

## ABSTRACT

### A Healing God Comes to Rome: Aesculapius and the Effects of the Arrival of His Cult

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The importation of Aesculapius, the Greco-Roman god of medicine, into Rome was a monumental event in Roman history. In order to comprehend the implications of the arrival of Aesculapius as well as the importance of his healing cult to the Romans, this thesis, through careful readings and analyses of various ancient literary works, explores the historical background of Aesculapius, the epigraphy of his importation, the effects that his healing cult had on the Roman world, and the downfall of Aesculapius and his cult mainly effected by the rise of Christianity in antiquity. For many Romans, the healing god's departure from Epidaurus, his former dwelling, and arrival at Rome signified more than a mere dismissal of the outbreaks of the plague for which they had summoned the deity. The importation – Aesculapius' "willingness" to come to the aid of the Romans – indicated that the gods favored the Romans and that Rome, now the capital of the world, could find the healing it would need to be the international hub.

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A HEALING GOD COMES TO ROME:  
AESCULAPIUS AND THE EFFECTS OF THE ARRIVAL OF HIS CULT

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Saga and the Historical Background of the Healing God

Ancient Greeks and Romans exalted Asklepius (Aesculapius in Latin) as their god of healing and medicine. For the pagans, the art of medicine and healing was not separable from religion – “the Greeks and the Romans believed that the gods could not only cause, but also cure disease.”<sup>1</sup> The cult of Asklepius thrived much throughout ancient history until the healing cult, one of the last pagan cults to fall, began to deteriorate and disperse after the arrival of Christianity. During this time, Asklepius and his cult had a tremendous impact on the Greco-Roman world; the ancients found comfort and reverence in the god, a compassionate deity who genuinely cared for mortal beings and rendered aid in their needs. The healing god was often imported into various cities and states during times of plague and pestilence.<sup>2</sup> The most notable importation of Asklepius and his cult took place in Rome during its outbreaks of the plague in 295 B.C. The Romans dedicated a temple to Asklepius, a Hellenistic god of medicine, in the Tiber Island. After the importation of Asklepius, the plague dissipated and the Romans gladly revered the healing god and his cult. Although most physicians in the Roman Empire were Greeks,<sup>3</sup> the importation of Asklepius facilitated the practice of Greek physicians in

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<sup>1</sup> Helen King, *Greek and Roman Medicine* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>2</sup> The cult of Asklepius was also imported into Athens from his sanctuary in Epidaurus in 420 B.C. due to an outbreak of plague that destroyed Attica during the Peloponnesian War.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

the Roman world – the introduction of the healing deity is “the first event of ‘medical history’ at Rome.”<sup>4</sup> In order to comprehend the importation of Asklepius and its impacts on Rome, one must first understand the saga of Asklepius – his origin and deification – and the development of his healing cult in the Greco-Roman world.

Various ancient authors and poets tell the story of the healing god. Asklepius, first mentioned in the *Iliad*, is depicted as the father of Podalirius and Machaon, heroes partaking in the Trojan War.<sup>5</sup> Some sources debate about whether Homeric Asklepius is indeed a physician,<sup>6</sup> but most ancient authors (e.g., Pindar, Hesiod, and Apollodorus) portray Asklepius as a physician found blameless in his art of healing. Although some variations occur regarding the origin of Asklepius, many of its elements are quite consistent – namely that Asklepius was begotten from Coronis of Thessaly, who “pleased... the Delphic god” (*placuit tibi, Delphice, Metamorphoses* 2. 543) and that when Apollo, Asklepius’ father, learned of her betrothal to Ischys, Apollo condemned Coronis to death:

icta dedit gemitum tractoque a corpore ferro  
candida puniceo perfudit membra cruore  
et dixit: “Potui poenas tibi, Phoebe, dedisse,

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<sup>4</sup> John Scarborough, *Roman Medicine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Cruse 2004: 16 mentions that “although Homer refers to Asklepius only once by name (*Iliad* II.731), his presence in the poem is important, for medicine as taught and practiced by him in a later period was certainly not a creation out of nothing.” One should note that Asklepius is merely mentioned in the *Iliad* and does not become deified until later in Classical times.

<sup>6</sup> Edelstein 1945: 9 notes that “the assumption that Asklepius was a physician,” despite the implication that his children are depicted as royal princes and aristocratic heroes, is valid because “Machaon and Podalirius are physicians rather than warriors, craftsmen rather than kings” and “it is only for the purposes of the Epic that the heroic mask is superimposed upon the physicians Machaon and Podalirius.”

sed peperisse prius; duo nunc moriemur in una.”  
hactenus, et pariter vitam cum sanguine fudit;  
corpus inane animae frigus letale secutum est.  
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.606 – 611)

Struck [by Phoebus], she gave a groan and, with the Punic iron pulled from her body, she drenched her white limbs in blood and said: “It was right for you, Phoebus, to have punished [me], but to have allowed me to give birth first; now two shall die in one.” [She spoke] thus far, and she poured out her life equally with blood; Her body, empty of spirit, followed the deathly cold.<sup>7</sup>

Realizing that Coronis was carrying his child, the Delphic god rescued his son from Coronis’ womb and entrusted him to Chiron, who “was considered the first physician... [and] enjoyed great and lasting fame on account of his medical accomplishments.”<sup>8</sup> The story of Asklepius goes on to claim that Chiron trained the son of the Delphic god as a physician and his art of healing eventually became so great that he not only healed all kinds of diseases and ailments, but he could also resurrect the dead:

ergo ubi vaticinos concepit mente furores  
incaluitque deo, quem clausum pectore habebat,  
adspicit infantem “toto” que “salutifer orbi  
cresce, puer!” dixit; “tibi se mortalia saepe  
corpora debebunt, animas tibi reddere ademptas  
fas erit, idque semel dis indignantibus ausus  
posse dare hoc iterum flamma prohibebere avita,  
eque deo corpus fies exsanguis deusque,  
qui modo corpus eras, et bis tua fata novabis.”  
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.640-8)

Therefore when [Ocyrhoë] conceived the prophetic madness in her mind and burned with god, with whom she was living enclosed in her heart, she saw the child and said “Grow, boy, the healer for the whole world! Often the mortal bodies will be indebted to you, it will be your right to return the dead souls, and having dared it once with the gods offended

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<sup>7</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1945, 1988), 5.



you will be prohibited to be able to give this again by your grandfather's fire, and on account of a god you will be made a bloodless body and [then] you, who were just a body, will be made a god, and you will renew twice your fates."

Many ancient sources offer differing reasons as to exactly why Asklepius was killed.

Asklepius' death is sometimes seen as a divine retribution for "[infringing] upon the rights which death has over mortals,"<sup>9</sup> Zeus' response to Hades' complaints about his diminishing reign, or Zeus' attempt to halt the mortals' progression into realm of divinity.<sup>10</sup> But the general assertion is that Zeus killed Asklepius because he gained the capacity "to return the dead souls" (*animas... reddere ademptas*, *Metamorphoses* 2.644).<sup>11</sup> Despite the different reasons for his death in various sources, Asklepius nevertheless underwent deification after his death, and thus a healing god was born.<sup>12</sup>

Asklepius was not the only pagan god who could utilize the art of healing. Other deities, at times, were also able to mend mortals or punish them with afflictions and diseases. Indeed, although more than a hundred healing shrines exist in Italy, not all of

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<sup>9</sup> Edelstein, 46.

<sup>10</sup> King 2001: 4 notes that, in some ancient literary works, "Asklepius' crime was not so much raising the dead, but doing it because he was offered a substantial amount of gold as a bribe."

<sup>11</sup> Stephens 1958: 181 asserts that "as was natural for a healing god, Aesculapius himself was regarded as a savior from death" and, specifically in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "the crime for which Aesculapius is to be killed is defiance of the gods, restoring to life those whom the gods had punished by death."

<sup>12</sup> There are debates among scholars regarding the origin of Asklepius and his posthumous deification. As Cruse 2004: 22 asserts, "because of his mixed parentage, controversy has always existed as to whether Asklepius was god or a hero." Edelstein 1988: 39 notes that "Thraemer, *Pauly-Wissowa*, II, p. 1653, 4 ff., reasons that Asklepius must have been a god" from the very beginning and adopted mortal-like qualities during his stay on earth, while "Farnell, *Hero Cults*, p. 244, advocates that [Asklepius] was a human being," who was immortalized and became a god after his death.

them were dedicated to and presided over by Asklepius because other godheads assumed healing powers.<sup>13</sup> Then why did the ancients seek Asklepius more than any other pagan gods for healing? Asklepius significantly differs from other gods who displayed healing power. For instance, Asklepius' father, Apollo, was also considered a god of medicine, but the Delphic god's domain extended far beyond that of art of healing. Asklepius' domain, on the other hand, was solely that of a physician; he was an exceptionally gifted physician in life, and he was a healing specialist as a god. Another important difference to note between Asklepius and the other gods, who could heal if they so desired, is that the latter genuinely cared for the well-being of mortals. In various ancient works, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the preeminent gods often do not act solely for the good of mortal beings and instead cause immense collateral damage without a concern for those whom they deem inferior.<sup>14</sup> Asklepius did not act thus – for the most part, the healing god was good and moral.<sup>15</sup> He “was different from other gods in the Greek pantheon... [and] unlike his father, Apollo, his nature is not dualistic; he was benign and kindly and

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<sup>13</sup> Audrey Cruse, *Roman Medicine* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2004), 110.

<sup>14</sup> Even when Jupiter seems to be acting as a just god in the *Metamorphoses*, punishing the wicked and blessing the pious, there are certain subtle elements within such instances that imply the god's sly wickedness. For example, in the case of Baucis and Philemon, Green 2003: 46 contrasts the past trip of Jupiter and Mercury to earth, a journey that resulted in the rape of Europa, with their visit to the village of Baucis and Philemon, questioning the benignity of the gods' journey. Fabre-Serris 2009: 242 also questions the gods' motive in massacring the people of the village by asserting that Baucis and Philemon are sorrowful when they learn the fate of their people.

<sup>15</sup> Cruse 2004: 28 notes, “Asklepius charged no entrance fee and made few requests of his patients; he merely required that the suppliant should purify his body by washing and having good thoughts, [and] he only refused to help those who came to him in dishonesty, or who had a high regard for personal wealth.”

his concern was only with healing.”<sup>16</sup> Also, the healing ritual of Asklepius was neither onerous nor painful. Those who sought healing from Asklepius needed only to sleep in the *abaton* – a process known as ‘incubation’<sup>17</sup> – and receive Asklepius’ instructions in the healing dream.<sup>18</sup> The priests would then interpret the patient’s healing dream and often recommend a ritual and a simple change in the patient’s diet or activities.<sup>19</sup>

Although both the ancient Greeks and Romans venerated enthusiastically Asklepius, they did not share identical views on medicine. In the ancient Greek society, the art of medicine was fairly well established. There were many medical schools, and physicians were not an uncommon sight in the Greek world.<sup>20</sup> Hippocrates, hailed as ‘the Father of Medicine,’ originated from ancient Greece, and a brief reading of the Hippocratic Oath reveals the importance of Asklepius in ancient Greek medicine:

I swear by Apollo the healer, by Asklepius, by Hygea and all the powers of healing, and call to witness all the gods and goddesses that I may keep this Oath and Promise to the best of my ability and judgment...  
(Cruse 2004: 37)

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Berry 1998: 263 points out that “[Asklepius] was the god of healing, that is, the personification of the mysterious healing powers of nature” and that “a sufferer would sleep through the night in a temple of [Asklepius], hoping to wake up cured.”

<sup>18</sup> Compton 1998: 303 argues that the receiving of Asklepius’ instructions in the healing dream occurred in later centuries, while in the earlier era of Asklepius’ worship, “the divinity would appear... during the suppliants’ sleep... healing them directly by touch, surgery, or medicine.”

<sup>19</sup> Although some shrines of Asklepius possessed surgical instruments, surgery was not common.

<sup>20</sup> Cruse 2004: 36 claims that these medical ‘schools’ were “simply groups of thinkers of similar intellectual persuasions, who... possessed their own individual doctrines and theories.”

The Romans, however, approached medicine differently. Pliny the Elder, the Roman encyclopedist, writes that, prior to the arrival of Archagathus, a Greek physician, in 219 B.C. (*Natural History*, 29.12), there were no physicians in Rome. There may have not been a particularly high interest in becoming a physician in the antiquity, and “with the exception of an elite doctor like Galen, the socioeconomic status of doctors in the Roman world was never high; like other craftsmen, they could belong to trade guilds.”<sup>21</sup> If we assume that the attitude of Pliny the Elder towards the art of medicine reflects not only his own contemporaries, but also the ancient Romans, then we can see that the art of medicine itself was not regarded too favorably. Pliny the Elder considered physicians unnecessary because the earth produced all the natural cures for ailments, and “he considered that doctors were bad because they take away the responsibility for looking after your own health”.<sup>22</sup>

at haec benigna, mitis, indulgens ususque mortalium  
semper ancilla, quae coacta generat, quae sponte fundit,  
quos odores saporisque, quos sucos, quos tactus, quos  
colores!... illa medicas fundit herbas et semper homini  
parturit. (Pliny, *Natural History*, 2.115)

Yet the earth is benign, gentle, and bountiful, ever a  
handmaiden in the service of mortals, producing by our  
forcing her, or pouring out spontaneously, what scents and  
flavors, what juices, what tactile surfaces, what colors!...  
[The land] produces medicinal herbs, and is always  
productive for mankind.

Whether the Romans really shared the distrust of physicians with Pliny the Elder is debatable. But it seems that, according to Pliny’s assertion, there was a general lack of

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<sup>21</sup> King, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

physicians and the healing arts, apart from the medicinal herbs found in their garden.<sup>23</sup>

This lack of professional physicians paved the way for one of the most monumental events in Roman history – the importation of Asklepius into Rome.

When an outbreak of plague occurred in 293 B.C. at Rome, the Roman Senate consulted the Sibylline Books, and the prophetic writings advised the senate to send for Asklepius in Epidaurus. Thus, in 291 B.C., the god of Hellenistic medicine arrived at Rome. This arrival was a significant event for the Roman society – “[the importation of Asklepius] is the first example of a foreign cult being imported directly into the Roman Pantheon; other foreign deities had been introduced via the cults of the Latin and Greek cities of Italy.”<sup>24</sup> Most of the Roman gods had Greek counterparts; to the Romans, Zeus was now known as Jupiter, Athena as Minerva, Hera as Juno, and so forth. When the Romans made contact with the other cultures and encountered their gods, they were quick to point out that those gods were already their own and, at times before battles, enticed the gods to join the side of the Romans with promises of reverence and sacrifice. In the Book III of *Aeneid*, as Virgil recounts the prayer of Iarbas, king of Numinia, angered by the *fama* of Dido’s love of and her possible betrothal to Aeneas, the poet does not hesitate to identify Amun (to the Greeks and Romans, Ammon), supposedly Iarbas’ father, as Jupiter:

protinus ad regem cursus detorquet Iarban  
incenditque animum dictis atque aggerat iras.

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<sup>23</sup> King 2001: 34 notes that “in keeping with their idealized sense of self-sufficiency, the Romans thought that the best medicine was very simple, based on a small number of ingredients readily available on the family farm.”

<sup>24</sup> Cruse, 126.

Hic Hammone satus rapta Garamantide nympha  
templa Iovi centum latis immania regnis,  
centum aras posuit vigilemque sacraverat ignem,  
excubias diuum aeternas, pecudumque cruore  
pingue solum et variis florentia limina sertis...

‘Iuppiter omnipotens, cui nunc Maurusia pictis  
gens epulata toris Lenaeum libat honorem,  
aspicis haec? an te, genitor, cum fulmina torques  
nequiquam horremus, caecique in nubibus ignes  
terrificant animos et inania murmura miscent?’

(Vergil, *Aeneid*, 3.196-202, 206-10)

[Rumor] immediately turned her course to King Iarbas and she inflamed his mind with her words and piled up his anger. This one, begotten from Hammon with the ravishing of a Garamantian nymph, built a hundred immense altars in his vast kingdoms and had consecrated a vigilant fire, eternal guards of the gods, and the soil was drenched with the blood of sacrifices and the entrances were blossoming with various garlands... [Iarbas prayed:] ‘Omnipotent Jupiter, to whom now the Maurusian race, having feasted on painted beds, offers the honor of Bacchus, do you see these things? Or, my father, do we shiver in vain when you whirl the thunderbolts, and do the blind fires in the clouds terrify our minds and mix the empty murmurs?’

As Iarbas beseeches his divine father, one can see that Ammon is merely another name and aspect for Jupiter. The king of Numinia is “begotten from Ammon” (*Hammone satus*, *Aeneid* 3.198) and yet Jupiter is his *genitor*. Thus, Virgil, as well as the other Romans, identified Ammon as Jupiter (Jupiter Ammon), even though other cultures did not do so.<sup>25</sup> Clearly the ancient Romans were not afraid to identify other gods as their own, insisting that such Roman god had already existed and the other societies knew them by

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<sup>25</sup> The ancient Egyptians considered Amun as a supreme god and identified him with their sun god Ra. See Wallis, *An Introduction to Ancient Egyptian Literature* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Limited, 1914).

different names.<sup>26</sup> They did not do this with Asklepius. They knew that Asklepius was originally a Hellenistic god and, although they did bestow the Roman name of Aesculapius after his importation to Rome, they never insisted that there was a Roman equivalent to begin with. The importation of Asklepius, therefore, is truly a monumental and unique event in Roman history in terms of both medicine and religion.

The pestilence that gripped Rome in the third century B.C. must have been dire for the importation to occur, as there was a general resistance amongst the Romans to Greek medicine.<sup>27</sup> The Roman Senate and its people had to overcome their suspicion of foreign gods. But the importation of Asklepius proved to be effective for the Roman people – the plague subsided quickly thereafter. Thus the cult of Asklepius (who was Romanized and was henceforth called Aesculapius) became popular throughout the Roman Empire due to its success in banishing the plague. When the Roman people finally accepted and exalted Aesculapius, their resistance to Greek medicine and physicians lessened.

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<sup>26</sup> While such polymorphism of deities may seem strange to those whose thoughts were influenced by religions founded upon the concept of orthodoxy, e.g. Judaism and Christianity, it was not uncommon in the ancient Roman world. King 2003: 294-295 notes that while “the Christian Trinity is carefully defined and limited by Christian theology,” the Romans assumed “the idea that the number of aspects a deity possessed was unknown and possibly quite large” and that “any deity could potentially be a manifestation of a number of other deities.”

<sup>27</sup> *Natural Historia*, 29, 1 (8), 17-18. See chapter three for more details.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Epigraphy of Aesculapius' Importation

There exist two schools of thought on the implications of the importations of foreign deities into the Roman society. One school argues that such importations and evocations of foreign gods were done with much skepticism and negativity,<sup>1</sup> while the other opposes such an assertion and argues that such adoptions of foreign gods and their cults were regarded as good and complementary to the Roman state.<sup>2</sup> Although the attitude of the Roman society towards the importation of Aesculapius and his cult is somewhat debatable, the Greek god of medicine certainly was not the only foreign deity evoked and adopted by the Roman society, indicating that such importations, albeit perhaps strange and alien, were not wholly detested and opposed by the Romans.<sup>3</sup> Much evidence from ancient literature demonstrates that the invocations of foreign gods were not uncommon:

*Peregrina sacra appellantur, quae aut evocatis dis in oppugnandis urbibus  
Romam sunt conata aut quae ob quasdam religiones per pacem sunt*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Eric M. Orlin 2002:1 asserts that “early studies of Roman religion [mistakenly] depicted the importation of alien cults in strongly negative terms, believing that these newcomers... polluted and debased an originally pure Roman religion... [but] recent studies have freed themselves from thinking of religion only in modern terms and begun analyzing Roman religion on its own terms, the adoption of new, even foreign, cults has come to be seen as a sign of health and vigor, a religious complement to the territorial expansion of the Roman state.”

<sup>3</sup> Another well noted importation of a foreign deity is that of the goddess of the Etruscan town of Veii as Juno Regina in 392 B.C. after Camillus and the Romans conquered the establishment.



petita, ut ex Phrygia Matris Magnae, ex Graecia Cereris, Epidauro  
Aesculapi: quae coluntur eorum more, a quibus sunt accepta.  
(Festus, *De Verborum Significatu*, 237 M)

Foreign are called those rites which, with the gods of besieged cities having been evoked, were brought to Rome, or those which were sent for in peace-time on account of a certain religious awe, such as from Phrygia those of the Magna Mater, from Greece those of Ceres, from Epidaurus those of Aesculapius: these [rites] are performed according to the customs of those from whom they were accepted.<sup>4</sup>

Aesculapius, however, was among the first foreign deities admitted into Rome, and, as Edelstein notes, “[Aesculapius’ importation] set a pattern for the attitude of Roman citizens and officials of later centuries” regarding such admissions of foreign deities.<sup>5</sup>

The works of Roman historians, authors, and poets assert that the importation of Aesculapius and his cult significantly affected the course of the Roman history, and the god himself intrigued the Romans; such literary testimonies regarding the adoption reveal much about its implication and importance, and thus they merit a careful perusal and analysis.

Various ancient sources testify that Rome, having been afflicted with outbreaks of the plague, consulted the Sybilline books and accordingly summoned Aesculapius into the city in order to dispel the pestilence. In particular, Valerius Maximus offers numerous details:

Sed ut ceterorum quoque deorum propensum huic urbi numen exequamur, triennio continuo vexata pestilentia civitas nostra, cum finem tanti et tam diutini mali neque divina misericordia neque humano auxilio inponi videret, cura sacerdotum inspectis Sibyllinis libris animadvertit non aliter

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

<sup>5</sup> Worship of Aesculapius was favored and prevalent throughout the Roman Empire. As Edelstein asserts, the Roman emperors and soldiers “took [Aesculapius] to all the regions that came under Roman domination, to the farthest corners of the empire, to the ends of the inhabited world.”

pristinam recuperari salubritatem posse quam si ab Epidauo Aesculapius esset accersitus... e vestigioque Epidauri Romanorum legatos in templum Aesculapii... perductos ut quidquid inde salubre patriae laturos se existimassent pro suo iure sumerent benignissime invitaverunt. Quorum tam promptam indulgentiam numen ipsius dei subsecutum verba mortalium caelesti obsequio cumprobavit: si quidem is anguis, quem Epidauri raro, sed numquam sine magno ipsorum bono visum in modum Aesculapii venerati fuerunt, per urbis celeberrimas partes mitibus oculis et leni tractu labi coepit, triduoque inter religiosam omnium admirationem conspectus haud dubiam prae se adpetitae clarioris sedis alacritatem ferens, ad triremem Romanam perrexit, paventibusque inusitato spectaculo nautis eo conscendit, ubi Q. Ogulni legati tabernaculum erat, inque multiplicem orbem per summam quietem est convolutus... atque in ripam Tiberis egressis legatis in insulam, ubi templum dicatum est, tranavit, adventuque suo tempestatem, cui remedio quaesitus erat, dispulit.

(Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, 1.8.2.)

But let me also describe the favorable will of the other gods towards this city [i.e., Rome], when, with our city vexed with pestilence for three continuous years, it seemed impossible to place an end to such a lasting evil either by means of divine mercy or human assistance, by their efforts the priests, when the Sibylline books had been consulted, observed that the former salubrity could not be restored unless Aesculapius were summoned from Epidaurus... And immediately the Epidaurians most kindly invited the ambassadors of the Romans into the temple of Aesculapius so that they might take and carry whatever they might deem wholesome for their country. This prompt indulgence of the citizens was instantly followed by the divine will of the god himself who confirmed the words of the mortals with heavenly complaisance: if indeed the serpent, who was seen rarely, though never with small benefit, and was worshipped by the Epidaurians as an epiphany of Aesculapius, began to glide through the most conspicuous parts of the town, with mild eyes and soft movements, and on the third day, under the pious admiration of all the people, he was seen exhibiting definite eagerness to reach a more renowned abode and turned toward the Roman trireme. While the crew was trembling in view of the unusual spectacle, he entered the boat at the very spot where the ambassador Q. Ogulnius had his tent, and there curled himself up most quietly in a circle of many folds... And when the ambassadors had disembarked at the bank of the Tiber, he swam across to the island where a temple has been dedicated; and through his arrival he dispelled the plague for the cure of which he had been summoned.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

Valerius' testimony regarding the importation of Aesculapius echoes many historical and poetic elements found in other testimonies – namely that, due to many outbreaks of the plague in Rome, the Romans sent an envoy for Aesculapius in Epidaurus, who came with them willingly and banished the plague from their city. Livy's much more truncated testimony regarding the importation of Aesculapius from Epidaurus matches closely that of Valerius Maximus:

Cum pestilentia civitas laboraret, missi legati, ut Aesculapi signum Romam ab Epidauro transferrent, anguem, qui se in navem eorum contulerat, in quo ipsum numen esse constabat, deportaverunt; eoque in insulam Tiberis egresso eodem loco aedis Aesculapio constituta est.  
(Livy, *Periocha*, 11)

When the [Roman] state was suffering with a pestilence, ambassadors [who were] deployed in order to transfer the image of Aesculapius to Rome from Epidaurus, brought a snake, which had brought itself into their ship, by which it was agreed that the god himself was present; and on the [serpent's] going [ashore] on the island of the Tiber, on the same place a temple was established to Aesculapius.

Livy's succinct testimony lacks many other details present in that of Valerius. The Roman historian fails to mention any religious activities associated with the plague or the importation itself and displays some skepticism of the presence of Aesculapius within the serpent – instead of asserting that the snake was the god, Livy merely points out that “it is agreed” (*constabat*) amongst the populace that the snake was an embodiment of the healing deity. Livy nevertheless stresses the most important point – Aesculapius left Epidaurus behind and came to aid the Romans in their time of need.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wickkiser 2009: 57-58 notes that “Livy... has a penchant for medical metaphor that may have carried over into his discussion of Aesculapius” and that “it is possible that he conflated an actual plague with political and military threats to Rome that more immediately motivated the importation from Epidaurus, especially given that Rome was beginning its military contact with Greece.”

Ovid's poetic narrative regarding the cause and the effect of Aesculapius' arrival into Rome also offers substantial, albeit dramatic, insight regarding the attitude of the Romans concerning the importation of the foreign healing god:

625 Pandite nunc, Musae, praesentia numina vatum,  
(scitis enim, nec vos fallit spatiosa vetustas),  
unde Coroniden circumflua Thybridis alti  
insula Romuleae sacris adiecerit urbis.

630 Dira lues quondam Latias vitiaverat auras,  
pallidaque exsanguis squalebant corpora morbo.  
Funeribus fessi postquam mortalia cernunt  
temptamenta nihil, nihil artes posse medentum,  
auxilium caeleste petunt mediamque tenentis  
orbis humum Delphos adeunt, oracula Phoebi,  
utque salutifera miseris succurrere rebus  
sorte velit tantaeque urbis mala finiat, orant:  
et locus et laurus et, quas habet ipse pharetras,  
635 intremuere simul, cortinaque reddidit imo  
hanc adyto vocem pavefactaque pectora movit:  
"quod petis hinc, proopiore loco, Romane, petisses,  
et pete nunc proprio loco: nec Apolline vobis,  
qui minuat luctus, opus est, sed Apolline nato.  
640 Ite bonis avibus prolemque accersite nostram."  
Iussa dei prudens postquam acceperet senatus,  
quam colat, explorant, iuvenis Phoebus urbem,  
quique petant ventis Epidauria litora, mittunt...  
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15.622-43)

Reveal now, O Muses, ever-helpful divinities of bards,  
(for you know, nor does the far-stretching time fail you)  
whence did the island bathed by the deep Tiber bring  
Coronis' son and set him midst the deities of Rome.

Once a deadly pestilence had corrupted Latium's air,  
and men's bodies lay wasting and pale with a ghastly disease.  
When, weary with caring for the dead, men saw that their  
human efforts were nothing, that the healers' arts were of no avail,  
they sought the aid of heaven, and, coming to Delphi,  
situate in the earth's central spot, the oracle of Phoebus,  
they begged that the god would vouchsafe with his  
health-bringing lots to succor them in their wretchedness  
and end the woes of their great city:  
Then did the shrine and the laurel-tree and the quiver which  
the god himself bears quake together, and the tripod from the innermost  
shrine returned these words and stirred their terrified hearts:

“What you seek from here, you should have sought, O Roman,  
 from a nearer place: Nor have you any need of Apollo  
 to abate your troubles, but of Apollo’s son.  
 Go with kindly auspices and call on my son.”  
 When the senate, rich in wisdom, heard the commands of the god,  
 they sought in what city the son of Phoebus dwelt, and sent an embassy by  
 ship to seek out the coast of Epidaurus...<sup>8</sup>

While Ovid’s poetic testimony shares many of its historical elements and details with those of Livy and Valerius, there are subtle, albeit important, differences. Ovid explicitly claims that although Rome was afflicted with outbreaks of the plague that was neither cured nor mitigated by human efforts, Phoebus himself came to the aid of the Romans in their time of need by offering his divine guidance towards the solution – his son, Aesculapius, the healing god. As Ovid goes on to depict the importation of Aesculapius from Epidaurus, the divine favors bestowed on the Romans become more lucid:

650           Dissidet et variat sententia, parsque negandum  
               non putat auxilium, multi retinere suamque  
               non emittere opem nec numina tradere suadent;  
               dum dubitant, seram pepulere crepuscula lucem;  
               umbraque telluris tenebras induxerat orbi,  
               cum deus in somnis opifer consistere visus  
               ante tuum, Romane, torum, sed qualis in aede  
 655           esse solet, baculumque tenens agreste sinistra  
               caesariem longae dextra deducere barbae  
               et placido tales emittere pectore voces:  
               “Pone metus! Veniam simulacraque nostra relinquam.  
               Hunc modo serpentem, baculum qui nexibus ambit,  
 660           perspice et usque nota visu, ut cognoscere possis!  
               Vertar in hunc: sed maior ero tantusque videbor,  
               in quantum debent caelestia corpora verti.”...  
               vix bene desierant, cum cristis aureus altis  
 670           in serpente deus praenuntia sibila misit  
               adventuque suo signumque arasque foresque  
               marmoreumque solum fastigiaque aurea movit  
               pectoribusque tenus media sublimis in aede  
               constitit atque oculos circumtulit igne micantes:  
 675           territa turba pavet, cognovit numina castos

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

evinctus vitta crines albente sacerdos;  
 “en deus est, deus est! Animis linguisque favete,  
 quisquis adest!” dixit “sis, o pulcherrime, visus  
 utiliter populosque iuves tua sacra colentes!”...  
 Adnuit his motisque deus rata pignora cristis  
 et repetita dedit vibrata sibila lingua;  
 tum gradibus nitidis delabitur oraque retro  
 flectit et antiquas abiturus respicit aras  
 adsuetasque domos habitataque templa salutat...  
 Restitit hic agmenque suum turbaeque sequentis  
 officium placido visus dimittere vultu  
 corpus in Ausonia posuit rate...  
 (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15.648-62, 669-79, 683-7, 691-3)

The will [of the Grecian elders] differed and was various; some thought  
 that aid should not be refused, [while] many advised to keep their god  
 and not let go the source of their own wealth nor trade their deity;  
 While they sat in doubt, the dusk of evening dispelled the lingering day,  
 and the darkness spread its shadows over the world.

Then did the health-giving god seem in your dreams to stand  
 before your couch, O Roman, just as he is wont to be in his  
 own temple, and holding his rustic staff in his left hand  
 and stroking his flowing beard with his right hand  
 and with calm utterance to speak these words:

“Fear not! I shall come and leave my shrine.

Only look upon this serpent, which twines about my staff,  
 and fix it on your sight so that you may know it!

I shall change into this: but I shall be larger and shall seem  
 as great as celestial bodies should be when they change.”...

Scarcely had they ceased to speak when the golden god  
 in the form of the serpent with high crest, uttered hissing warnings  
 in his presence, and at his coming the statue, altars, doors,  
 the marble pavement and gilded roof, all rocked, and, raised breast-high  
 in the temple’s midst, he stood and gazed about with eyes flashing fire;  
 The terrified multitude quaked with fear, but the priest, with his sacred  
 locks bound with a white fillet, recognized the divinity and said:

“It is the god, it is the god! Think holy thoughts and stand in reverent  
 silence, whoever is here! O thou most beautiful be this vision  
 of thee expedient for us and bless thou this people  
 who worship at thy shrine!”...

The god nodded graciously to them and, moving his crest, assured them  
 of his favor and with darting tongue gave forth repeated hisses;  
 then he glided down the polished steps and with backward gaze  
 looked fixedly upon the ancient altars which he was about to leave  
 and saluted his well-known home and the shrine where he had dwelt...  
 Here he halted and, seeming with kindly expression to dismiss his

throng of pious followers, he took his place  
within the Ausonian ship...<sup>9</sup>

In Ovid's testimony, there is a grave tension between the Romans, who seek to import Aesculapius into Rome, and the Epidaurians, who do not wish to surrender the healing god to the Romans. Such tension is absent in the testimonies of Valerius Maximus and of Livy – the Roman historian mentions nothing about the Epidaurians and Valerius asserts that Epidaurians most kindly offered the Romans to take whatever they deemed necessary. Ovid does not hesitate to portray Rome and the Roman people to be the favorite in Aesculapius' eyes, and he continues to depict them as such as his testimony goes on:

695           Aeneadae gaudent caesoque in litore tauro  
                  torta coronatae solvunt retinacula navis...  
                  Huc omnis populi passim matrumque patrumque  
730           obvia turba ruit, quaeque ignes, Troica, servant,  
                  Vesta, tuos, laetoque deum clamore salutant...  
                  Iamque caput rerum, Romanam intraverat urbem:  
                  erigitur serpens summoque acclinia malo  
                  colla movet sedesque sibi circumspicit aptas.  
                  Scinditur in geminas partes circumfluis amnis  
740           (Insula nomen habet) laterumque a parte duorum  
                  porrigit aequales media tellure lacertos:  
                  huc se de Latia pinu Phoebus anguis  
                  contulit et finem specie caeleste resumpta  
                  luctibus inposuit venitque salutaris urbi.  
                  (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15. 695-6, 729-744)

The Romans rejoiced and, after sacrificing a bull upon a beach, they wreathed their ship with flowers and cast loose from the shore... Hither [i.e., Tiber's mouth] the whole mass of the populace came to meet him from everywhere, matrons and fathers and the maids who tend thy fires, O Trojan Vesta, and they saluted the god with a joyful cry... And now the ship had entered Rome, the capital of the world; The serpent raised himself aloft and, resting his head upon the mast's top, moved it from side to side, viewing the places fit for his abode. The river, flowing around, separates at this point into two parts and on each side it stretches out two equal arms with the land between (it is named the Island):

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<sup>9</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

On this spot the serpent-son of Phoebus disembarked  
from the Latian ship and, resuming his heavenly form, put an end  
to the people's woes and came to them as health-bringer to their city.<sup>10</sup>

These narratives regarding the importation and subsequent Romanization of Aesculapius share certain elements: there were outbreaks of the plague in Rome (*pestilentia civitas laboraret, Periocha 11*); Sibylline oracle was consulted revealing that help of Aesculapius from Epidaurus was needed (*cura sacerdotum inspectis Sibyllinis libris animadvertit non aliter pristinam recuperari salubritatem posse quam si ab Epidauro Aesculapius esset accersitus, Facta et Dicta Memorabilia, 1.8.2.*); the Grecian god of medicine himself, assuming the form of a serpent, came willingly to the Romans to be imported into Rome and settled on the island of Tiber to disperse the pestilence. (*Restitit hic agmenque suum turbaeque sequentis / officium placido visus dimittere vultu / corpus in Ausonia posuit rate...*, *Metamorphoses 15.691-3*).

Nonetheless, as mentioned before, some notable differences occur amongst these various testimonies. Valerius Maximus recounts that, after having been consulted by the Romans regarding their dire situation, “the Epidaurians most kindly [invite] the ambassadors of the Romans into the temple of Aesculapius so that they [could] take and carry whatever they might deem wholesome for their country” (*Epidauri Romanorum legatos in templum Aesculapii... perductos ut quidquid inde salubre patriae laturos se existimassent pro suo iure sumerent benignissime invitaverunt, Facta et Dicta Memorabilia, 1.8.2.*). In the poetic narrative of Ovid, however, the Epidaurians and their Grecian elders are not so quick to offer aid nor their god to the Romans – “many elders [advise] to keep their god and not relinquish the source of their own wealth nor trade their

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<sup>10</sup> Translated by Edelstein.



deity” (*multi retinere suamque / non emittere opem nec numina tradere suadent, Metamorphoses 15.649-50*). Indeed, Aesculapius himself abandons his home in Epidaurus (*tum gradibus nitidis delabitur oraque retro / flectit et antiquas abiturus respicit aras / adsuetasque domos habitataque templa salutata, Metamorphoses 15.685-7*), and willingly “[takes] his place on the Ausonian ship” to Rome (*corpus in Ausonia posuit rate, Metamorphoses 15.693*).

In the *Metamorphoses*, certain important implications arise within the Grecian elders’ refusal to offer their god to the Romans. From the Ovidian narrative, Epidaurians regard Aesculapius as their source of wealth and, thus, are not willing to hand over their precious deity. Such a notion is quite understandable because losing the god of medicine and consequently their wholesomeness (arguably one of the highest goods) would prove detrimental to their society. Aesculapius certainly was an important god, directly responsible for one’s good health and swift recovery from diseases, and indirectly responsible for everything affected by one’s well-being, such as accumulation of wealth. Such an important god, in most of the historical narratives regarding Roman history, comes most willingly to Rome, as Ovid puts it, “the capital of the world” (*caput rerum, Metamorphoses 15.737*), in the form of a snake.<sup>11</sup> Through this assertion, Ovid offers an important, albeit subtle, notion – that Rome and the Roman people are favored over other races and nations by Aesculapius, one of the most important deities.

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<sup>11</sup> Edelstein 1945: 228 notes that “the serpent was taken as sign of the rejuvenation which Asklepius brought about; for the animal restores itself by shedding its skin” and that “the serpent was understood as a symbol of sharp-sightedness which the physician needs, or of vigilance and guardianship which are also his duties, or of the healing power as such, for the snake was used as a remedy.” He also asserts that “the belief was current that the reptile, being itself mild and friendly, indicated the mildness of the god of medicine.”

Ovid is not alone in making so implicit an assertion. Writing many years after Ovid, Claudian offers a few more poetic details:

Huc depulsurus morbos Epidaurius hospes  
reptavit placido tractu,, vectumque per undas  
insula Paeonium textit Tiberina draconem.  
(Claudianus, *De Consulatu Stilichonis*, 3.171-3)

Hither (i.e., to Rome) the Epidaurian friend slithered  
in gentle motion to expel the disease, and Tiber's isle sheltered  
the Paeonian serpent who had been carried across the waves.

The image of Aesculapius being portrayed as a serpent can also be found in *Anthologia Latina*:

Quod natum Phoebus docuit, quod Chiron Achillem,  
quod didicere olim Podalirius atque Machaon  
a genitore suo, qui quondam versus in anguem  
templa Palatinae subiit sublimia Romae...  
(*Anthologia Latina*, 1.2.719e.1-7)

What Phoebus taught his son, what Chiron [taught] Achilles,  
what Podalirius and Machaon learned long time ago  
from their father [i.e., Aesculapius], who once having been changed into  
a serpent entered the lofty time of Rome on the Palatine...

These narratives reveal the gentle, sacred serpent, either an embodiment of Aesculapius or a sign of his good will, as it comes to aid the Romans of its own accord.

A less poetic, but no less inspired, source regarding Aesculapius' special benevolence towards Rome and the Romans occurs in Arnobius' description of the *Libri Fatales*:

... ex libris fatalibus vatumque responsis invitari ad urbem deus  
Aesculapius iussus est, ut ab luis contagio morbisque pestilentibus tutam  
eam incolumemque praestaret, et venit non aspernatus... colubrarum in  
formam conversus...  
(Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes*, 7.44-8)

... from the books of fate and the responses of the seers, the god  
Aesculapius was ordered to be invited to the city [i.e., Rome], so that he

might cause it to be safe and guarded from the contagion of the plague and pestilential diseases, and he not having spurned [his invitation to Rome] came... having been changed into the form of serpents...

Thus these Roman narratives assert and continue to emphasize the notion that Aesculapius, in the form of a serpent that twines about his healing staff, entered Rome to secure the city from pestilential diseases and established a new residence for himself at the isle of Tiber. These assertions provide an effective means for the Romans to reinforce further the idea regarding the divine nature of Roman society's origin and destiny – not only do the Romans receive divine instructions from the Delphic oracle and the Sibylline books in their dire times of need as to dispel their suffering, but also from the god of medicine, gentle and benevolent, the deity of one of the highest goods, relinquishing his Epidaurian residence in order to aid the Romans and to found a new home in Rome. Clearly from these narratives the Romans and the city of Rome seem to be particularly beloved by the deities, both native and foreign.

Whether the importation of the Grecian god of medicine truly banished the outbreaks of the plague from Rome is dubitable. Many Roman historians, poets, and writers claim that Aesculapius “put an end to the people's woes and came to them as health-bringer to their city” (*finem... / luctibus inposuit venitque salutifer urbi, Metamorphoses* 15.743-4), yet narratives offered by the opponents of Aesculapius, his cult, and paganism in general depict Aesculapius in a different fashion:

Cum enim deus aditus in hoc esse dicatur, ut omnino omnes causas quibus pestilentia conflabatur averteret, sequebatur ut civitas intacta esse deberet flatuque a noxio immunis semper innocuaque praestari. Atquin videmus, ut superius dictum est, saepenumero his morbis cursu eam vitae habuisse funestos nec dispendiis levibus esse populi fractas debilitatasque virtutes. Ubi ergo Aesculapius fuit, ubi ille promissus oraculis venerabilibus? (Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes*, 7.44-8)

For because the god is said to have been summoned for this, so that he might wholly ward off all the causes by which the pestilence was inflamed, it followed that the state ought to be safe, and to be maintained always unburdened and innocuous from noxious breath. And yet we see, as it has been said before, that very often it has had seasons made mournful by these diseases and that the strengths of its people has been fractured and maimed by no slight losses. Where, then, was Aesculapius, where was that [god] promised by venerable oracles?

As the passage shows, Arnobius in his testimony argues against the Romans' assertion about the efficaciousness of Aesculapius' healing power and notes that Rome had still suffered various diseases even after the importation. Like Arnobius, Augustine, too, considers the cult of Aesculapius in Rome and argues against the authenticity of Aesculapius' healing:

Illa itidem ingens pestilentia, quamdiu saeviit, quam multos peremit!  
Quae cum in annum alium multo gravius tenderetur frustra praesente  
Aesculapio, aditum est ad libros Sibyllinos... tunc ergo dictum est eam esse  
causam pestilentiae, quod plurimas aedes sacras multi occupatas privatim  
tenerent: sic interim a magno imperitiae vel desidia crimine Aesculapius  
liberatus est. (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 3.17)

And that other great pestilence, which raged so long and carried off so many! When in its second year it only grew worse, while Aesculapius was present in vain, recourse was had to the Sibylline books... In this instance, the cause of the plague was said to be that so many temples had been used as private residences. And thus Aesculapius for the present escaped the charge of either want of skill or ignominious negligence.<sup>12</sup>

These narratives, however, are offered by Christian apologists during paganism's rapid decline, and, thus, it is difficult to state whether many Romans also viewed Aesculapius with such unfriendly and hostile attitude. Many people, ancient and modern scholars alike, have pondered over the location of Aesculapius' temple in order to glean more insight regarding the attitude of the Romans towards the healing god. Writing near the beginning of the second century A.D., Plutarch raises a particular question about location.

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<sup>12</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

‘διὰ τί τοῦ Ἀσκληπιοῦ τὸ ἱερόν ἐξω τῆς πόλεως ἐστὶ;’ πότερον ὅτι τὰς ἐξω διατριβὰς ὑγιεινέρας ἐνόμιζον εἶναι τῶν ἐν ἄστει; καὶ γὰρ Ἕλληνας ἐν τόποις καὶ καθαροῖς καὶ ὑψηλοῖς ἐπεικῶς ἰδρυμένα τὰ Ἀσκληπιεῖα ἔχουσιν. ἢ ὅτι τὸν θεὸν ἐξ Ἐπιδάουρου μετάπεμπτον ἢ κειν νομίζουσιν, Ἐπιδαυρίους δ’ οὐ κατὰ πόλιν ἀλλὰ πόρρω τὸ Ἀσκληπιεῖόν ἐστιν; ἢ ὅτι τοῦ δράκοντος ἐκ τῆς τριήρους κατὰ τὴν νῆσον ἀποβάντος καὶ ἀφανισθέντος αὐτὸν ὦντο τῆν ἰδρυσιν ὑφηγεῖσθαι τὸν θεόν;  
(Plutarchus, *Aetia Romana*, 94, 286 D.)

‘Why is the shrine of [Aesculapius] outside the city?’ Is it because they considered it more healthful to spend their time outside the city than within its walls? In fact the Greeks, quite reasonably, have their shrines of Aesculapius situated in places, which are both clean and high. Or is it because they believe that the god came at their summons from Epidaurus, and the Epidaurians have their shrine of Aesculapius not in the city, but at some distance? Or is it because the serpent came out from the trireme into the island [of Tiber], and there disappeared, and thus [the Romans] thought that the god himself was indicating to them the site for building?<sup>13</sup>

Although it may be inferred that the temple of Aesculapius was founded not within the city itself but on the isle of Tiber because the Romans distrusted the foreign deity, such inference is not likely true. Many historical narratives give other reasons for the location of the temple, with one being that “the temple for Aesculapius was built on the island [of Tiber] because the sick [were] aided by physicians particularly with water” (*in insula Aesculapio facta aedes fuit, quod aegroti a medicis aqua maxime sustententur, De Verborum Significatu*, 110 M), while another suggested that the sacred serpent disappeared on the isle of Tiber, signifying the god’s will for his temple to be built there.

For the Romans, the importation of Aesculapius did not merely represent a boon to their health and well-being. Aesculapius was an extraordinary deity, benevolent and

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<sup>13</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

gentle to mankind.<sup>14</sup> The god's acceptance of his invitation to reside in Rome and, thus, to become a deity for the Roman society denoted and reinforced the concept of the divine favor and authority towards the Roman people as well as Rome being the "capital of the world" (*caput rerum*).

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<sup>14</sup> The healing god was believed to be impartial to socioeconomic status of his worshippers and followers. Allbutt 1909: 1603 asserts that "not only his soldiery, but also Marcus Aurelius himself, not only the plebs, but also the aristocracy... sought the shrine of the Tiber island."

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Cult of Aesculapius and the Worship of the Healing God

As Aesculapius was imported from Epidaurus to Rome, so was his cult.<sup>1</sup> One ought to note that in ancient Roman society “the deity [demanded] continuous worship from his devotees” and that “in antiquity a religion without rites, without sacrifices, processions, festivals, was inconceivable.”<sup>2</sup> Aesculapius and his cult were no exception.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, many poetic and historical narratives of Roman authors assert that the serpent from Epidaurus, either claimed to be Aesculapius himself or a sign of the god’s good will towards Rome and its people, landed on the Tiber Island upon its arrival in Rome; thus, a temple to the healing god was consecrated upon the isle. There are, however, multiple variations for the reason that the temple of Aesculapius was built on the island as opposed to any other part of the city. Examinations and analyses of

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<sup>1</sup> Once Aesculapius had gained a foothold in the Roman world, he was worshipped by many and his cult facilitated that worship. Renberg 2007: 88 notes that even after his importation, Aesculapius “retained his role as healer [and] aided his devotees in other capacities as well, becoming a popular recipient of private cult because of his tendency to take a direct interest in his worshipers’ lives,” which caused “[Aesculapius’] cult in Rome [to evolve] over time: initially worshipped as a god whose presence was essential to the state, during the republican period [Aesculapius] quickly came to be worshipped privately as well, and in the imperial period he primarily belong to the spheres of private religion and military religion, though his importance in public affairs continued to be manifest in his role of protector of the emperors’ well-being.”

<sup>2</sup> Edelstein, 181.

<sup>3</sup> As Edelstein asserts, “if men did not perform the sacred ceremonies, the gods did not fulfill their task either, nor were they expected to do so” and, thus, a deity was almost never without his cult; in other words, the god’s cult embodied and represented the divine being himself.

these variations allow the reader to comprehend not only the impact of the healing cult's presence in Rome but also its implications.

Ovid, for example, asserts that the island was chosen by the healing god himself and implies that such explanation as to why the temple was built on the Tiber Island is canonical:

sacravere patres hac duo templa die.  
accepit Phoebos nymphaque Coronide natum  
insula, dividua quam premit amnis aqua.  
Iuppiter in parte est; cepit locus unus utrumque  
iunctaque sunt magno templa nepotis avo.  
(Ovid, *Fasti*, 1.290-4)

On this day [sc., January 1<sup>st</sup>, 291 B.C.] they dedicated two temples.  
The island, upon which the [Tiber] river presses with its divided water,  
received the god begotten from Phoebus and the nymph Coronis.  
Jupiter is in that part [as well]; one place took them both  
and the temple of the grandson is joined to [the temple] of his powerful  
grandsire.

Ovid's poetic narrative depicts a scene that evokes benign, familial emotion. Here is the god of medicine and healing, a "child of Phoebus and the nymph Coronis," (*Phoebos nymphaque Coronide natum*) sharing his holy grounds with Jupiter, his "powerful grandsire" (*magno... avo*). Rome, it seems, is blessed beyond measures to house such powerful family of deities protecting its citizens from calamities and pestilences. It is possible that Ovid means to portray the temples and gods in such a familial scene so as to reinforce implicitly the idea that Rome and its people are a significant part of this divine lineage, originating not only from Aeneas but also Romulus, Remus, and other deified Roman leaders as well. Another plausible explanation, however, is that Ovid, cognizant of the dichotomy of Hellenistic medicine and Roman medicine, depicts Aesculapius, a god of Hellenistic medicine, in the familial setting where Roman medicine was often



practiced. As King points out, “Roman medicine was performed within the family, based on the authority of *paterfamilias*, the male household head,” while “Greek medicine was presented as something done by outsiders for a fee,” an act that was abhorred by the Roman populace.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the Ovidian narrative we have Aesculapius, despite being of Hellenistic origin, providing healing to the Roman people in the presence of Jupiter, the *paterfamilias* of all the gods and the Roman people – the Hellenistic god of medicine placed in the setting of Roman medicine.

By no means is Ovid’s explanation most authoritative; there are numerous ancient authors who propose their own interpretation of the founding of Aesculapius’ temple on the Tiber Island. Festus, for example, offers an explanation, utilitarian and not religious:

In insula Aesculapio facta aedes fuit, quod aegroti a medicis aqua maxime sustententur. (Festus, *De Verborum Significatu*, 110 M)

The temple for Aesculapius was built on the [Tiber] island, because the sick are supported by physicians especially through water.

Although the presence of water around the island would certainly have been useful, it was not the only place wherein water could have been procured sufficiently in order to aid the sick. Certain geographical features of the island would also have imposed difficulties, rendering such utilitarian explanation somewhat doubtful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> King, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Kerenyi 1959: 16 points out that “the terrain [of the island] was so low lying that special measures were frequently required to prevent it from becoming a morass” and that “[the island’s] geographical situation makes it clear that the choice was determined by religious rather than hygienic considerations.”

Pliny the Elder, however, asserts that the reason why the temple of Aesculapius was founded on the Tiber Island was in fact due to the Romans' distrust of physicians and the practice of medicine as an art:

non rem antiqui damnabant, sed artem, maxime vero quaestum esse manipretio vitae recusabant. ideo templum Aesculapii, etiam cum reciperetur is deus, extra urbem fecisse iterumque in insula traduntur et,<sup>6</sup> cum Graecos Italia pellerent, diu etiam post Catonem, excepisse medicos. (Pliny, *Natural Historia*, 29.1(8),16.)

The ancients were not condemning [healing] itself, but the art [of medicine], and indeed they rejected especially that there be monetary gain with price of life. On that account, they are said to have made the temple of Aesculapius, even when he was received as a god, outside the city and afterwards on the [Tiber] island, and, when they banished the Greeks from Italy, even long after the time of Cato, [they are said] to have [not] exempted the physicians.

According to Pliny, the Romans did not deny that Aesculapius was a god (*cum reciperetur is deus*), but had distrusted Aesculapius because the physicians in the Roman world did not practice medicine as an art of healing. Rather, they converted it as an art of business and profits (*maxime vero quaestum esse manipretio vitae recusabant*). Also, it seems that much distrust of the Romans towards physicians and the practice of medicine either arose from or was inflamed by the existence of fraudulent doctors and the laws that protected medical professionals virtually from all liability even when the patient was harmed or killed directly by the physician's incompetence:

Itaque, Hercules, in hac artium sola evenit, ut cuicumque medicum se professo statim credatur, cum sit periculum in nullo mendacio maius... nulla praeterea lex, quae puniat inscitiam capitalem, nullum exemplum vindictae. discut periculis nostris et experimenta per mortes agunt, medicoque tantum hominem occidisse impunitas summa est. quin immo transit convitium et intemperantia culpat, ultroque qui periere arguuntur. (Pliny, *Natural Historia*, 29,1(8),17-8)

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<sup>6</sup> Sillig suggests in his commentary that 'et' ought to be read as 'nec.'

And so, it happens in only this of the arts [i.e., the art of medicine], by Hercules, that whoever that has professed himself to be a doctor is believed [as such] immediately, when there is no greater danger in any other falsehood... Moreover, [there is] no law that punishes [the physician's] deadly inexperience, no example of [such] legal justice. [The physicians] learn through our perils and they perform experiments through our deaths, and only for a physician is there the highest freedom from the punishment of having killed a man. Nay, indeed, on the contrary the reproach passes [to the sick] and he is blamed with intemperance, and moreover they who have perished are accused.

As shown in the passage above, unlike his poetic counterparts who offer reasons of religious and divine nature regarding the location of the temple of Aesculapius, Pliny offers a secular reason. Apparently the Romans were highly distrustful of physicians and their art of medicine due to their attempt to turn healing into profit, their fraudulence and ignorance which deprives the patient of his life, and the laws that exempted physicians from punishment for the deaths of their patients, losses viewed as murders by the Roman citizenry. If such hostile views towards physicians were widely embraced by the Roman populace, the Romans would have been also quite skeptical of this physician-god. Such skepticism towards Aesculapius and the physicians, who were mostly Greek or at least schooled in Hellenistic medicine, could also have been derived from the dichotomy between the Romans' view of medical practice and that of the Greeks as mentioned before.<sup>7</sup> Although "Hellenistic medicine, practiced among the Romans by physicians schooled in the concepts of Hippocrates, Praxagoras, and their successors, never lost its predilection for the general and spoke with the authority of philosophy," the Romans, on

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<sup>7</sup> The Greeks, unlike the Romans, had a much different view of the medical profession. Jaeger 1944: 3 notes that "Plato speaks of doctors and medicine in such high terms that, even if the early medical literature was entirely lost, we should need no further evidence to infer that, during the late fifth and the fourth centuries before Christ, the social and intellectual prestige of the Greek medical profession was very high indeed."

the other hand, “remained skeptical, and valued their own tradition of medicine well expressed in Cato, Celsus and Varro.”<sup>8</sup> King reinforces this assertion by stating that “from the third century BC onwards it is clear that there were strong Greek influences on Roman medicine, but these were often found alongside a patriotic desire to present the earlier Roman medicine as something more simple, cheap and effective than Greek medicine.”<sup>9</sup>

Aesculapius and his healing cult, however, displayed no such malevolent characteristics associated with fraudulent physicians. The god was concerned with morality of his patients, offered aid and healing without charge, and cured his patient regardless of the patient’s faith or the lack thereof.<sup>10</sup> Aesculapius and his priestly physicians demanded no costly fees from the patient, only that he offer supplication and prayers to the god, make sacrifices accordingly,<sup>11</sup> and “pays his respect to Aesculapius

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<sup>8</sup> Scarborough, 12.

<sup>9</sup> King, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Edelstein 1998: 113 asserts that “the deified physician gave help freely and without envy” and that only “those who were themselves not virtuous he would not heal.” Besides the good moral upstanding from his patients, Asklepius “did not expect anything, no reward, not even belief in his power; he cured his patient, whether he was a devotee or a disbeliever.” Although there may have been very subtle differences between Asklepius and his Romanized self, Aesculapius, the healing god would have retained much of his core attributes, a chief of them being his benevolent compassion towards his patients, which the Greeks and the Romans believed to be an absolute requirement for one to become a physician. Even Edelstein uses Asklepius interchangeably with Aesculapius in his translation of the Latin testimonies.

<sup>11</sup> Nilsson 1940: 74 mentions that “the sacrifice is a meal common to the god and his worshippers, linking them together in a close unity.” And, as Edelstein 1998: 189 notes, while certainly “all animals which the ancients were wont to give to their deities could also be offered to Aesculapius,” the sacrifice itself and the communion it represented between the god and the patient were upheld adamantly by the healing cult. To Aesculapius, the object of the sacrifice was not so important as the gesture itself.

with his head covered” (*operto capite Aesculapium salutat, Curculio, 3.1.389-90*).

Unlike the fixed, often expensive, cost of a physician’s service, Aesculapius and the healing cult delighted in sacrifices that reflected the patient’s wealth, a practice that would have been met with more enthusiasm by the Romans.<sup>12</sup> The social stature of the patient was not crucial to the god either; both paupers and emperors alike prayed to Aesculapius for good health, either for themselves or for their loved ones:

Deos igitur omnes, qui usquam gentium vim suam praesentem promptamque hominibus praebent, qui vel somniis vel mysteriis vel medicina vel oraculis usquam iuvant atque pollent, eorum deorum unumquemque mihi votis advoco, meque pro genere cuiusque voti in eo loco constituo, de quo deus ei rei praeditus facilius exaudiat.

Igitur iam primum Pergami arcem ascendo et Aesculapio supplico, uti valetudinem magistri mei bene temperet vehementerque tueatur. (Pliny, *Epistulae*, 3.9.1-2)<sup>13</sup>

I, [Marcus Aurelius] call, therefore, with my vows to hear me each one of all the gods, who anywhere in the world give their aid and show their power in dreams or mysteries, or healing or oracles; and I place myself according to the nature of each vow in that spot where the god who is invested with that power may the more readily hear.

Therefore I now first climb the citadel of Pergamum and beseech Aesculapius to bless my master’s health and mightily protect it.

In addition to these benign and benevolent attributes of Aesculapius, a just and impartial god, the healing cult imposed no procedures harsh to neither the body nor to the mind of the patient. The priests of Aesculapius merely bade the patient to sleep within the *abaton*, the most sacred part of the sanctuary – a practice known as incubation. While asleep, the patient would dream of Aesculapius and the god would give them divine signs regarding

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<sup>12</sup> Edelstein 1998: 190 asserts that Aesculapius, who most happily accepted a meager sacrifice of a cock from the poor, “seems to have agreed with Hesiod’s demand that everybody should give to the gods as much as was in his power, and no more.” Cp. Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo*.

<sup>13</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

their afflictions and instructions as to how to heal them. Such sanctuaries and the healing cult also were bestowed with certain holy rights in antiquity as well, namely that “whoever took refuge in the temple was protected by the right of asylum against any persecution”.<sup>14</sup>

Is quoque annus legationes Graecarum civitatum habuit, Samiis Iunonis, Cois Aesculapii delubro vetustum asyli ius ut firmaretur petentibus... neque dispar apud Coos antiquitas, et accedebat meritum ex loco: nam cives Romanos templo Aesculapii iuduxerant, cum iussu regis Mithridatis apud cunctas Asiae insulas et urbes trucidarentur. (Tacitus, *Annales*, IV. 14. 1-2)

This year [*i.e.*, 23 A.D.] also brought delegations from two Greek communities, the Samians and Coans, desiring the confirmation of an old right of asylum to the temples of Juno and Aesculapius, respectively... The Coans had equal antiquity on their side, and, in addition, a claim associated with the place itself: for they had sheltered Roman citizens in the temple of Aesculapius at a time [in 88 B.C.] when, by order of King Mithridates, they were being butchered in every island and town of Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly many Romans appreciated Aesculapius and the healing cult in antiquity; many poetic and historical narratives speak of Aesculapius the healing cult’s success in banishing pestilence from Rome and aiding the sick. Despite such stories, however, the healing efficacy of the cult remains uncertain and debatable. Many Christian apologists such as Augustine and Lactantius wrote prolifically in order to disprove the restorative acts of the healing cult and tarnish the reputation of Aesculapius, as it will be shown in the next chapter. Even some Romans, including Cicero himself, remained skeptical of the healing cult:

Qui igitur convenit aegros a coniectore somniorum potius quam a medico petere medicinam? An Aesculapius an Serapis potest nobis praescribere per somnium curationem valetudinis, Neptunus gubernantibus non potest?

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<sup>14</sup> Edelstein, 192.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by Edelstein

Et si sine medico medicinam dabit Minerva, Musae scribendi legendi ceterarum artium scientiam somniantibus non dabunt? At si curatio daretur valetudinis, haec quoque quae dixi darentur; quae quoniam non dantur, medicina non datur.  
(Cicero, *De Divinatione*, II. 59. 123)

What would be the sense in the sick seeking treatment from an interpreter of dreams rather than from a physician? Or do you think that Aesculapius or Serapis can prescribe a cure for our illness through a dream, but that Neptune cannot aid pilots through the same means? Or if Minerva will give treatment in a dream without the aid of a physician, will not the Muses impart a knowledge of writing, reading, and the other arts to dreamers? But if remedies of illness were so given, the arts, too, which I just have mentioned would thus be given. However, since they are not so conveyed, medicine is not either.

Although the healing cult may not have been so efficacious in driving out plagues and healing diseases as some authors claim, the cult nonetheless remains as an integral part of Roman history and culture. For the Romans, the importation of Aesculapius and his cult represented the favor of the deities towards them over other contemporary societies, especially in their time of needs. The presence of the healing cult in Rome also reflects the Romans' embrace of Hellenistic culture.<sup>16</sup> Aesculapius and his priests embodied compassion and benevolence that the Romans could not find in the physicians of their time.

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<sup>16</sup> I should like to stress again that while they did embrace Aesculapius, a god who represented Hellenistic medicine, some Romans would have done so tentatively with much skepticism. Such attitude can be inferred from *Natural Historia*, XXIX, 1 (8), 17-18, where Pliny the Elder condemns the profession of medicine and Greek doctors. Nonetheless, this acceptance was quite monumental in Roman society.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Decline of the Cult of Aesculapius: Its Struggle Against the Followers of Christianity

The cult of Aesculapius continued to rise in power and influence even into the second century when a relatively new religion began to appear publicly and make its presence well known – Christianity. During this time Christianity had evolved from a small religious group that faced much prosecution and “was anxious to live undisturbed by others into a proselytizing mass movement threatening to destroy the foundations of ancient religious life.”<sup>1</sup> It would not be an understatement to claim that Christianity has played a major role in the decline of paganism, including the downfall of Aesculapius’ cult, and thus to examine the history of the healing cult in the ancient Roman society merits not only the juxtaposition of Aesculapius with Christ, but also the analysis of the interactions between Aesculapius’ followers and those of Christ.

The realm of paganism left much room for many, various gods, provided that the gods and their followers did not disturb the *Pax Romana* during the age of the Roman Empire. Christianity and its zealous followers, however, proved to be difficult to be absorbed into the sect of paganism, as the early Christians would neither acknowledge nor worship other gods except their own. Of course, Judaism refused to worship the other gods except its own as well, but there were subtle, albeit substantial, differences between Judaism and Christianity from the perspective of the Roman society. Judaism embraced the belief that its form of worship was the only true and acceptable form that was reserved specifically for the Jews, a holy people chosen by God, and thus the Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Edelstein, 255.



made no effort to proselytize the others, including the Roman pagans. Christians, on the other hand, held a view different from that of Judaism. They believed that their way of worship and their creed offered the one and only true salvation and that it was up to them to convert and proselytize the unbelievers and the ignorant men for their own good.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to the Romans, attempting to promote religious peace and establish that their emperor was a god (thereby requiring utter obedience from the masses),<sup>3</sup> “Christianity was... an uncivilized kind of religion... threatening the placidity with which society pursued, none too energetically, its religious destiny.”<sup>4</sup> The followers of Christ steadily proved themselves to be a hindrance, an annoyance, and a threat to the Romans, who “defended the faith of their fathers as a part of their social and political heritage and... dreaded new forms of religious cult as providing a transition to new kinds of superstition.”<sup>5</sup> The frustration of the Roman magistrates with the obstinacy and the stubbornness of the Christians can be seen in the letter of Pliny the Younger to emperor Trajan regarding his dealing with Christians:

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<sup>2</sup> O'Donnell 1979: 50 asserts that “[w]here Christianity differed crucially from Judaism, from a Roman’s point of view, was in its proselytizing spirit... [for the Christians] it was [their] duty... to bring that story... a privileged narrative of the salvation history of mankind as a whole... to the unconverted world, to reproach the unbelievers with their sin and ignorance.”

<sup>3</sup> Shepherd 1938: 60 notes that “pagans really cared very little that their Christian neighbors believed the gods to be not gods but rather evil demons, or, at best, deified men of old... but when Christians refused even to death to bury a penny’s worth of incense or pour out a couple drops of wine for the safety of the emperor, and refrained from any participation in the ancient and venerable sacrifices of the state cults, and avoided all social responsibilities... they were regarded as not only impious but also dangerous.”

<sup>4</sup> James O'Donnell, “The Demise of Paganism.” *Traditio* 35, (1979): 45-88.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 71.

Interrogavi ipsos an essent Christiani. Confitentes iterum ac tertio interrogavi supplicium minatus; perseverantes duci iussi. Neque enim dubitabam, quaecumque esset quod faterentur, pertinaciam certe et inflexibilem obstinationem debere puniri.  
(Pliny, *Lib. 10.96: C. Plinius Traiano Imperatori*)

I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians. The ones confessing (that they were Christians) I, having threatened them with torture, interrogated again and a third time: the ones persevering (the torture) I ordered them to be killed. For I did not doubt that, despite whatever it was they were confessing, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy ought to certainly be punished.

At first the concept of Judeo-Christian God did not make much sense to the Romans, either. Paganism and Christianity did not share much in their beliefs, starting with the fact that the former believed in polytheism while the latter in monotheism. The Christians asserted to the Romans that their God had neither beginning nor end – an eternal, infinite being – who sent his only begotten Son, Jesus the Christ, to die for the salvation of mankind and that Christ was resurrected and ascended into heaven, a holy and blessed realm where the believers go in afterlife, as opposed to the gloomy underworld the pagans' souls went after death. Roman pagans did believe in gods but even Jupiter, the king of the gods and all mankind, had a beginning as he was born from Cronus and, although his realm was vast, he was neither omnipresent nor infinite.

As Sir James George Frazer notes, it was not uncommon to learn that historical figures and persons of importance were demigods and had partaken of divinity:

The notion of a man-god, or of a human being endowed with divine or supernatural powers, belong essentially to that earlier period of religious history in which gods and men are still viewed as beings of much the same order, and before they are divided by the impassable gulf which, to later thought, opens out between them. [T]he idea of a god incarnate in human form... has nothing very startling for early man, who sees in a man-god or a god-man only a higher degree of the same supernatural powers which he arrogates in perfect good faith to himself. (Frazer 1951: 106)

But not even these demigods, the children of the gods, were exempt from death.<sup>6</sup> Christ in the end, however, was.

Although the Christians were persecuted severely, albeit sporadically, throughout the Roman Empire and the Roman magistrates and emperors were attempting to eradicate them, they eventually prevailed.<sup>7</sup> Christianity was eventually accepted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Throughout the time of persecution and even after this adoption of religion by the empire, the Christians did not cease to combat the heresy of the pagans and their gods. Such struggle can be seen in the Christian works like *Apologia Prima Pro Christianis Ad Antoninum Pium* and *Divinae Institutiones* as various Christian authors attempt to defend the practices and beliefs of Christianity. It was not difficult for Lactantius, a Christian author and an early church father, to attack paganism when the pagan gods themselves conducted immoral behaviors:

Quid Apollo pater eius? Nonne ob amorem, quo flagrabat, turpissime gregem paut alienum... Homicida Mars et per gratiam caedis crimine ab Atheniensibus liberatus, ne uideretur nimis ferus et inmanis, adulterium cum Venere commisit... Fur ac nebulo Mercurius quid ad famam sui reliquit nisi memoriam fraudum suarum? ... quid horum omnium pater Iuppiter, qui in sollemni precatione Optimus Maximus nominatur? Nonne

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<sup>6</sup> Frazer 1951: 308 points out that “[m]an has created gods in his own likeness and being himself mortal he has naturally supposed his creatures to be in the same sad predicament, [and thus] when the Greenlanders... [who] believed that a wind could kill their most powerful god... heard of the Christian God, they kept asking if he never died, and being informed that he did not, they were much surprised, and said that he must be a very great god indeed.” Frazer continues to note the mortality of other pagan gods, and asserts that “the grave of Zeus, the great god of Greece, was shown to visitors in Crete as late as about the beginning of our era.”

<sup>7</sup> Some of the major persecutions of Christians include Emperor Nero’s accusation of arson (65 A.D.), arrest and execution of Christians described by Pliny the Younger sent to Emperor Trajan (109 – 111 A.D.), and persecution at Lugdunum under the reign of Emperor Aurelius (177 A.D.).

a prima sua pueritia inpius ac paene parricida deprehenditur, cum patrem regno expulit ac fugauit nec expectauit mortem decrepiti senis cupiditate regnandi? ... omitto uirgines quas imminuit.

(Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, lib. 1, cap. 10)

What about [Aesculapius'] father, Apollo? Did he not, on account of love, with which he was inflamed, most shamefully tend the flock of another... Mars, murderer and freed from the charge of murder by the Athenians through favor, lest he appear too feral and fierce, committed adultery with Venus... What did Mercury, a thief and idler, leave behind to his fame except the memory of his frauds? ... What about Jupiter, the father of all these, who in the customary prayer is called *Optimus Maximus*? Is he not, from his early childhood, discerned to be impious and nearly a parricide, because he expelled his father from his kingdom and exiled him and did not wait for the death of his decrepit old [father] due to his desire of ruling [the world]? ... I [even] omit the virgins whom he violated.

Lactantius is quick to condemn the Greco-Roman gods, and he does not do this without evidence. In the Greco-Roman mythological literature, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, Jupiter wantonly rapes nymphs and mortals and actively pursues his devious sexual behaviors. Indeed, there are rare moments when Jupiter seems to be fulfilling the role of divine judiciary as he punishes the wicked, yet a careful reading and an analysis of Jupiter's seemingly benevolent behaviors reveal that, in fact, the king of the gods and mankind acts with subterfuge and is rather a tyrant operating under the disguise of a righteous avenger.<sup>8</sup>

Lactantius and other early Christian writers attempting to defend Christianity and eradicate paganism often used this point to their advantage in order to prove the superiority of their religion to that of the Greco-Roman pagans. After all, who would rather worship murderous, thievish, and immoral gods of paganism than the Christian

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<sup>8</sup> In contrasting the Ovidian Jupiter's act of drowning the world to save its 'better parts' (1.263) with his act of saving the world from the conflagration caused by Phaethon (2.308), Segal 2001: 81 notes that the use of nearly identical language in the rape of Io (1.599) ought to remind the reader of Jupiter's ignoble motives behind his seemingly noble actions.

God, the true *Optimus Maximus*, who genuinely cared for the well-being of all mankind? But to them one Greco-Roman god remained exemplary above the other gods, who was truly benevolent – Aesculapius.

Certainly Aesculapius shared with Christ many similar characteristics.<sup>9</sup> As Edelstein notes, “the god of medicine... cured the sick had shown charity to the poor, philanthropy toward all [and] he had been satisfied with small gifts in exchange for the greatest boon, health and freedom from disease.”<sup>10</sup> Aesculapius, like Christ, was a son of god, healed the sick, raised the dead and, after his death, was deified.<sup>11</sup> Because of this similarity, early church fathers and Christian authors, such as St. Justin, had some difficulty in setting apart Christ from Aesculapius and other children of god:<sup>12</sup>

Dum autem Verbum, quae prima est Dei progenies, sine mistione genitum dicimus, Jesum Christum Magistrum nostrum, eundemque crucifixum et mortuum et redivivum ascendisse in caelum; nihil ab iis, qui apud vos dicuntur, Jovis filiis alienum et novum afferimus... Aesculapium, postquam fulmine etiam ob medici munus percussus est, evectum in caelum... Quod autem natum ex Virgine tenemus, commune id cum Perseo existimate. Quod claudos denique et paralyticos, et ab ipso ortu mutilos sanitati ab eo restitutos, et murtuos ad vitam revocatos dicimus, similia haec quoque dicere videbimur iis, quae ab Aesculapio facta

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<sup>9</sup> Other attested figures of Christ include Apollo, the arch-physician god, and Hercules, who was born mortal but was deified at his death.

<sup>10</sup> Edelstein, 257.

<sup>11</sup> Collins 2000: 90 observes that “there was a tradition that the mortal [Aesculapius] raised the dead Hippolytus,” and “thus, the story of Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter... also [elicits] a comparison with [Aesculapius].”

<sup>12</sup> Harnack in *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (1908) points out that “[Aesculapius] belonged to the old gods who held out longest against Christianity, and therefore he is often to be met with in the course of early Christian literature.”

narrantur. (Justin, *Apologia Prima Pro Christianis Ad Antoninum Pium*, 21-22)

While, however, we say that the Word, who is the first offspring of God, was born without mixture [i.e. physical union], as Jesus Christ our Teacher, and that he was crucified and died and he, revived, ascended into heaven; we introduce nothing foreign and new from those, who are called before you all, sons of Jove... [one being] Aesculapius, [who], after he was struck by lightning on account of his gift of medicine, ascended into heaven... [If] however we hold that [Christ] was born from a virgin, you consider that to be common with Perseus. [If] we say that the lame and the paralyzed, and the maimed from their birth were restored to health by [Christ], and that the dead were returned to life, we also seem to speak to [the pagans] about things, which are told that they [also] have been done by Aesculapius.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the attributes of the god of medicine that the Christians found most troublesome to deal with were his morality and benevolence.<sup>14</sup> He, like Christ, “was interested in the private needs of men, in their most personal affairs”.<sup>15</sup> There were arguments “whether Jesus or Aesculapius was the true Savior.”<sup>16</sup> Lactantius attempts to disregard the divine nature of the healing provided by Aesculapius in *Divinae Institutiones* by imposing a question, “what other deed did Aesculapius do [that is] worthy of divine honors except that he healed Hippolytus?” (*Aesculapius... quid fecit aliud divinis honoribus dignum nisi quod sanavit Hippolytum?*, *Divinae Institutiones* 1.10.15), yet he still nonetheless must admit that the healing (i.e. the resurrection) of Hippolytus reveals an attribute of divinity in Aesculapius.

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<sup>13</sup> Translated by Edelstein.

<sup>14</sup> Edelstein 1998: 113 notes, “the deified physician gave help freely and without envy [and] he refused assistance only on moral grounds; those who were themselves not virtuous he would not heal.”

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Harnack.

Even St. Augustine in his defense of Christianity after the sack of Rome in the early fifth century mocks Aesculapius and refutes his healing powers and miracles as frivolous and fictitious:<sup>17</sup>

Atque in tanta strage bellorum etiam pestilentia gravis exorta est mulierum. Nam priusquam maturos partus ederent, grauidae moriebantur. ubi se, credo, Aesculapius excusabat, quod archiatrum, non obstetricem profitebatur... Illa itidem ingens pestilentia, quamdiu saeuit, quam multos peremit! quae cum in annum alium multo grauius tenderetur frustra praesente Aesculapio... Tunc ergo dictum est eam esse causam pestilentiae, quod plurimas aedes sacras multi occupatas priuatim tenerent: sic interim a magno imperitiae uel desidia crimine Aesculapius liberatus est. (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 3.17.119)

And in such ruin of wars, a grave plague of women appeared. For before they were giving birth, the pregnant women were dying. Aesculapius was making excuse for himself, I believe, that he professed to be the arch-physician, not a midwife... And that vast plague, which raged for a long time, how many men did it kill! [The plague] which when in the second year was extending more seriously with Aesculapius present in vain... Then, therefore, it was said that that was the cause of the plague, namely that many sacred temples were used as private residences; thus meanwhile Aesculapius was freed from the great crime of inexperience or idleness.

As one can see in *De Civitate Dei*, St. Augustine attempts to prove the impotence of Aesculapius and thus disprove the existence and divine attribute of Aesculapius. But St. Augustine was not the first person to attack Aesculapius and his cult; there had been numerous attacks on the healing cult from other Christian authors and early church fathers, such as St. Justin (A.D. 100 – ca. 165) and Lactantius (A.D. ca. 240 – ca. 320). Yet the ancients held a profound sense of reverence for the god of medicine even unto the

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<sup>17</sup> The Romans saw the sack of Rome as a divine punishment for abandoning the traditional Roman religion and its gods for Christianity.

fall of the Roman Empire, despite such attacks. The pious reverence for the healing cult, therefore, must have been derived from more than mere deceit.<sup>18</sup>

An interesting juxtaposition can be made between St. Justin's stance towards Aesculapius and that of St. Augustine, as it offers an insight to the transition of the relationship between Christianity and paganism in time. St. Justin's treatment of Aesculapius, as well as other mythological demi-gods like Perseus, is rather syncretic, and, thus, seems to aim at amalgamating Christianity with paganism to some degree. St. Justin's intention, of course, is not to combine these two religions, but rather to strike some similarities between them in order to mitigate the attacks of the pagan on Christianity and to bring about a more tolerant relationship between the two warring factions. St. Augustine's treatment of Aesculapius, on the other hand, resembles more of triumphant attacks on the Greco-Roman god of medicine and his cult; he belittles Aesculapius' supposed divinity and mocks the tales of his miracles and healing. Rather than diplomatically approaching the pagans as St. Justin did, St. Augustine attacks their gods audaciously. This distinction, as mentioned beforehand, highlights the transition of Christianity from a meager minority to a predominant power as well, a source for the gradual downfall of paganism. One can see that in St. Justin's time (A.D. 100 – ca. 165), an active effort for a degree of syncretism between Christianity and paganism exists, while in St. Augustine's time (354 – 430 A.D.), centuries past, the tides have turned and Christianity has become less feeble, and actively, triumphantly attacks paganism and its gods, including Aesculapius.

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<sup>18</sup> Edelstein 1998: 110 rightly asks “supposing that Asclepius' healings were trickery, apt to please and convince the simpletons, can mere deceit create pious reverence, and such reverence as was paid to Asclepius for many centuries?”



Despite the fact that Aesculapius and his healing cult were revered throughout and beyond the Roman Empire and that he proved to be a substantial champion of paganism against Christianity, the god of medicine eventually relinquished power. The causes that contributed to this downfall of paganism are debatable. Perhaps, Christianity with its emphasis of love, forgiveness, and a personal, benevolent God had drawn more believers than paganism whose gods, excluding certain ones like Aesculapius, acted detestably at times and would employ subterfuge and commit rapes against humanity. The fact that Aesculapius, one of the pagan gods most noble and kind toward mankind, was worshipped by so many pagans and was one of the last pagan contenders against Christianity implies that there was such a thirst for such a benevolent deity. Christ would have quenched that thirst quite well. During the fourth century, Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, destroyed the temple of the healing cult at Aegae.<sup>19</sup> The worship of the healing god eventually became esoteric, often reserved only for the learned. “The sanctuaries of the pagans,” including those of Aesculapius, “became quarries for the shrines of Christ.”<sup>20</sup> Certainly the temples of Aesculapius and his healing cult were among the last pagan cults to fall as they lasted into the sixth century, when the last traces of major active paganism were finally eradicated. Thus, the Greco-Roman god of medicine, benevolent to all and offering healing to the sick, was superseded.

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<sup>19</sup> For the temple at Aegae, cf. J. Geffcken, *der Ausgang des griechisch-römischen Heidentums*, 1920, p. 279, n. 42. Edelstein 1998: 257 notes that “the fate of Aegae was symbolic” and foreshadowed the inevitable downfall of the healing cult and triumph of Christianity.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Aesculapius was truly an extraordinary god. Originally depicted as a hero, he was later portrayed as a supernal physician deified after his death. Unlike most of the Greco-Roman gods, Aesculapius sincerely cared for mortal beings and benevolently cared for all mankind, indifferent to the socioeconomic status of the sick who came to receive his aid. Such compassionate characteristics of Aesculapius made him one of Christ's greatest contenders, and combating the influence and effecting the downfall of the healing cult proved to be a difficult endeavor for the early Christians.

The importation of Aesculapius into Rome was a monumental event in ancient Rome. For many Romans, the healing god's departure from Epidaurus and arrival at Rome signified more than a mere dismissal of the outbreaks of the plague that they were suffering. The importation – Aesculapius' willingness to come to the aid of the Romans and leave behind his former dwelling – indicated that the gods particularly favored the Romans and that Rome, indeed, was the capital of the world. Furthermore, not only did the presence of Aesculapius reinforce their authority in the world, but the Romans had also secured the well-being of their state as well as that of themselves.

The influence that Aesculapius and his healing cult had upon the Roman world was vast, and, as such, the healing god and his cult merit many more careful analyses. While wholly grasping the impact that Aesculapius and his cult had on antiquity may be a difficult, if not an impossible, endeavor, such scholarship would lead to fuller understanding about the Roman society and how the god of medicine has affected our modern world.

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