Asklepios and His Colleagues
Doctors and Divine Healers

Our ancestor Asklepios established our techne when he had learned to impose love and harmony on opposites, as these poets of ours say and as I myself believe.

Erythimachos (fifth-century Athenian physician)
Plato, Symposium 186e

A Greek farmer of the fifth century BC has been suffering from a throbbing pain in his foot that will not go away. The pain has become so acute that he finds it difficult to walk at all. As a farmer, he depends on his feet for his livelihood—for all the labor involved in plowing the fields and harvesting crops and even in transporting his produce to the agora several kilometers away where it can be sold. He realizes that unless he gets help, not only will his foot continue to ache, but his family will soon be without food because he will no longer be able to work. At some point he decides to seek treatment from a doctor, but the doctor shakes his head and says that although he knows what is wrong with the foot—it's a difficult case of gout—there is nothing he can do to help. As the doctor gathers up his medicine box to leave, the farmer notices the image of Asklepios carved on its lid, the patron god of all physicians. "Perhaps a trip to Asklepios' sanctuary will help," he thinks. "Maybe the doctor-god Asklepios can heal my foot." (For an example of such a medicine box, see Fig. 3.1)

Such a scenario is artificial; there is no evidence for just such a series of events, nor would all individuals have sought the help of a doctor prior to visiting Asklepios. Some might have sought help from other healers first, while others would go directly to Asklepios (though the costs of travel to Asklepieia and of the various rituals incumbent upon those who incubated...
there probably made this option a second or third resort for most people). Yet the rapid growth in Asklepios' cult beginning in the fifth century BC seems to have had a direct relation to the turning away by doctors of patients with apparently untreatable conditions. Those whom doctors could not treat were likely to seek help from the gods, given the respect shown towards gods and the acknowledgment of the divine by doctors themselves. The gods were not alike in their methods and credentials for healing, however. Only one god had medical training, directed all his efforts towards healing, and used many of the same techniques as mortal physicians. That god was Asklepios.1

Asklepios as Doctor in Myth and Cult

The mythology of Asklepios begins with Homer and is remarkably uncomplicated as to his function: he is a healer. Homer, as we have seen, portrays Asklepios and his sons as doctors (Il. 2.731–732, 4.193–194, 11.833) and indicates that Asklepios had to learn his trade: Cheiron guided Asklepios (Il. 4.218–219) much as Asklepios seems to have trained his own sons. In the Iliad, there is no hint yet of any divinity about Asklepios. Thus, in at least one line of the early mythic tradition, Asklepios appears to be merely a mortal doctor.

The earliest source to identify Asklepios as Apollo's son is Hesiod (MW fr. 51), and most accounts thereafter in antiquity would maintain this lineage.2 But Asklepios never loses his identity as a doctor, nor does having a divine father, even one known for healing, exempt him from having to learn his trade.3 Moreover, as with any doctor, there are limits on how far Asklepios may go to heal. Already in Hesiod, Asklepios is punished with death for raising someone from the dead (MW fr. 51). Later tradition generally holds that Zeus grew angry at Asklepios upon learning of this transgression and hurled him into Hades with a flash of his lightning bolt, which in turn prompted Asklepios' father, Apollo, to kill the Cyclopes, Zeus' thunderboltmakers. Never one to be outdone by his children, Zeus retaliated by making Apollo serve the mortal Admetus for one year. Although Zeus would eventually bring Asklepios back from Hades and make him immortal, Asklepios would never again restore anyone to life.4

It is no surprise that this very act of raising someone from the dead—and thus overstepping his proper bounds, an inherently hubristic act—remains the focus of Asklepios' myth in fifth-century tragedy and epinician (e.g., Aesch. Ag. 1022–1024; Eur. Alc. 1–7), the only frequent variable being whom he brings back to life.5 Pindar uses this myth as the centerpiece of his third Pythian ode, addressed to Hieron, ruler of Syracuse. Unlike most of the Pythian odes, which celebrate athletic victories, the occasion of this ode is an unnamed illness Hieron happens to be suffering at the time; thus the myth of Asklepios makes sense in this context. Moreover, as we shall see, Pindar focuses in detail on the transgressions and punishment of both Asklepios and his mother, and so the myth serves as a typical Pindaric tale about the dangers of hubris (and, in this case, of avarice)—fitting for a cautionary tale addressed to a wealthy potentate. Since this ode contains one of the most detailed accounts of Asklepios, I quote part of it here.

After telling the story of the union of Apollo and Koronis, by which Asklepios is conceived, Pindar tells of Koronis' affair with a stranger. Apollo, angered at Koronis' betrayal, has his sister send a deadly plague upon her, but resolves to save his unborn son from Koronis' funeral pyre.

But when her relatives had placed the girl within the pyre's wooden wall and the fierce blaze of Hephaistos ran around it, then Apollo said: "No longer shall I endure in my soul to destroy my own offspring by a most pitiful death along with his mother's heavy suffering."

Thus he spoke, and with his first stride came and snatched the child from the corpse, while the burning flame parted for him. He took him and gave him to the Magnesian Centaur for instruction in healing the diseases that plague men (καὶ πᾶς Μάγνητι φέρων πόροι Κενταύρῳ δίδαξα πολυπήμονας ἀνθρώποις ιατρον ἱόσων).6

Now all who came to him afflicted with natural sores or with limbs wounded by gray bronze or by far-flung stone, or with bodies wracked by summer fever or winter chill, he relieved of their various ills and restored them; some he tended with calming incantations (εὐαλαίας ἱπαταίνεις), while others drank soothing potions (πετραία), or he applied remedies (φάρμακα) to all parts of their bodies; still others he raised up with surgery (τομαία).
But even wisdom is enthralled to gain.
Gold appearing in his hands
with its lordly wage
prompted even him to bring back from death a man
already carried off. But then, with a cast from his hands,
Kronos' son took the breath from both men's breasts
in an instant; the flash of lightning hurled down doom.
It is necessary to seek what is proper from the gods
with our mortal minds,
by knowing what lies at our feet and what kind of destiny
is ours.

(Pyth. 3.38–60; trans. William H. Race in Race 1997)

Hippocratic humoral theory almost certainly influenced this method of treatment. According to humoral theory, the body contains certain fundamental fluids, or humors, such as bile, blood, and phlegm.\(^{11}\) In a healthy body these humors are in balance with one another; illness results from an imbalance. Thus, to heal the body, one rebalances the humors by ridding the body of whatever humor is in excess. The draining of fluid from Arata's body would have restored humoral balance. While other healers may have had a similar view of the functioning of the body, it seems likely, given that Asklepios was himself a doctor and patron of physicians, that Hippocratic humoral theory exerted a direct influence on treatment at Asklepieia; his worshippers expected the god to behave like a physician. The cult thus appears to have accepted not just the mechanics of medical practice but also medicine's account of illness and health.

In other narratives from Epidaurus, the god draws weapons out of the body (much as Asklepios' son Machaon does in the Iliad), grinds and pours drugs, excises growths, and administers emetics. All of these procedures are typical of doctors, even if the extent to which they are carried, such as the reattachment of limbs or the regeneration of an eyeball, seems superhuman.

Some Ianaita mention treatment by animals. Snakes and dogs most often, but also horses and geese, would lick or otherwise touch the afflicted area.\(^{12}\) Here is the narrative of one such treatment, which takes place in a building called an abaton (perhaps the long stoa in which the Ianaita were recovered, although this is not certain):

A man's toe was healed by a snake. He was suffering terribly from a difficult wound on his toe, and during the day was carried outside by servants and was sitting on some seat. When sleep overtook him, a snake came out of the abaton and healed his toe with its tongue; after it had done this, it returned to the abaton. When the man awoke, he was healthy and said that he had seen a vision: a handsome young man seemed to have sprinkled a drug over his toe. (IG IV \(\text{r} 1\) 121.113–119 = LiDonni 1995 [A17])\(^{13}\)
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Pythagoreanism characterizes Asklepios in much the same way Homer describes him. He is a doctor (63–67) and craftsman of his trade (rēsestr, 6) and must undergo training with the centaur Cheiron to achieve this status (45–46). But Asklepios also faces certain limitations. These limitations, like those faced by all good doctors, are external to the healer rather than inherent (imposed by the sovereignty of Zeus in the case of the former, and by the limits of the technique in the latter).

Most of the healing techniques attributed to Asklepios in this ode also resemble those employed by Homeric doctors and described in the Hippocratic corpus: Asklepios applies drugs, either externally in the form of poultices or internally via potions, and he performs surgery (51–53). In the same poem Asklepios uses incantations (eisōdēi, 51), a technique rarely associated with doctors. His use of incantations makes sense inasmuch as supernatural methods are consistent with his divine lineage. One effect of these affinities and distinctions between Asklepios and other doctors in Pindar and evident throughout much of the mythic tradition is to characterize Asklepios as a doctor while simultaneously elevating him above his mortal counterparts. As a super-doctor of sorts, Asklepios is capable of more than any human physician—even to the point of raising the dead (even though this power is curtailed by Zeus).

Affinities between doctors and Asklepios apparent in the mythic tradition are evident also in cult practice by the late fifth century BC. The earliest of the Epidaurus iatres mention instances of the application of drugs to the eyes, surgical removal and reattachment of parts of the body, the cutting open and sewing up of the belly, removal of material from the belly after it has been cut open, and the draining of fluid from the body. Here is how the iatres describe the last procedure:

Arata of Laconia, hydrops. Her mother slept here on behalf of her daughter who remained in Lacedaemon, and she sees a dream. It seemed that the god cut off her daughter's head and hung her body with the neck towards the ground. When a lot of fluid had run out, he united her body and put her head back on her neck. After she saw this dream, she returned to Lacedaemon and found that her daughter was healthy and had seen the same dream. (IG IV 122.1–6 = DiDion 1995 [B1]

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The narrative provides a dual explanation, one that states what was happening to the man while he slept (a snake licked his toe) and the other that tells what the man dreamt had occurred (a youth applied drugs to his toe). Thus, even treatment by an animal, whether actual or imagined, could be conflated consciously or subconsciously with medical procedures. A good illustration of such a conflation, in this case also involving a snake, appears on a relief dedicated to another healing god, Amphiarao (Fig. 3.2), whose cult will be discussed in more detail below. The snake seems to lick or bite the worshipper's shoulder while the god applies an instrument—perhaps a scalpel—to the same area.  

The tamata are our richest source for Asklepios' cures, but even in the early period of the cult the description of his use of medical procedures was not limited to a single type of witness; works of comedy and history tell a similar story.

In the Ploutos, Asklepios carries a pestle, mortar, and medicine chest (kaphorion) as he makes the rounds among his ailing worshippers (Pl. 707–711), and he mixes various plants and spices to make a poultice for the eyes of a certain Neakleides (Pl. 715–723). Moreover, according to the fifth-century historian Hippys of Rhegium, a woman suffering from an intestinal worm visited an Asklepios where temple attendants severed her head from her neck and drew out the worm, after which Asklepios reattached her head.  

Here again, although severing the head from the body is hardly typical of medicine, surgery as a method of healing is, and Asklepios' divine abilities make such extreme surgery possible.

Nonliterary sources, too, confirm that Asklepios used medical techniques. For instance, the relief representing Asklepios' arrival in Athens, which will be discussed in Chapter 4, depicts the god next to a cupping instrument and forceps. Such tools are common on monuments of doctors, as discussed in Chapter 3 and pictured in Figures 1.1 and 1.3, but they are extremely rare in depictions of any deity other than Asklepios.  

By the late fourth century BC, the city of Epidaurus even minted coins with Asklepios on one side and a cupping instrument on the other.

As time went by, Asklepios' cures shared a somewhat different affinity with practices of medicine. Inscriptions of the second century BC from Lebena on Crete detail cures that include careful lists of drugs to be assembled and administered by the patients themselves, similar to prescriptions given by doctors. While at Epidaurus only general terms like pharma or poul (herb) describe a drug, the Lebena tamata mention specific plants like chestnut, myrtle, laurel, and lettuce. One even lists a cupping instrument (asklos) as part of a cure. In the second century AD, Aelius Aristides' Sacred Tales, which vividly recount his own healing experiences under the care of Asklepios, include bloodlettings and regimens for diet and exercise, as well as drugs and poultices. These increasingly descriptive narratives reflect a growing familiarity with medicine (or at least a general knowledge of how a medical prescription might sound) among those who incubated in Asklepios' sanctuaries.

Since Asklepios is a god, it should come as no surprise that his healing in sanctuaries as in myth also included supernatural techniques. For instance, one of the early tamata from Epidaurus states that the god made a woman pregnant simply by touching her with his hand. In another instance, a mute boy who performs sacrifices and rituals in the sanctuary is suddenly able to speak. These cures sound much like the kind Apollo performs in the Iliad, a healing by presence or mere touch. The Ploutos of Aristophanes likewise combines supernatural and medical techniques. Asklepios carries around a mortar, pestle,
and medicine kit and mixes drugs for some incubants, but he heals Ploutos by putting a scarf over the blind god's head and beckoning sacred snakes to lick his eyes (Pl. 727–738).

Other Healing Gods and Heroes

While many gods shared with Asklepios the ability to heal, Asklepios differed from his immortal counterparts in several significant ways. Other gods who heal seem to have been born with the knowledge rather than needing to train to acquire it; they often function as much more than healers; and when they heal, they employ techniques unusual among doctors. Asklepios' father, Apollo, is a prime example of this type of divine healer. Known for his healing skills, Apollo was renowned also for his powers of prophecy, poetry, and even archery, as evident, for example, in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo. Nor is there any tradition that he ever had to learn to heal; his ability seems innate. Finally, in myth and cult, Apollo's methods of healing, as far as we know, do not involve surgery, bandages, poultices, or other techniques associated with doctors; rather, he heals most often in inexplicable ways. In the Iliad, for example, when Apollo heals Glaukos of an arrow wound, he does so in a manner described only as making the pains cease, staunching the blood, and putting strength into Glaukos' heart (Il. 16.527–531). Exactly how he accomplishes this is not stated. Later he is known for healing simply by raising his arm on high, which earns him the epithet 'Therapeutes.' While Euripides in the Alcestis mentions drugs (φάρμακα) in relation to Apollo, there is no indication that the god uses them to heal; rather, he gives them to the descendants of Asklepios (Eur. 9t. 969).

Apollo did receive the epithet 'iatros,' doctor, as attested in Asia Minor and the Black Sea region as early as the sixth century BC, although how or whether this epithet reflected a change in healing technique is uncertain. In Greece itself Apollo seems not to have had a presence as a doctor until the late fifth century. One of the earliest literary references to Apollo's being a doctor occurs in Aristophanes' Birds (Av. 584), which was produced in Athens in 414 BC, that is, after Asklepios' arrival in that city and after his cult at Epidaurus had reached panhellenic fame, and therefore Apollo's being so described may have resulted from these latter events. Even Apollo's identity as a doctor in the Black Sea area seems in at least some cases to relate to his son's acts of healing: a fourth-century Athenian sculptor named Stratonides dedicated a statue to "Apollo iatros" in Olbia as well as one to Asklepios in Athens.

Apollo may thus have acquired the "iatros" after his name (without undergoing any special training or change in technique) to enhance his appeal or even his authority at a time when interest in medicine and the cult of Asklepios was increasing.

Rarely do we glimpse any god other than Asklepios employing medical procedures on human patients. Paeon uses surgery and drugs in the Iliad, but he employs them to treat gods, not men. Moreover, he seems to have been assimilated into Apollo soon after Homer, hence the name Apollo Paeon and Apollo's subsequent position as healer of the gods. According to some ancient sources, Athena Hygieia, who had a sanctuary on the Acropolis, prescribed drugs to treat one of Pericles' workmen, but the sources are of Roman date and probably reflect the healing practices of Asklepios' cult at that time (Poll. NH 2.44, also Plut. Per. 13.12–13). Asklepios is unique in being the only Greek god for whom the surviving evidence for both myth and cult consistently represents as a deified doctor.

Asklepios' dual nature as a deified doctor is rare among healing heroes. In Attica, for which cults of healing heroes are better documented than elsewhere in Greece, prominent healing heroes of the Classical period include Amphiarao (Ἀμφιαράος), Ambros (Ἀμφύσατος), and the anonymous Hero-Doctor, or Heroes Iatros (Ἱερὰς ἰατρῶς).

Amphiarao, an Argive hero, was healing at his sanctuary in Oropus on the border of Boeotia and Attica by the late fifth century. Inscriptions and votive stelai of the fourth century indicate that Amphiarao, like Asklepios, appeared to his worshippers in dreams and employed procedures such as surgery common to doctors. The most famous and descriptive piece of evidence for the manner in which Amphiarao cured is the votive relief from the early fourth century BC inscribed "Archinos erected this for Amphiarao" (Ἀρχίνος Ἀμφιαράος ἱερέων) (Fig. 3.2, above). The relief has been interpreted as depicting three vignettes of Archinos' healing: (i) a left, Amphiarao with a scalpel to Archinos' shoulder (this presumably is what Archinos experienced in his dream); in the middle, Archinos is licked or bitten by a snake as he sleeps (what Archinos believes happened to him as he dreamed that Amphiarao was treating his shoulder); and to the right, Archinos stands next to a depiction of the stelae he is dedicating in thanks for being healed. If this interpretation is correct, then Amphiarao's cure, with its dual interpretation combining a dream of the god applying a medical technique alongside belief that an animal touched the affected area, closely resembles some of Asklepios' cures (especially IG IV 1.121.113–115 = LiDonnici 1995 [A17], mentioned above).
Unlike Asclepius, however, Amphitaur was not a healer but a prophet. In myth, Amphitaur was one of the original Seven against Thebes. He is said to have prophesied the fall of Thebes and to have been slain by a satyr who attacked him. His cult was established at about the same time or perhaps even earlier, in the south of the Peloponnese and in the Argolid. The evidence makes it difficult to determine exactly how the cult of Amphitaur began, but it is known that he was worshiped in the south of Greece, particularly in the region of the Acropolis.

Further evidence of the cult of Amphitaur comes from the literary sources of the fifth century B.C. Doctors and their patrons used the name of Amphitaur as a divine patron of healing, and the cult of Amphitaur was associated with the healing activities of doctors. The name of Amphitaur was also used by doctors as a surname, and it was often used as a title in medical works. The cult of Amphitaur was particularly popular in Athens, where it was associated with the healing activities of doctors and was considered to be a patron of healing.

Herodotus, a historian of the fifth century B.C., mentions the cult of Amphitaur in his work on the history of Athens. He describes the cult of Amphitaur as a healing cult, and he notes that the cult of Amphitaur was particularly popular among the doctors of Athens. The cult of Amphitaur was also associated with the healing activities of doctors, and it was considered to be a patron of healing.

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their profession. The doctor Eryximachus in Plato’s Symposium declares, “Our ancestor Asklepios established our technique when he had learned to impose love and harmony on opposites [such as hot and cold, wet and dry, bitter and sweet], as these poets of ours say and as I myself believe” (Smp. 186c). By adding “these poets of ours” as another source for his claim, Eryximachus indicates that the idea of Asklepios as the founder of medicine was gaining wide acceptance and was of some age by the late fifth century.

In the Hippocratic Oath, which may date to the fifth century BC, doctors swear by Asklepios to behave properly towards their fellow doctors—that is, to behave as a member of a family or brotherhood claiming common descent from Asklepios. An essential aspect of this familial metaphor was the claim that Asklepios was the ancestor of all doctors. The term Asklepiad, or descendants of Asklepios, appears already in the fifth century BC, although scholars since antiquity have debated whether specific instances of the term refer to true blood-descendants of Asklepios or to all doctors. By tracing their lineage back to Asklepios, doctors forged a powerful link between themselves and their divine counterpart. By doing so, they undoubtedly gained, and presumably intended to gain, authority and prestige among the population at large through this divine genealogy.

At the same time doctors touted Asklepios as their ancestor, Asklepios’ cult forged its own ties to the medical profession. The iatma published at Epidaurus, as we have seen, describe the god behaving like a physician. It is likely that the iatma contain some degree of interpretation and elaboration by the priests or other cult personnel who compiled the tales, and so it is remarkable that none of these functionaries expunged references to Asklepios’ medical techniques. The very least that can be said is that the cult personnel were unopposed to description of Asklepios’ methods in terms of medical procedures; perhaps they even favored it. If it had been unprofitable to do so, presumably they would have amended or deleted such descriptions from the iatma.

Examples of the links between doctors and Asklepios later in antiquity give a sense of how the links forged in the fifth century multiplied with the passage of time. In the fourth century, for instance, doctors were dedicating votives at sanctuaries of Asklepios, sacrificing to him, and swearing oaths in his name. Inventory records from Asklepieion on the Athenian Acropolis and at the port of Piraeus list various medical instruments dedicated to the god, including cautery implements, probes, cupping instruments, small pots for the preparation of medicine, and physicians’ writing tablets. While it is not certain that doctors made all these dedications, it seems unlikely that others would have

had reason to do so, as Sara Allen has remarked in her careful study of the Athenian inventory lists. Such instruments were also found in excavations of the sanctuary of Asklepios on Kos. In the Asklepieion sanctuary in Athens, moreover, someone dedicated a statue of Polykratos, perhaps Polykratos of Mende, a famous doctor of the early fourth century BC.

An inscription from Athens dating to the mid-third century BC mentions an ancestral custom in which public doctors sacrifice to Asklepios twice a year on behalf of themselves and those they have healed (IG II² 772.9–13). That this is described as an ancestral custom (παρεπάτησις) suggests that such sacrifices were taking place in the fourth century, if not earlier. In the third century, the poet Theocritus wrote an epigram about his friend Nicias of Mileto, a doctor who made daily sacrifice to Asklepios and who commissioned a wooden statue of the god (Epig. 8).

By the first century BC, mythic traditions arose linking Asklepios and Hippocrates. According to a collection of letters falsely claiming to be by Hippocrates, known as the Pseudepigraphia, Hippocrates was a descendant of Asklepios on his father’s side (Ep. 2, also Ep. 10, 17, 25) and dreamed that the god took him by the hand and gave him comfort when he needed assistance in healing a difficult case (Ep. 15). Strabo writes that Hippocrates derived some of his treatments from iatma posted at the Asklepieion on Kos (Strabo 14.2.39 [C 657], also 8.6.15 [C 374]). Likewise the antiquarian Varro, Strabo’s contemporary, is quoted by Pliny as saying that Hippocrates had copied down cures from Koan healing inscriptions (NH 29.1) and that when the temple of Asklepios burned, Hippocrates established clinical (clinic, or bedside) medicine using these very cures (Plin. NH 29.4). Such influences were perceived as flowing also from Hippocrates to Asklepios. A mosaic of the second or third century AD that has been interpreted as depicting Hippocrates greeting Asklepios as he arrives by boat on Kos implies that Hippocrates and the medical profession had been established there before the arrival of Asklepios (Fig. 3.3). The bond between Hippocrates and Asklepios was advertised also on coins of Kos with the head of Hippocrates on one side and the staff and snake of Asklepios on the other. Hippocrates eventually received hero status and worship on Kos.

While these legends about Hippocrates are largely apocryphal, by the Roman period other doctors were publicizing their close relationships to Asklepios. In the first century AD the Koan doctor C. Ser exempt Xenophon, famous for his role as doctor to the emperor Claudius, made lavish dedications at the Asklepieion on Kos, including water supplies, a library, a naikos to Asklepios, Hygieia, and Epione, and an altar to Asklepios. He even served as a priest in the
himself as a servant (θεσπόν) of Asklepios, donated a prominent statue to “Basilus Asklepios” for his frequent help in escaping sickness.\(^5\)

Doctors themselves were thus in some cases directly responsible for the architectural expansion and general wealth of individual cults of Asklepios. And while such beneficence helped various Asklepieia, it no doubt also increased the visibility and reputation of the doctors who made these contributions. This may have been why Galen, doctor to Marcus Aurelius, repeatedly emphasized a close association with Asklepios. Galen wrote that not only was he a descendant of Asklepios but he had been personally healed by the god of an abscess (υστόστεμα) and was advised by him in making at least one important decision while serving the emperor: Galen claimed that Asklepios told him in a dream not to accompany the emperor Marcus Aurelius on his German campaign (Lib. Prop. (Kühn 19.18–19)).\(^5\)

While this dream may simply have been an acceptable way out of an unwelcome obligation, it nevertheless presented others with the impression of a close relationship between Galen and Asklepios, and it suggests to us that Galen knew he could benefit by creating such an impression. Furthermore, Galen claimed that Asklepios was largely responsible for his becoming a doctor: the god appeared to Galen’s father in a dream and revealed that Galen would practice medicine.\(^52\) Also, Galen was born, studied, and practiced medicine at Pergamon, home of one of the most popular and lavish Asklepieia of the time. He may even have held a position in the cult there.\(^53\)

At the time Galen was writing his numerous tomes, the chronically ill orator Aelius Aristides was consulting Asklepios in addition to the gods Sarapis, Apollo, and Athena, and continued to seek help from physicians while under the care of the gods.\(^54\) For Aristides, Asklepios’ cult could function in tandem with medicine as well as other forms of divine healing.\(^55\) Moreover, doctors participated in medical competitions held at the Asklepieion in Ephesus, and they toted images of Asklepios on their medical kits and rings, portable visual links between themselves and their divine patron. On one such ring Asklepios stands watching a doctor examine a patient (Fig. 3.4).\(^56\)

All of this evidence indicates that as the cult of Asklepios continued to develop alongside medicine well into the Roman period, interaction between doctors and the cult remained strong. Had the cult at any point proven problematic for doctors, they would likely have severed all links with Asklepios; the converse is true as well. And so, beginning at least as early as the fifth century BC, doctors and Asklepios’ cult enjoyed an active, amicable, and mutually advantageous contact.
Asklepios' Specialization: Chronic Ailments

That Asklepios’ popularity resulted in part from the reluctance of physicians to treat incurable ailments becomes even clearer when one considers the sorts of ailments Asklepios cured. Healing inscriptions from Epidaurus point again and again to chronic ailments. For example: “Antikrates of Knidos, eyes. This man, hit by a spear through both his eyes in some battle, had become blind and was carrying the spearhead around with him lodged inside his face. While sleeping here he saw a vision. The god seemed to him to draw the weapon out and fit the so-called ‘girls’ (pupils) back into his eyelids. The next day he left healed” (IG IV² 1 122.63–68 = LiDonnici 1995 [B12]). Other reportedly cured ailments include infertility, paralysis, deafness, ulcers, tumors, festering sores, muteness, dropsy, baldness, φθόρα (a wasting condition of some sort), persistent headache accompanied by insomnia, stones in the penis, gout, stomach disorder, pus, worms in the belly, leeches in the chest, lice, and epilepsy. The overwhelming majority are recurrent or lingering conditions. Blindness, paralysis, and infertility, moreover, appear among the earliest healing tales from Epidaurus, as Lynn LiDonnici dates them.

Thus, the earliest cultic evidence for Asklepios’ cures characterizes him as a healer of chronic cases, nor does this aspect change throughout the history of his cult. Later iamata from Epidaurus as well as from Lebena, Athens, and Rome mention blindness, gout, dyspepsia, shoulder pains, headaches, troublesome coughs, sore throats, pleurisy, growths, ulcers, scrofulous swellings, phthisis, and sciatica. The most common ailment recorded in all of the iamata is blindness.

Many of the iamata also emphasize the amount of time a patient suffered from an ailment before getting help from Asklepios. For example, Kleo was pregnant for five years, Ithmonika for three; a man named Eubippus had a spear lodged in his jaw for six years; another named Gorgias had an arrow festering in his lung for a year and a half and filled an astounding sixty-seven bowls with pus before being healed.

Elements in these accounts may have been exaggerated to magnify the skill of Asklepios in comparison to his mortal counterparts, but if that were the prime purpose, it could have been more effectively accomplished by stating that the god had cured fatal ailments. Such statements do not occur: the iamata never say that Asklepios saved anyone from death, nor, except for two problematic examples discussed in this note, do any other sources. The absence of evidence for Asklepios treating fatal ailments in his sanctuaries accords with the mythic tradition in which Zeus forbade him from raising the dead.

The length of time that these patients suffered before consulting Asklepios suggests that they had previously sought other forms of healing and found them inadequate. Some sources state explicitly that Asklepios was an alternative pursued after human healers had failed to provide sufficient assistance. For example, the orator Aeschines wrote an epigram celebrating Asklepios’ healing of an ulcer on his head. He claims to have gone to Epidaurus only after “having despaired of the help of mortals (θυμόν κατὰ τῶν αὐτοφόρον τοῖς).” An inscription of the second century AD thanks Asklepios for curing gout that “no mortal can heal” (IG II² 4574).

In some instances, moreover, these bemoaned mortal practitioners are clearly doctors. Aelian, writing ca. AD 200, records the case of a man suffering pneumonia:

Wretchedly afflicted with a sickness that the sons of the Asklepiads call pneumonia (πνευμονία), he first turned to the healing of mortals and clung to these men. His illness was stronger than the knowledge of his doctors. When he was already at the farthest limits, his friends took him to a sanctuary of Asklepios. (De fr. 92 c–e)
The man then dies at the sanctuary, an outcome Aelian attributes to his im- pious (ἀδικία) interest in Epicurus, but which may have had more to do with his ailment being fatal rather than merely chronic by the time he visited Asklepios. At any rate, in this particular instance Asklepios is the next resort after doctors.

The sense of despair that drove many patients to seek help from Asklepios and other divine healers was often felt by doctors themselves in difficult cases, as George Tinker has argued. Diodorus Siculus records that in the Roman period, “his has restored many to health whose doctors have lost hope of treating them because of the difficulty of their illness” (Diod.Sic. 1.29). In a fifth-century AD account of the life of Proclus, Proclus visits an Asklepiasion as a proxy for a young girl suffering a difficult illness (σοφός χειρατής). Proclus makes the visit only after her doctors despair of treating her successfully (ἀποτελομένους ἄνιε τῶν ἰατρῶν, Marin. Procl. 29). A direct cause-and-effect relationship between the limits of medicine and visits to sanctuaries of Asklepios is thus evident in at least some cases handled by the god.

Given the chronic nature of the vast majority of these ailments, it is understand- able that any mortal healer would have found them difficult to cure. Certain types of blindness, deafness, paralysis, baldness, tumors (φύματα), and troublesome sores (κεφαλάσια) remain untreatable, or at least not fully curable, even today. By contrast, ailments like arrow wounds were fully treatable in antiquity; doctors since the Bronze Age have successfully cared for many such injuries. However, whether their location in a difficult place in the body, like the lung, or the degree to which they had festered sometimes placed them beyond the limits of medicine. Gorgias’ arrow wound to the lung that festered for a year and a half may have fallen under either or both of these categories.

Comparison of the ailments fifth-century medical treatises name as untreatable with those Asklepios is credited with curing reinforces the picture of Asklepios picking up where the skill of mortal doctors left off. The author of Book 2 of Pneumatics, for example, lists gout (ποδήμα) among those illnesses that, under certain circumstances, a doctor should refuse to treat; gout is also mentioned in an early healing inscription from Epidauros, as well as a later one from Athens. The authors of Regimen and On the Sacred Disease advise against treating certain cases of dropsy and even epilepsy, ailments that also appear in the Ian- tia. These ailments are either chronic or can become so. In fact, the author of On the Sacred Disease considers epilepsy uncureable only if it has become chronic, as does the author of Aphorisms. Thus, as the limits of medicine, especially in treating chronic ailments, generated the need for another healer—ideally one who practiced like a doctor but whose powers were farther-reaching—the deified doctor Asklepios stepped in to meet this very need.

The relationship between the cult of Asklepios and medicine was one principally of complement, not competition. Far from stealing patients from doctors, Asklepios treated patients that doctors found difficult or impossible to heal. Moreover, the god’s use of medical techniques and his patronage of the medical profession speak of an interest on both sides of forging and maintaining mutual bonds that were obvious well beyond the medical community. While a complex set of factors was responsible for Asklepios’ burgeoning popularity beginning in the fifth century, including the god’s personal interaction with his worshippers, the ever-shifting political climate of Greece, and concern over health sparked by the prevalence of plague and other hard-to-treat illnesses, the medical profession itself generated substantial interest in the cult of this doctor-god.