

Asclepian *iamata* and narratologies of healing

This paper investigates the *iamata* healing tablet inscriptions of the Asclepion at Epidaurus that were preserved on marble stelae during the temple's 4th century BCE renovation. Every patient that was healed at an Asclepion was required to dedicate a votive tablet containing a formulaic statement that said their name, illness, and type of treatment (Edelstein 1998). We interpret the inscriptions on these votive tablets using the framework of "narrative medicine." The narrative approach to modern medicine outlined by Charon (2008) discusses four fundamental divisions between the patient and the doctor: relation to mortality, context of illness, etiology, and shame/ fear / blame about illness. Charon suggests that viewing the patient as a complete human being rather than by just their illness, and talking to the patient about their disease bridges the divide between doctor and patient. This serves as my starting point for discussing how a narrative approach to medicine was in use 2,300 years ago at sanctuaries of Asclepius. Ancient patients, just as medical patients today, had difficulty understanding and coming to terms with their illness. Verbalizing one's illness and cure, as we find in the *iamata*, helped the patient psychologically come to terms with their disease and the healing process.

We interpret a selection of these 42 preserved inscriptions as not only didactic texts, as suggested by Dillon (1994), but also theorize about the role they played in helping the sick Asclepian suppliants understand their illness. After they were healed, they would be able to tell others about the healing powers of Asclepius since they knew how to talk about both their disease and the treatment method. We then apply theories of the orality and literacy to suggest how this information would have been read aloud, heard, and passed on to others by word of mouth. We show that the *iamata* inscriptions that appear on the marble stelae in the 4th century

BCE were carefully curated by the Asclepiad priests to show the all-encompassing healing powers of Asclepius. We analyze these inscriptions through a structuralist lens by analyzing the meanings of names of the patients and correlating them with the events of their healing narratives. The individual inscriptions are read as stories in a frame tale telling the greatness of Asclepius's healing abilities. Each inscription tells a small, formulaic story with a simple plot that builds a narrative of the god and his temple's greatness as a healing center. We suggest that the names of the patients in these stories serve as mnemonic devices for remembering Asclepius' ability to heal illnesses affecting various body parts or organs.

We conclude by connecting these *iamata* inscriptions to other marble stelae erected by private citizens in the 2nd century BCE. These are found outside the Asclepion premises and provide more detailed healing narratives complete with medical recipes. We interpret this as a further development of the Asclepian *iamata* healing narrative tradition and as an example of the democratization of medical knowledge since patients show greater knowledge of cures and treatments.

Bibliography

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