

asclepieion

A sacred healing centre

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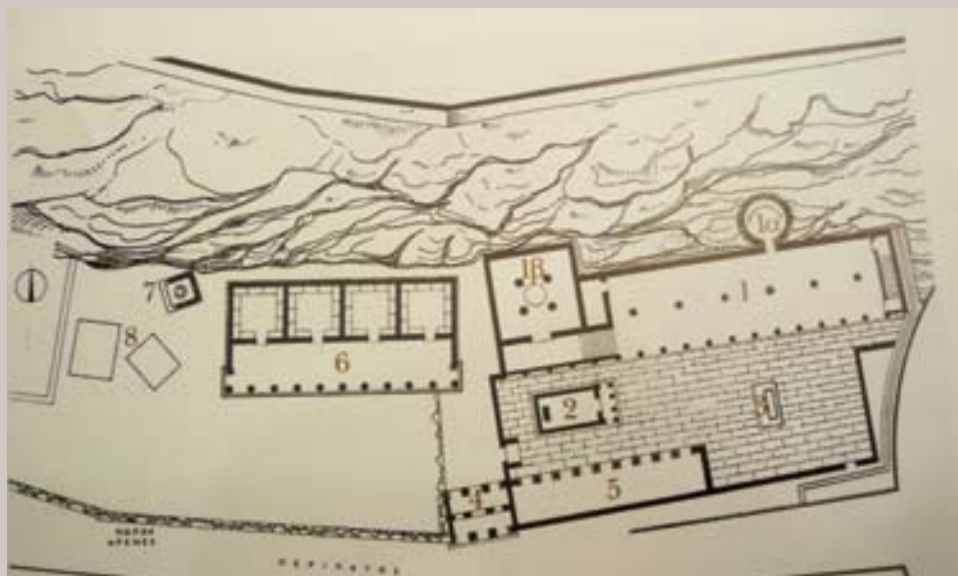


Fig. 1:
Restoration plan of the Asclepieion of Athens (1st c. AD), J.Travlos, 1971. *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens*, London.



Fig. 2
NMA 1332. Votive relief depicting Asclepios, Demeter and Kore (Persephone), who receive worshippers. Second half of the 4th c. BC



Fig. 3
NMA 1378. Base of a votive offering with a relief depicting surgical instruments and suction cups (sikyies). 320 BC



Fig. 4
NMA 15244. Part of a female face, votive offering by Praxias in the sanctuary of Asclepios. Second half of the 4th c. BC

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Asclepios, a mortal hero and son of Apollo, who had powers of healing, is known from as early on as Homer's writings. His status was elevated to that of divine healer in the 5th century BC, at a time when medicine was being developed and practised by professional doctors who regarded Asclepios as their patron. His earliest sanctuary is thought to have been situated at Trikke, in Thessaly. However, the Asclepieion at Epidaurus was his most important cult centre with pan-Hellenic influence; it certainly played a definitive role in the spread of his worship throughout the Hellenic world.

The cult of Asclepios came to Attica from Epidaurus. Having first reached Piraeus, a private initiative by Telemachos of Archanes transferred the cult to the southern slope of the Acropolis in 420/19 BC (**Fig. 1**). The establishment of the new god must have been facilitated by the priests of Eleusinian Demeter. According to local tradition, the god was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries (**Fig. 2**) and he then resided in the temple of Demeter within the city while his urban sanctuary was being built.

Worshippers went to the sanctuaries of Asclepios to be healed, believing that his divine powers were able to heal even the most deadly diseases. Having been given special herbs to make them fall asleep, the god would appear in their dreams and either reveal the cure or heal them himself. In many cases, his sacred animals – snakes and dogs – would also lick the patients as part of the healing process. In reality, the healing centres had personnel with medical knowledge who carried out the healing process with herbs or concoctions, or performed operations. The presence of water in the sanctuary was vital during the initial cleansing of the patients. An initial offering for these divine services was compulsory, normally in the form of a cockerel or sweets. Once cured, followers would thank the god by dedicating representations of him or his family, ritual vessels, jewellery, coins, as well as replicas of human body parts (**Fig. 4**). The Athenian Asclepieion stands out for preserving a wealth of information about these offerings and more generally about this type of

sanctuary. Priests kept annual inventories of the valuable dedications and, in some cases, recorded their locations in the sanctuary, thus providing a rare testimony of the interior layout of the ancient temple.

Several state celebrations in honour of Asclepios were also held in Athens, such as the Epidauria, the Asclepieia and perhaps the Heroa. These involved sacrifices, processions, hymns and nocturnal rituals. Professional doctors would offer dedications (**Fig. 3**) and sacrifices to their patron twice a year, on behalf of themselves and all those they had healed. It appears that there was no conflict between the healing that took place by professionals outside the sanctuary and that which took place within. Frequently, having failed to recover from a serious disease or disability by means of human intervention, patients would place their last hopes in the hands of the god.

The sanctuary of Asclepios in Athens remained active and popular for many centuries. However, at the end of the 5th century AD, the new religion used it for the worship of its own healing saints.

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