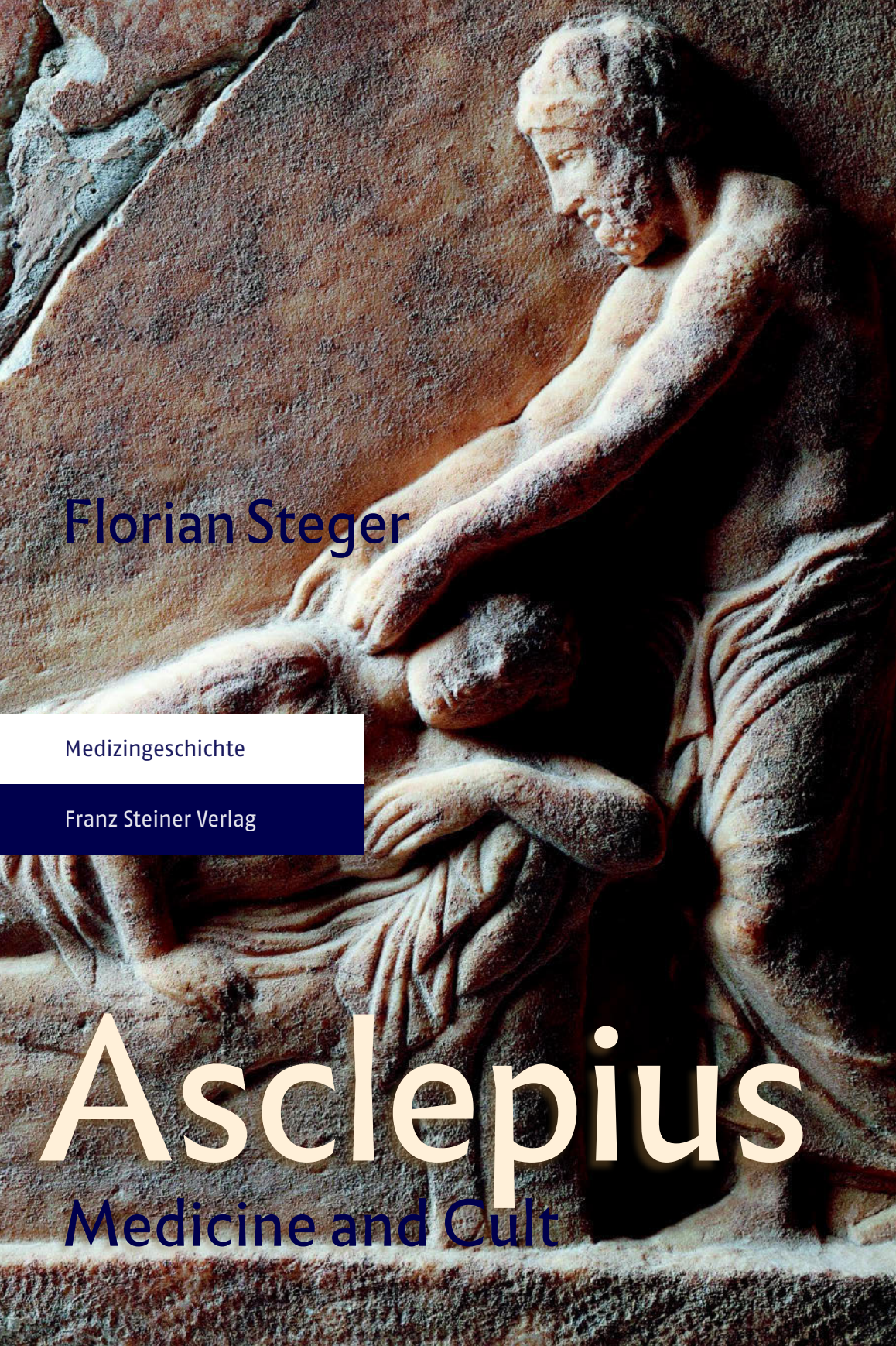


Florian Steger

Medizingeschichte

Franz Steiner Verlag

Asclepius

Medicine and Cult

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Translated from the German by Margot M. Saar



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Cover illustration: Asclepius heals a female patient, marble, 4th century BC,
Archaeological Museum, Piraeus, Inv. No. 405.
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Preface

This book is a translated and revised version of my former "Asklepios: Medizin und Kult" (STEGER 2016a) and is published in answer to many and frequent requests from various sides. Any literature published since 2016 has been added throughout the text. A section on the *Iamatica* of Poseidippus has been added to chapter III.3. Three figures have been added, one has been exchanged. Critical comments in reviews published so far on STEGER (2016a) have been considered. Again, I have to thank Dr. Frank Ursin, who is a faithful and wise companion of my research in medical history, especially in the field of ancient medicine. Furthermore I thank Margot M. Saar for her translation of the manuscript. Last but not least I thank Dr. Thomas Schaber for his support of my research into Asclepius.



Fig. 1 – Serpent of Asclepius, mosaic, Lindau (Germany)

I.

Introduction

Everyday life is determined by biological phenomena such as birth, life and death, and, as biological processes, health and illness impact importantly on the way people live. With a few exceptions, most people do what they can to preserve their health and combat illness. A look at the history of cultures reveals a wide variety of health-related problems and conditions, approaches and applications (PORTER 2000 and GRMEK 1989).

It was in the course of the Roman imperial period that a consciousness of health- and illness-related problems gradually emerged, and with it a colorful array of healthcare providers: sorcerers and miracle workers representing a magic-demonic approach, healing cults offering theurgic rituals and healing concepts, midwives and drug-dealers, each of them constituting a non-medical group that operated, however, in close proximity to the scientific medical practitioners. And each of them was in itself highly heterogeneous: the physicians, for instance, can be divided into private, public and military practitioners. For any groups that did not produce written records of their experiences, other sources need to be consulted. GUMMERUS (1932) and OEHLER (1909) have collected epigraphic testimonies to public and private physicians as representatives of scientific medicine, HILLERT (1990) and JACKSON (1988: 56–85) have assembled archaeological evidence. While there are publications on the military physicians (e. g. SAMAMA 2017), research on private and public physicians are surprisingly few and far between, a fact that is partly due to the sources being widely dispersed. In contrast to the knowledge we have of physicians who were also writers (such as Celsus or Galen), information on individual – male or female – medical practitioners is fairly sparse.

As a whole, these groups provided a multifaceted market of healthcare and healing approaches that contributed significantly to the cultural life in general. Efforts were made, moreover, to place medicine on solid theoretical foundations, an endeavor that was, as the contemporary specialist literature reveals, surrounded by some controversy.

Research into ancient medicine, which is mostly conducted by classical philologists, tends to concentrate on this specialist literature, of which the Hippocratic Corpus and the works of Galen of Pergamum and Aulus Cornelius Celsus constitute the keystones. And yet, it must be borne in mind that

any conclusions regarding the actual practice of medicine that can be derived from these sources are of limited validity. The same is true for the medical knowledge of the Islamic Golden Age, which has always been based on Avicenna's *Canon Medicinae*. This *princeps medicorum* has been assigned a central place in medieval medicine but little consideration has been given to the fact that he represented only one of many approaches to medicine in the caliphate (STROHMAIER 1999 and WEISSER 1983).

The affiliation of religion and medicine, which is manifest in the healing cults above all, presents as a separate field of research. Among the most important of these ritual, cultic forms of healing was the cult surrounding the hero and later god of healing, Asclepius, who was called Aesculapius by the Romans. From the fourth century BCE, magnificent temples (*Asclepieia*) were dedicated to Asclepius all across the Mediterranean world and further afield, in Gallia and Germania. In these temples Asclepius was worshipped and there, those seeking healing for their ailments would find help. This book will demonstrate how the healing cult of Asclepius, the god of healing, provided a particular form of medicine that encompassed more than its defining, and important, religious elements. The medicine of Asclepius was practiced in his temples and, with its interweaving of cult and medicine that will need to be examined in more depth, it was an important element of the healthcare on offer in the Roman Empire. KRUG (1993: 141) points out correctly that the research literature does, for the most part, not assign particular importance to this form of treatment. And yet, such lack of recognition seems unwarranted, historically as well as medically – as will be illustrated in chapter III.5, which examines some inscriptions from this cult, giving particular emphasis to medical-historical analysis.

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Research has focused primarily on the religious and mythical aspects of the Asclepian healing cult, but its medical elements, and consequently its position within the history of medicine, have been of equal interest. Scientists have tried above all to ascertain where between the religious-magic and the scientific-rational approaches to healing the medicine of Asclepius is to be located. The thesis of a separate Asclepian medicine that had fused with the healing cult whilst continuing to be informed by a scientific-rational approach and relying on observation and an understanding of nature has so far been largely discounted. If at all, such developments have been assigned to the Roman im-

perial period, but no arguments have as yet been brought forward that could give weight to this view.

An older publication by EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN, consisting of two comprehensive volumes, contains almost all the written sources on Asclepius available up to 1945. Volume I presents these sources in their original language and in English translation, with annotations, while Volume II offers an overall evaluation (both parts were newly published in one volume in 1998). Interpretation based on this material alone is, on the whole, restricted to the mythological aspects and the cult's religious-historical significance, an approach that was pursued before by OHLEMUTZ (1940) and WEINREICH (1909). This interpretation, which focuses on the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, is no longer in keeping with modern-day methods of epigraphic evaluation. The stone inscriptions that have been preserved only reflect some of the materials commonly used for epigraphy – others were wood, fabric, and leather – and are therefore not fully representative (ECK 1997: 95–98).

In most cases only the sources themselves are interpreted but they are neither contextualized during analysis nor interrogated as to their representative strength. Another aspect that remains unconsidered is that the epigrams themselves only record what was intended to be preserved for posterity. EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN failed to recognize the division that comes to light when one reads through their collection of testimonies, and that calls attention to a new development in the medicine and cult of Asclepius, starting with the first century BCE. The sources collated by EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN therefore need to be critically re-evaluated with the inclusion of any findings from after 1945.

LIDONNICI (1995) – and PEEK before her, in 1993 – presented a new and annotated text edition on the Epidaurian stele inscriptions (IG IV² 1.121–124). She examined three Epidaurian epigraphs, plus fragments of a fourth, which are known from PAUSANIAS (2.27.3) and go back to the (late) second half of the fourth century BCE, and published them with individual annotations in the original as well as in English translation. The new collection of sources by GIRONE (1998) is worth mentioning, too, because it includes further imperial epigraphs. In a selection of examples, which seems somewhat arbitrary, GIRONE brings together 32 individually annotated epigraphs from Athens, Epidaurus, Lebena, Pergamum and Rome, all originating in the period between the fourth century BCE and the fourth century CE. Missing from this publication are an overall assessment in addition to the individual comments and (as was the case with EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN also) the inclusion of sources other than inscriptions.

Unlike EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN, LIDONNICI, and GIRONE, KRUG (1993:120–187) not only includes the written sources, but gives equal consideration to the numismatic and archaeological testimonies, making her comprehensive chapter on Asclepius therefore a, so far, unique evaluation of the Asclepius material. After introducing the Asclepian myth and its representations, KRUG describes the healing cult and the individual locations where it flourished, including those in Britannia and Hispania, and concludes that Asclepius was entrusted with the healthcare and welfare of all sick people. She contends that this makes Asclepius the refuge of the unhealed who had been turned away elsewhere because, in accordance with Hippocratic tradition (De Arte 3 (6.4.16–6.6.1 L.)), physicians refused to treat patients who were considered incurable (VON STADEN 1990 and WITTERN 1979).

Asclepius was also able to cure aspects of afflictions that were not accessible to rational explanation. In contrast to EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN, KRUG (1993: 121) sees Asclepius' medical interventions as complementary since the periods when Asclepius flourished were contemporaneous with the highpoints of medicine. NUTTON (2004: 114) contended therefore that Hippocratic medicine and the cult of Asclepius together formed an alternative to magic medicine on the ancient health market. A closer investigation into practicing physicians is missing, however, and so the question as to the relationship they had with the *Asclepieia* remains open. KRUG relies instead on the writings of the Hippocratic tradition, although COHN-HAFT (1956: 29–31) and JACKSON (1988: 140) had already concluded that relationships between practicing physicians and the Asclepian healing sites had existed since the fourth century BCE. WICKKISER (2008) even asserted such a relationship for the fifth century BCE, but is unable to present convincing evidence to corroborate this theory.

SCHNALKE/WITTERN (1993) and SCHNALKE (1990: 1–35) largely agree with KRUG's view and consequently refrain from differentiating between an Asclepian cult and Asclepian medicine. They hold instead that the rise of Asclepius occurred to compensate for the gradual repression of magic-mystical approaches (SCHNALKE/WITTERN 1993: 89). This view is opposed to that of the Hippocrates expert JOUANNA (1996: 48 f.) who saw the religious healing practiced in the Asclepian temples as distinct from medicine. SCHNALKE/WITTERN (1993: 100), on the other hand – in opposition to EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN and KRUG – detect a clear division between the Asclepian treatments used in classical Greece and those of the Roman imperial period. In agreement with JACKSON (1988: 138–169), and opposing the view of SCARBOROUGH (1696: 24 f.), they claim that the medical treatments provided in the

imperial *Asclepieia* were rational and scientific. Earlier investigations into the medicine on offer in the Asclepieia during the imperial period were carried out by HAHN (1976) and MÜLLER (1987).

HAEHLING VON LANZENAUER (1996) focused less on the medicine in her dissertation and more on the cult of Asclepius, as RÜTTIMANN had done earlier (1986) in a religious-historical investigation based on a similar research question. It is the central role they both assign to the aspect of healing (Asclepius Soter – Imperator soter – Christus Soter) that makes their work interesting for our investigation. They consider the alliance between imperial cult and Asclepian piety to have been a genuine threat to Christianity. As healers, both the Princeps and Asclepius were confronting Christ the healer. The imperial cult tried to exploit the pious dedication to Asclepius and it is therefore conceivable that, after Constantine, the cult of Asclepius was deliberately expanded and instrumentalized, even though the Christian faith was prevailing over the pagan cults at that time. Focusing on the cult of Asclepius in the second century CE, RÜTTIMANN (1986) makes an even more compelling case for the view that the worshippers of Asclepius – just like the Christians, and guided by similar theological considerations – saw miraculous cures as a proof of divinity. The cult of Asclepius therefore retained its importance while other pagan cults began to fade away. It can therefore be concluded that Asclepius did not make way for his Christian rival until the end of the ancient period, and not without having left his imprint on its approach to healing.

HART (2000) has knowledgeably compiled the wide array of sources available in relation to Asclepius, the god of medicine. His volume is richly adorned with images that often succeed in creating a link to the present but also lend the work an air of popular science. HART, moreover, restricts himself to the older work by EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN (1945) as the inspiration for his monograph. Any research conducted after 1945 is only included marginally and selectively, and once again, the old thesis is aired that the only patients to turn to Asclepius were those whom the physicians were unable to cure; that their afflictions were mostly psychosomatic and that Asclepius was able to offer them a therapy with placebo effect (HART 2000: 89) – a thesis that is not convincing in the historically undifferentiated form in which it is presented.

This outline of the overall research situation reveals an obvious gap: Asclepius research so far has focused on aspects of religious history but has not taken into account the medical dimension. The development of Asclepian medicine from its beginnings in the fifth century BCE up until the Roman imperial period has not been documented convincingly and it therefore remains uncertain how medicine was integrated into the cultic rituals. Researchers rarely

differentiate between the cult of Asclepius and the medicine of Asclepius, and no one has as yet thought of considering the medicine of Asclepius as an integral part of the Roman Empire's medical culture. The epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological sources providing evidence of this culture have been evaluated by RIETHMÜLLER (2005), but his extensive research material is difficult to use because of the way it is structured. An exemplary contribution has been made by the Italian MELFI (2007), who carried out in-depth research into the major and minor *Asclepieia* on the Peloponnese, the Cyclades, and in Central Greece. And yet, neither of these works manages to convey a clear picture of Asclepian medicine.

Systematic assessments of the epigraphic material have so far been attempted by BENEDUM (1977), PFOHL (1977), ROWLAND (1977), NUTTON (1977/1972/1970/1969), COHN-HAFT (1956), GUMMERUS (1932), HABERLING (1910), OEHLER (1909) and POHL (1905). The numismatic testimonies have mostly been investigated in scattered specialist researches undertaken by AGELIDIS (1911), SZAIVERT (2008), and KRANZ (2004), to name but a few, on Pergamum, and by HAYMANN (2010) on Aegeae. KAMPMANN (1993) studied the imperial coins in relation to Asclepius, and PENN (1994) examined Greek and Roman coins and their references to medicine in general.

This monograph aims to delineate the medicine of Asclepius in as much detail as possible based on the scattered sources available on imperial medicine. Historically, it focuses on the Roman imperial period (27 BCE to 284 CE). Earlier or later sources will also be taken into account as long as they facilitate a better understanding of the subject under consideration. Presenting the rituals performed in the *Asclepieia* as an integral part of the eclectic healing market of that cultural period will add another dimension to the research into the cult of Asclepius, which has so far been restricted to aspects of religious history; it will, moreover, illustrate how important a role the medicine of Asclepius played within that context. As a first step it will be necessary to provide a portrait of everyday life during the period in question, in which the cult and medicine of Asclepius can be embedded. Using primarily inscriptions for this investigation seems appropriate seeing that the first and second centuries CE have been designated the "era of epigraphic culture" (ECK 1997: 99). Dedicatory inscriptions prove most useful in this undertaking because they express the gratitude visitors felt toward Asclepius, reflect the piety and trust of the worshippers, and, in some cases, contain descriptions of the healing process itself. Also included will be funerary inscriptions for physicians, which may provide insights into the medical profession and activities, as well as honorific inscriptions to physicians, which often reflect the benefactor's own love for

self-presentation. 525 inscriptions of Greek physicians have been gathered by SAMAMA (2003). In all this it needs to be borne in mind that – however valuable the epigraphic testimonies are – they only record what was intended for commemoration. Their representative value therefore is to be critically scrutinized and it is clear that this investigation cannot rely on inscriptions alone; but neither must the epigraphic material be discounted altogether, as it was by EDELSTEIN/EDELSTEIN (1945). The route that recommends itself is to use the inscriptions and complement them with evaluations of the relevant literature, the numismatic and archaeological sources, and the papyri.

The author proposes that during the Roman imperial period the medicine of Asclepius contributed significantly to the healthcare market by offering a complex web of therapies. The medicine practiced in the Asclepian sanctuaries consisted in a combination of cultic healing rituals and medical therapies. The productive interweaving of cult and medicine that characterizes it gives it its undoubted place as part of the healthcare market in the Roman Empire.

This book will first introduce the wide range of imperial healthcare available (II), and then use this as a foundation for arguing in favor of an independent Asclepian medicine. The eclectic nature of the healthcare on offer during the imperial period (II.1) derives from a cultural and historical development that can be traced back to the ancient orient and from there to Greece. These cultural origins are mentioned if they can support the main thesis (II.2). A review of the cultural history reveals that the practice of medicine has always gone hand in hand with the endeavor to underpin this practice with solid theoretical foundations. An introduction to the medical theory (II.3) that arose from, and at the same time influenced, the medical practice is therefore essential for an understanding of everyday healthcare and medicine. It is important to note that independent traditions with large numbers of followers need to be distinguished from individuals who, in some cases, also kept written records (II.4). The varied groups providing practical everyday healthcare (II.5) included physicians, midwives and drug-dealers (who were not considered medical practitioners), and representatives of magic and religious cults. All together these groups offered a wide array of health services that is enriched by the inclusion of Asclepian medicine (III). Asclepius, the hero and later god of healing, was very popular and highly revered and his healing cult is no less important than those of Heracles or Serapis (III.1). Between the fourth century BCE and the sixth century CE the Asclepian healing cult became so prominent and influential that it grew far beyond the Mediterranean world. Thanks to the devotion of his worshippers, Asclepius, the pagan god of healing, was able to hold his own for a long time alongside the Christian god.

Cultic rituals were performed in special sanctuaries dedicated to Asclepius. Those afflicted with illness also came to these sacred places, where they prayed to Asclepius for healing. These sites of Asclepian practice (III.2) can be further investigated as to their social function and particularly also their location and layout. Another interesting question is how the devotees spent their time in these sanctuaries: where they stayed, where they had contact with Asclepius, where the therapy took place, and what kind of measures or facilities enhanced their experience inside the sanctuary. On examination of individual cases it can be demonstrated to what extent healing was experienced solely as a result of Asclepius appearing to patients in their dreams, in a fashion similar to that of reported miracles in the Christian tradition (III.3), or whether rational instructions were also conveyed to these patients. The author will attempt to look at the healing processes experienced in the Asclepian temples "bottom up", that is from the patient's perspective. Aelius Aristides, who is renowned for his literary work, left such introspective reports which grant deeper insights into the medical provision at Pergamum (III.5.1). In addition there are inscriptions that also describe healing processes. Two patients, one who attended the sanctuary in Epidaurus (III.5.2) and another who went to the temple at Pergamum (III.5.3), use such inscriptions to relate their experiences of Asclepian medicine. In conjunction with the topographical accounts of the Asclepian temples these reports convey a good picture of the entire healing procedure. Against this background of the daily medical practice it is possible to gain an understanding of the myth surrounding Asclepius, of his healing cult and, above all, of his medicine during the Roman imperial period.