

Snatched from the Pyre:
Contemplating the Narrative of Asclepius' Mythological Birth

Recurring mythological tales depict Asclepius, son of Apollo and god of medicine, miraculously delivered from his mother Coronis' lifeless body thanks to divine intervention. Scholars have interpreted it as one of the first accounts of a Cesarean section's performance (Romani, 2004; Iavazzo *et al.* 2008; Hughes, 2013; Bettini, 2015), reflecting an Ancient Greek obstetrical practice (Lurie, 2005; 2015; Todman, 2007; Do Sameiro Borroso, 2013). However, the oldest textual accounts of the god's birth, I argue, do not necessarily imply the opening of Coronis' womb. Additionally, I contend that Ancient Greek medical works -including those of Hippocratic *corpus*, Galen, and Soranus- do not provide any evidence of Cesarean section executions.

First, I delve into multifaceted literary depictions of Asclepius' birth. Pindar's *Pythian III* offers its most ancient narrative where Apollo rescues the infant from being burned in Coronis' funerary pyre (*Pyth.* III, 42-43: βάματι δ' ἐν πρώτῳ κιχὼν παῖδ' ἐκ νεκροῦ/ **ἄρπασε**· καιομένα δ' αὐτῶ διεφαινε πυρά). Apollodorus similarly recalls the myth in *Bibl.* III, 10,3 ([Ἀπόλλων], καιομένης δὲ αὐτῆς **ἄρπάσας** τὸ βρέφος ἐκ τῆς πυρᾶς πρὸς Χείρωνα τὸν Κένταυρον ἤνεγκε). Pausanias, in contrast, displays a slightly different version as he reports that Hermes saved Asclepius from the flames (II, 26, 6-7: ἐξημμένης δὲ ἤδη τῆς πυρᾶς **ἄρπάσαι** λέγεται τὸν παῖδα Ἑρμῆς ἀπὸ τῆς φλογός). In illustrating the god's delivery, I emphasize how the three writers employ the verb *ἀρπάζω* instead of *τέμνω*, which indicates the cutting of the body open. Rather, *ἀρπάζω* usually involves the gods' intervention in the heroes' rescue amidst battle or their sudden capture by winds, gods, or other supernatural entities (Burgess, 2001). It is analogous to the Latin term *eripio*, as Ovid uses it, describing the episode (*Met.* III, 630-631).

Next, I underline that it is only in the Augustan period that the narrative shifts towards a surgical interpretation. Hyginus firstly mentions how Apollo extracted his offspring from his mother's womb (*Fabulae*, CCII. 2). This version is echoed by Servius, who, in his commentary on

Aeneid X, 316, links the birth of Asclepius with the Caesarean procedure and the mythic origins of the Caesar family. Pliny the Elder (*NH* VII, IX. 47) also relates the name Caesar derives from the verb *caedo*, explaining that the first Caesars got his name from cutting his mother's womb (*a caeso matris utero*). Contrary to Greek physicians, Roman doctors were likely acquainted with the Caesarean section (Nardi, 1971).

Lacking any reference to this practice in Ancient Greek medical texts -even in those dealing with childbirth-, I state that accounts of Asclepius' birth do not originally involve the cutting of Coronis' body open. Rather, this interpretation starts to be envisioned in the Augustan age. Augustus, indeed, promoted Apollo as his tutelary divinity and even adopted Apollonian imagery (Zanker 1988; Lorsch, 1997). In conclusion, I suggest that Augustus began fostering a new narrative of Asclepius being born via Cesarean section to align the myth with his family's ancestor, strengthening his propagandistic connection with the god.

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