Sam Kase

Places of Healing

Omur Harmansah

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The Healing Process through Architecture and Ritual: The Asclepieion Sanctuary at Pergamum

Son of Apollo and raised by the centaur Chiron, Asclepius is known as the ancient Greek god of medicine and healing. Half-god and half-mortal, Asclepius walked the earth as a physician and was known as a savior and healer. However, Zeus killed him after he revived someone from the dead. Due to Asclepius’ myth and reputation, by 400 BCE, people began to worship him at a sanctuary in Epidaurus. Various other Asclepeia, or healing sanctuaries, were constructed during the fourth century as pilgrims who had been cured at Epidaurus wanted to bring the healing abilities and the new deity back to their cities. Additionally, as practicing physicians began refusing difficult cases in order to protect their own practices, people turned to Asclepius for help. These Asclepieion sanctuaries appeared in numerous locations including on the island of Kos, in Athens, and in Pergamum (Tick 2001: 17-32). In this paper, I will explore the Asclepieion sanctuary in Pergamum to determine how it acted as a place of healing. The unique architectural development of this Asclepieion sanctuary and the established rituals on site provided the structure through which pilgrims experienced the bodily healing process.

The exact construction date of the Asclepieion at Pergamum is unknown but most likely occurred in the early third century BCE. Clumped together outside of the ancient city of Pergamum, a sacred spring, bathing pool, and a modest complex of incubation chambers form the poorly unified original site. Few details of the sanctuary remain from before Hadrian, the 14th Roman emperor, remodeled it after his visit in 120 CE. His interest in the Asclepieion came immediately after several miraculous healing episodes had occurred among pilgrims (Hoffmann 1998: 42-51). In addition, his remodeling of the site reflected the principles of Roman expansion and imperialism that dominated the start of the Common Era. Hadrian started the construction of numerous buildings that added to the appeal of the Asclepieion as a healing site of pilgrimage. After Hadrian’s death, Antoninus Pius carried out the grandiose expansion. The new additions included the Via Tecta and Propylon, a grand courtyard, a theater, enlarged residential quarters, a gymnasium, a new temple, a rotunda, and a library. This expansion created a sanctuary “that had become the precise new center of public life in Pergamum” and one of most important places in Asia Minor (Kee 1983: 91).



Map of the Asclepieion at Pergamum (http://www.ntimages.net/Pergamum-asclepion-site-plan.htm)

One of the first structures that Hadrian introduced to the sanctuary in his construction plan was the Via Tecta, or sacred way that linked Pergamum to Asclepieion. This path was lined with statues and marble likenesses of public and religious figures, such as members of the Imperial family and Asclepius. The ionic columns allowed for a cover to be constructed, obstructing rain and excessive sunshine from reaching the pilgrims en route to the sanctuary. Along the path lay a large fountain, a bathhouse, and a heroon, or shine, dedicated to the founder of the Asclepieion. In addition, the *Lex Sacra*, which acted as a guide for proper conduct within the sanctuary, was located towards the entrance along the path. This colonnaded path, along with the various significant spots, created a visually impressive facade for any pilgrim approaching the destination. The Via Tecta led the visitor directly to the grand Propylon entrance. Given the northeast angle of the Via Tecta, the Propylon entrance and court allowed the pilgrim to orient him or herself upon entry into the sanctuary. Following the Hellenistic architecture of the path, the Propylon entrance had a large portico, or porch, with Corinthian columns. After passing through the monumental edifice, the pilgrim entered the large peristyle courtyard (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: 172-185).



Image of the Via Tecta (http://images.travelpod.com/tw\_slides/ta00/c92/f86/asclepeion-via-tecta-bergama.jpg)

The courtyard, about 93 meters wide and 120 meters long, contained the sanctuary’s older structures at its center. This large open area provided a space for rituals activities, including processions and sacrifices. Enclosed by walls lined with porticoes, the courtyard was viewed as a safe space where pilgrims who had come for healing purposes could find refuge and peace. In the center of the courtyard, a larger residential building was constructed in order to accommodate the influx of visitors. A theater was also built in the northwest corner, near to the residential facility. Common to healing sanctuaries, the theater had a capacity of almost three thousand people and was used for special performances to honor Asclepius. Although the remains no longer exist, it is believed that a gymnasium existed in the courtyard, allowing pilgrims the ability to exercise (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: 185-190).

One of the largest additions to the Asclepieion was the temple of Zeus-Asclepius, located to the left of the Propylon. Across from the older temple of Asclepius, this new temple was grander in appearance. In this temple, the unification of the god of healing with the god of the universe created a syncretized Zeus-Asclepius. A smaller replica of the Roman Pantheon, the temples’ magnificent features included an oculus, a dome, and a large pronaos, or inner porch. Although the beauty of this new temple attracted pilgrims, scholars have found little evidence that visitors came to this temple for healing. Due to few offerings left and written accounts, it is believed that this temple was viewed as a landmark of grand architecture that mainly attracted intellectuals who were not seeking healing (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: 194-197). In an effort to further serve the intellectual people who began visiting the sanctuary, a library was constructed. The library contained a large rectangular room lined with texts in addition to smaller alcoves along the sides. Showing strong ties to the Roman Empire, the library had a large statue of Hadrian and was adorned with marble (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: 207-210).

Perhaps the most significant structure to be added to the Asclepieion was the rotunda, a specialized space for healing to occur. Blending next to the temple of Zeus-Asclepius, the rotunda was also circular and had a dome with an oculus. The rotunda consisted of a superstructure with a large hall and a substructure. With six pockets along the sides that dug into the earth, the substructure provided pilgrims with a place to undergo incubation in order to seek healing (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: 203-206). A cryptoporticus, or underground passageway, stretched from below the courtyard at the sacred drawing well to the substructure. This tunnel also acted a place of incubation for pilgrims who were unable to secure a spot within the rotunda (Petsalis-Diomidis 2010: 187-189).

With an understanding of the architectural layout of the sanctuary, one can understand how the pilgrims performed the ritual practices described by Asclepius through priests. As mentioned above, the *Lex Sacra*, along the Via Tecta, contained guidelines for pilgrims to follow upon entering the sanctuary. These rules ranged from dress, requiring white chiton with no belts or shoes, to how one was supposed to move about the sanctuary. In addition, the *Lex Sacra* provided the pilgrims with information on how to make sacrifices, undergo incubation, and leave votive offerings (Petsalis-Diomidis 2005: 198-206)

Within the large number of worshippers at Asclepieion and the intellectual visitors, a significant cohort was present to seek healing from Asclepius through incubation. Incubation was carried out in one of two locations. The first was in the cryptoporticus of the southern portico or between the sacred drawing well and the rotunda. Prior to incubation here, a pilgrim was required to make a bloodless offering. The second place of incubation was in the rotunda, which required the sacrifice of a pig. This larger, more luxurious space that required a more exquisite offering created a socio-economic gap among pilgrims within the sanctuary. Despite this divide, the other rituals, including processionals and purification practices, such as abstaining from sex and avoiding certain foods, fostered a sense of community among pilgrims (Petsalis-Diomidis 2005: 198-206).

After incubation, pilgrims reported their dreams to priests who analyzed the dreams and prescribed treatments accordingly. In this act, the difference between priest and doctor became blurred and, in many instances, priests at the Asclepieion were doctors. These treatments ranged from altering daily activities to the use of drugs. In a few instances, the pilgrim were healed upon waking, suggesting a miracle and the only treatment being incubation. As the majority of treatments involved changing lifestyle activities, such as amount of exercise, use of baths, diet and “a cheerful temper and restful surroundings,” the Asclepieion became more like sanitarium than a sanctuary (Walton 1894: 57-67). Pilgrims, upon hearing of the necessary behavior changes from the priest, remained in the sanctuary and use the services of the Asclepieion to regain health. In response to having been healed, either by miracle or through treatments declared by priests, pilgrims left ex-voto offerings, or gifts, in the sanctuary. The most famous of these are terracotta body parts representing what had been healed (Walton 1894: 76-82). Furthermore, these offerings allowed a pilgrim to remain connected to the sanctuary, permitting healing to continue or good health to remain indefinitely (Petsalis-Diomidis 2005: 215-217).

The assortment of buildings at the Asclepieion allowed for pilgrims to engage in a wide range of activities. While prayer and sacrifice took place in the temples and courtyard, incubation occurred in the cryptoporticus. The fact that incubation took place underground suggests the importance of nature in the healing process. In an attempt to return to the healthy, or natural, state, pilgrims were directed to sleep in this underground space, resembling the womb of the Earth. Other activities, such as exercise and bathing, could take place in the surrounding area of the courtyard and the library and theater provided pilgrims with outlets for entertainment during their stay. These buildings in the Asclepieion created a unique miniature city, thus providing pilgrims with a place to reside while regaining their health. During the recovery process, healthy and appropriate habits were necessary and the sanctuary’s architectural design allowed for these behaviors to develop. As the ritual procedures and incubation either cured the illness or helped find a treatment plan, the physical layout of the Asclepieion coordinated the pilgrims’ healing experiences and provided the means for treatment to occur.

The pilgrims who visited the Asclepieion, distraught in a state of disease, looked to the sanctuary for healing and a way to return to the natural, healthy order. The architectural layout and defined rituals provided this order and comfort to the ill. It is important to note the dichotomies of the ancient world that were breached within the walls of the Asclepieion, specifically the separation of the private sphere and the public sphere. Although incubation was a private ritual, the healing processes of living in the residential quarters, using the baths, and preforming the various processions and rituals in the courtyard were public and fostered a sense of community among pilgrims. As the Asclepieion became more like a sanitarium and people stayed for extended periods of time, it is likely that communal activities increased despite the individualized requirements for healing (Walton 1894: 47-56). Furthermore, with the exception of rare cases, pilgrims in need of healing benefited from others who were also seeking the same goal. The comfort felt in others who were also pursuing good health added to the community identity.

Guided by the architectural layout and ritual practices, pilgrims to the Asclepieion, brought together for a common purposed and confined, willingly, within the boundaries of the sanctuary, sought aid through healing. As viewed through the youtube clip below, the location of the sanctuary is noteworthy. Nestled on a hill and removed from the city of Pergamum, the Asclepieion can be further identified as a safe haven and refuge in nature. The concept of incubation within the earth in order to be closer to nature is supplemental to the entire sanctuary being constructed in nature, detached from the city. It is not uncommon for cities to be associated with disease, malevolence, and unhealthy behaviors. As a result, it is appropriate that the Asclepieion was constructed above the city, suggesting its superiority and detachment from the harms that resided there. Additionally, the water fountain, as seen in the youtube clip, is what remains of the sacred spring that was for drinking and bathing in ancient times. The calming sound and peaceful atmosphere that is portrayed through the video provides the viewer with an idea as to what a pilgrim would have experience at the site. It is possible that modern medicine can learn from the Asclepieion model presented here in an attempt to humanize and improve healing practices. Specifically, the concept of a miniature city and the focus on architecture creates a healing sanctuary that is more welcoming and appealing to those who are ill. Many patients require a place to stay and regain health after they have overcome the initial part of their illness. As good health is the natural state of the human, making the relationship between achieving this state and nature, as was done at the Asclepieion, would immensely benefit those who are ill. Although residential facilities to promote healing exist, very few contain grand buildings and a landscape, as demonstrated at the Asclepieion, that engage with the healing process.

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