

Epidauros: A Holy Shrine in Greece

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Epidauros (in Greek, Epidavros) is an old center of cult, cure and healing located in the northeast Peloponnesian peninsula. Peloponnesus is a section of mainland Greece, and is connected to the mainland by the Isthmus of Corinth, about ten miles wide. Peloponnesus is 8,350 square miles, about the size of Massachusetts, with a population of over a million. For about 2400 years, from 431 B.C. to 404 B.C., two great Greek nations, the Spartans (or Peloponnesus) and the Athenians (on the mainland) fought each other for territory and domination. The Peloponnesian War was won by the Spartans. If you imagine this peninsula as a hand, Epidauros is almost at the lateral margin of the thumb, located on the southern coast of the Aronic Gulf, approximately 90 km southwest of Piraeus and Athens. It was the place of worship of the ancient healing god Aesculapius, who let healing happen and worked in the Aesculapion, a huge ancient sanatorium. Due to the untiring lifework of the Greek archeologists Kavvadias and Papdimitrou as well as others, a large number of clearly arranged ruins have been uncovered since 1881. They are reminiscent of other shrines whose main buildings arose between the 4th and 3rd century B.C. These discoveries allow healing arts practitioners to draw important conclusions about the advanced holistic, therapeutic and psychosomatic procedures being used in these times.

The priest-physicians played on a large therapeutic piano with several octaves. The following buildings surrounded the main buildings: the Aesculapian temple with its golden ivory illustration of the god; the round temple called Tholos; the huge incubation sleep hall called the Abaton or Enkoimeterion; the guest building called Katageion; and the very well conserved open theater in which dramas and tragedies are still presented. The beauty and dignity of the theater was praised by the writer and poet Pausanias in the 2nd century A.D. Votive inscriptions chiseled into upright slabs, called "steles," document cures occurring mainly during the incubation sleep. Two marble slabs in the Aesculapian of Epidauros with the description of 43 cases of cures were uncovered dating to the second half of the 4th century B.C. These reports, as well as consecrations of pictures about the healed body parts correspond to the customs of Christian pilgrimages. If taken seriously, the cures of

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paralyzed, lame and blind people confound the science of today.

Today's village of Old Epidauros is situated on the east coast of Peloponnesus between pine woods and a fertile plane with tropical fruits and horticulture. It is surrounded by high mountains giving way only via narrow passages to Argos and Corinth. The climate is hot and humid. The old sea port was a pivot in the Saromic Gulf located exactly opposite to Aigma, Kyra and Angistri. An ancient road connected the metropolis with the Aesculapian shrine. This road led right through the pine woods, the wild olive trees, paralleled the new street Isthomos-Asklepieion and ended with the large Propylaea, a huge columned hall in the north of the holy uncovered area. This Propylaea, with six outer Ionic and six inner Corinthian marble columns in a double row, stands like a triumphed gate, and in front of this big building is an inscription that reads: pure should be everyone who enters the incense fragrant temple-pure, meaning to cherish sacred intentions and thoughts only. Or, according to another translation: pureness is to have a pious mind

Not only psychic harmony and complete purification was the intention. If one enters the shrine, the feeling is instantly that one is in a sacred, spiritual space. Man should forget about his worries and troubles, purify spiritually and keep in mind divine and beautiful thoughts only. An immortal and completely harmonic life is ailing here. Death and birth are rejected from this holy place in a strange way. Life is without beginning, without an end. The god who was worshiped had several attributes. He was called "soter" meaning rescuer, "evergetis" meaning charioteer, "epikoos" meaning the listener, "filolaos" meaning the friend of the folks, "efkolos" meaning the accessible, "philanthropatos" meaning highest friend of human beings (related to other Greek gods), "cpikouros" meaning the helping god who loved human beings, helped them in times of disharmony and would have freed them even from death if Zeus would not have intervened with his lightning to restore the proper order.

John Pierrakos, in the first issue of *Energy & Consciousness*, summarized the basic treatment procedure for the pilgrim patients who went to Epidauros. "After a patient marched for several miles, he would bathe in a Castillian spring and then sleep for a hundred days in a private room in a special temple. During this period he asked the gods for guidance through dreams. The priest-physicians would interpret the dreams and prescribe the particular procedure the dream indicated. This work utilized dimensions of the emotional, medical and spiritual. Next to the temple was a theatre seating 20,000 people, where comedies and tragedies were performed. People would cry' and beat drums and have

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cathartic dreams.”

According to Otto L. Bettmann in “A Pictorial History of Medicine”:

The priest-physicians tried to induce dreams in which Aesculapius would reveal the cure to the patient. A solemn pageant appeared before the drowsy eyes of the sufferers. To make sure they saw Aesculapius, a tall priest donned the god’s mask. Just before dawn, he made the rounds of the dormitories, accompanied by tiptoing assistants. Ventriloquism may have been used to impress the patients with revelations coming from nowhere.

There is no conclusive evidence that hypnotism was employed. Oddly enough, substitute dreamers were allowed to appear in the temple to take the place of patients who were unable to appear themselves. One Laconian woman, Arata, suffered from dropsy. She sent her mother to the sanctuary to receive the god’s message. As the rites were performed, her mother had a vision: Aesculapius cut off her daughter’s head, let the water drain from the neck, then replaced the head. When the mother returned, Arata was cured.

These incubation ceremonies were made more mysterious by the use of holy snakes. With the aid of heat and soft flute music, tame reptiles were coaxed to lick the patients’ wounds, from ulcerated toes to swollen eyes (dogs were trained to do the same). To help relations between reptiles and patients, *popona*, a kind of snake biscuit was placed on sale. Patients bought it and fed it to the serpents.

Such emotionally-charged ceremonies were abetted by rational therapy. Patients were bathed, massaged and treated with soothing ointments. Surgery was sometimes attempted. And above all, fresh air and recreational activities helped to insure some kind of relief. The patient could at least leave the establishment refreshed and strengthened in his faith. In light of modern psychotherapy, the Aesculapion compares favorably with the sanitarium or rest home. Originally, the temples were sustained by gifts from the pilgrims. When the establishments expanded, outright fees were necessary. The priest could “revoke the cure” if the pilgrims tried to avoid payment. One masked “Aesculapius” is reported to have forgotten himself by shouting at his patient: ‘Thou art healed, now pay the fee.’ Bills were based on ability to pay. A grateful boy, for instance, offered ten dice to the gods for his cure, while Phalysius of Naupactus gave 2,000 gold coins (about \$10,000) for the restoration of his sight. Time payments, stretched over a year, were arranged

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for the father of a boy cured of dumbness. Other pilgrims paid their way with previous metal replicas of their restored organs or limbs. Such gifts give us a faint idea of the anatomical knowledge of the period. Their receipt was proudly and faithfully recorded by the superintending priest.

The votive offerings found in the temple ruins at Epidaurns and Athens are replete with dramatic case histories in which the patients described their cures in great detail. Their testimonials were placed in the entrance hall to impress the newly arrived sufferers with the temple's successful record. Most of these histories were medical fairy tales, but they served as part of the therapy. The priests reading them to the illiterate crowds exaggerated each kernel of truth to catch the credulous and win over the doubters.

The Aesculapian cult sprang up all over the Hellenic and, later on, the Roman world very quickly. It has survived the Olympic gods and all religions of antiquity. After Christianity made its way through the Occident, the Aesculapian cults stayed alive for many centuries. The biographer of the neoplatonic philosopher Proklos (485 AD.) mentioned that the shrine of the rescuer remained unattackable.

Aesculapius is believed to have been born in 1260 B.C. in Thessaly, where later on Hippocrates is believed to have died in 370 B.C. The oldest legend describes Aesculapius' birth as a cesarean section. While Thessalonian King Phleges made war on Peloponnesus, his daughter Koronis (who was pregnant with Aesculapius by Apollo) began an intimate relationship with Ischys. Apollo, informed of the relationship by his white raven, became enraged and turned the white raven black and sent his sister Artemis to hunt for Koronis. Artemis shot an arrow into Koronis as she rested at Sea Boibias near her Thessalonian. whereupon Hermes snatched Aesculapius from the womb of the unfaithful earthly mistress and carried him to the richly vegetated, loving Thessalonian mountain Pelion-home to Chiron the Centaur. The immortal Chiron educated heroes and demigods like Hercules, Jason, Amphiaraos, the Dioscuri. Peleus and his famous son Achilles. He was an excellent musician and physician, well versed in herbal medicines and Aesculapius became his most renowned student.

In Homeric days, Aesculapius, an excellent physician, was a mere mortal. His rise to godhood occurred somewhere between the Trojan War and the 9th century B.C.. according to mythology Aesculapius soon surpassed his teacher as a healing practitioner and became so successful that Zeus had to smite him with a thunderbolt so that the gods could

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retain their power over life and death.

The question of who came first, Aesculapius or the serpent, has been settled in favor of the serpent. Reptiles have been considered synonymous with wisdom since time immemorial. The snake, in particular, coming out of the ground (which holds many curative substances) was believed to possess secret healing powers. Consequently, the ancient Greeks ate snake meat to acquire proficiency in the healing arts and even immortality.

The Aesculapian staff has often been confused with the caduceus used by Hermes to open doors between gods and men. But the Aesculapian staff entwined by one snake is regarded by classicists as the true symbol of the medical profession. Aesculapius, who replaced Apollo as the preferred god for health and medical concerns, practiced a holistic and powerful spiritual treatment that was preferred and continued by Jesus.

The Iliad describes three important aspects in Aesculapius' treatment. He healed through words, through medicinal herbs, and through the knife. These three aspects correlate to today's psychotherapy, drug treatment and surgery.

Many Greek regions, towns and cities such as Trikki in Thessaly, Epidauros in Argolia, Messinia and Arcadia, claim to be the birthplace of Aesculapius. According to the oldest tradition, he was born in Trikki, where stands the oldest holy shrine. Later on the Aesculapion in Epidauros became the most famous one. According to the Epidauric legend Koronis feared her father and so gave birth to Aesculapius and hid him on the mountain Tittion where a goat nursed him and a shepherd's dog guarded over him day and night. One day the shepherd Aristenas came along searching for his animals. He saw the child and wanted to touch him. As he approached, he saw a beam of light coming out of the child's entire being. He felt the divine nature of the child and did not disturb him. Then he announced over land and sea that a god child was born who could heal all diseases and revive the dead.

From this time on, the goat, the dog and the snake of Apollon were considered the holy animals of Aesculapius. His holy shrine was built right between the mountains Tirrhion (the goat) and Kynortio (the dog). Today it is hard to distinguish between Aesculapius the god and the human being. Maybe the outstanding physician is the real Aesculapius.

The priest-physicians of Aesculapius' day knew the supernatural power of divine spirit and maintained this knowledge by secret tradition. If we dare to judge their successes, documented via inscriptions in stone

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slabs, we must acknowledge that they were highly spiritual thinkers. The main reason for their success was that they knew about, acknowledged and felt the spiritual laws ailing the entire cosmos and all entities living within it.

Imagine the magnificence of this holy Aesculapian shrine uncovered by Kawadias 1800 years after attacks, earthquakes and catastrophes. We can see backward into the ancient masterpieces on all levels to learn for today and for tomorrow .

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