

Dina G.

Mountain View, California

Asclepius

Acrylic on canvas, LEDs

This is a painting of my mom and I. The two brown braids belong to the younger me, and the glowing hand belongs to my mom. She doesn't glow in real life, but she does paint. This might seem like too ordinary a task to put on a five foot by six foot canvas, but it's pretty incredible to me. When I was eight years old, she was diagnosed with Stage Four lung cancer. In the years since then, I've never stopped thinking about what is to come for us, worrying constantly about the future. She pulls me back into the present - drawing and writing and smiling. She taught me how to be an artist - not the technical drawing and painting skills, but how to wake up each day and choose to make art despite it all.

In ancient Greek society, the gods of healing, singing, and prophecy were worshiped in different capacities at different times. During prosperous times in Greek history, the emphasis was on healing, but when times were grim, the focus switched to prophecy. In my painting, I used symbols of the Greek god of healing, Asclepius, with his constellation in the background and his snake wrapped around one of the braids, reminiscent of his rod. Even in times of sickness, my mom and I choose art and healing over a need for prophecy and stability.

Prophecy and Greek Healing Divinity



Dina G.

The Oxbow School

OS47

Author's Note: How do ancient and modern societies treat and perceive those who are sick? This essay blends a historical and mythological deep-dive with personal narrative. Trigger Warning: terminal illness (non-graphic).

I grew up reading a lot of fantasy books - *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *Land of Stories*, anything I could get my hands on. All of the main characters had a prophecy and a quest. The worlds were filled with magic and wise mentors and funny sidekicks. I was a little girl with frizzy brown pigtails, braces, and a mom with Stage Four lung cancer. There is no known cure, nothing predictable - just hope for more research and treatments. I think I would have done anything for a prophecy like Harry's or Percy's.

In Greek epics and mythology, prophecies are omnipresent. They work as the inciting incident, the basis for heroes' personalities, and the structure for many epics. Apollo is the god of prophecy, the sun, music, healing, and so much more. When I was little, learning about Apollo in *Percy Jackson* for the first time, I was in awe - he seemed so powerful. I wished for a prophecy, so I wouldn't have to fear the unknown that comes with cancer. As it turns out, the ancient Greeks felt the same about illness. The origins of prophecy and songs that are so central to Apollo's worship have their origin in Greek healing practice. During prosperous times in Greek history, the emphasis was on healing, but when times were grim, the focus switched to prophecy.

To understand the chronology of different gods and societies, we first need to establish the different eras of ancient Greece. When most people think of ancient Greece, they think of the Classical era, also known as the Golden era (510 B.C. - 323 B.C.). This era brought us the classic gods in the roles we know and love from pop culture - Zeus as a lightning king, Hades as a god of

the Underworld, Poseidon as god of the sea. However, Greek society did not start here. Directly before Classical era Greece was the Greek Dark Ages (1050 B.C. - 750 B.C.), which was a time of cultural, economic, and political regression. There are no Greek written records from this period. One more step before this, and we come across Mycenaean Greece (1750 B.C. - 1050 B.C.). This is the “ancient Greece of ancient Greece,” and is the predecessor to Classical Greek society. Much of their society and religion was based on the nearby Minoan society from the Aegean islands.¹ The Minoans used a script called Linear A, which the Mycenaeans adapted to create Linear B.² Linear A remains completely undeciphered, while Linear B is mostly, but not fully, understood. Mycenaeans were known for their cities fortified by large walls called Cyclopean walls, and for the extensive riches that they buried with their kings.³ Mycenaean religion passed along some recognizable elements to the Classical pantheon, but it is also fundamentally different in many key ways. For example, instead of Hades being the King of the Underworld, he did not exist at all, and his roles were taken over by Poseidon⁴. Gods were described in vastly different roles, and some important gods had not yet been added to the pantheon.

Asclepius was the Classical god of healing, and represents what the Greeks thought of medicine and healing during that time. Before we can analyze what his existence says about Greek society, we need to get a clear picture of his story. I’ll use two main sources - Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca* and Pindar’s *Pythiae*, since they are the two most well-preserved and complete versions of the Asclepius myth. In Pindar’s telling, Asclepius is the son of Apollo and a mortal woman named Coronis. Coronis fell in love with another and was unfaithful to Apollo. When Apollo found out, he sent his sister, Artemis, to kill Coronis. While Coronis was burning, Apollo

¹ https://www.worldhistory.org/Mycenaean_Civilization/

² https://www.worldhistory.org/Mycenaean_Civilization/

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://historyhub.info/the-development-of-poseidon-over-the-years/>

decided not to let his child in her womb die and took the baby to the centaur Chiron. Chiron is known as the trainer of all the great Greek heroes, and he raises Asclepius to be the greatest physician of ancient Greece. As his “greed”⁵ grows, Asclepius moves past healing the living and starts healing those who have already passed on. In Pindar’s version of the myth, Zeus strikes down Asclepius and kills him for his impiety. However, Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca* carries the story further - Apollo is enraged by the death of his beloved son and kills the Cyclops who forged Zeus’s lightning bolt. In response, Zeus throws Apollo in Tartarus⁶. With a promise to never resurrect the dead again, Zeus brought Asclepius back to be immortal among the stars.

Sometimes I wonder how Asclepius, as a physician, would feel about the fact that his life caused a chain of suffering and death. As easy as it is to get attached to mythological figures as characters, thinking about them as individual people is mainly irrelevant. Gods are a complex amalgamation and personification of a society’s feelings about a topic, rather than people in their own right. As I continue through this paper, I will discuss how different gods in historical Greek societies reflect healing values in their contexts.

Asclepius personifies healing, but there are also interesting facets of his characterization and worship that relate to prophecies and dreams. Greeks thought of disease as a punishment from the gods for a moral transgression. Depending on the social construct the person violated, different gods would inflict disease. Each god protects their domain of society. For example, if you were to be unfaithful in your marriage, Hera, goddess of marriage and family, may send down physical

⁵ Pindar

⁶ Deepest place in the Underworld, used to imprison those the gods considered evil (the Titans, most notably)

ailments. Apollo was associated with sudden death, Artemis⁷ with mental and nervous disorders, Hekate⁸ with delirium and night sickness, and so on.

From there, the jump to the involvement of prophecy is very natural. When people got sick, they would wonder which god they had wronged. They believed they needed to fix their moral sins as a precondition for getting healthy again. Since there is no real negative physical effect from moral actions, they would need spiritual advice to figure out how to morally correct themselves for healing. From there, they would reach out to prophets, seers, and physicians to tell them which god they had to appease to get better. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, when disease came to wreck Greek camps, seers or prophets were called upon to help⁹.

Asclepius is usually depicted as an older man with a beard and a knotted staff with a snake wrapped around it. Snakes were sacred to Asclepius's cult and their bite was not considered venomous. In one explanation for how Asclepius learned to resurrect people from the dead, it was said that he watched a snake bring back its deceased partner with herbs.¹⁰ For ancient Greece and the societies preceding it, snakes were a strong chthonic¹¹ symbol. Across Greek society, snakes represented prophecy, dreams, and healing. Asclepius was so strongly associated with snakes that sometimes he was said to have returned to the mortal world in the form of a snake to interact with humans. Asclepius's recurring snake symbolism once again connects him to prophecy, since it abstractly has connections to the Underworld (the future for everyone, eventually), and its relation to prophecy and dreams.

⁷ Apollo's sister (goddess of the moon, the hunt, and chastity, most notably)

⁸ Goddess of magic

⁹ *The Healing Gods of Ancient Civilizations* (Pg. 276)

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Relating to the Underworld

Apollo is the dedicated prophecy god. You would think that Asclepius would be an offshoot of Apollo because he is a more minor and specific god that falls under Apollo's godly duties. If that were the case, however, all of these links to prophecy in his characterization would not make sense. Those links would be redundant in a god whose whole purpose is to be more specific than his parent. This means that there is likely a more ancient source from whom both Apollo and Asclepius broke off from.

Apollo plays a big role in the Classical Greek pantheon, with major roles in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. However, Apollo's name is nowhere to be found in Linear B transcripts. He was not a Mycanean god. While Asclepius's name is not mentioned either, there are multiple references to a specific healing and medicine god named Paeon.

Paeon is described as a "physician of the gods,"¹² implying that he healed other gods as well as served as a healing god for the mortal Greeks. In the *Iliad*, when the Greek hero Diomedes wounded Ares, Ares returned to Mount Olympus, where Paeon treated his wounds. In the *Odyssey*, when Heracles shoots Hades with an arrow, Paeon is the one to treat his injury. He is treated as an independent deity by both Homer and Hesiod, and only after the 6th century B.C. (after the Dark Ages) does he become reduced to an epithet¹³ for Apollo and Asclepius.

Beyond his role as a medical healing god, Paeon was also the personification of the practice of singing poetry called paeans to heal the sick. The similarities in the name of the god and the name of the songs show the shared etymology and historical connection between the two. Paeans are classified as song-dances and are usually performed in groups to heal, although have also been used for celebration and prayer. Distinct from its Greek poetic peers, paeans are associated with

¹² The Healing Gods of Ancient Civilizations

¹³ An adjective added onto a god's name to describe what capacity they are being worshiped in.

life and joy, while dirges (slower meter mourning songs) and dithyrambs (special rhythmic hymns to Dionysus) are associated with the chthonic.

So, now we know the historical context and the mythological context of all of the gods: let's put it together. Healing worship preceded Apollo's prophecy worship because Paeon was found in Mycenaean records whereas Apollo was not. Using song as healing was such a prominent cultural tool to cope with illness that it got personified into Paeon. He and the singing practice was so powerful that Paeon could heal gods themselves. After the Bronze Age Collapse, somewhere in the recordless Greek Dark Ages, Asclepius was created and Apollo was added to the pantheon and was syncretized¹⁴ with Paeon.

We can't know for sure why this all happened, especially with the lack of written information in the Dark Ages. My hypothesis is that whatever was the cause of the Bronze Age Collapse and Dark Ages caused widespread physical illness or injury. One likely prediction for the fall of the Mycenaeans is a conflict between them and the Hittites¹⁵ that collapsed all trade in the area. This is the war that the *Iliad* was an allegory for. The fall of Troy caused a trade collapse in the Middle East since the Hittites were the middleman for much of the trade between Greece and Anatolia. The siege of Troy caused death in battle, but the real cause of mass illness and death is the total economic and political collapse that followed. With all of that physical injury and sickness, there was likely an urge for the certainty that prophecy provides. The focus on the power of healing, music, and art was superseded and absorbed by thirst for a stable society. Apollo grew in popularity and power and was given a major role in the *Iliad*: a retelling of the Bronze Age

¹⁴ The merging/assimilation of two originally distinct traditions or deities.

¹⁵ A civilization in Anatolia, which is modern-day Turkey

collapse. In the *Iliad*, Apollo takes the side of the Trojans, even being the one to guide the arrow that killed Achilles. At one point, he sends diseased arrows into the Greek camp, causing plague among them. In my opinion, the Greeks were scared of their collapsing society and the amount of sickness and loss present. Paeon gave way to Apollo because of fear, but survived in the form of Asclepius. Asclepius mainly came into play in the Classical era, once Greek society was back on its feet, valuing art and song more than ever. Aesclepius and his snakes represent rebirth in many ways- the snake as a symbol itself, but also through Aesclepius's mythological story. Even Asclepius's birth was a rebirth in a way; he was rescued from his dying mother's womb. Asclepius dying and being brought back to immortality by Zeus is a compelling plot for his myth, but it may also be the Greek's explanation for Paeon's fall from popularity and rebirth in the form of Asclepius.

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Even as an artist myself, I've rolled my eyes at the whole "art is healing" thing. Okay, sure, art is great, but what about our whole fucked up healthcare system? What about the overinflated medication prices and funding disparities and strained hospitals? And then I think of my mom, a lung cancer patient advocate who still hums a little melody to her pills before she swallows them every morning and night. I sing with her too, although I go for Hamilton a bit more often than she does.

My mom draws and paints almost every day. Although our artwork is completely different, I think I learned how to be an artist from her. How to look at each daunting, frightening day and say, "Okay. I'm going to make some art today." Living with a severely immunocompromised person during Covid was (and continues to be) a very stressful situation. If March of 2020 was the Bronze Age Collapse, then my family has been living through the Dark Ages. When the present is

scary and the past is unreachable, the future is a place for mental solace. I can very much understand why Apollo and his prophecies were so popular among the Greeks in their time of regression.

What I've realized is that in all my favorite stories, the prophecies never tell you the important things. "Neither can live while the other survives," but Harry gets reborn. "You shall fail to save what matters most in the end," but Percy's mom gets returned. "From that moment on, his doom was sealed," but Patroclus dies a hero. The art of the story and the characters is what I fell in love with growing up, not a state of knowing the future.

Making art is an effort. Art is drawing and painting, yes, but it is also writing. It is listening to music, it is laughing with your friends, it is sending your grandmother a handwritten thank you. It is when there is a double rainbow and you take a mental picture; never wanting to forget how pretty it is. It is wearing a mask, getting painful booster shots, sacrificing to protect people you will never meet. Art is figuring out how to share the world with others, in all its beauty and misery. In times of sickness, that becomes even more important.

I've come to terms with the fact that I am never going to receive one of Apollo's famous prophecies - cancer bends to no predictions. What I have learned though, is to sing. Not in prayer to any god, not to plead for moral correction, just for myself and anyone who needs to hear it.

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