Ancient Architecture for Healing

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As the Greek myths say, Apollo was the Olympian god of health. However, medicine and healing eventually became associated with his son Asclepius, now also known by the Roman name Aesculapius. The name Asclepius has also been spelled Asklepios or Asclepios in literature; in this article I have adopted the spelling that is most commonly used today.

The story of Asclepius, although it deals with healing and medicine, is quite violent. Asclepius’s mother was a mortal, the nymph Coronis. Coronis, bearing Apollo’s son, chose to marry another mortal, Ischys. Envious Apollo killed Coronis but then snatched unborn Asclepius from the funeral pyre. He took him to the centaur Chiron, who brought him up and instructed him in the healing arts. Asclepius so excelled in his profession that at some point he could even raise people from the dead. Unfortunately, he angered Zeus when he accepted payment for raising a man called Hippolytus. Violence ensued again: Zeus struck Asclepius with a thunderbolt. However, later, and perhaps prompted by Apollo’s fury, Zeus realized all the good Asclepius had done and made him a god. Several versions of this myth exist that differ in details (1, 2, 3).

The cult of Asclepius in Greece emerged in the sixth century BC and was brought to Athens around 300 BC. The Asclepius sanctuaries, called Asclepieions, became healing centers to which the sick travelled, sometimes long distances. The rituals performed in these places included purification, sacrifice, and the so-called incubation, during which a patient spent a night in the temple and was supposed to be visited by Asclepius during sleep. Later a priest would interpret the patient’s dreams and prescribe treatment (3, 4).

The most important Asclepeion in Greece was in Epidaurus in the Peloponnesse. Another monumental one was later built on the island of Kos (which, incidentally, is also the place of birth of Hippocrates) (4). A smaller Asclepeion was erected in the very center of Athens.

The Athenian Acropolis, with its impressive entrance, the Propylaea, and its main temples, the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, and the Temple of Athena Nike, is an iconic image in the European cultural memory (5). The buildings on the south slope of the Acropolis are less widely known. Several structures were erected at that location: on the west side of the slope there was the Odeon of Pericles, where musical events during the Panathenaic Games took place. To the east there was the sanctuary of Dionysus with its temple and the large theater. Between these, along the ancient encircling road called Peripatos, there was the Asclepeion, originally established in 420–419 BC and rebuilt after the Roman invasion of Athens in 87 BC.

The architecture of Asclepieions reflected—and supported—the healing ritual. A sanctuary was usually located close to a spring. The Athenian Asclepeion was built on 2 terraces linked by the entrance gate (the Propylon). The east terrace contained the temple of Asclepius, the altar, and a stoa (colonnaded portico) built in the Doric style, which served as the incubatory (abaton), where the patients spent their healing night. On the west terrace there was another stoa, built in the Ionic style, and a fountain dating back to the sixth century BC. This second stoa probably housed the priests as well as patients. A small chamber was cut in the rock face around the sacred spring at the back of the sanctuary, and there was a pit where the sacrifices were placed. The Romans added the third stoa on the south side (5). The ruins visible today are mostly from the Roman era (Fig. 1).

Later there were Hellenistic additions to the south slope, such as the Stoa of Eumenes, which was donated by the King of Pergamon in 197–153 BC. The Romans added the Odeion of Herodes Atticus around AD 160. Still later, the Parthenon was for several centuries transformed into a Christian church, and then, during the Ottoman occupation of Greece, into a mosque. In the fifth century a Christian basilica was built right on the site of the Asclepeion. Interestingly, at that time the place was known as a Christian healing center.

The pre-Hippocratic healing was a mixture of mystic rituals, simple remedies, and lifestyle measures. It is interesting to see that long before the emergence of rational medicine, a specific architectural framework was consistently used to support the rituals. In a wider architectural perspective, as Mary Beard discussed, the Athenian Asclepeion, and indeed the whole of the
Acropolis, while retaining its Classical core, contains traces of later structures from different periods, reflecting the complex historical pathways of the place and Greece itself (6). This fascinating architectural layering has only recently started to be recognized as important.

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**References**


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