

MAGIC, MEDICINE, RELIGION AND DIVINATION IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD (WEEK 4 NOTES)

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

In relation to ancient Greece and Rome, can we draw a boundary or clear division between medicine and magic? How was divination linked with ‘magical’ practices which sought to heal, cure and protect? How was divination used within ‘religious’ practices which sought to heal, cure and protect? How central was the role of Oracles and oracular temples / sanctuaries of the deities Asclepius, Sarapis and Isis in the Graeco-Roman World and did these practices and their importance change over time?

THEMES FOR THIS WEEK:

- Magic and medicine: early connections and links
- Incantations and healing amulets
- Healing oracles and divination practices: sanctuaries and oracles of Asclepius in Classical and Hellenistic Greece and in the Roman World
- The Healing oracle of Demeter in Patras: mirrors and *catoptromancy*
- Oracles of Sarapis and Isis in Hellenistic Greece and Late Antiquity

MAGIC AND MEDICINE: EARLY CONNECTIONS AND LINKS

This week we continue our exploration of the concepts of magic and divination by exploring their connections with ancient medicine and healing practices. Divination was often involved in healing practices and procedures in the Graeco-Roman world. Nowadays, magic and medicine are two subjects which are seen as being very clearly distinct and separate. However, the line between these two disciplines does not always seem to have been so clearly drawn or clear-cut in the ancient Graeco-Roman world.

Greek medicine, from at least the seventh century B.C., used procedures that to our eyes are indistinguishable from the techniques employed by sorcerers. Yet there is no evidence, even in the fifth or fourth centuries B.C., of anyone accusing doctors who used these procedures of resorting to sorcery and of having abandoned medicine.

What were these procedures?

The use of *pharmaka* (drugs / poisons)

Both the ancient magical practitioner and the ancient doctor were renowned for their use of *pharmaka* (which can mean both “drugs” and “poisons” within an ancient Greek context).

The use of Incantations

In Greek, the same word is used for a song that heals or relieves pain and for incantation in general, *epode* or *epaoide*. In Latin, the verbs *incantare* and *praecantare* have roughly the same basic meaning.

One of the techniques used in ancient medicine to cure conditions was singing over the affected body part. It seems mostly to have been used to relieve pain and to stop bleeding, but it may have had a wider application. In many cases this is treated as an accepted medical practice.

The wrapping of substances and amulets

The technique of wrapping substances around the affected area: this technique of wrapping substances, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, or a combination of these, around a limb or the neck of the patient, was used in both ancient medicine and magic. In Greek this 'wrapping' is called *periamma* or a *periapton*; in Latin, an *amuletum*. This principle lies behind the use of amulets in the ancient world. In the ancient Graeco-Roman world, the use of an incantation and the application of an amulet to a patient were often performed in conjunction with each other.

Evidence for medical and magical practices

The earliest evidence we have of an incantation being used to stop bleeding and to heal occurs in Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus' uncles bind a wound he has incurred from being attacked by a boar and sing an incantation over it to heal him:

The boar was too quick and caught him above the knee, where he gave him a long flesh-wound with a cross lunge of his tusk, but failed to reach the bone. Odysseus' thrust went home as well. He struck him on the right shoulder, and point of his bright spear transfixed the boar, who sank to earth with a grunt and there gave up his life. Autolycus' sons took charge of the carcass. They also skilfully bound [*desan*] the handsome, godlike Odysseus' wound, staunching the dark blood with an incantation; and before long they were back at their father's palace.¹

The use of the incantation here suggests that the binding of Odysseus' thigh may have had an amuletic significance as well as a practical one. However, while to modern readers this procedure looks like a quintessentially 'magical' practice, there is every reason to suppose that medical incantation was a recognized and respectable procedure not infected by the taint of sorcery / magic.

In Plato's *Republic*, 462b: Socrates lists techniques employed to heal the sick – including incantations and amulets.² In Plato's *Charmides* (155), Socrates speaks of a leaf that was useless as a remedy (*pharmakon*) unless an incantation (*epaoide*) was intoned over it. If the incantation was performed it was an effective cure for a headache. The poet Pindar, in a poem composed in the 470's B.C., lists techniques used by the mythical patron of ancient medicine, Asclepius, to cure patients including: 1/ gentle incantations (*epaoidai*); 2/ soothing potions; 3/ wrapping (*periaptein*) of antidotes (*pharmaka*) about limbs; 4/ cutting or surgery.³ It can be inferred that Pindar thought incantations and amulets were healing devices sanctioned by the father of medicine (the god Asclepius). Plato speaks of amulets and incantations as though in the eyes of his contemporaries they were on a par with surgery, drugs and cauterization. Therefore, as stated above, there is every reason to suppose that

¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 19.449-458, translated by E.V. Rieu, London: Penguin, 1946, with my own slight emendations.

² Plato, *Republic*, 462b.

³ Pindar, *Pythian Ode*, 3.47-53, translated by G.S. Conway and R. Stoneman, *Pindar: The Odes and Selected Fragments*, London: Everyman, 1997.

medical incantation was a recognised and respectable procedure not infected by the taint of sorcery / magic. In fact the use of incantations by doctors continued right through until at least the second century AD, if not later, and was sanctioned by the greatest physician of that time Galen. **Therefore it cannot be assumed that actions which we would classify as ‘magical’ seemed so to a Greek of the fifth or fourth centuries B.C.**⁴

Magicians and healing

Many magical practitioners also claimed the ability to heal, cure and prevent certain diseases and medical conditions. In the *Greek Magical Papyri*, for example we find detailed instructions and spells for curing scorpion stings, dog bites, stings, discharge of the eyes and other eye diseases, migraine headache, coughs, hardening of the breasts, fever, shivering fits, gout and many other ailments (cf. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek magical papyri in translation, including the Demotic spells*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, for a very wide range of examples).

Greek Magical Papyri: some examples

PGM VII.193-96:

For scorpion sting: On a clean piece of papyrus, write the characters and place it on the part which has the sting; wrap / the papyrus around it, and the sting will lose its pain immediately.
[the characters are then given in the text]

PGM VII.197-98:

For discharge of the eyes: Write on a piece of papyrus and attach it as an amulet:
“ROURARBISAROURBBARIASPHREN.”

Hippocratic medicine, magic and religion

Hippocratic and later physicians held that natural explanations can be given as the causes of illnesses – the effect upon the human body of cold, warmth, sun, air and climate. However, to some physicians these were not only natural forces but also divine. For the author of the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease* this is the case (see Appendix 1 at the end of these notes for an extract of the treatise). We don’t know who the author of this treatise was; it was written in Ionic, the dialect used in a band that stretches across the Aegean from the east of Athens to the coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), but medical works were conventionally composed in Ionic. The author criticizes those who want to see each disease as caused by one particular god, and claims that magical practitioners call the disease (he is referring to epilepsy) ‘divine’ in order to cover up their own ignorance of how to treat it. He himself ascribes the symptoms of epilepsy to an excess of white phlegm.⁵ However, when he criticizes the name of the ‘sacred disease’ popularly given to epilepsy, he does not deny that it is divine but insists instead that it is no more divine than other diseases:

This disease seems to me to be no more divine than any other disease: it has the same nature as the others, and the same cause....there is no need to put it

⁴ See Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp.24-25.

⁵ Helen King, *Greek and Roman Medicine*, London: Duckworth, 2001 (republished: 2009), p.7.

in a special category and to consider it more divine than other diseases; they are all divine, and all human.⁶

Additionally, for physicians who follow Plato and Aristotle (Plato, *Laws*, 10.899b; Aristotle, *On the Heaven*, 288a) the divinity of the sun, stars and climate is unquestionable; nor are the forces of the lower world, air and water deprived of divinity. Stoic physicians firmly believe in the divine character of the forces of nature. The interpretation of the gods as natural powers is very common and very Greek. The Ancients' conceptions of natural phenomena are very different from those of modern times. Another anonymous medical treatise states:

I too think that these diseases are divine, and so are all others, no one being more divine or more human than any other; all are alike, and all divine, but each of them has a nature of its own, and none arises without its nature.⁷

According to this way of thinking, everything is equally divine (cosmologically, this view of the world could be considered "pantheistic," in the sense that it sees the divine as a component or underlying element or "principle" of all things in the cosmos). This does not imply that gods act directly and are responsible, by reason of their personal interference, for the single event. The individual disease has a nature of its own, but the divine character of the disease is not done away with by being explained through nature. Everything is natural, but in being so, it is divine too – in this view, *there is no opposition between the divine and nature*. One of the main implications of this view is that when one examines the Hippocratic writings one cannot possibly interpret all natural terms as devoid of any religious meaning. Hippocratic writers in general do not renounce the divinity of nature. The opinion that nature is created and more importantly, permeated, by the divine is found throughout antiquity.

Many physicians acknowledged the divine as a factor in the medical art, apart from nature. Within a book on *Prognostics*, at the outset the physician is advised, "to learn the natures of such diseases, how they exceed the strength of men's bodies, besides whether there is any divine influence in them and to learn how to forecast them" (Edelstein (1967), p.216). Meanwhile, the famous ancient physician Galen saw his vocation as a doctor as a kind of sacred mission and saw the medical art as ultimately arising and deriving from the god Asclepius; the human practice of medicine was therefore an act of worship which honoured the god by using the gift which he gave to mortals:

...this is a sacred book which I composed as a true hymn of the god who has created us, in the belief that I am really pious not if I sacrifice many hecatombs of oxen to him and burn thousands of talents of cassia, but if I first recognise myself and then explain also to others the wisdom of god, his power, his excellence.⁸

THE HEALING CULT OF ASCLEPIUS: DREAM ORACLES AND 'INCUBATION' PRACTICES

Within a 'religious' context in the Graeco-Roman World, healing practices were very often connected with divination and oracles. 'Incubation' shrines, where the sick would sleep in the sanctuary of a deity in order to receive an oracle in a dream which would offer advice

⁶ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, 5 and 21.

⁷ Book on *Airs, Waters and Places*, cited from Ludwig Edelstein, *Ancient Medicine: selected papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967, p.213.

⁸ Galen, *On the Use of Parts*, III.10, cited from Ludwig Edelstein *Ancient Medicine: selected papers of Ludwig Edelstein*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967, p.218.

about treatment and sometimes a cure, were common, particularly in the sanctuaries (temple sites) of Asclepius. Asclepius was the Greek and Roman god of healing, and the patron deity of doctors, physicians and medicine. Asclepius arrived in Athens only in 420/419 BC, and was soon joined in his sanctuary on the south side of the Acropolis by Hygieia, goddess of health and hygiene. Distinguished private citizens were among the earliest supporters of the cult, including Sophocles, the fifth century tragic playwright, who was priest at the shrine.

Athens was not the only city to welcome this new god and the various members of his family, including Hygieia, Panacea and Epione. By the mid 4th century his cult was established in many parts of the Greek speaking world, from Cyrene on the coast of Africa to the island of Thasos in the Northern Aegean and from Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) in the East to Sicily in the West. Associations of worshippers (these are 'private' religious associations, referred to as *thiasoi* in Greek) of Asclepius are known from across the Greek world from the 4th / 3rd century BC until the 3rd century AD.

Asclepius co-existed as a healer with many other similar cults. Apollo, his father, in particular never lost his functions as a healing god. Many semi-divinities and heroes had healing shrines (involving the use of oracles and divination) such as the hero Amphiaraus who had his own sanctuary with incubation rooms (for patients to sleep in, in order to receive an oracle in the dream which would suggest a cure or practices for healing) in Oropus, Northern Greece. As Vivian Nutton, an authority on ancient medicine, has pointed out:

...any divinity had the power to protect and to heal, and that sufferers from illness had a very wide choice of divinities to whom they could appeal for assistance. The author of *Regimen* mentioned Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Hermes, Earth, sun and the Heroes as healers who might be invoked to avert disease.⁹

Many Asclepian sanctuaries throughout the Graeco-Roman World, including those at Epidauros, Pergamon and Kos, were well-known for their incubation procedures. Incubation, sleeping in the temple in order to obtain a dream oracle from the deity, involved those who were sick and requiring healing going as suppliants to an Asclepian sanctuary. They would generally stay in the sanctuary for a period of several days, undergoing the ritual practice of sleeping in the temple overnight with the expectation of receiving an oracular dream from the god. The clients or inquirers had to undergo a series of ritual preparations preceding their "incubation." Asclepius was thought to appear to suppliants in their dreams, in direct epiphany or in the form of his statue or in the form of a snake (an animal sacred to the god), and either heal the person directly or prescribe medical treatment.

As briefly mentioned above, throughout Antiquity, dream oracles obtained through incubation rituals were not uniquely practised in sanctuaries of Asclepius, but were also practised in the sanctuaries of the Graeco-Egyptian deities Sarapis and Isis, and in caves and subterranean chambers throughout Greece, dedicated to various semi-divinities, *daimones* and heroes.¹⁰ The most well-known of these is the god or semi-divinity Trophonios, who had an Oracle from at least the sixth century BC in a cave in Lebadea, Boeotia. The procedure of consultation is attested by Pausanias, who describes the *katabasis* of the inquirer into the cave

⁹ Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, London: Routledge, 2004, 108.

¹⁰ Cf. Y. Ustinova, "Either a Daimon, or a Hero, or Perhaps a God:" Mythical Residents of Subterranean Chambers," *Kernos* 15 (2002), 267-88, for a comprehensive analysis of these semi-divinities, *daimones* and heroes and their subterranean places of worship, which often included oracles. She describes the cults, myths and forms of worship devoted to Amphiaraus, Trophonios, Kaineus, Aristaios, Zalmoxis, Rhesos and Althaimenes of Rhodes, as well as the subterranean nature of Asclepius' iatromantic cult at Tricca, Thessaly.

and the expected epiphany of Trophonios, considered to appear directly to the inquirer in a dream or vision.¹¹ Other ancient accounts describe legendary encounters with the Oracle of Trophonios.¹² This cult shared many similarities with that of Asclepius including, most notably, the direct epiphany of the deity in a dream and the prevalence of snakes at the cult site, which were thought to be a direct manifestation of the deity. Amphiaraos, a famous seer and hero, also had a dream incubation Oracle at Oropos in Boeotia and a shrine near Thebes.

The Incubation Ritual and Dream Oracles from Asclepius

Details of the incubation ritual and the epiphany of the god and the treatment of the sick are available to us through inscriptions inscribed on *stelae* (tablets) within the Temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus and other Asclepian sanctuaries, dating from the late third or early second century B.C. These give the testimonies of those who were cured and were inscribed on tablets around the sanctuary walls. Those from Epidaurus, which are the most extensive group of cure inscriptions to survive, must represent only a selection of the accounts given to the priests or guardians of the shrine and then carved onto the temple wall in a long consecutive series of case histories. Two such *stelae* still survive today, although there seem to have been more erected in the temple. Pausanias tells us that there were six tablets on display in his day, upon which were inscribed the names of those who were healed, the disease from which they suffered and how each patient was cured.¹³ The quality of writing and the stylised nature of the accounts indicate that they are an official collection of testimonies established by the temple priests.¹⁴ Strabo reports that votive tablets were also erected at Kos and Tricca, which seems to indicate a widespread similarity in the healing procedures at Asclepius' temples. Since Asclepius had many temples throughout the Graeco-Roman world where incubation and healing rituals were regularly practised, it was customary for the sick to go to the nearest shrine.

The sick themselves usually underwent the incubation procedure, although it was possible that another person could undergo incubation acting on their behalf. Those undergoing the incubation had to undergo preparation: this included bathing, a purification ritual which was intended to purify body and soul, and offering sacrifices to the god and to other deities, which seem to have consisted of honey-cakes although they may have included other offerings.¹⁵ The patients did not have to pay any fee of admission to undergo incubation in Asclepius' temples. Having undertaken the preliminary ritual preparations, the patient would enter the *abaton*, the special hall built for incubation and lie down on the floor, on a pallet. At Athens, the suppliants slept opposite the statue of the god. In the temples of

¹¹ Cf. Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 9.39.4-14.

¹² Cf. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 8.19-20; Plutarch, *De gen.* 21-2, 590a-592f Cf. M. Hamilton, *Incubation*, London: Henderson, 1906, 88-93.

¹³ Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 2.27.3.

¹⁴ H.C. Kee, "Self-Definition in the Asclepius Cult," in B.F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders (eds.) (1982), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition Volume 3: Self-Definition in the Graeco-Roman World*, London: SCM Press, 122.

¹⁵ Aristophanes, *Plut.* 633-747, Testimony 421 in Ludwig Edelstein (1945a) I.213-220; Testimony 511 in Ludwig Edelstein (1945a) I.290. A set of ritual rules, *lex sacra*, have been found engraved on stone at Asclepius' sanctuary in Pergamon, Asia Minor, although these are quite late (second century AD), cf. A. Petsalis-Diomidis, "The Body in Space: Visual Dynamics in Graeco-Roman Healing Pilgrimage," in J. Elsner and I. Rutherford (eds.), *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 200-203 for the original text and a translation of the *lex sacra*. These ritual rules are a detailed set of instructions for pilgrims undergoing the incubation ritual at Pergamon, including the order of sacrifices to be made to specific deities and the rules of purification (including abstaining from certain foods and from sex). It is unclear to what extent ritual rules regarding preparations for incubation differed at specific Asclepian sanctuaries, although all would include some type of purificatory ritual before the incubation occurred. Cf. Ludwig Edelstein (1945b) II.186-7.

Asclepius, suppliants did not sleep on animal skins, as they did during incubation rituals at other incubation and healing sanctuaries, such as those of Trophonios and Amphiaraus. When the patients had assembled in the *abaton*, the lights were extinguished by the priest shortly before the god was supposed to make his appearance.

If the suppliants were fortunate, while asleep they would receive a vision and often an oracle from Asclepius. In the dream, sometimes the god himself appeared and healed them by acting as a physician or surgeon; sometimes in the dream Asclepius appeared to the suppliant and delivered an oracle which might have required further assistance to be understood. On waking, the sufferer might be completely recovered, all paralysis or swellings gone, but sometimes the god had given instructions which needed to be interpreted by a priest or temple guardian and then followed up before a cure was secured.

Most of the cure inscriptions are reports of chronic sickness cured by divine intervention: paralysis, facial blemishes, blindness, 'lice,' swellings and a failure to conceive are all mentioned. Later cure inscriptions from the shrines in Rome, Pergamum and Lebena tell similar stories. The walls of the shrines were also hung with tablets and representations of parts of the body that were healed, some in terracotta or stone, others in bronze, silver or gold – hands, feet, legs, arms, ears, breasts, genitalia, as well as images of the whole invalid.

Inscriptions from the Sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidauros (some examples)

A man with an abscess within his abdomen. When asleep in the Temple he saw a dream. It seemed to him that the god ordered the servants who accompanied him to grip him and hold him tightly so that he could cut open his abdomen. The man tried to get away, but they gripped him and bound him to a door knocker. Thereupon Asclepius cut his belly open, removed the abscess, and after having stitched him up again, released him from his bonds. Whereupon he walked out sound, but the floor of the Abaton was covered with blood.
(L. and E.J. Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, Volume 1, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1945, 1.235, no. 27)

Hermodicus of Lampsacus was paralyzed in body. This one, when he slept in the Temple, the god healed and he ordered him upon coming out to bring to the Temple as large a stone as he could. The man brought the stone which now lies before the Abaton.
(Edelstein (1945), *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, Volume 1, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1945, 1.232-3, no. 15)

Asclepius' Healing and Doctors

What was the relationship between ancient doctors and Asclepius' healing sanctuaries and incubation shrines? The exact nature of the relationship is uncertain, but recent research suggests that doctors may have been employed at Asclepius' temples to assist and advise the priests. There is also some evidence that doctors are known to have actually been priests of the god themselves in the incubation shrines. It is probable that for the biggest festivals, Epidauros arranged for doctors to be present to attend the ailments of those who travelled a long way. The inscriptions from Epidauros are silent about relationship between doctors and the shrine (but they focus on cures, not on who was doing the healing), but the Athenian evidence suggests a considerable degree of co-operation. In the 3rd century BC it was already an 'ancestral custom' for physicians who were in the service of the state to make a sacrifice twice a year to Asclepius and Hygeia on behalf of themselves and the patients whom they had healed. The shrine's inventories list dedications of surgical instruments, cupping flasks and

medical writing tablets – showing that doctors were among those who made offerings to the god. Decrees were set up at Temple of Asclepius on Cos – in honour of physicians.

It is important to note that the author of the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease* does not direct his attack against temples and shrines, as such – for in them the decision to heal or not is left to the divinity – but against those who claim to be able to drive out demons and compel the gods to do their will by means of chants and charms. He attacks providers of sacred healing who wander from place to place claiming a personal, non-institutional relationship with the gods. Their assertion that they can in some way order the gods to do what they want is truly impious for it detracts from the majesty and power of the gods.

THE HEALING ORACLE OF DEMETER IN PATRAS: MIRRORS AND CATOPTROMANCY

On the healing Oracle of the goddess Demeter at Patras in Greece, mirror divination (*Catoptromancy*) and related practices please see my article:

Crystal Addey., “Mirrors and Divination: *Catoptromancy*, Oracles and Earth Goddesses in Antiquity,” in Miranda Anderson (ed.), *The Book of the Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Collection exploring the Cultural Story of the Mirror*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, 32-46.

ORACLES OF SARAPIS AND ISIS IN HELLENISTIC GREECE AND LATE ANTIQUITY

It was not only the god Asclepius who was thought to heal through oracles and dream visions in his sanctuaries and temples. Both the Graeco-Egyptian god Sarapis and the Egyptian goddess Isis were also thought to have the power to heal through oracles given in their temples. Below, I set out some of the main features of the cult of Sarapis, particularly oracular and “incubation” practices which were associated with his cult.

Sarapis (Latin: “Serapis”) was a god of Graeco-Roman Egypt who appears to have been a Graeco-Egyptian hybrid deity. The worship and cult of Sarapis is attested from the early Hellenistic period, although it may actually be much older. The name of the god first appears in the fourth century BC, but it is in the third century BC that the cult of Sarapis attained prominence in Egypt and the Greek world, with the establishment of many cult centres throughout the Mediterranean. There is great debate amongst scholars regarding the role of the Ptolemies in either creating or propagating the cult of Sarapis throughout the Mediterranean basin. Hellenistic writers variously equate Sarapis with Osiris, Dionysus, Pluto, Zeus, Helios and Asclepius. Sarapis was often connected with the goddess Isis, perhaps due to his connection with Osiris, Isis’ traditional consort. Osiris, a prominent Egyptian deity of death and fertility, is often connected, and sometimes identified, with Sarapis.

As well as being a saviour god who was associated with the afterlife and fertility, Sarapis was also an oracular and healing deity, with similar functions to those of Asclepius. Although there is some evidence for the identification of these deities, it seems more likely that, rather than any kind of formal syncretism between them, the connection rested upon their similar powers. Like Asclepius, Sarapis was a healing and saviour deity who bestowed cures upon worshippers via dream incubation and oracles.

As with the incubation procedures undertaken in Asclepian temples, those wishing to be treated for ill health would sleep in a temple of Sarapis, in the hope of receiving a dream oracle from the god offering a medical cure or prescription for treatment. Plutarch writes of an Oracle at Canopus in Egypt, which appears to have belonged to Sarapis:

In fact, men assert that Sarapis is none other than Pluto and that Isis is Persephone, even as Archemachus of Euboea has said, and also Heracleides Ponticus who holds the oracle in Canopus to be an oracle of Pluto.¹⁶

The context of this citation makes it clear that as far as Plutarch was concerned, “the Oracle at Canopus” belongs to Sarapis, since he cites Heraclides as proof that Sarapis and Pluto were the same deity. In the first century BC, Strabo described the shrine of Sarapis at Canopus in considerable detail, and mentioned the fame of its incubation cures and its oracles.¹⁷

Sarapis’ identification with Pluto and chthonic associations with the underworld, *daimones* and death, may well have affected his role as an oracular god. I have argued elsewhere for the close connections between oracles, healing, chthonic power and earth goddesses in Antiquity, particularly the goddess Demeter, linked to the Underworld through her daughter Persephone.¹⁸ Generally healing power and its opposites, destruction and death, were often connected with the same deity in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, so that Pluto, for example, has associations with wealth and fertility, as well as being the god of the Underworld. Similarly, Hekate was an Underworld goddess associated with *daimones* and ghosts, but also a saviour goddess. For the Greeks, a deity has power over a whole area or sphere of activity and encapsulates both the negative and positive aspects of their attributes.

Sarapis seems to have been particularly associated with the healing of blindness and other ophthalmic ailments. In the sanctuaries (temple sites) of Sarapis on the Greek island of Delos, many silver and gold votive offerings to the god in the form of pairs of eyes have been discovered, suggesting that the healing of blindness and other ophthalmic disorders was Sarapis’ speciality, at least at Delos. Demetrius of Phalerum was cured of blindness by Sarapis, and also wrote five books about dreams and cures involving Sarapis. Tacitus reports that the Roman emperor Vespasian performed several miraculous healings involving ophthalmic ailments under the auspices of Sarapis when he was in Alexandria in 69 AD.¹⁹ However, a degree of caution must be employed in interpreting the votive offerings of eyes and Sarapis’ connections with eyes only in a literal manner, for Plutarch, who explicitly identifies Sarapis with Osiris, asserts that:

Then again, they [i.e. the Egyptians] depict Osiris by means of an eye and a sceptre, the one of which indicates forethought and the other power...²⁰

If, as Plutarch maintains, Sarapis/Osiris was linked with forethought (*provnoia*), this may well be a significant reason for his role as an oracular deity. Additionally, it may have been thought that Sarapis bestowed forethought and wisdom upon his devotees as an element of

¹⁶ Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*,. 361e-f, trs. trs: F.C. Babbitt (1936; repr. 2003), *Moralia*, Vol. 5, Loeb, London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, with my own slight emendations.

¹⁷ Strabo 17.1.17 (801c), trs. H.L. Jones (1932), Loeb Vol. 8, London: Heinemann.

¹⁸ Crystal Addey, “Mirrors and Divination: *Catoptromancy*, Oracles and Earth Goddesses in Antiquity,” in M. Anderson (ed.), *The Book of the Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Collection exploring the Cultural Story of the Mirror*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007, 32-46.

¹⁹ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.82.

²⁰ Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, 371e. Cf. 354f-355a.

his healing powers and that those who received forethought or some kind of revelation from the god dedicated offerings in the shape of eyes, as a symbol of forethought, to the god.

Literary and epigraphic evidence attests more generally to the dream oracles and healing powers of Sarapis and the practice of dream incubation, both for healing and for other non-medical purposes. Plutarch refers to a temple of Sarapis in Babylon in 323 BC, reporting the fact that Alexander's advisors consulted the god when Alexander was on his deathbed, to see if they should take him to the *Sarapeion*.²¹ Inscriptions in the Delos temples of Sarapis frequently attest dream appearances, which parallel those in which Asclepius appeared at his shrines. In fact, the inscription (dated to approximately 200 BC) from the temple courtyard of Serapeum A records how Sarapis used dreams to encourage the Egyptian priest Apollonius II to build and dedicate a temple to Sarapis on Delos. Evidence suggests that in Egypt, it is usually in connection with the Alexandrian cult that Sarapis' prominence as a healing deity is attested.

There is also much evidence that astrology may have been used in the temples of Sarapis in Graeco-Roman Egypt in the first, second and third centuries AD.²² In particular, much iconographic evidence indicates the presence of astrological practice within the cult of Sarapis. For example, approximately ten mummy portraits from the first to third centuries AD depict priests of Sarapis wearing diadems affixed with a disk which supports a seven-rayed star; the disk and seven-rayed star are symbols often linked with Sarapis, and since generic stars on Greek coins and gems generally carry six or eight rays, it seems as though the seven-rayed stars attached to these priestly diadems represent the seven planets, the central crux of astrological theory and practice. Many gems depict the bust of Sarapis surrounded by a ring of the twelve zodiac signs. A statue depicts the head of a Sarapis priest wearing the diadem with the disk and seven-rayed star attached; on the base of this statue is engraved a zodiac ring, connecting the astrological zodiac to the priests of Sarapis. Some gems show Sarapis surrounded by two concentric rings, one of which bears the twelve zodiac signs and the other, the seven planetary gods. A coin depicts Sarapis and Isis surrounded by a double zodiac: James Evans argues convincingly that the presence of the double zodiac had to be inspired by actual astrological apparatus.²³

Moreover, we have documentary evidence that zodiacal prognostication was associated with Sarapis before the middle of the second century BC. A papyrus known as the *Art of Eudoxus*, which represents the earliest extant Greek astronomical document with illustrations, depicts a zodiac circle at the end of the text, within which is written, "Celestial circle/Oracles of Sarapis." A second hand has interspersed the following lines among the lines of the colophon: "Work O men, in order [to work] no longer. Oracles of Sarapis. Oracles of Hermes." Since there is little other evidence for Greek horoscopic astrology at so early a date, it is not necessary to assume that the writer worked on a full-fledged horoscope. Yet, this papyrus provides evidence that by the time of its composition (i.e. before 163 BC) some sort of zodiacal prognostication was already being practised in the temples of Sarapis.

²¹ Plut. *Alexander*. 76.4, trs. B. Perrin, Loeb Vol. 7. Other examples of oracular dreams from Sarapis: Artemidorus, 4.80; Pseudo-Callisthenes 1.33, 3.24 (third century AD work).

²² Evans, J. (2004), "The Astrologer's Apparatus: A Picture of Professional Practice in Greco-Roman Egypt," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 35.1: 1-44.

²³ Evans, J. (2004), "The Astrologer's Apparatus: A Picture of Professional Practice in Greco-Roman Egypt," *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 35.1: 27-32.

A BRIEF NOTE ON GALEN

Galen, who was from Pergamum, is a pivotal figure in the history of Western medicine. He was a physician who was born in 129 AD at Pergamum and was a Roman citizen. It was as a result of a dream (or dreams) sent by Asclepius to his father that the sixteen yr old Galen was turned towards the study of medicine.

The pious Galen rules out a simple dichotomy between a secular and a religious approach to health and healing. Galen was an avowed worshipper of Asclepius and was confident that his whole career was guided by the god.

MEDICINE, MAGIC, DIVINATION, RELIGION AND COSMOLOGY: FURTHER QUESTIONS

When religion is 'embedded' (i.e. thought to influence and underlie every aspect of human life and of the cosmos) and polytheistic, as Greek and Roman religion was, can there be a divide between secular and religious approaches towards phenomena such as healing?

Furthermore, when a religion often seems to be pantheistic (or at least many ancient philosophers, cosmologists and thinkers imply that they thought it was pantheistic), i.e. that all phenomena and everything in the cosmos is seen as being full of the divine and the gods are in everything, can there be a divide between religious and medical approaches towards healing?

Extract from *On the Sacred Disease in Hippocratic writings* (ed. G.E.R. Lloyd (1978))

1. I do not believe that the 'Sacred Disease' is any more divine or sacred than any other disease but, on the contrary, has specific characteristics and a definite cause. Nevertheless, because it is completely different from other diseases, it has been regarded as a divine visitation by those who, being only human, view it with ignorance and astonishment. This theory of divine origin, though supported by the difficulty of understanding the malady, is weakened by the simplicity of the cure, consisting merely of ritual purification and incantation. If remarkable features in a malady were evidence of divine visitation, then there would be many 'sacred diseases,' as I shall show. Quotidian, tertian and quartan fevers are among other diseases no less remarkable and portentous and yet no one regards them as having a divine origin. I do not believe that those diseases have any less claim to be caused by a god than the so-called 'sacred' disease but they are not the objects of popular wonder. Again, no less remarkably, I have seen men go mad and become delirious for no obvious reason and do many strange things. I have seen many cases of people groaning and shouting in their sleep, some who choke; others jump from their bed and run outside and remain out of their mind till they wake, when they are as healthy and sane as they were before, although perhaps rather pale and weak. These things are not isolated events but frequent occurrences. There are many other remarkable afflictions of various sorts, but it would take too long to describe them in detail.

2. It is my opinion that those who first called this disease 'sacred' were the sort of people we now call witch-doctors, faith-healers, quacks and charlatans. These are exactly the people who pretend to be very pious and to be particularly wise. By invoking a divine element they were able to screen their own failure to give suitable treatment and so called this a 'sacred' malady to conceal their ignorance of its nature. By picking their phrases carefully, prescribing purifications and incantations along with abstinence from baths and from many foods unsuitable for the sick, they ensured that their therapeutic measures were safe for themselves. The following fish were forbidden as being the most harmful: mullet, black-tail, hammer and eel. Goat, venison, pork and dog were considered most likely among meats to upset the stomach. Of fowls: cock, turtle-dove and buzzard and those which are considered very rich were forbidden; white mint, garlic and onion were excluded from the diet because over-flavoured food is not good for a sick man. Further, their patients were forbidden to wear black because it is a sign of death, to use goat skin blankets or to wear goat skins, nor were they allowed to put one foot on the other or one hand on the other; and all these things were regarded as preventative measures against the disease. These prohibitions are added on account of the divine element in the malady, suggesting that these practitioners had special knowledge. They also employ other pretexts so that, if the patient be cured, their reputation for cleverness is enhanced while, if he dies, they can excuse themselves by explaining that the gods are to blame while they themselves did nothing wrong; that they did not prescribe the taking of any medicine whether liquid or solid, nor any baths which might have been responsible.
I suppose none of the inhabitants of the interior of Libya can possibly be healthy seeing that they sleep on goat skins and eat goat meat. In fact, they possess neither blanket, garment nor shoe that is not made of goat skin, because goats are the only animals they keep. If contact with or eating of this animal causes and exacerbates the disease while abstinence from it cures the disease, then diet is alone the factor which

decides the onset of the disease and its cure. No god can be blamed and the purifications are useless and the idea of divine intervention comes to nought.

3. It seems, then, that those who attempt to cure disease by this sort of treatment do not really consider the maladies thus treated of sacred or of divine origin. If the disease can be cured by purification and similar treatment then what is to prevent its being brought on by like devices? The man who can get rid of a disease by his magic could equally well bring it on; again there is nothing divine about this but a human element is involved. By such claims and trickery, these practitioners pretend a deeper knowledge than is given to others; with their prescriptions of 'sanctifications' and 'purifications,' their patter about divine visitation and possession by devils, they seek to deceive. And yet I believe that all these professions of piety are really more like impiety and a denial of the existence of the gods, and all their religion and talk of divine visitation is an impious fraud which I shall proceed to expose.

4. If these people claim to know how to draw down the moon, cause an eclipse of the sun, make storms and fine weather, rain and drought, to make the sea too rough for sailing or the land infertile, and all the rest of their nonsense, then, whether they claim to be able to do it by magic or by some other method, they seem to be impious rogues. Either they do not believe in the existence of the gods or they believe that the gods are powerless or would not refrain from the most dastardly acts. Surely conduct such as this must render them hateful to the gods. If a man were to draw down the moon or cause an eclipse of the sun, or make storms or fine weather by magic and sacrifices, I should not call any of these things a divine visitation but a human one, because the divine power has been overcome and forced into subjection by the human will. But perhaps these claims are not true and it is men in search of a living who invent all these fancy tales about this particular disease and all the others too. They make a different god responsible for each of the different forms of the complaint.

If the sufferer acts like a goat, and if he roars, or has convulsions involving the right side, they say the Mother of the Gods is responsible. If he utters a higher-pitched and louder cry, they say he is like a horse and blame Poseidon. If the sufferer should be incontinent of faeces, as sometimes happens under the stress of an attack, Enodia is the name. If the stools are more frequent and thin like those of birds, it is Apollo Nomius; if he foam at the mouth and kick out his feet, Ares is to blame. If he suffers at night from fear and panic, from attacks of insanity, or if he jumps out of bed and runs outside, they talk of attacks of Hecate and the assaults of the Heroes. *In using purifications and spells they perform what I consider a most irreligious and impious act, for, in treating sufferers from this disease by purification with blood and like things, they behave as if the sufferers were ritually unclean, the victims of divine vengeance or of human magic or had done something sacrilegious. It would have been better if they had done the opposite and taken the sick into the temples, there, by sacrifice and prayer, to make supplication to the gods; instead they simply purify them and do none of these things. Charms are buried in the ground, thrown into the sea or carried off into the mountains where no one may touch them or tread on them. If a god really be responsible, surely these things should be taken into the temples as offerings.*

Personally I believe that human bodies cannot be polluted by a god; the basest object by the most pure. But if the human body is polluted by some other agency or is harmed in some way, then the presence of a god would be more likely to purify and sanctify it than pollute it.