

a history of medicine in pictures

by *George A. Bender*

painting by *Robert A. Thom*

The Temples and Cult of Asclepius

LIKE THAT of all peoples of antiquity, the beginning of Greek medicine dates back beyond recorded history. It emerges upon the world scene as a curious mixture of mythology and rationality. While paying obeisance to the gods favored by their people and times, Greek medical practitioners seem to have been relatively free of the religious handicaps which affected the thinking of their colleagues in some other lands. They approached their practice from a more rational, naturalistic point of view, which, though not always correct, had at least some degree of scientific background.

Side by side with Greek scientific medicine, however, there grew up a religious medical cult which became the most famous of its kind in all history: the cult of Asclepius. At an even earlier date, certain groups of Greek physicians identified themselves as Asclepiads ("Son of," or, "of the family of," Asclepius).

First mention of Asclepius in Greek literature is in the Homeric poem, the *Iliad*. Here Asclepius is represented as one of the aristocrats of old, a tribal leader, physician, and father of physicians. At that time he is referred to as a man; a skilled physician; and a student of Chiron (a Thessalonian physician whose equestrian skill gave him the reputation of having been a centaur—compound of man and horse). According to Homer, Asclepius' sons, Machaon and Podalirius, served both



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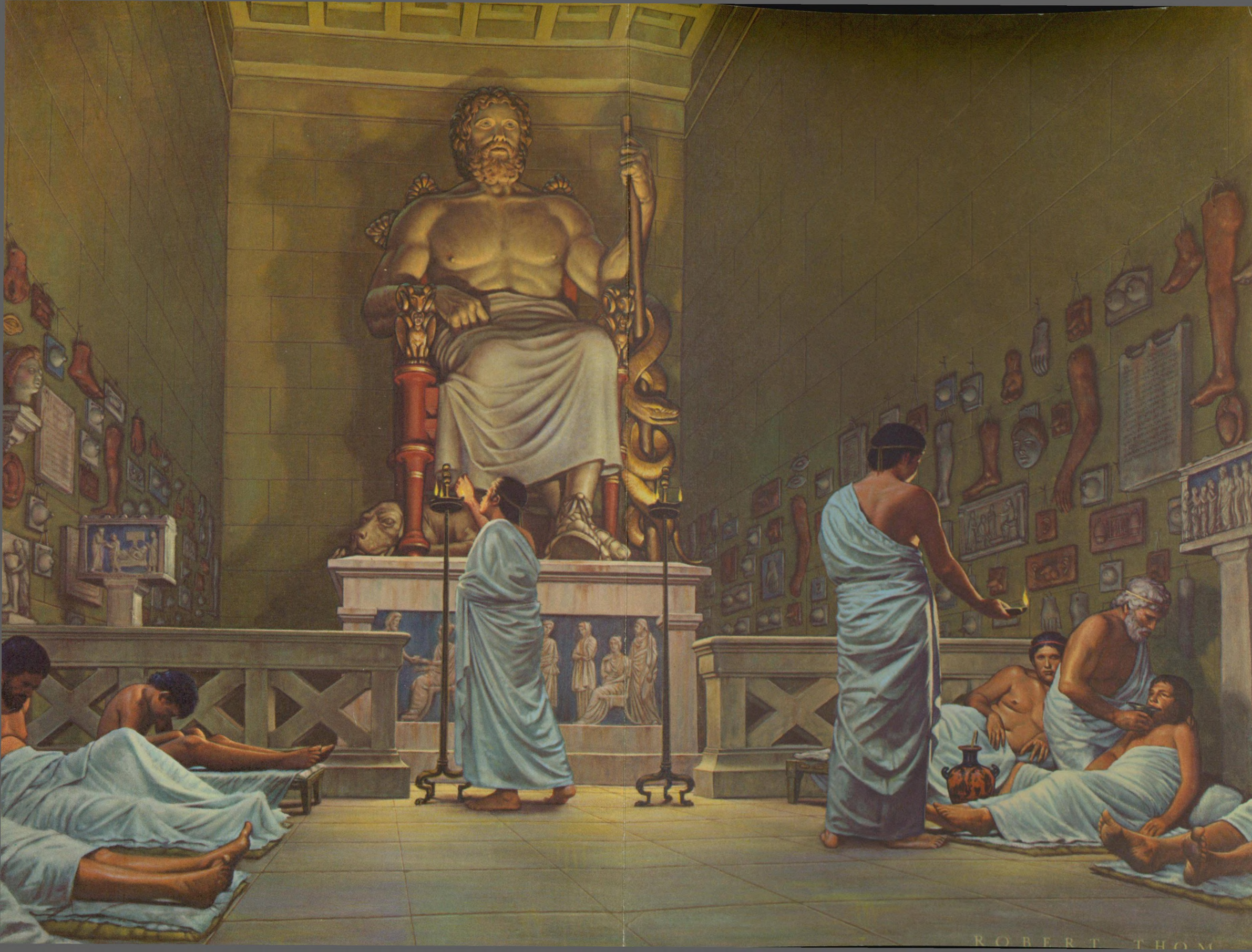
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LIKE THAT of all peoples of antiquity, the beginning of Greek medicine dates back beyond recorded history. It emerges upon the world scene as a curious mixture of mythology and rationality. While paying obeisance to the gods favored by their people and times, ancient medical practitioners seem to have been relatively free of the religious handicaps which affected the physicians of their colleagues in some other lands. They approached their practice from a more rationalistic point of view, which, though not always correct, had at least some degree of scientific background.

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as military leaders and physicians in the historic siege of Troy (about 1180 B.C.). Whether they were true sons, or "sons" by virtue of following the calling of Asclepius, is not clear. Though by no means verified, some ancient scholars believed that Asclepius' death took place in the year 1237 B.C.

Ancient writings, particularly Homer's, credit Asclepius with superior knowledge and ability in medicine. While not the originator of Greek medicine, as is sometimes claimed, apparently he was responsible for markedly improving it.

Legend slowly developed around the great healer. He became thought of as a half-god, the son of Apollo and a mortal woman. Rescued from the womb of his slain mother by Apollo, an early god of medicine, legend states that he was turned over to Chiron, who raised and educated him. Eventually the god of gods, Zeus, is supposed to have killed Asclepius with a thunderbolt because he had revived the dead—threatening prerogatives of the deities.

The stature of Asclepius continued to grow in Greek thought over the centuries, and around 525 B.C., popular opinion seems to have raised him to the rank of a god. It was then thought that, by grace of a remorseful Zeus, Asclepius had been granted immortality after his violent death, and had taken over his father's position as god of medicine. His legend was adapted to this new role, and by 450 B.C., Asclepius had been supplied with a large mythical family, which included not only the sons Machaon and Podalirius, but a third, Telesphorus; and daughters Hygieia, Panacea,

the picture Every night, for nearly one thousand years, sick and afflicted pilgrims flocked to the Grecian Temples of Asclepius, or to the nearby *abaton*s, to take part in a ritual called incubation. If successful, the ancient, kindly god of medicine was expected to visit them during a dream-state halfway between waking and sleeping, and either heal them or prescribe drugs, diet, and modes of treatment. Only requisites were that they should be clean and "think pure thoughts." To show their appreciation, recipients of Asclepius' favors caused votives (stone or terra cotta images of the afflicted parts which supposedly had been healed) to be made, suitably inscribed, and presented to be hung on temple walls. Temples were set in favorable surroundings not unlike those of spas and shrines of today.

and Iaso, who symbolized other aspects of their father's calling.

The cult of Asclepius gradually spread throughout Greece until more than 200 temples, or Asclepieia, were known. These probably began with, or at least centered about, the Asclepieion at Epidaurus, in central Greece. Other temples of exceptional fame were located at Cos, Tricca, Pergamum, Lebena, Aegae, Corinth, and Athens. The cult was carried to Rome in 293 B.C., when at the request of the Romans, an Epidaurian mission sailed up the Tiber. A sacred snake is said to have sprung from the vessel and to have swum ashore on Tiber Island, and a temple to Asclepius was built on the spot. More and more Asclepius became accepted as the most important Greco-Roman god of healing—a position he was to hold until about 500 A.D.

Earlier temples of Asclepius seem to have been patterned after those devoted to the worship of other Greek gods. Later, they became much more elaborate institutions, usually situated, like the modern spa or health resort, in a favorable spot with good air, springs of pure or mineral water, and woods, though some were located in large cities.

The Asclepieia were large, sprawling groups of buildings, court-yards, groves, and watering places. Their scope was somewhat broader than that of the modern sanitarium. Centrally, of course, was the temple of Asclepius, ornate with magnificent works of art, and other treasures, many of gold. Close by was a second important building, the *abaton*, where pilgrims retired to sleep and to be visited by the god in their dreams. Smaller temples, devoted to other gods, might be found on the premises. Usually a holy well and a hallowed grove were a part of the grounds. In addition, there might be hostels, baths, and gymnasiums. At Epidaurus, a magnificent outdoor theater and a stadium in which games were periodically featured, were parts of the Asclepieion. A large corps of priests, helpers, choirboys, musicians, and others, was required. Sacred animals, especially dogs and snakes, roamed about

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the grounds. Numerous stone tablets and steles, bearing stories of miraculous cures, were located on the grounds; and on the walls were many votive offerings of stone, terracotta, or other materials, some of which paid tribute to Asclepius and to his mythical family. More frequently, these votives reproduced in relief some part of the patient's body which had been healed, along with suitable laudatory statements and prayers of thanks. Inscribed tablets told of pious monetary donations. About the grounds also were statues, altars, benches, and other conveniences contributed by grateful, wealthy patients for the convenience and comfort of visiting pilgrims, frequently numbered in the hundreds.

Visitors to the Asclepieia included, of course, the sick, in various stages of seriousness of illness. In addition, perhaps even greater numbers of healthy persons came to worship, to insure their good health, and, likely, to enjoy holidays, much as at today's spas. Certainly games, plays, periodic festivals, recreation and amusements of other sorts were afforded. Then too, worship services, sermons, and singing, were used to help put pilgrims in proper mental mood for the steps to follow. Troubled persons might enter temples to pray at any time.

The cult was not restricted to the poor. The great Sophocles wrote a hymn for Asclepius. The last words of Socrates dealt with Asclepius; and numerous emperors, including Alexander the Great, Marcus Aurelius, and Julian, were devotees of the healing god. In keeping with the spirit of their god, however, keepers of the Asclepieia seem not to have been motivated primarily for profit, and the poor, the indigent, the rich, and the mighty, were received with equal kindness. In fact, the poor and indigent might even have received financial help in the temples. Unlike most other Greek deities, Asclepius was considered a kind, sympathetic god, a physician first of all, to whom anyone, in suffering or in trouble, might turn. Those who could afford it were expected to pay, and cheats were punished; but no

worthy persons were denied, the only requisite being that "Pure must be he who enters the fragrant temple; purity means to think nothing but holy thoughts." Only those near death, and parturient women, were denied entrance; neither birth nor death was permitted within the temple areas.

Those who came in quest of the god's help were required to bathe and to offer sacrifices (cakes or animals). Apart from this nothing further is mentioned as required of pilgrims, not even an admission fee.

At night, patients went to places where they were supposed to wait for the god. Usually, these would be the *abaton*, although in some Asclepieia patients were allowed to sleep in the temple. Dressed in their usual apparel, they lay down on the bare floor, or on a pallet; lights that were burning when the patients assembled were then extinguished.

This practice, called incubation, was a standard custom. The god was seen by the pilgrim in his sleep, or in a strange state between sleeping and waking. Asclepius is reported to have come in the form in which he is portrayed in statues—as a bearded man, his face gentle and calm; or as a youth of beautiful and fine appearance. In his hand he held a rustic staff, about which a serpent twined. There was nothing to terrify the patient. If the god did not visit the patient the first night, incubation was continued on following nights. Once personal contact was made, the god proceeded either immediately to heal the disease brought to his attention, or to advise treatment to be followed. While many miracles are attributed to Asclepius, they seem to have been associated with reports of earlier times, with the latter form of care taking precedence in later chronicles. Serpents, too, are reported to have appeared to patients in their dreams, and to have healed them by licking their wounds.

According to inscriptions, the god cured paralysis, epilepsy, blindness, baldness, dropsy, wounds, headaches, sterility, worms, tuberculosis, dyspepsia, gout, and many other afflictions. Not only did Asclepius effect cures, he also was thought to protect health, and to protect families. His temples were places of asylum for fugitive slaves and for warriors eluding capture. He was thought of as a kind

of supernatural family doctor; and his close personal relationship with his worshipers, his kindness, which was not shared by other ancient gods, might explain survival of his worship and of cults during early centuries of the Christian era. Asclepius was considered the principal and the most serious competitor of Jesus Christ by the early Christian church fathers. Though they attacked Asclepius with vigor and bitterness, early church leaders had to recognize many parallels between the old god and Jesus Christ, who in early gospels appeared to be a physician, a healer of diseases, and a performer of miracles. Such a god indeed must have been very attractive to a society which was as concerned with health (hypochondriac) and as afraid of death as was the ancient Greek society. Strange as it might appear today, the Asclepieia seem not to have been places of pretense, fraud, or trickery; but temples of a cult based on sincere belief, in which many people found relief through their faith. No enmity appears to have existed between regular Greek physicians, of whom there were many, and priests of Asclepius, who dealt largely with the incurable and with the poor. Because of this practice and because of limitations of science, undoubtedly large numbers of ill persons turned to Asclepius as a last resort. From among these, might it not be reasonable to expect to find a percentage who would respond to spiritual and to psychosomatic influences found in the Asclepieion?

No longer regarded as a deity, Asclepius still is revered in medical circles, and many societies bear his name. His staff, entwined by a serpent, still is the symbol of medicine, used and worn in many ways. (This symbol, of course, is not to be confused with the so-called caduceus, which originally was associated with the god Hermes.) The serpent, however, may be found in the lore of many ancient peoples, including those of Babylon and the Hebrew tribes.

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