Chapter 3

Asclepius: A Divine Doctor, A Popular Healer

Olympia Panagiotidou

The Asclepius Cult: Diffusion and Popularity

Asclepius was the healing god par excellence of Graeco-Roman antiquity. His cult is first documented on the Greek mainland in the fifth century BCE, when the Asklepieion of Epidaurus was established.¹ From then onwards, sanctuaries were built to honour Asclepius in many cities, offering an alternative healing option to the people who suffered from various illnesses or diseases. This paper intends to explore the popularity of the Asclepius cult, and the particular social, cultural, and cognitive processes that mediated the spread of the reputation of Asclepius’ healing power in the Graeco-Roman world.

Greek authors unanimously regard Thessaly as the region in which the cult of Asclepius arose, but the Epidaurian Asklepieion gradually developed into the cult’s most popular healing centre.² The inscriptions dated from the early fourth century BCE record various cases of patients who travelled from Aigina, Argos, Halieis, Epeiros, Messene, Sparta, Herakleia, Hermione, Kaphyiai, Keos, Kirrha, Pherai, Thebes, and Troezen, and from more distant places—Chios, Knidos, Lampsakos, Mytilene, Thasos, and Torone—, to Epidaurus,³ reflecting the pan-Hellenic reputation of the sanctuary. Under Epidaurian influence, early sanctuaries were devoted to Asclepius in Messene,⁴ Arcadia,⁵ Athens,⁶ and Corinth,⁷ and flourished during the classical period (fifth-fourth century

¹ The Asclepius sanctuary in Tricca was earlier than the Epidaurian Asklepieion, but has not been found by archaeologists; Julius Ziehen (1892, 195–197) provides some evidence about it. A stoa building found by Kastriotis (1918, 65–7) is dated in the late Hellenistic period.
⁴ The excavations from 1987 onwards revealed the earlier phases of the Asclepius sanctuary in Messene in the Peloponnnesus.
⁵ Ginouvès 1959; Martin and Metzger 1976, 66.
⁷ Roebuck 1951; Lang 1977; Martin and Metzger 1976, 64–65; Papachatzis 2002, 80.
BCE). In the fourth century BCE, in Pergamon, Lebena on Crete, and on the island of Cos, Asklepieia were also built that evolved into great healing centres that attracted visitors from places near and far for almost one millennium.

From the Hellenistic era onwards, Asclepius enjoyed increased reverence. Numerous temples were devoted to him in many Hellenistic cities, while his reputation spread widely in the Graeco-Roman world. In the Peloponnese, in addition to the earlier sanctuaries in Epidaurus, Corinth, Messene and Arcadia, Asklepieia were built in Cyllene, Argos, Helieia, Gortys and Sicyon. Temple were dedicated to Asclepius in Attica and Phocis as well as in many cities of Macedonia. It is estimated that during the fourth and third century BCE about 200 Asklepieia were erected on the Greek mainland, and hundreds of temples were devoted to Asclepius beyond.

In Greek insular areas, Asklepieia were established, among others, on Euboea, Thasos, Delos, Paros and Anaphe. In Asia Minor, temples

11 Pausanias VI, 21, 4. Virtually all the ancient testimonia about Asclepius are collected in Edelstein and Edelstein 1945.
12 Pausanias II, 21, 1.
13 Pausanias VI, 26, 5; V, 7, 1.
14 Pausanias VIII, 26, 6; X, 32, 12.
15 E.g. Pausanias II, 10, 2.
16 E.g. Scholia in Aristophanem, Ad Plutum, 621.
17 Pausanias X, 34, 6.
18 Especially on the Asklepieia in Macedonia see Lioulias 2010.
19 Riethmüller (2005, 11, 9–315) estimates that 171 Asklepieia were built in Greek mainland during that period.
20 Riethmüller (2005, 11) records 732 temples built beyond Greek mainland and provides relevant bibliographical and literary references.
21 IG XII, 9, 194.
22 IG XII, 8, 265.
23 IG XI, 2, 161 A, 72–73.
24 IG XII, 5, 119.
25 IG XII, 3, 248.