



Calloway Scott // In an earlier post, I sketched the rise and characteristic features of Hippocratic medicine in the 5th century BCE. There I was interested in the peculiar forms of technical authority the Hippocratic practitioner developed over the bodies of his patients. I noted that the creation of such technical authority created a specific set of ethical parameters and imperatives for the care of the self. That is, once one is made aware of the causes of disease and the precautions that can be taken to avoid it, illness becomes a blameworthy matter, a failure to take proper care. So too, we saw that Hippocratic diagnostic expertise was rooted in objectification of the patient's body as a semiological canvas, diminishing the patient's own role in narrating her experience or the subjective significance of pain, illness, or disability. Here, I want to turn to an arm of medical care which emerged at precisely the same time as technical medicine and which offered a different approach to these experiences: the miraculous dream-cures performed by the god Asklepios in his healing sanctuaries across the Greek world.

From the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE, Asklepios' healing cults had spread to some 200 Greek cities, an unparalleled religious and medical phenomenon in antiquity. The primary medium of Asklepios' medical interventions were dreams. After a suppliant arrived at the god's sanctuary and undertook a series of prescribed ritual preparations (purifications, prayers, and sacrifice), she bedded down in the *abaton* (the "untreadable" place). There the god would appear to the suppliant

in a dream and generally heal him or her directly by placing his hands on a wound or purging a *materia peccans*. In some instances, the god indicated a dietary or pharmacological recipe, much like a “typical physician.”

These cures and their enduring popularity are known from a variety of literary sources, from Classical Aristophanic comedy to the Imperial Greek author Aelius Aristides, whose *Sacred Tales* offer an autobiographical account of the dreams and cures he received from Asklepios over decades. But the documents I find most revealing of the cult’s popularity—particularly in their chronological and cultural relation to Hippocratic medicine—are not of this “literary” sort at all. Rather, they are large slabs of stone (*stelai*) found in the god’s first and most important sanctuary at Epidauros, upon which have been inscribed third-person narrative accounts of miraculous cures performed by the god there.

These healing narratives, known as the *iamata* (“Cures”), date to sometime in the 4th century BCE, although it’s likely that stories they contain are elaborations of folk-lore that was considerably older. While we possess four of these *stelai*, and ancient authorities suggest there were still more in the sanctuary, only the majority of the first two and bit of the third are still legible. But in these we read a variety of complaints, ranging from general complaints like headaches, parasites, and wounds to disabilities like blindness, crippled limbs, and infertility. While it is now clear that these narratives do not record the actual patient “experiences” of historical individuals within healing sanctuaries, they are invaluable for reconstructing the ritual *ideal*. Take, for instance, the very first narrative about a miraculous birth:

Kleo was pregnant for 5 years. After the fifth year of pregnancy, she came as a suppliant to the god and slept in the *abaton*. As soon as she had left and was outside the sanctuary, she gave birth to a son who, as soon as he was born, washed himself at the fountain and walked about with his mother. After this success, she inscribed upon an offering: “The wonder is not the size of the offering, but the act of the god: Kleo bore a burden in her stomach for five years, until she slept here and the god made her well.

There is much one could say about this as an initial story: it is clearly advertorial in celebrating the healing powers of the god to potential “clients” as well as instructive regarding proper ritual praxis. Moreover, by detailing how Kleo keeps her child safe in the womb for five years, the tale realistically touches on what must have been an acute anxiety in the ancient world, where infant and maternal mortality rates were extremely high. This narrative extols the god and creates hope in the suppliant that she too will meet success and leave healthy.

But there is still more to the *iamata*, particularly when viewed as a *corpus*. As I have argued elsewhere, there is an essential *social* element to these stories. More than merely documenting the physical recovery of individuals, these tales acknowledge the marginalizing effects of illness and emphasize healing as a process of social re-integration or a changing of social status. This is particularly clear in a story in which a man incubates in order to have tattoos—a mark of slavery in the Greco-Roman world—removed from his face. Indeed, healing shrines were popular sites for

the manumission of slaves well into later antiquity. “S/he left the sanctuary healthy” thus registers more than a set of physiological facts, but regards health as socio-somatic state.

Equally, the *iamata* reflexively feature the suppliant as active readers and viewers of these narratives themselves. This gestures beyond their preparatory function in terms of “priming” the expectations of readers. Rather, they encourage the suppliant to *interpret* her body and bodily experiences against those of community of sufferers represented within the text. That is, in contrast with the Hippocratic construction of the sick body as an object of mastery, the *iamata* invite forms of inter-subjective interpretation, in which even the imagined presence of another, suffering subject offers scale and meaning to embodied experience. In the next installment of “Bodies in Stone” I’ll continue to cache out the value of inter-subjectivity for thinking about the ritual and visual regimes of healing cult. For now, though, I simply want to stress that, as today, in antiquity different medical approaches promoted and suppressed different forms of interpretive agency, knowledge of the self, and subjective expression.

Works

Holmes, B. 2010. *Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Classical Greece*. Princeton.

Scott, C. 2018. “Gender in the Temple: Female Ailments in the Epidaurian Miracle Cures,” *Classical Antiquity* 37(2): 321-50.

Image: *Archinos Relief*. c. 350 BCE. National Museum, Athens, Greece. The foreground depicts a dream in which the healing hero Amphiaraos treats a patient while the background depicts the cure as being effected by a sacred serpent.