useful move for the pancratium. Naked in the moonlight as the other pilgrims slept, he lunged time and again. Then ex-

hausted he slept. Years later he often recalled this experience. Especially did he delight in telling young men in the gymnasium that it was this very lunge which enabled him to win the pancratium at Nemea and that the wreath of wild celery was placed on his head finally freed from pain. "Forever," he told them, "will I believe in the powers of Asclepius." And Hagestratus as if to convince us left his story on a column at Epidauros for all to see:

Hagestratus with headaches. He suffered from insomnia on account of headaches. When he came to the Abaton he fell asleep and saw a dream. It seemed to him that the god cured him of his headaches and, making him stand up naked, taught him the lunge used in the pancratium. When day came he departed well, and not long afterwards he won in the pancratium at the Nemean games.²

This somewhat imaginative story of Hagestratus' cure and subsequent athletic victory was developed from the above inscription and the author's research into the health sanctuaries of the ancient world.³ The researcher was interested in determining, as far as possible, the answers to the following questions: Was exercise or sport usually a part of the suggested treatment? Were games sponsored as entertainment for the patients? Are there modern parallels to these ancient sanctuaries?

At Epidauros forty-three columns telling of miraculous cures stood near the Temple of Asclepius. They were apparently written in a prescribed manner, recording the individual's name, the illness, the dream while sleeping in the abaton (dormitory) and the cure.⁴ These inscriptions were strategically located in order to be read easily by the sick pilgrims on their way to the temple. In addition to the stelae describing Hagestratus' success in the pancratium at Nemea and the boy, Euphanes, giving up his dice to the god, another stela recalled the feat of Hermodicus of Lampsacus. Weight lifting as recommended by the god cured his bodily weakness or, as another translator suggests, his paralysis.

The inscription reads:

Hermodicus of Lampsacus: bodily weakness. The god cured this man as he slept, and ordered him when he came away to carry into the temple the largest stone he could. He carried the stone which now stands in front of the shrine.⁵

Interestingly as a sequel to this story, a stone with the following inscription has been found

Hermodicus of Lampsacus

As proof of Thy merit, Askleopios, I dedicated this
stone which I lifted myself, plain for all to see,
Clear evidence of Thy skill; for, before I came into Thy
hands and the hands of Thy servants, I lay sick of a foul
disease,

Congestion of the lungs and utter bodily weakness; but Thou, Healer, persuadedest me to pick up this stone and to live completely cured.⁶

Harris reports that the stone weighs 674 pounds leaving the reader to place his own interpretation upon this accomplishment and cure.⁷

It appears to be common knowledge among the ancients that exercise could be part of the treatment recommended by the priests of Asclepius. For Marcus Aurelius comments:

We have all heard Asclepius has prescribed for so and so riding, exercise, or cold baths, or walking barefoot.

and he goes on to say:

Let us then accept our fate, as we accept the prescriptions of Asclepius. And in fact in these, too, there are many 'bitter pills,' but we welcome them in hope of health.⁸

Although only a few of the stelae at Epidauros specifically speak of cures resulting from physical exertion, the fact that any do seems worthy of consideration. The belief of the ancient Greeks in the benefit of exercise for health can readily be documented.⁹ A number of references from classical sources speak of exercise as a way of curing illness.¹⁰ Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that exercise, or perhaps sports participation, was considered one form of treatment at Epidauros. This appears to be consistent with the practices at Pergamum the other sanctuary studied. Pergamum, located on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, was equally famous as a medical center. It is said to have been started by a Pergamene who was cured at Epidauros.

Aristides, a frequent visitor to Pergamum in hopes of a cure for a variety of ailments, wrote at length about the sanctuary and its treatment. He said:

We were ordered to do many paradoxical things; among those which I recall there is a race which I had to run barefoot in winter-time, and again horse riding, the hardest of undertakings, and I also recall an exercise of the following kind: when the harbor waves were swollen by the south wind and ships were in distress, I had to sail across to the opposite side, eating honey and acorns from an oak tree, and vomit; then complete purification is achieved. All these things were done when the inflammation was at its peak and had even spread to the right navel.¹¹

Aristides also tells of a sick man who was instructed to struggle hard until he perspired and this then "broke up the entire sickness."¹² In a speech in honor of Asclepius at Pergamum he tells a story reminiscent of Hagestratus:

The god revealed even boxing tricks to one of our contemporary boxers while he was asleep, by the use of which it is no wonder that he knocked out one of his outstanding competitors.¹³

Walking and running barefoot, riding, bathing (perhaps swimming), and passive exercise were at least part of the treatment recommended to some of the sick at Epidauros and Pergamum. Techniques for boxing and the pancratium as well as a weight-lifting feat were legendary cures recorded in inscriptions or by writers of that era.

The ancient sanctuaries included facilities for athletic festivals. These facilities, important both at Epidauros and Pergamum, formed integral parts of all Greek cities. The stadium, gymnasium, and baths at Epidauros were located close to the temple of Asclepius and to the abaton where patients slept. At Pergamum both the stadium and a gymnasium were situated between the Asclepieion (medical sanctuary) and the acropolis, site of additional temples and theaters.

In both Greek and Roman times, games were held at these centers. Pergamum's festive days in the second century BC were called the Nicephoria and included games and musical contests. A coin commemorated the founding by Eumenes II in 182 BC; these festivals were known to have continued until at least 133 BC.¹⁴

Later during the Roman period the cult of Asclepius increased in popularity at Pergamum.¹⁵ An inscription gives evidence of games called the Augustea being held in AD 181. This same inscription refers to the Asclepieia, the games at Epidauros.¹⁶ There are numerous references by classical authors to these games dedicated to Asclepius. In writing about what she calls the "cure and cult" of another sanctuary, Corinth, Lang noted that the Asclepieion is located just inside the city walls, with the gymnasium and theater nearby. She believes these were:

recreational facilities which could also contribute to the god's work of achieving 'mens sana in corpore sano'.¹⁷

Along with rituals for the sick (incubation or curative sleep) and regular services at the temple, games and festivals were considered features of the cult of Asclepius.

There can be little doubt that many of the sick benefited greatly by the rest, the pure air, the simple diet, the sources of mental interest, the baths, exercise, massage, and friction, and in later days by the actual medical treatment.¹⁸

Epidauros and Pergamum were only two of some four hundred sanctuaries known to have existed in the ancient world. For hundreds of years, the people's devotion to Asclepius seemed to indicate the success of the treatment, their faith and, of course, their need for a solution. The procedures recommended were strictly followed, for disease was a constant threat and bodily well-being an important concern.¹⁹

According to legend, Asclepius was a mortal man, a hero-physician who was later idolized as a god. Family members including his daughters assisted in the practice of medicine. Hygeia was the goddess of health; her name came to represent prevention of disease. Another daughter, perhaps less well known, was Panacea, whose name in modern usage means cure-all. From these origins, ancient medicine developed more fully under Hippocrates from Cos and Galen from Pergamum.

Although we no longer sacrifice a cock to Asclepius or even have an English word rooted in his name, hygiene and panacea are part of our vocabulary. We are also familiar with a medical symbol, the caduceus, picturing serpents entwined about a staff.²⁰ This symbol stands even today on the Asclepieion at Pergamum. The serpent in shedding its skin renews itself and so for the ancient Greeks this explained its relationship to healing. Symbolically the sick person was casting away his illness.

We, of course, support the belief that physical activity is important to our health and well-being, perhaps even a panacea for our ills. Bowl games and televised professional sport may have therapeutic effects similar to those experienced by patients attending festivals at Epidauros and Pergamum. In modern times miraculous cures have enabled some to gain athletic prominence and given meaning to the story of Hagestratus. A most intriguing parallel to the twentieth century was suggested by Meier. He believes that curative sleep, an essential feature in Asclepieion, is the ancient prototype of modern psychotherapy.²¹ He points out that the word 'clinic' is derived from a Greek word meaning couch. Patients in the Asclepieion lay on a couch in the abaton with the intent of dreaming about the treatment which would cure them.²² It would seem to this author that the magnificent sanctuaries of the ancient world compare more markedly with the health spas, resorts, and sanitariums of today's world as they emphasize rehabilitation through exercise, recreation, diet, counseling, and sleep.

Notes

1. From Pindar's Third Pythian Ode for Hieron of Syracuse, 11.47-53. The translation used is by Geoffrey S. Conway, *The Odes of Pindar* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1972), p. 99. Pindar, deeply interested in religion and athletics, provides us with excellent material. Conway's book includes a chronological chart of winners and events derived from Pindar.
2. Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), Vol. I, p. 235.
3. Several sources were used to give authenticity to this story. For background information, see Anthony Andrewes, *The Greeks* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967); Robert Flaceliere, *Daily Life in Greece at the Time of Pericles* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965), Trans. by Peter Green; and George Gask, *Essays in the History of Medicine* (London: Butterworth and Co. Publishers, 1950). For a somewhat farcical description of the ritual, see Aristophanes, *The Plutus*.

4. Carl A. Meier,

