CHAPTER 2

Asclepius before the Roman Imperial Period

Introduction: The Pre-Imperial Cult

The cult of Asclepius is believed to have originated in either Tricca in Thessaly or in Epidaurus at some time during the 5th century BC. Worship of the god continued and flourished throughout antiquity; by the end of the 4th century AD cults of Asclepius had been disseminated all over the ancient Graeco-Roman world. The god was known in different guises before the 5th century BC and the physician Asclepius is mentioned a number of times in Homer.1 Myth relates that Apollo, who was also worshipped as a healing deity, was believed to be Asclepius’ father.2 In many locations, such as Corinth, the cult of Asclepius was introduced to a sanctuary previously dedicated to Apollo. Over time, Asclepius’ worship eclipsed that of his father as a healing god and worship of Apollo became secondary to that of Asclepius, something which happened, for example, at Epidaurus.3 At some point the Delphic oracle ratified the cult of Asclepius, which had numerous important effects on the cult such as recommending the founding of a number of Asclepieia; legitimising him as the son of Apollo and Coronis; confirming Epidaurus as the god's birth-place; and also sanctioning his position as a healer.4 This approval mattered greatly for the spread of the cult, with sanctuaries being established in most Greek cities, including Delphi, where a sacred precinct was granted to Asclepius at the end of the 5th century BC, something which furthered connections with Apollo.5 Delphi ratified a number of Asclepieia and played an important role in the early history of the cult. However, under the Roman Empire the role of Delphi changed and the oracle stopped playing a significant part in the cult. The early emperors did not consult the oracle as much as Hellenic kings and cities had.6 The number of dedications declined and while there was a level of

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1 Hom. Il. 2.729–33, 4.193; Hom. Hymn Asc.
2 Apollod. Bibl. 3.10.3; Paus. 2.26.4ff.
3 Tomlinson (1983) 22–23. See also Chapter 5 on Eshmun-Asclepius.
5 Edelstein and Edelstein (1998) 2.121. Delphi’s ratification of a cult did not affect the sovereignty of a polis but should rather be seen as another way of adding prestige to a cult.
6 Scott (2014) 204.
interest from some of the emperors in Delphi, over time the sanctuary changed from an important consultation hub to a tourist attraction which engaged with memory and history.7

This chapter will examine Asclepiean cults in the Classical and Hellenistic periods up to the age of Augustus. As the Roman Imperial era from 27 BC to the death of Severus Alexander is the timeframe for this work, it is necessary first to provide an overview of the cult up to that point in order to be able to explore how matters within the cult of Asclepius changed during the Roman Empire. This chapter will, therefore, explore the dissemination of the cult and the methods by which this happened within the pre-Augustan cult. It is necessary to understand how the cults spread and were connected with each other as it possible that if two sanctuaries shared the same place of origin, they might also have certain rites and rituals in common. Understanding the shared and unique aspects of each sanctuary, their patterns of dissemination, and the connections between them, allows for the regional and global characteristics of the cult to become clear. As such, regional and more generic characteristics of the cult will be examined and also how external factors, such as the patronage of Hellenistic kings, influenced worship of Asclepius. This chapter will start by examining the earliest available source on Asclepius, namely Homer, and the view he presented of the god and the later ramifications of this. The general dissemination of the cult will then be discussed and the four main sanctuaries of Asclepius, namely Epidaurus, Athens, Cos, and Pergamum, and those located in Italy will also be examined in more detail. These cult sites will each be discussed further for the Roman period in the subsequent chapters. A general discussion on epithets and their use within the cult will follow this as well as a survey of Asclepieian iconography. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the role which divine epiphany and the rite of incubation played within the cult.

Homeric Origins

Homer is the earliest source who mentions Asclepius but he does so only very briefly:

οἳ δ᾽ εἶχον Τρίκκην καὶ Ἰθώμην κλωμακόεσσαν,
οἵ τ᾽ ἔχον Οἰχαλίην πόλιν Εὐρύτου Οἰχαλῖος,