

## The Use of Water in Asclepieia

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### Introduction

The use of water for therapeutic purposes has been known in Greece since the ancient times. The ancient Greeks were the pioneers in the use of warm and cold baths, especially for the hygiene and cleanliness of the body, as well as for the treatment of various diseases. Asclepius was one of the greatest healers of ancient Greece. Cult places for the healing god are uninterruptedly frequented in the Greek world, from the late Classical to the late Imperial period and enjoyed great popularity especially during the Hellenistic and Roman times (Melfi, 2010, Lioulias, 2010). The most characteristic of Asclepius therapeutic practice was the “ritual”, the main part of which was the water, followed by special diet, hygiene and purification rules.

### The importance of water in ritual of Egkoimisis and Purity

The location of Asclepieia next to thermal springs is connected with physical therapy. They have been located some distance from the urban settlement, in or near a grove, next to natural springs or the sea. Still, most of the Asclepieia were built in holy places and were considered sacred by the people before their devotion to Asclepius (Chatzinikolaou, 1999, Panagiotidou, 2014). The temples were often protected, located in concavities or in open valleys and hills with water streams, which were passed through the temples and were considered shelters (Vincent, 2009). Dedicated to Asclepius, the Asclepieia were not only temples of worship but also medical care centers. Scattered throughout the ancient world, they were over 300 in number, the largest and most famous being those of Trikke, Epidaurus, Kos, Athens, Corinth, Pergamon and Lebena. Data from ancient literary sources, such as the comedy “Plutus” by Aristophanes and the works of Pausanias, Strabo, Plutarch, Lucian of Samosata and others, and also archeological findings from some of the largest Asclepieia, provide valuable information about the operation of these holy institutions (Christopoulou-Aletra et al., 2010). At Asclepieia, the daily rituals were performed by priests, while the cities organized celebrations dedicated to Asclepius (Panagiotidou, 2014). During the consecration, the priests entered into the *Avaton*, which was connected to water springs and practiced the treatments as the patients slept (Economidou, 2015). According to Aristophanes, water had an important role in the ritual of incubation (Egkoimisis). There are abundant natural elements of Asclepieia, including those related to slumbers, springs, wells, fountains, small and big cisterns for complete immersion of the body and other water containers. Also, it is not at all clear what kind of water was used exclusively for Egkoimisis, and if the water available near *Avaton* was intended for cleaning or hydrotherapy or both. The only valid conclusion is that the water at the entrance of a sanctuary was mainly intended for the symbolic cleansing required for those visiting any Greek sanctuary, not only Asclepieia - as suggested by Hippocrates. Usually, outside from the sanctuary (and possibly at a distance from the entrance), there was a small basin serving as a local cleansing bath, since, according to the sacred laws of Asclepius, visitors had to be washed from impurities caused by various activities before entering the sanctuary (Renberg, 2017).

### Role Of Water In The Sanctuaries Of Asclepius

Asclepieia were located next to springs, in holy places, so as to supply the temple with water. The landscape, combined with the holy waters and the groves, had a direct influence on people's health, releasing them from stress and other factors. Patients were relaxing to retrieve their vision or voice or to be cured from breast and foot disorders. In addition, the water was not only medical and beneficial to patients, but even to those who were healthy (Panagiotidou, 2014). Asclepieia were built around springs, e.g. the Asclepieion of Epidaurus and Pergamon, which were built in forest valleys next to springs. Also, the Asclepieio of Lebena, which was built on the southern coast of Crete in a landscape dominated by the harbor and a spring, and the Asclepieio of Kos, which was built near hot springs, with thermal baths (Panagiotidou, 2014), while the Asclepieion of Gortyn was situated beside the river Loussios.

Bathing facilities were found in almost all the sanctuaries of Asclepius, such as in Dion, the Asclepieio of Veria and others. The statue of Health was found in Kelepouri, to the south of the sanctuary of Asclepius, where a bath complex was excavated. At the same time, it is not unlikely that the abundance of water in these areas have also been used for healing purposes, resulting from the large number of bathing facilities that were excavated in the area, combined with the particularly intense worship of Asclepius in the city. Four bath complexes have emerged from the city of Dion including the large *Thermae* (Figure 1): (i) the big *thermae* near the southern entrance of the city, (ii) the so-called forum *thermae* in the NE corner of the respective complex, (iii) the *thermae* of the main road to the east of the sanctuary, and (iv) finally the so-called *thermae* of the eastern road located in the south of the Dionysus mansion (Lioulias, 2010).



**Figure 1. Aerial photography of the great thermae complex at Dion**  
([http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/eh251.jsp?obj\\_id=976](http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/2/eh251.jsp?obj_id=976))

In addition, the existence of baths is also concerned in the case of Asclepieion of Veria in which it is believed that there should be a set of bathing facilities. Excavations have revealed special architectural elements, as well as statues that indicate the quality of its construction (Lioulias, 2010).

### **Conclusions**

It is generally accepted that Asclepieia in ancient Greece offered health care, combining experimental therapeutic methods with a variety of religious elements. The holistic approach they used to treat patients was based on the healing properties of the natural environment: knowledge of the life force of the sun, water, minerals, rocks, and knowledge of the properties of medicinal plants. What is now at the core of modern hospital design seems to have been a well-established practice in ancient Greek therapeutic centers. This is evident in the careful selection of the location of sanctuaries of Asclepius, which did not lack running water, and in some cases also healing springs (Christopoulou-Aletra et al., 2010). We can conclude that the importance of "heilig water", which was used for natural and spiritual purification, while offering treatment to patients through its properties, was fundamental in the general holistic philosophy and function of Asclepieia.

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