

SACRED LANDSCAPES:

The Placement of the Sanctuaries of Asclepius

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By the 8th Century BCE land was being set aside for the development of communal sanctuaries, which also demarcated the boundaries of the *polis*, separating the secular space of the citizens from the sacred sphere of the gods. Greek religion was intimately connected to the growth of the *polis* and the everyday life of its citizens. While major shrines dedicated to the gods were mostly placed outside the city, sanctuaries were also established within the city precinct or on its acropolis, becoming the focal point for the development and stature of the city.

Influencing the placement of a sanctuary was a variety of factors, including the temperament and spirit of the divinity as well as the function of the deity's cult. The geography of the site was also influential; perhaps a sacred act had inspired the sanctuary's position or the social geography of the landscape had particular significance. For instance, hero shrines flourished near graves and Mycenaean ruins, which encouraged continuity and reverence for the ancestors and their past. Natural settings, like a mountain peak or a fertile vale, may have inspired the placement of a shrine due to its natural beauty or its resonance with the particular god or goddess. Demeter's sanctuaries were often placed near arable land, outside cities. As an agricultural goddess, it was appropriate that her sanctuaries looked out upon the fertility of her plains. At Corinth her sanctuary offers a panoramic view of the plain along the Gulf of Corinth, inspiring reverence for this goddess. The mythic nature of the deity to be worshipped at the sanctuary also contributed to the placement of the site. Artemis was a goddess of the wild who presided over transitions in the life cycle as well as the protection of the young. Reflecting this transitional aspect, her sanctuaries were often located in marginal regions like swamps or at junctions where boundaries blurred and became unclear, on the edge of cultivation. Likewise, her aloof and distant brother Apollo was reflected in the sacred landscape of his oracular sanctuary, Delphi which was often inaccessible and afar. Hence the specific geography of the site contributed to the ambiance of the sanctuary and held reverence for the deity who was honoured there. Asclepius was the god of healing, therefore his sanctuaries' geography needed to support and encourage the process of healing, the experience pilgrims sought at these shrines.

Sanctuaries dedicated to Asclepius were often located in a beautiful rural setting, 'sometimes on the seashore or in a lone valley'¹. The healing cult of Asclepius emerged in the 5th Century, three centuries after the seminal impetus to organise shrines to the gods. From the latter 5th Century BCE the popularity of the cult of Asclepius spread throughout the classical world. Sanctuaries to the god were located in all areas of classical Greece, including the islands (Aegina, Delos, Cos, Crete, Paros, Rhodes etc.) and all over the mainland (Amphissa, Argos, Athens, Elis, Corinth, Messina, Sparta, Titane etc.). The cult also spread to Rome, Southern Italy, North Africa, Egypt, and Asia Minor. While local cults were plentiful throughout Greece, the sanctuary at Epidaurus became the major pan-Hellenic site late in the 5th Century BCE. Two other major pan-Hellenic Asclepieions developed later at Cos and Pergamon. Many city states and their sanctuaries were already well established by the time the cult had been introduced.

¹ Fritz Graf, "Asclepius" from Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilisation*, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 1998) p. 86.

In analysing the placing of the Asclepieions (the sanctuaries of the healing god Asclepius) specific factors such as the function of the cult, its healing rituals and the cult's later emergence into Greek religion are primary considerations. It was important that the environment supported a healthy atmosphere, including clean air and water as well as a beautiful setting, which inspired tranquillity. Water was a priority in most sanctuaries, but of special significance for an Asclepieion, due to its curative and restorative properties. However water was also needed for purification rites such as the bathing ritual, which occurred before the suppliant entered the abaton. Water was synonymous with the divine, therefore springs, rivers, and other water supplies became invested with the sacred ('healing waters' or 'sacred springs'). The belief that water and prophecy were synonymous was already well established, therefore many healing centres were in proximity to divination sites as well. A standard feature of the Asclepieion was a water supply, often near springs that possessed curative properties. Pausanias described many sanctuaries and shrines dedicated to Asclepius as all having a major water source: 'a copious supply of water' (Book VII: 27,11); 'sacred springs' (III: 24,2; II: 21,8); 'cisterns' (V: 11,11) etc.² Aristides, a contemporary of Pausanias who had been healed at Pergamon, wrote poetically of the famous sacred springs at the Asclepieion there.³ Perhaps the most common feature in any Asclepieion was water, often being a sacred spring or well.

Pilgrimage was an essential, albeit underestimated aspect of the healing process. The journey to the Asclepieion suspended routine and encouraged withdrawal from everyday life, encouraging new rituals that promoted contact with the divine and promoted healing. Pilgrimage was liminal which suggested this possibility. The pilgrimage and the anticipation of being healed may have contributed to the 'psychological factors involved in the selection of sites away from major habitation areas'⁴. While not all Asclepieions were far from main cities, the pan-Hellenic sites of Epidaurus, Cos and Pergamon became well known, and attracted pilgrims from all parts of the ancient world. Vitruvius (*DeArchitectura* 1,2,7) suggested that the combination of pilgrimage and the tranquilly of the site promoted healing: 'when sick persons are moved from a pestilent to healthy place and the water supply is from wholesome fountains, they will more quickly recover'⁵. Many of the Asclepieions also have a stunning vista or are sheltered by mountains; one outstanding feature of the sanctuaries of Asclepius was their natural beauty.

The specific outlook may have contributed to the selection of the site. The sanctuary at Cos is built on terraces connected by a monumental stairway. The temple to Asclepius was placed on the top terrace where there is a panoramic view across the Aegean to Asia Minor, and the city of Halicarnassus. At Piraeus the sanctuary looked out across the Saronic Gulf to Mount Oros. And at Orchomenos, Asclepius' sanctuary has a view across the waters of Lake Copais. Similarly at Titane the Asclepieion looked out towards the Gulf of Corinth. While the location of these sanctuaries encouraged a feeling of being elevated and close to the divine, the clean crisp sea air along with the view promoted a healthy sense of well-being.

² Pausanias, *Guide to Greece (two volumes)*, translated by Peter Levi, Penguin (London: 1979).

³ Aristides, *Oratio XXXIX, 1-2*: 'no single speech could express the quality of this well, its beauty and taste; but we are better at drinking of this water and bathing in it and beholding it with pleasure than at having something to say about it'. As quoted in Emma & Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies, Volume 1*, p. 409.

⁴ Fritz Graf, "Discussion", from *Le Sanctuaire Grec*, Fondation Hardt (Geneva: 1992), p.201. In a discussion of the placement of healing sanctuaries outside towns it is argued that the pilgrimage was an important consideration. Even if the distance was not great the journey could be symbolic of the search for a cure and the 'great efforts' made to petition the god for healing.

⁵ Vitruvius, *DeArchitectura* 1, 2, 7 as quoted in Emma & Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies, Volume 1*, p. 370.

At Epidaurus the landscape differs; however the majesty, beauty and fertility of its valley setting, sheltered by low lying mountains, inspires a feeling of calm and well-being.⁶ Many of the Asclepieions were placed to reflect both the chthonic and divine aspects of the cult. As already suggested, healing sanctuaries often included oracular shrines, as both healing and divination encouraged a more direct contact with the divine. Many oracles were chthonic by nature and utilised the same ritualistic process of incubation. No special site is required for this ‘other than a place to lie down and touch the earth’⁷

In comparison to other religious cults which had flourished through the Archaic period, the cult of Asclepius emerged during Classical times and continued growing in popularity through Hellenistic times. The growth of the cult of Asclepius was not ‘a new aspect of Greek religion, but rather a concentration of a particular aspect - healing - on the particular personality - Asklepios.’⁸ In myth Asclepius is both hero and deity and unlike other heroes whose shrines were localised, the cult of Asclepius became pan-Hellenic. As a hero he ‘must have been emancipated from the attachment to a local grave’⁹ which encouraged the cult to spread. The growth of the religious cult of Asclepius paralleled the rise in Hippocratic medicine and both managed to co-exist through this period. When Hippocratic medicine was unable to prevent the spread of the plague in Athens in 430/29 BCE, the cult of Asclepius began to flourish. When medicine failed, the divine was petitioned. The sanctuary at Epidaurus had already been established, yet now flourished as a pan-Hellenic sanctuary, ‘fostered by the plague in Athens’¹⁰. The people of Epidaurus, thankful not to have been infected by the plague after contact with the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), widely promoted the sanctuary. Finally in 420 BCE the Athenian Asclepieion was established on the sheltered southern side of the Acropolis. Social needs and concerns influenced both the cult’s popularity and its placing of new sanctuaries.

Because the cult of Asclepius was a later arrival into Greek religion its sanctuaries were defined by previous cult existence: ‘in his early sanctuaries, those of the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Asclepius normally takes over the sanctuary of an established deity.’¹¹ The sanctuaries of Asclepius were founded near the shrines of other gods, especially his father, Apollo, the god of medicine. This is the case in Epidaurus. Since the late Bronze Age a shrine to a local hero Maleatas had existed nearby. His cult was assimilated by Apollo in the Archaic age (Apollo was known as Apollo Maleatas here), and finally yielded to Asclepius during the Classical period. Similarly at Cos the cult of Asclepius continued on from Apollo Cyparissius and at Corinth the sanctuary to Asclepius was previously a 6th Century open-air shrine to Apollo. From the Classical period Asclepieions were placed in well-established sanctuaries, ‘annexed’ to the already existing site such as at Athens and Corinth:

⁶ Vincent Scully, *The Earth, The Temple, and the Gods*, p.205 comments on the feeling of awe in approaching Epidaurus: ‘The whole entrance to the site has been a kind of resurrection itself: out of the narrow way into the soothing valley with the unexpected appearance of the sacred symbols, rising like hope in the opening west’. While Scully uses poetic license here, it does illustrate the point that it was important for the sites of Asclepius to inspire a sense of being whole and secure in the hands of the divine.

⁷ (A. Schachter, “Policy, Cult and the Placing of Greek Sanctuaries from *Le Sanctuaire Grec*, page 5).

⁸R.A. Tomlinson, *Epidaurus*, p. 24.

⁹ Fritz Graf, “Asclepius” from Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.). *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilisation*, p.86.

¹⁰ Christopher Mee and Antony Spawforth, *Greece an Oxford Archaeological Guide*, Oxford University Press (Oxford: 2001), p. 81.

¹¹ Fritz Graf, “Discussion”, *Le Sanctuaire Grec*, Fondation Hardt (Geneva: 1992), p. 201.

‘as a latecomer Asklepios did not possess sanctuaries traditionally dedicated to him and he was therefore accommodated in or near sanctuaries of other gods, particularly if they had some other healing significance’¹².

As suggested, there are discernible patterns in the placement of sanctuaries to Asclepius which could be summarised as follows:

- To promote healing (clean air, unpolluted land etc.).
- A water source, often springs or wells, generally deemed to contain curative properties
- An idyllic landscape, which inspired well being (heightened views, sea air, a beautiful outlook etc.).
- Extra-urban (in the majority of cases). The journey to the site anticipated a cure and psychologically prepared an individual.
- Social concerns and needs contributed to the institution and placement of the cult (especially the end of the Peloponnesian Wars and the Athenian plague).
- The proximity of a previous shrine, generally to Apollo

As a later developed cult one of the main factors influencing its placement was previously established sanctuaries and shrines which the new cult either co-existed with or assimilated. The Asclepieions were most likely to assimilate the Apollonian shrines, Apollo being both the father of Asclepius as well as being an earlier god of healing. Social needs and concerns also influenced the location of these sanctuaries. As discussed, water especially springs and wells were a common attribute of these sanctuaries, as was the landscape. The geography of the setting was varied and ranged from valleys to mountaintops. Whether the landscape provided a vista or a shelter, the common pattern was the natural beauty of the setting generally located away from the cities, although not always. The beautiful setting, its clean air and unpolluted land promoted a feeling of well being. Landscape reflected the deity and promoted contact with the divine.

¹² R. Tomlinson, *Greek Sanctuaries*, p.97.