

Inquiry into Testimony of Dream Healing
from the Asclepeion at Epidaurus

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If testimonies of healing by the god Asclepius are accepted as personal testimony of experience, not as falsehood or myth, then the power of dreaming and perhaps deity is greater than normally acknowledged. For centuries in ancient Greece and Rome, suffering people would visit temples of Asclepius to have a dream that would provide miraculous healing. Their stories would occasionally be written down or inscribed in the temples and we can read them today. If we accept them as stories of personal experience, then we must accept the possibility that either a spiritual and occasionally physical entity visited healed them or, else, their own dreams invoked miraculous healing. Perhaps both possibilities are the case. Regardless, they are strong testimonies to the power of dream.

It isn't difficult to accept stories of these types as personal testimony without insisting that they are mythic or deceitful. Both Galen and Hippocrates relate third party testimonies of healing by the god. In fact, Galen refers to his own healing by Asclepius of a deadly abscess (as cited by Edelstein & Edelstein, 1998, p. 263). Considering that people sought healing at the Asclepeion at Epidaurus from 3rd-4th century BC' up to nearly 4th century AD, one can not doubt that the supplicants derived some benefit (Epidaurus, 2012).

I will use this paper as an opportunity to explore the nature of healing attributed to Asclepius. I hope that my exploration will reveal something about the power of dreams to heal. Although there are hundreds of various testimonies, I will focus on a collection of 43 inscriptions from the temple at Epidaurus, which are from the second half of the fourth century BC. This collection is ideal for me because these inscriptions were used to teach the supplicants about the power of the Asclepeion. For example, "While looking at the tablets in the temple he expressed incredulity regarding the cures and scoffed at the inscriptions. But in his sleep he saw a vision..." (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 230).

I hope that by looking at the collection as a whole, I'll be able to understand the nature of the healing dream. However, I acknowledge that such a collection would not include stories of failure. Perhaps only one of hundreds are miraculously healed such that the healed person's story is inscribed and the remainder are ignored. This could well be the case, so I will only make observations rather than conclusions.

There are three phases to my inquiry. First, I performed rudimentary content analysis. I identified main themes or categories and counted their occurrence. For example, I count that 79% of the healing occurred within the temple, 12% without, and 9% unknown. My findings are summarized in Table 1. Second, I observe the main patterns of healing. For example, adult men are healed by blindness by dreaming of Asclepius performing eye surgery and applying a drug. Third, I observe the unique cases. For example, when Asclepius mends a broken goblet for a distressed servant, it suggests that the emotional distress invokes the mending of a physical body rather than the mere presence of sickness or wounds (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 232).

Unfortunately, some of the collection was too damaged to provide information (as cited by Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 229). This reinforces the notion that my exploration is simply observation. While I see that 88% of healings occurred with adults, it could be possible that the damaged inscriptions only described healing children, such that my observations were biased toward the surviving testimonies.

I counted along several dimensions of each testimony. There are descriptions of each dimension and factor within Table 1. Nearly every one of the testimonies expressed some information for each dimension, which is why I choose to observe them. The table is not exhaustive because it is

outside of my scope. I neglect some information, such as the hometown of the supplicant, whether Asclepius personally address the supplicant or directly heals them, etc.

There seems to be several phases of experience, which I will now describe and then examine. First, a supplicant feels distress about an illness or condition. The condition may be a physical ailment, a fertility issue, or merely something that causes distress. Then, they may visit the temple or the healing may spontaneously occur. If they visit the temple, they may read inscriptions about previous healings or view images of Asclepius. Preliminary sacrifices are mentioned once (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 230), but they're referred to as the "unusual rites," suggesting that they take place even if not mentioned.

The supplicant may sleep within the temple, although it is not uncommon for the healing to take place before sleep occurs. Once asleep, a dream or vision is frequently reported, although occasionally it is not mentioned at all. The supplicant has an encounter with a healing entity, generally Asclepius, an animal, or a handsome male.

A healing or "making sound" always occurs. The encounter with the healing entity generally involves one or more modes of interactions. These include surgery, instructions, physical contact, application of a drug, and verbal communication. A small percent of reports don't mention any mode of interaction and simply report that a healing occurred. Some report that a physical manifestation occurred, such as waking up with a surgically extracted arrowhead in hand or blood from the dream surgery surrounding the supplicant.

Finally, the supplicant leaves the temple and occasionally dedicates a thank offering. While it is mentioned only 26% of the time, I assume it occurs more often. One inscription acts as a cautionary

tale, “His blindness was cured by Asclepius. But since afterwards he did not bring the thank-offerings, the god made him blind again... (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 234)”

It is clear that the experience of distress or suffering is essential to the ritual. While the physical body is the object of healing in 95% of the testimonies, it is not essential to the ritual. There is the story of a lost boy and his father, “Thereafter his father, since he did not find him anywhere on his search, came to Asclepius and slept in the Abaton... the god lead him to a certain place and showed him that there was his son. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 234)” Likewise, the suffering does not need to be physical pain. It could be an issue of fertility as in 14% of cases. It could be related to appearance, as in 7% of cases, for example, “He had no hair on his head, but an abundant growth on his chin. He was ashamed because he was laughed at by others. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 233)”

The case of the goblet speaks on this matter. A porter fell and broke a goblet he carried and “he was in great distress”. A passer-by said, “Foolish fellow, why do you put the goblet together in vain? For this one not even Asclepius of Epidaurus could put to right again.(Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 232)” However, when the boy arrived at the temple, the goblet was miraculously whole. It is interesting to note that Asclepius seems to respond to incredulity, as it is mentioned in four cases and the god addresses it directly in two. This reports clearly indicates the Asclepius is concerned with the experience of suffering and would be willing to provide evidence that he may alleviate it.

The role of the temple is unclear. Either the healing occurs outside of the temple or it is not mentioned at all in 20% of the testimonies, although it may be argued that its presence is implied by the fact it houses the inscriptions. In any case, it appears to have more power than merely housing relics and priests and providing a sleeping place for the supplicants. Both cases of prolonged pregnancy

involve birth immediately after the mother leaves the sacred grounds (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 229).

Two healings occurred by snakes that left the temple. Both suggest that the snake acts a vehicle for Asclepius's power, enabling him to travel outside of the temple walls. In one case, the priests take a supplicant outside the walls. As soon as he falls asleep, a snake comes from the temple and cures him. When he awakes, he reports that he dreamed a beautiful youth applied a drug to his toe. In fact, it almost seems as if the purpose of this is to show that Asclepius heals through the snake and that the dream state is necessary to connect with Asclepius (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 233).

Looking at it another way, one could say that Asclepius is a psychical entity and that he uses either the physicality of the snake or temple as a body. Just as we assume various bodies in the dreamworld from the basis of our sleeping physical body, so too, perhaps, Asclepius assumes various physical bodies from the basis of his enduring psychical body. If I would begin experiments to revive this form of dream healing, I would begin by consecrating a physical body of some form for this use.

It seems as if different temples attract or magnetize his presence more than others. For example, a woman visits the temple at Troezen, but only dreams that “the sons of the god, while he was not present but away in Epidaurus. Cut off her head, but, being unable to put it back again, they sent a messenger to Asclepius asking him to come. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 234)” The testimony suggests that his presence finds a home in Epidaurus, but can be called in. Going further, it suggests that the same entity appears in different dreams. Just as we have one physical body, but many spiritual and psychical manifestations, so too, perhaps, Asclepius has one spiritual body, but many physical manifestations.

The majority of healings take place while the supplicant is asleep. However, eight testimonies

or 20% report the healings take place while the supplicant is wide awake. All of those but three involve healing by an animal. For example, “While wide-awake he had his eyes cured by one of the dogs in the Temple.(Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 233)” If the testimony of the supplicant who dreams of a youth applying a drug while others physical observe contact with a snake is considered to be a stereotypical, then we can assume that god is acting through these animals in an equivalent way to appearance in dream.

Asclepius, however, does not seem limited to manifestation through dream or animal. In one report, a woman “saw no distinct dream.” On her way home, “a man of fine appearance seemed to come upon her.” He then performs what seems to be physical surgery. Afterwards, “Asclepius revealed to her his presence and enjoined her to send thank-offerings. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 234)”

I have identified six modes of healing. However, there is no clear majority and it does not seem to matter how he heals. Surgery is most popular, being mentioned in 26% of cases. In 9% of cases, Asclepius's mere appearance is sufficient for healing. It is tempting to say that that the encounter with Asclepius and healing is an objective occurrence, but the experience of the supplicant could be subjective.

Perhaps the experience of healing is much like the experience of integrating the sound of an alarm clock into a dream. It is a physical and objective event, but its manifestation in the dream is an entirely subjective experience. However, there are similarities between experience, such as in the case of blindness, Asclepius frequently applies a drug to the eyeball. It may be fruitful to examine the variety of dream experiences for healings of one type of ailment only.

The reports of physical manifestations suggest that the experiences within the dream are not

subjective, like the alarm clock. Rather, it would be as if by dreaming of a repetitive sound, the alarm clock suddenly went off. There are four reports or 9% of testimonies that mention a physical manifestation beyond healing. For example, “As he was sleeping in the Temple the god extracted the spearhead and gave it to him into his hands. When day came Euhippus departed cured, and he held the spearhead in his hands. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 232)” The dream experience of surgery yielded the physical extraction an embedded spearhead.

In summary, if I were to accept the testimony of the Epidaurus inscriptions as straightforward reports of experience, I could make several observations of the Asclepius and the world. First, dreams and spiritual experiences may cause physical events. Second, there may be a class of being whose physical and psychical manifestations are inversely analogous to our modes of manifestation. When Asclepius visits, it seems as if the cause of events has its foundation in the dream world rather than in physical world.

Table 1

<i>Demographic of Supplicant</i>	Sum	Ratio
Adult: Not mentioned as a child	38	0.88
Child: Explicitly referred as a child	5	0.12
Male	32	0.74
Female	11	0.26

<i>Object of Healing</i>	Sum	Ratio
Blindness: Either by physical injury or other means	8	0.19
Fertility: Including long pregnancy and desire for pregnancy	6	0.14
Paralysis	3	0.07
Wound: Puncture wound, generally from war, or other wound	3	0.07
Appearance: Baldness or blemish, causing emotional distress	3	0.07
Stone	2	0.05
Parasite: Worms or tapeworm	2	0.05
Other: Headache, growth, abscess, lost child, and broken goblet	5	0.12

<i>Location of Healing</i>	Sum	Ratio
In temple: Healing is said to occur within the temple	34	0.79
Not in temple: Occurs outside of temple	5	0.12
Unknown: No location is mentioned	4	0.09

<i>State of Supplicant During Healing</i>	Sum	Ratio
Sleeping: Healing occurs in sleep	34	0.79
Not sleeping: Healing occurs while supplicant is awake	8	0.19
Unknown: Sleep is not mentioned	1	0.02

<i>Mode of Healing</i>	Sum	Ratio
Surgery: Healing involves surgery, i.e., cutting open the body	11	0.26
Instructions: Healing involves instructions	10	0.23

Physical manifestations: Dream has a physical manifestation	8	0.19
Physical Contact: Healing involves direct physical contact beyond surgery	8	0.19
Drug: Healing involves application of a drug	6	0.14
Discourse: Healing involves verbal interaction with Asclepius	5	0.12
Sudden: No mode of healing was mentioned	4	0.09

<i>Appearance of Asclepius</i>	Sum	Ratio
Asclepius appears: Asclepius is said to appear	32	0.74
Does not appear: His appearance is not mentioned	8	0.19
Animals: A snake, dog, or horse appears	8	0.19
Handsome male: A handsome male is involved in healing	4	0.09

<i>Theme of Testimony</i>	Sum	Ratio
Healing: A miraculous healing occurred	38	0.88
Fertility: Either a woman gave birth or became pregnant	6	0.14
Cautionary: Testimony show repercussions of disrespecting healing ritual	4	0.09

References

Edelstein, E., & Edelstein, L. (1998). *Asclepius: Collection and interpretation of the testimonies*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press.

Epidaurus. (2012). Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epidaurus>