Chapter 1

Mobility and Connectivity in the Cult of Asclepius

While the cult of Asclepius originated in Greece, it was introduced to Rome in 293 BC by order of the Sibylline Books.¹ The cult flourished in the Classical and Hellenistic eras and worship of the god was spread across the Mediterranean. However, a secondary dissemination took place during the Roman Empire when the cult spread into the Roman provinces through, among others, the army. As the cult came into contact with more peoples and regions, worship of the god was changed, altered, and intensified. This was because the advent of the Roman Empire was a momentous event which greatly influenced all aspects of Roman society, among which its religious world. A cult could be taken over by Rome and, as Rome extended its empire, worship of a god could be disseminated along with this provincial expansion. Vital for this cultic diffusion was the improved infrastructure which was central to the Empire.² The increased levels of mobility and connectivity which occurred at this time facilitated cultic transferral as well as the creation, or intensification, of a global cult. However, at the same time, cults also became more regional as a result of coming into contact with a global cult, a phenomenon which will be explored in this work. As local people encountered more cultic options, they could pick which were the most suitable for their needs and purposes. New cultic elements were introduced as a result of this expansion and other aspects, which were perhaps only relevant to a certain area, were discarded; supplicants determined which parts of the cult were relevant to their needs and which were extraneous. Thus, each sanctuary could show distinct rites which were specific to that one locality alone.

Change was highly important for the continued existence of any cult and this should be seen as a sign of vigour and not of decline.³ For a cult to attract worshippers there had to be a reason or a need for people to seek help from a god. While certain deities may have been imported in order to deal with momentous events which threatened the Roman state, for example Asclepius and Apollo were introduced to the city as the result of plagues, it was the day-to-day interactions which people had with a cult, shown, among others, in dedications, which showed its importance. As Bendlin puts it, the gods can only be

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¹ Livy Per. 11.
fully appreciated through the analysis of private, mundane, religious actions. If people did not have a need for a god, then the cult would not penetrate an area (see Chapter 2) or a cult would dwindle in importance and eventually cease to exist. In order to suit the needs of its worshippers, a cult had to adapt with the world around it. In an expanded Roman world, this would have meant incorporating elements and gods from newly conquered regions and adapting worship in order to reflect the newly formed institutions of the empire, namely the emperor, imperial courtiers, and the army.

This work aims to examine the impact of Rome on the cult of Asclepius and how it adapted and changed under the Roman Empire. The Roman Imperial era has often been overlooked by Asclepieian scholars who prefer to focus on the Classical Greek cult (see below). However, Asclepieian worship became more multifaceted over time and it is necessary also to understand the history of the cult during the Imperial period in order to be able to comprehend fully the nature of the cult throughout antiquity. It will be examined how Asclepieian identities were formed by looking at the cult in the provinces, where the god was worshipped by various groups of people or individuals, and by seeing how the cult was altered by contact with the Empire in these regions. Only when this is clear will the interconnectedness between these cults become visible. In order to show whether or not Rome had an impact on the cult, it is necessary to examine the global and regional aspects of the cult. The creation of a global cult would have been more possible than before as a result of increased mobility in this period and this movement of people would have also facilitated transference and dissemination of the cult. Mobility, connectivity, and movement will be key themes for this work as the factors for cultic change analysed here relied on mobility to reach other areas. This will be shown predominantly via travelling emperors and by the movements of the army. Both of these influenced the cult in the areas they reached but in different ways. Emperors visited and altered existing sanctuaries whereas the army brought the god with them and facilitated the creation of new cult places.

Thus, a study of the impact of the Roman Empire on religion in the ancient world will be presented in this work via the case-study of Asclepius, filling in the gap in current scholarship. It does so by isolating a number of factors by which the Empire changed the cult, namely emperors, courtiers, the army, and cross-provincial mobility and movements. The Empire has been chosen as the time period for this study as at this time many of the factors which influenced

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4 See Chapter 2 for the importation of Asclepius into Rome; Bendlin (2000) 119.