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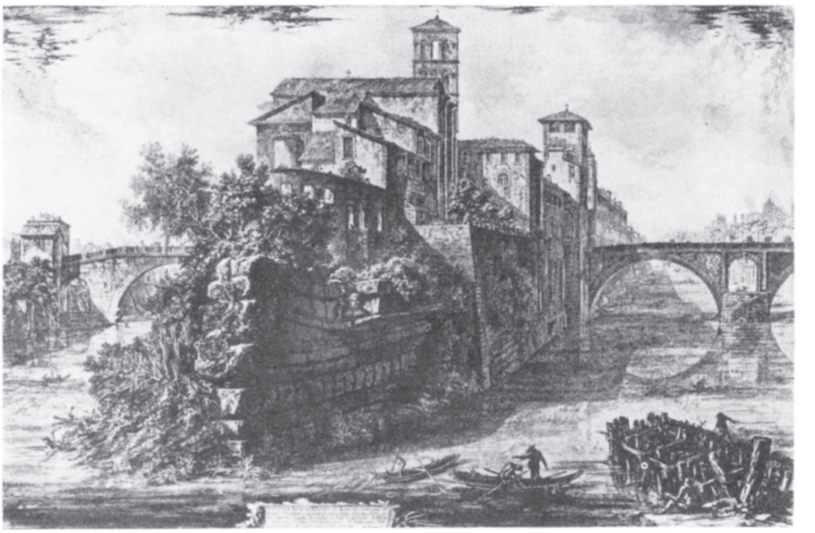


1. *The Tiber Island in Rome before the* XIX *century. Drawing by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1707–78). Note the bust of Aesculapius on the wall near the center of the picture*

# I. ASKLEPIOS IN ROME

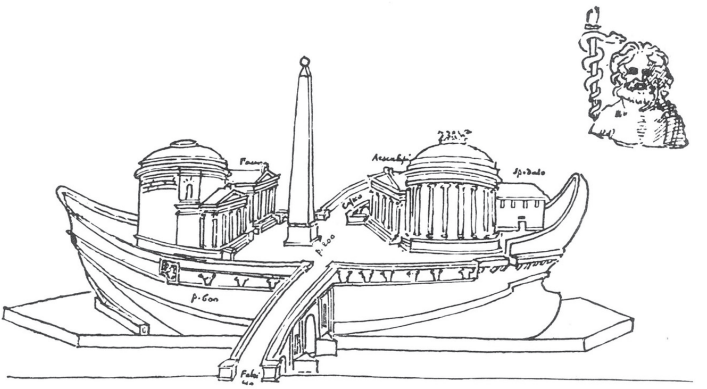
STROLLING along the Tiber in the course of a visit to Rome, we pass the Ponte Garibaldi; and then, a few steps further on, in the direction of the Aventine, we suddenly come into view of the site whence the influence of the Greek god of medicine spread through the whole Roman empire. From the Lungotevere dei Cenci we look across to the Tiber Island where the church of San Bartolomeo [1] stands amid a group of hospital buildings. Thus disposed, church and hospital are heirs to an ancient Asklepieion, a cult site unique in form.[1] On closer investigation we

discover, on the southern tip of the island, the remains of the old containing wall, built of travertine [2]. This wall gave the island the form of a ship [3], commemorating Asklepios' voyage from his native Epidauros to Rome. A fragment of a relief representing Asklepios—or Aesculapius, as the Romans called him—and a snake is still visible on the wall. The snake is coiled around a staff. Inside the church we find columns from an ancient temple. And we find something else that does not necessarily belong in a Christian church: the mouth of a well in the middle of the steps leading to the presbytery. The well opening is adorned with reliefs dating from the twelfth century, for the present church of San Bartolomeo was not built until close to the year 1000.

2. *Detail of the present remains of the ancient containing wall which gives the Tiber Island its shiplike form. Traces of the bust of Aesculapius and the snake-and-staff can still be seen. Nearby, one of the bulls' heads which decorated the island-ship*

The presence of a well fits in with a "temple secret" recorded by the Greek traveler Pausanias. When in the course of his visit to Epidauros he asked why no water or oil was brought to the temple to clean the ivory on the statue of Asklepios, the priests told him that there was a spring under the statue.[2] The spring was not found when the temple was excavated, but in general a spring seems to have been one of the requisites of the temples of Asklepios.

Starting from the church and hospitals on the Tiber Island, a living monument as it were to the cult of Asklepios, our road will lead us to the god in whom the physicians of antiquity saw the source and prototype of their profession, their spiritual and physical ancestor. The



3. *Reconstruction of the Tiber Island in its ancient form by a draftsman of the* XVI *century. Upper right, the artist has reproduced the bust of Aesculapius and the snake-and-staff. The obelisk, erected in late antiquity, proves that the island-ship, turned to the west, opposite to the direction of arrival, was conceived as a sun ship*

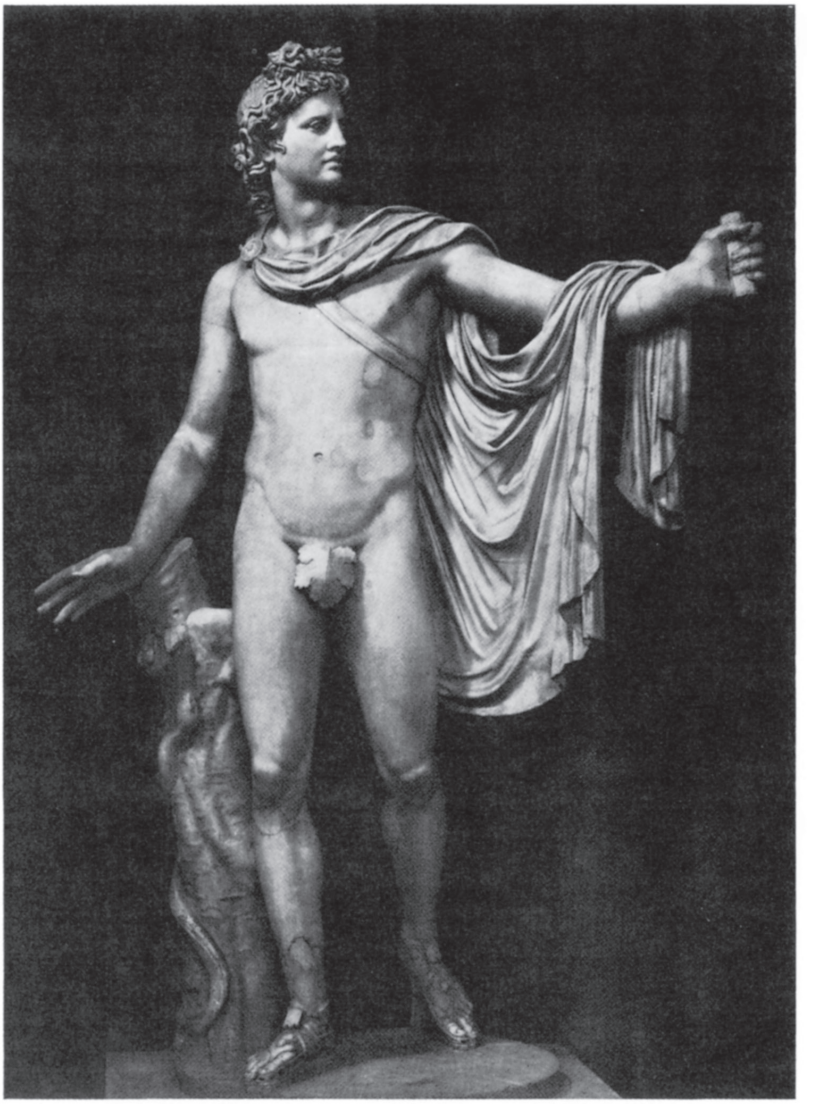
ancient physicians took this ancestry of theirs very seriously. Classical Greek medicine flourished chiefly in Kos and Knidos in eastern Greece. Its representatives, among them Hippokrates, whom we call "the Great" to distinguish him from grandsons and other relatives bearing the same name, were members of a single family, a family of physicians. The physician's oath that has come down to us in the collection of Hippocratic writings bound everyone wishing to practice medicine to consider his teacher as his father and the teacher's sons as brothers, to whom he must impart the doctrine free of charge as though they were his own sons by blood.[3] The art of healing was handed down in a genealogical line from father to son. Paying pupils outside this line took second rank; still, they had to take the same oath, through which they became in a manner of speaking adoptive sons, members of the same great family. Asklepios was looked upon as the ancestor of the family of physicians. In their own belief the Greek physicians were descended from him and were therefore known as Asklepiadai, or "sons of Asklepios."

In connection with this living genealogy, embodied in every physician, two related facts should be considered: on the one hand a god of physicians, the Asklepios of dreams, visions, mythological and religious embodiments; on the other hand a "techne" ( τέχνη ), a knowledge and skill handed down as a family tradition and at the same time as a hereditary talent. The cultivation of an acquired technical tradition goes hand in hand with conscious attachment to the family line. In the ancient world this attitude was reflected in a mythical genealogy and a corresponding family cult. Thus the divine author of the line is not so much the source of traditional knowledge as the supra-individual fountainhead of an inherited gift. And so we may expect the figure of

Asklepios, god of physicians, to reflect in a measure the profoundest origins of Greek medicine. Perhaps these very general remarks may lend special meaning to the historical study of an ancient god.

The arrival of Asklepios in Rome was a significant historical event; the legends surrounding it are highly instructive. They show us the god in his own atmosphere, the elements of which can be traced back to archaic Greece. In the main the sources tell the same story of how a sacred serpent was transferred from Epidauros to Rome.[4] In the years 295 and 293 B.C. the plague broke out in Rome. To the ancient mind the disease was like a fire: it was "scorching," says Livy in speaking of its devastations.[5] And in the background, behind the bodies charred by an inner fire, behind the burning heaps of corpses, the Greeks sensed the wrath of Apollo. As Homer puts it toward the beginning of the Iliad: "He shot an arrow with a dreadful twang from his silver bow, attacked the mules first and the nimble dogs; then he aimed his sharp arrows at the men, and struck again and again. Day and night innumerable fires consumed the dead."[6]

In such cases the Greeks turned to Apollo in accordance with an ancient principle of homeopathy expressed in a famous saying of the oracle of Apollo: "The wounder heals."[7] The responses given by the god when besought for his aid in combating an epidemic are recorded in inscriptions from the temple of Apollo in Klaros.[8] The oracle demanded first of all the erection of a statue of Apollo, that is to say, an embodiment of the god in the form described in the verses quoted from the Iliad. A Greek statue dating from the fourth century, a copy of which is known to us as the "Apollo Belvedere,"[9] shows us the god who kills, yet purifies and heals [4].



*4. Apollo Belvedere, perhaps interpreted in Rome as Apollo Medicus. The small snake on the tree trunk is a "friendly snake" such as might be characteristic of the god of medicine. Snake and trunk have been added by the Roman copyist*

In the year 293 the Romans consulted their own oracle of Apollo, the Sibylline Books, and were told to invite Asklepios to Rome from Epidauros. Such advice would have been inconceivable if Asklepios had not by that time been known in Italy and in Rome itself as a healer god, who in this function represented Apollo. The transfer of a powerful new god from a foreign land to Rome demanded an elaborate ceremony, to be executed with care and attentiveness—that is, *religio*.[10] At first, because the city was still at war, nothing more was done than to devote a day of prayer to Asklepios. Only in 291 were ten men, led by Quintus Ogulnius, sent to Epidauros to bring the god back to Rome. The essential features of this ceremonial event stand out clearly from Ovid's account in Book XV of his *Metamorphoses*. At the outset we encounter the belief that the cure—though indirectly—must come from Apollo. Ovid brings this out by substituting the supreme Apollonian authority, Delphi itself, for the Sibylline Books:

> *Men were weary*
> *Of caring for the dead, and saw their efforts*
> *All came to nothing, found the arts of healers*
> *Of no avail, and so they went to Delphi,*
> *Earth's center, there to beg the god to help them,*
> *To help them in their misery, and end*
> *The ills of their great city. All things trembled,*
> *The shrine, the laurel, and Apollo's quiver,*
> *And from the innermost tripod came the words*
> *That shook them all with fear: "What you are seeking*
> *In Delphi, Romans, you should have sought for nearer.*
> *Go, seek it nearer home. Apollo cannot*
> *Lessen your troubles, but Apollo's son*
> *Has power to help you. Go, with all good omens,*
> *And call upon him."* [11]

Thereupon the Roman Senate inquired after the abode of this son of Apollo, who was regarded as a young, still unknown god, just about to come into his inheritance. The healer god was no longer Apollo himself, who also bore the epithets "the healer" and "the physician"—to the Romans he was Apollo Medicus [12]—but Asklepios with his special cult in Epidauros. Thither emissaries were sent to bring the god himself to Rome. But the Epidaurians took a different view of the matter. To their minds Asklepios would remain forever in Epidauros but would do his work wherever, by the sending of a sacred snake, a branch of his cult was founded. Ovid describes the episode from the Roman point of view. According to him the Epidaurians were divided in their opinion: some were disinclined to withhold assistance from the Romans, others wished to keep the god for themselves. It was Asklepios himself who made the decision in his own typically Epidaurian fashion by appearing to Q. Ogulnius in a dream just as he ordinarily appeared to the sick sleeping in his temple. The god stepped up to the Roman's bedside:

> *"Be not afraid; I shall come, and leave my statues,*
> *But see this serpent, as it twines around*
> *The rod I carry: mark it well, and learn it,*
> *For I shall be this serpent, only larger,*
> *Like a celestial presence."* [13]

Asklepios appeared to Ogulnius just as he is represented in his temple, in the form recorded by the ancient sculptors. Thrasymedes had

5. *Silver coin from Epidauros, ca. 350 B.C., bearing an effigy of Asklepios. Under the throne lies a dog*

6. *The snake of the enthroned Asklepios on the Pincian Hill in Rome. The god's forearm, the snake's neck, and other parts of the statue have been restored; but the essential part, showing the snake curling round a sort of omphalos beneath the throne, dates from the* II *century* A.D.

fashioned him for the Epidaurians as an enthroned figure of gold and ivory, and it is thus seated, with the snake before him, that he appears on the coins of Epidauros [5]. And we have still another version of the enthroned god with the snake [6]. But at the height of his cult, attested in Epidauros by the long list of cures [14] and in Athens by Aristophanes' reference to it,[15] the patients sleeping in the temple generally dreamed of him in the form described by Ovid. It is thus that he is represented in the best-known statues [7], leaning on his staff with the snake twined round it. Ovid retains this human form of the god, though he also describes his animal manifestation.

In the morning the Epidaurians themselves asked for a sign from Asklepios:

> *And silence*
> *Had hardly fallen, when the god, all crested*
> *With gold, in serpent-form, uttered a warning,*
> *Hissed terribly, a sign that he was coming,*
> *And all the altars, all the doors, the pavement,*
> *The roof of gold, the statue, shook and trembled.*
> *Reared high, he stood there, and he gazed about him*
> *With fiery eyes, and as the people shuddered,*
> *The priest, in ceremonial headdress, knew him,*
> *Calling: "The god! Behold the god! Bow down*
> *To him in word and spirit, all who stand here!*
> *That we may see his beauty as our blessing,*
> *Here at his shrine!"* [16]

Here we have an extremely un-Greek epiphany of an otherwise beautiful Greek god! But for this very reason it offers a unique opportunity to note the characteristic feature of the religion of Asklepios that distinguishes it from the Olympian world of the Homeric gods. "Chtho-

7. *Aesculapius. From the port of Anzio, the Antium of antiquity, where, according to legend, the god first landed. Roman statue. ca.* A.D. *150*

nic" would have been the ancient word for it, while today, speaking from a different standpoint, one might say "numinous." These two terms cover different aspects of the phenomenon, but it is in any case the same phenomenon. D. H. Lawrence suggests the essential point when he says that the symbol of the snake goes so deep that "a rustle in the grass can startle the toughest 'modern' to depths he has no con-

trol over." [17] In the cult of Asklepios what is most deeply hidden in man is raised to the gold, ivory, and marble upper world of the Greek temples. This is the cult that now came to Rome. The serpent god makes his way to the harbor of Epidauros and, the narrative continues, boards the Roman ship of his own accord.

Favorable winds bear the ship to Antium. Valerius Maximus as well as Ovid relates that here the serpent left the ship to dwell in a temple. According to Ovid the temple belonged to Apollo, according to Valerius Maximus it was already dedicated to Aesculapius. But the latter tells us that the snake hung for three days from a palm tree in the outer court of the temple. This tree, not native to Italy, creates an Apollonian atmosphere. We recall the palm tree on Delos, beside which Apollo was born.[18] In a sacred grove in northern Greece snakes were kept in honor of Apollo himself and looked upon as the god's playthings.[19] *Coluber longissimus,* the species of snake sacred to Asklepios, is a tree snake which in southern climates attains a length of over six feet. A snake fancier has written of it: "I admired the elegant movements of the slender body, the shining brass-colored head, finely chiseled as the work of a goldsmith, which emitted blood-curdling hisses as it darted up and down." [20] There is nothing very dark or underworldly about a snake of this sort hanging from a tree of the sun—for such was the palm tree to the Greeks, related by its name *phoinix* to the reddish color of the sun.

We shall soon see that it makes little difference whether the temple at Antium was dedicated to Asklepios or to Apollo. The better informed of the two writers was probably Ovid, who says that there was a temple of Apollo at Antium before the arrival of Asklepios in Rome. After

the god's sojourn in this temple, at all events, the ship bore him to the mouth of the Tiber. There began his solemn entry into Rome:

> *. . . and here the people*
> *Came thronging down to meet him, men and matrons*
> *And maids, the Vestals, with joyous shouts*
> *As the swift ship rode on upstream, and incense*
> *Crackled on altars on both sides the river*
> *And air was fragrant with the smoke of incense*
> *And victim beasts made the knife warm with blood.*
> *He had entered Rome, the capital of the world,*
> *And climbed the mast, and swung his head about*
> *As if to seek his proper habitation.*
> *Just at this point the river breaks and flows,*
> *A double stream, around a mole of land*
> *Men call The Island. Here the serpent-son,*
> *Apollo's offspring, came to land, put on*
> *His heavenly form again, and to the people*
> *Brought health and end of mourning.*[21]

According to the whole legendary tradition it was the snake god himself—the Phoibean,[22] i.e., Apollonian, snake as Ovid called him—who chose the Tiber Island as his abode. The scene is shown in a medal commissioned by the Emperor Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138–61) [8]. This

8. *Arrival of the Asklepios snake on the Tiber Island, where it is welcomed by Faunus, god of the island. Reverse of a bronze medal of Antoninus Pius*

choice of locality probably had profounder causes than is usually supposed. The ancients picked their cult sites on the basis of religious meanings that usually found their expression in mythology. What impelled the Romans to select this island, which could never have been healthful, for a temple and hospital dedicated to Aesculapius? The terrain was so low lying that special measures were frequently required to prevent it from becoming a morass. This state of affairs is described in the ancient sources, and Bachofen witnessed it barely a century ago.[23] Though inscriptions tell us of cures effected on the island,[24] its geographical situation makes it clear that the choice was determined by religious rather than hygienic considerations. The Tiber Island was a place of considerable religious significance: according to the Roman tradition it was originally a floating island which had formed from wheat (a plant sacred to the goddess Ceres) that had been cast into the river near the Campus Martius.[25] The relation to Mars and Ceres suggests the sphere of death and the underworld. The Campus Martius, as we know, was a burial ground. After the island had formed, it was consecrated to Faunus, the ancient Italic wolf god. For Faunus signifies "strangler," [26] and the name of his priests, the Luperci, derives plainly from *lupus*, "wolf." [27] The Romans identified Faunus with the Greek Pan, but he was wilder and had about him something of the beast of prey, expressing the wolflike quality of the all-devouring darkness. But there is an inscription that mentions not Faunus but Vediovis in connection with Aesculapius on the island: [AESCV]LAPIO VEDIOVI IN INSVLA.[28] In the early days of Rome Vediovis or Veiovis, the underworld Jupiter, took the place of the Greek Apollo who sent the plague and its cure. Not far from Rome, on Mount Soracte, the cult of this god of

the underworld, named Soranus and here too identified with Apollo, was celebrated by priests who in the language of the Sabines were called *hirpi,* "wolves." [29] Soranus was connected with purifying fire: the *hirpi Sorani* leapt over the fire. Thus an Italic Apollo—an ambivalent god who killed and healed—had his place on the Tiber Island.[30] But it is in keeping with the Greek form of Apollo—the god whom we find bending his bow in the Iliad—when the Vestal Virgins invoke him as Apollo Medicus, Apollo Paean, and when a special temple of Apollo is built in order "to preserve the health of the people." [31]

As we cross over to the Tiber Island by the bridge with its ancient hermae, thinking back on the ancient Romans who brought the snake from Epidauros, we cannot help but feel a little like visitors to the underworld. Here, side by side with Faunus, the snake of Asklepios was to glitter in a wolflike nocturnal world and yet with its cold body symbolize as it were the warm light of life: a paradox that will force itself repeatedly on our attention in the course of this study. In the cult of Asklepios, as the Romans knew it on the Tiber Island, the limits between chthonic darkness and solar radiance are effaced in a way that is almost terrifying—terrifying to those who cling to the romantic conception of the Greek gods, but less so perhaps to the physician, who, even in surroundings more hygienic than the ancient temples of Asklepios on this island, is accustomed to a certain twilight realm between life and death.

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