
Asklepios, Medicine, and the Politics of Healing in Fifth-Century Greece: Between Craft and Cult by Bronwen L. Wickkiser

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 178. ISBN 13-978-0-8018-8978-3. Cloth \$55.00

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This is a revised version of part of a 2003 Austin thesis, directed by Lesley Dean-Jones. Despite the restrictions in its title, it offers new ideas about a variety of healing cults in later Greece, and even in Italy, although its main focus is on the burgeoning of the cult of Asclepius and specifically its arrival in Athens between 421 and 417 BC. After decades in which scholars largely contented themselves with quoting the literary evidence assembled by the Edelsteins in their deservedly famous *Asclepius* [1945], the last 20 years have seen a revival of interest in ancient healing religions, led principally by archaeologists and epigraphists. The range of easily accessible material has expanded enormously; new journals dealing with ancient religion like *Kernos* have sprung up; and young scholars in Italy, Germany, France, and the USA have challenged many of the older presuppositions about healing cults in Classical Antiquity. Above all, there has been a welcome return to setting ancient religion within a civic, and often a political, context. From being a dully antiquarian study, ancient religion has become a very controversial topic, with new and important contributions constantly appearing. Although Wickkiser has done her best to integrate some very recent studies into her revision, she has at times been unable to do little more than add a footnote reference; and one would have liked to hear more of her views on Melfi's *I santuari di Asclepio in Grecia* [2007] or on Riethmüller's massive *Asklepios. Heiligtümer und Kulte* [2005], a fundamental survey of the archaeological, epigraphic, and numismatic evidence for shrines of Asclepius in the Ancient World.

But these weaknesses are unavoidable in a fast-changing debate and do not seriously detract from the value of this short book. Elegantly written, and with a sound command of the original Greek, it

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ISSN 1549-4497 (online)

ISSN 1549-4470 (print)

ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)

Aestimatio 6 (2009) 111-115

provides an excellent introduction to the rise of Asclepius' cult in Athens.¹ It also promotes a clear and challenging thesis. In her view, the spread of Asclepius' cult is in large part the result of the rise of medicine as a craft in the late fifth century; and, at Athens in particular, it was deliberately fostered by leading Athenians and by the Athenian state for their own political reasons. The introduction of Asclepius into the city in 420/419 BC was not a private initiative but one sanctioned at the highest civic level. It was not a response to the plague of 430–426, but part of a political rapprochement with neighbors across the Saronic Gulf to gain allies against Sparta. Neither thesis is entirely new, but Wickkiser provides some fascinating perspectives, even if some of her conclusions require modification.

Wickkiser rightly rejects the traditional dichotomy between religion and healing, and refuses to see Athenian, or Greek doctors, for that matter, deliberately setting out to create an anti-religious system of healing. Her arguments are compelling, not least because of the part played by doctors in endowing healing shrines and, as at Athens, participating in certain cult rites and practices. But she goes too far in claiming that Asclepius' cult burgeoned as a reaction to the rise of medicine, and as a response of patients faced with doctors who were now encouraged to avoid treating the sick as part of their new professionalism. Asclepius thus stepped in when doctors abandoned their patients. The god cured, because doctors in a sense allowed him to.

But this is a difficult thesis to sustain for several reasons. The first is simply the absence of evidence. There is nothing to show that earlier doctors did not regularly refuse to treat patients whom they considered incurable, or that the desire of the sick to be healed by whatever means, including the divine, was not prevalent also in the sixth century. Some patients and their families grumbled when doctors refused to help (just as they do today), but the author of the *Art* expected to persuade them that only the incompetent doctor expected to cure every single case—a sentiment that might well

¹ Misunderstandings are few. At p. 57, Wickkiser mistakes a reference to Asclepius as Galen's 'ancestral god' (i.e., both come from Pergamum) for a claim to his being a direct descendant, an Asclepiad like Stertinius Xenophon (who also boasted descent from Hercules, another healing god). The epigraph on p. 10 syncretizes Herophilus of Chalcedon and Erasistratus of Ceos.

have been shared by the wider public. Secondly, the evidence itself, when it exists, is far from convincing as to what happened. Some of the texts cited by Wickkiser date from well after the fifth century, a fact that is still likely to trip up the unwary reader of Edelstein's *Ancient Medicine* [1967]; and one must be careful not to read back into history documents that may not have been written until centuries afterwards.² Much of the advice comes from prescriptive texts on how a doctor should behave—others, by contrast, also discuss palliative care—and it is not always easy to see how these recommendations were put into practice. The situation of the isolated sufferer from *phthisis* in Isocrates' *Aegineticus*, abandoned by friends, most of his family, and doctors hardly depends on recent developments in medical ethics or professionalisation, but reflects a typical human reaction when faced with a distressing, chronic, and fetid illness. The arrival of Asclepius, at least in Attica and perhaps elsewhere, also seems to overshadow existing healing cults, too often forgotten in the story.

Wickkiser's second thesis is more convincing, even if her rejection of any influence from the recent experience of the plague may be excessive. She follows Parker, Clinton, and others in emphasizing that in Classical Greece religion was not just a private matter. The arrival of Asclepius' cult, whatever the role of Telemachus, was sanctioned by the Athenian authorities: it was not some private whim. Wickkiser develops the observations of Clinton about the interactions of Asclepius' cult with both the Eleusianian mysteries and the cult of Dionysus to demonstrate in a clear and convincing manner that the location of the shrine of Asclepius placed it at the very center of Athenian imperial ambitions. Unlike the Asclepieion of Rome, which was on an island in the Tiber and not quite in the city, the Athenian shrine lay on the slopes of the great religious center of Athens, the Acropolis, and visitors to one of its major festivals, the Dionysia, took their seats in the theatre immediately below the walls of the shrine. Even if a slightly different political context for the arrival of Asclepius can be envisaged, and even if the later rapid spread of

² Pace p. 131, the *Oath* seems to have been known, and disliked, by Cato in the early second century BC, since he sees it as proof of a conspiracy of doctors against their patients. Wickkiser, like many other scholars, seems not to know the fragments of Galen's commentary on the Hippocratic *Oath*, published by F. Rosenthal [1945], although Galen's observations contain much of relevance.

Asclepius' cult may owe less to Athenian political and military power than Wickkiser implies, her neat demonstration of the interplay of religion and politics is convincing. The thesis itself is not new, but the evidence and arguments that are used by Wickkiser to support it expand our understanding of the whole development.

Given that Wickkiser pursues some of her researches in this book well into the Hellenistic period, it is somewhat surprising to find nothing of the role of Asclepius' cult at Messene [see [Riethmüller 2005](#), 1.141–143, 2.156–167]. Here in the revived city, the shrine of Asclepius was erected in the main square in the center; and legends grew up insisting that Asclepius was a local hero god, not an import from Epidaurus or Thessaly. Here Asclepius' cult is used to establish, or re-establish, a city's political and cultural identity. Isyllus' hymn to Asclepius at Epidaurus has also recently been placed in a political as well as a religious context by Antje Kolde [[2003](#)]. One might also wonder whether the relatively limited influence of the cult of Asclepius at Tricca was not also the result of that region's political impotence throughout the whole of Classical Greek history [see [Aston 2004](#)].

This is a valuable book, even if in its over-eagerness to push its theses it seems rather unconvincing at times. It shows how much the history of ancient healing cults has developed since the Edelsteins, and provides the Anglophone reader with a sound guide to the introduction of the god Asclepius into Athens and Attica. There are indications of how Wickkiser might approach Asclepius' cult in other regions around the Mediterranean, or characterize it in relation to Judaism and Christianity, and it would be good to see them developed further in another book.

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