

# Is the College an Asklepieion?

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**ABSTRACT** After an annual introduction of new Fellows one of them viewed the neckties on display and, referring to their sagittary motif, was heard to say, 'I suppose it is the College crest.' Of course, it is precisely not that. The only crest the College has is that of its arms, which is completely different. However, one can sympathise with the new Fellow, for in the College he was surrounded by confusing reminders of the medical mythology of ancient Greece. This account is offered as a refresher course on the *dramatis personae* of the pantheon and some of their activities and attributes.

**KEYWORDS** Apollo, Asklepios, Cheiron, Greek medical mythology, Hippocrates, RCPE

**DECLARATION OF INTERESTS** No conflict of interests declared.

## INTRODUCTION

'I swear by Apollo the physician, by Asklepios, by Hygieia, by Panacea' – Hippocratic oath

'Myth is what never happened but has always existed'  
– Stephanus Byzantinus

A characteristic of ancient Greek myths is their extreme malleability. People in different parts of the Greek world adopted gods and heroes as their own, giving them local epithets and devising genealogies related to their own district. This makes it impossible to provide definitive versions of most myths. I have made an arbitrary selection from various versions to give some accounts of the RCPE's adopted Greek patrons, based mainly on secondary sources (see bibliography); in doing this I have simply followed the example of the Greeks themselves. I have used a similar freedom in the inconsistent English spelling of Greek names.

## APOLLO

Leto, 'of the lovely locks', a Titan's daughter, conceived twins by Zeus. The ruler of the gods, however, married Hera, who persecuted Leto during her pregnancy, sending the serpent Python to pursue her until she reached the island of Delos. There, beside a palm and a laurel, she gave birth to Apollo and his sister, Artemis. Apollo, the dazzling archer-god of light (hence his epithet, Phoebus – radiant), was also the patron of medicine, music and poetry. He had many loves, including Daphne, a nymph he tried to seduce; but the earth gaped and Daphne turned into a bay tree. Apollo then made the laurel sacred to himself.

Apollo came to Mount Parnassus where, with his arrows, he slew Python, who then was living in caves at Delphi, the earth's centre, marked by a conical 'navel-stone' (Figure 1).

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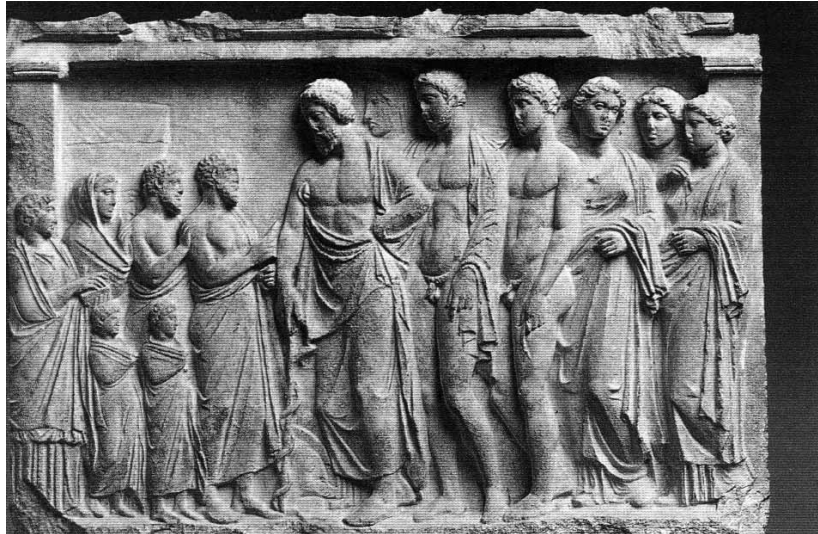
**FIGURE 1** Map showing places mentioned in the text.

This may represent the overcoming of winter darkness by the light of spring, or even the victory of a new sun-religion over an earlier serpent-worship. From 582 BC, to commemorate the victory, the four-yearly Panhellenic Pythian Games were held, at which musical competitions were included and winners were awarded garlands of laurel. Apollo's temple at Delphi was the site of Greece's most famous oracle, whose priestess was called the Pythia. The god spoke through her when, crowned with laurel and chewing bay leaves, she sat on Apollo's tripod throne over a chasm and, amid fumes rising from it, entered an ecstatic trance. Her utterances were translated by priests as hexameter verses.

Although he has been hailed as the most Greek of the gods, paradoxically in the Trojan war Apollo supported the Trojans, and it was a Trojan, Aeneas, who was claimed by the Romans to have founded Rome. The worship of



**FIGURE 2** The Crest of the College's arms, drawn from the blazon in ancient Greek style.



**FIGURE 3** Marble votive relief, fourth century BC. Asklepios is followed by Hygieia, veiled and in the background, and then by Machaon and Podaleirios, his two healer sons, and his daughters, Iaso (recovery), Akeso (cure) and Panacea. The smaller figures (left) are suppliants. (By permission of Kapon Editions and the National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv. no. 1402.)

Apollo was introduced to Rome under its last king, the Etruscan Tarquinius Superbus, when the books containing prophecies by the Sibyls were brought there to avert a plague in 433 BC.

The arms of the Society of Apothecaries in London show 'Apollo the Inventor of Physic ... supplanting a serpent', and the crest of our own College's arms is not a centaur, but 'Apollo couped at the waist with bow and quiver on his back, holding a lyre in his hands and wreathed about the temples with a garland of bay' (Figure 2). Versions of our arms crown the main door inside the Great Hall, are also in the New Library and are repeated in the balustrade of the Grand Staircase.

## ASKLEPIOS

Ares, the god of war, came from Thrace. One of his wives, Chryse, a snake-goddess of Lemnos, bore their son, the warrior Phlegyas of Orchomenos, in Boeotia. He became the father of Ixion, king of the Lapiths, a branch of the ancient race of Minyans who came from Thessaly but spread all over Greece after the Trojan War.

There are several versions of Asklepios's birth. In the Thessalian account, Apollo impregnated Phlegyas's daughter, the nymph Koronis. However, she slept with an Arcadian, so Apollo (or Artemis) slew her. From her funeral pyre at Triikka, in Thessaly, Apollo then rescued Koronis's unborn son, Asklepios. Another version, from Argolis, claimed Epidaurous as the birthplace of Asklepios, and held that the infant was exposed on a local mountain, but guarded by a dog and suckled by a goat. The infant was taken to a wise and kind centaur, Cheiron, on Mount Pelion. Cheiron brought up Asklepios, teaching him

especially the lore of medicine. There is a botanical link between Asklepios and the centaur: 'Asklepios's gentian' (*Gentiana asclepiada*) has the synonym 'centaur's root', an extract from which was used to treat poisonous bites. Asklepios became such an accomplished healer that he restored a dead man to life. For this hubris Zeus killed him with lightning, provoking Apollo, in turn, to kill the makers of the thunderbolt.

It has been suggested that Asklepios was originally a snake-god in the north of Greece and a rival to Apollo, and that his kinship to Apollo was devised to reconcile the two cults. Although Homer regarded him only as a hero – 'the blameless physician' of the *Iliad* – he was later worshipped as a god. His chief attribute is a harmless snake, usually coiled around his staff, and he was said sometimes to assume the form of a snake. Other common attributes are the dog and goat that succoured him and the laurel wreath of his father, Apollo.

Asklepios fathered several sons and daughters by his wife, Epione. His elder sons, Podaleirios and Machaon, were Greek army surgeons at Troy, and commanded 30 ships and men from Triikka. They gave a general anaesthetic to Philoctetes the archer before operating on his poisoned foot, and Machaon cured Menelaos's arrow-wound with salves given by Cheiron to his father long before. Machaon was himself later worshipped in Lakonia at a sanctuary that claimed to have been founded from Triikka. The most famous daughters of Asklepios were Hygieia and Panacea, each revered in her own right. Hygieia is often depicted feeding a harmless snake with milk.



**FIGURE 4** Alexander Ritchie's statue of Asklepios beside the aedicule above the main entrance of the College.

The cult of Asklepios spread from the north all over Greece in the late Archaic period (sixth century BC), then farther afield. In the second century AD, Pausanias wrote a guide to the antiquities of Greece. He mentions about 50 sanctuaries or temples of Asklepios, from Thessaly in the north-east to Messenia in the south-west. As early as the sixth century BC there were the two local variations of the birth myth, suggesting two Archaic *loci* of the healer cult, which perhaps reflect the migration of people. The first-century geographer Strabo states that the oldest and most famous sanctuary was at Trikka, but archaeologists have yet to find it. Messene has an important Hellenistic sanctuary, but its early roots are also still unidentified.

Telemachos, an Athenian citizen, brought the cult of Asklepios to Athens, and Sophocles, the tragic playwright, welcomed him there. The god reached Piraeus in his form of a snake in about 420 BC. From there he and Hygieia were taken by mule-cart to his main Athenian sanctuary on the south slope of the Acropolis. Both Cos and Epidauros also became famous in the same century, but there were important differences between these two great sanctuaries, or 'Asklepieia'. Cos claimed a Trikkan origin and practised bedside medicine, turning into a medical school with

trained practitioners like Hippocrates. At Epidauros, a form of faith-healing was practised and the Asklepieion there became very rich indeed, forming the centre for later expansion of the cult.

The regimen at the Asklepieion at Epidauros, and in most others, included the patients bathing in healing waters, being exposed to harmless snakes and dogs, and sleeping in dormitories where they dreamed that the god (often as his snake) had revealed the means of cure. Cures were recorded. Epidauros was a miraculous pilgrim centre, in some ways resembling Lourdes, rather than an early teaching hospital as was the atypical Asklepieion on Cos. Satisfied patients made a sacrifice, often of a cock, and presented votive tablets indicating their disorders, or plaques showing Asklepios, sometimes with his healer children (Figure 3). A festival, the Asklepieia, was held there in the god's honour every four years.

In the fifth century BC Asklepios's cult came to Sikyon, near Corinth. Perhaps as early as the fourth century BC it reached Asia Minor, where it spread to Smyrna and Pergamon. The cult also travelled to Crete and south to Cyrene in North Africa. In 293 BC there was another plague in Rome and the Sibylline books suggested that Asklepios should be brought from Epidauros. He came, as his snake, by ship to Ostia and then up the Tiber to the Isola Tiberina in Rome, which he adopted as his home, with his Latin name, Aesculapius. His temple was where the church of San Bartolomeo all' Isola was built in the tenth century AD, and there is also, to this day, a hospital on the island (Ospedale Fatebenefratelli). His cult survived a surprisingly long time. In the Asklepieion at Epidauros statuettes of Asklepios and Hygieia were found dating from the late third century AD.

Asklepios appears as a 'supporter' in the arms of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. His sons, Podaleirios and Machaon, support the arms of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, while Hygieia supports those of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow. A statue of Asklepios with a snake stands on one side of the empty, temple-like aedicule above the outside porch of our own College (Figure 4), and Hygieia stands over the aedicule (Figure 5). One bust of Asklepios crowns the entrance of the Great Hall and can be seen from the bottom of the Grand Staircase; another occupies the same position on the inside of the entrance. A statuette of Asklepios forms the finial of the silver College Golf Cup. Dinners of the Aesculapian Club of Edinburgh are held in the New Library.

## CHEIRON

Cheiron has already been mentioned and a very good article about him was written by Mawdsley for the *College Chronicle* in 1981.<sup>1</sup> The centaurs were a mythical race





**FIGURE 5** Alexander Ritchie's statue of Hygieia about to feed her snake, above the aedicule.

inhabiting the mountains of Thessaly and Arcadia. Once when I visited wooded Mount Pelion, my companion told me to 'keep an eye open for centaurs'. I was unlucky; but perhaps not, for Homer said centaurs were 'intemperate'.

As so often, centaurs have several genealogies. Ixion, king of the Lapiths, murdered his father-in-law, but, to save him from revenge, Zeus rescued him. However, Ixion then tried to woo Zeus's wife, Hera, so Zeus made a cloud resembling Hera, and by it Ixion became the father of a man-horse monster, which, the poet Pindar says, consorted with Magnesian mares on the slopes of Mount Pelion and so was the progenitor of the centaurs. Other versions give their descent from Apollo and Hebe, or from Peneus, Thessaly's chief river. The centaur myth probably originated when people first saw an equestrian tribe from the north settling in Thessaly at a time when, in Greece, horses were not ridden. Sir William Smith considered that the name *kentauros* ('bull-spearer') suggests the hunting of cattle by Thessalian cowboys. Like satyrs, centaurs represented unbridled animal lusts, and their combats with the Lapiths, and with Herakles and his wife, stood for strife between barbarism and civilisation.

Cheiron, however, was strikingly different from other centaurs. His descent is variously given as from his mother Philyra, from Ixion, Poseidon or even from Kronos. Cheiron



**FIGURE 6** Silver statuette of a centaur representing Cheiron, presented by Sir James Cameron.

lived on Mount Pelion with his wife, Chariklo, and was wise, kind and civilised. He is often represented in early Greek art as having a body that is wholly human, but attached to the rump to the chest and hind legs of a horse, and clothed with a tunic and, often, a cloak. He was instructed by Apollo and Artemis and became famous for his skill in medicine, music, prophecy and gymnastics. In turn, he had as pupils in these skills many distinguished heroes, including Herakles, Achilles, Jason and Asklepios. Theophrastus (372–287 BC), 'the founder of botanical science', and Dioscorides, a physician who wrote a great treatise on *materia medica* in the first century AD, have given us some examples of herbs traditionally said to have been used by Cheiron. They include species of the genus *Centaurea* (named after Cheiron), Elicampane ('the all-heal of Cheiron') and Black Bryony – which are British, as well as Greek, wild plants.

When Herakles was fighting wild centaurs, one of his poisoned arrows accidentally wounded Cheiron and caused him such agony that he longed to die. He could not, however, do so until he had passed his immortality to Prometheus. Zeus then raised him to the stars as the constellation Sagittarius. Galen (129–215 AD), who learned and taught medicine at the Asklepieion at Pergamon, accepted Cheiron as an early teacher of medicine.

Sir James Cameron, while president of the RCPE in 1962, presented to the College a silver statuette of a centaur representing Cheiron (Figure 6) and instituted a Cheiron cult. Many of us can remember the overpoweringly repetitive centaurs all over the wallpaper of the entrance hall and stairwell – mercifully now gone. Centaurs adorn the neckties that interested our new Fellow mentioned in the abstract, and recently the uniquely distinguished arms of the College have been replaced on writing paper and publications by a commercial logo – a centaur, like Cameron's, which is not like Cheiron as typically depicted by the ancient Greeks. A recently arrived centaur adorns the sundial on the back, outside, wall of No 8, Queen Street.



**FIGURE 7** Lamp standard outside the College's main entrance crowned by a cock.



**FIGURE 8** The College Officer's staff entwined by snakes and with a cock as finial. The previous centaur wallpaper is behind.



**FIGURE 9** The College mace, crowned by a cock and entwined by snakes.

## COCKS

The College has another cult – that of cocks. The cock-crow heralds the dawn and Apollo's light. In Greece cocks were symbols of virility and were often used in cock-fighting and as sacrifices. Associated with Greek deities, and sacred to them, were various animals. Aphrodite, for example, the fertility goddess of sexual desire, was associated with lustful animals – rabbit, ram, goat and partridge. Athens was devoted to Athene, the great goddess of war and wisdom, whose chief attribute was the Little Owl (*Athene noctua*), but who also had a cock and a snake. Her gigantic gold and ivory statue by Pheidias in the Parthenon showed a snake at her feet. Cocks and snakes were also sacred to Apollo and Asklepios. At Epidaurus the Asklepieion was sited below a temple of Apollo, and Athene, too, was worshipped there.

At Olympia the museum holds a bronze shield-band of about 600 BC showing a cock upon an altar. It also has an ancient terra-cotta figure of Zeus abducting Ganymede to be his beloved cup-bearer: the boy carries a rooster. Cocks appear on Attic pottery of the mid-sixth century BC. They are still symbolic in Greece, as we are reminded by Lawrence Durrell's account of the poet Katsimbalis arousing them at night from the Acropolis by uttering a wild 'cock-crow':

'From the distance silvery clear in the darkness a cock drowsily answered – then another, then another ... until all over Athens like bugles they were calling and calling ... the whole night was alive with cock-crows – all Athens, all Attica, all Greece.'

Plato, in the *Phaedo*, relates the dying words of Socrates to Kriton who looked after his affairs: 'We owe a cock to Asklepios. Be sure to pay the debt, and do not neglect to do so.' Perhaps the payment was for the hemlock that cured Socrates of 'life's fitful fever'.

Cocks are charges on the arms of the Institute of Hospital Engineering. The late eighteenth-century unadopted draft of arms for the College has as its crest a cock fighting a snake.<sup>2</sup> In 1993 Dunlop published in the *Proceedings of the College* an excellent account of the many cocks it houses, with good photographs.<sup>3</sup> Perched on the four lamp standards outside the main entrance, they alert visitors to what they will find inside (Figure 7), where four bronze hanging lamps each supports a cock. Cocks are engraved on the glass vestibule doors and carved on the lectern and ceremonial chairs in the Great Hall. The College Officer's staff carries a silver cock (Figure 8), and it is a cock that crowns the great golden College mace (Figure 9).

## SNAKES

From earliest times snakes, both harmful and harmless, were common in Greek mythology – Zeus himself sometimes appeared as a snake. We have seen that healing snakes were part of the cult of Asklepios, perhaps because their shedding of old skin symbolised renewed strength and health. Interestingly, a paper from Italy in *The Lancet* in 1992<sup>4</sup> reported the presence of an epithelial growth factor in the salivary epithelium of a species of the genus *Elaphe*, which were probably the sacred snakes of southern Europe. Within the Asklepieion at Epidaurus are the foundations of a curious circular labyrinth, thought,



**FIGURE 10** Rods of Asklepios on the base of the lamp standard and on the wall beside the main entrance.

perhaps, to have been a snake-pit below an elaborate and important building.

The confusion of the rod of Asklepios with the *caduceus* of Hermes is a common error in medical symbolism. Hermes, a herald, carried as his baton what was at first an olive branch, ending in two shoots twined in a loose knot, and adorned with white ribbons. Over time, the ribbons became two snakes and wings appeared to emphasise his speed as a messenger. By contrast, Asklepios's rod, or club, is without wings and entwined by a single snake, as on the plaques on either side of the College's main door,

on the outside of the north wall of the New Library and on the lamp standards outside the College's entrance (see Figure 10). A rod entwined by snakes is carved in each side of the backs of the ceremonial chairs in the Great Hall. The mace and the College Officer's staff are also entwined by snakes (see Figures 8 and 9). Golden serpents are the supporters of the arms of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

## HIPPOCRATES

Unlike the mythological beings discussed above, Hippocrates was a historical person in Greece in the fifth century BC, at the start of its golden age, and so was likely to have had as contemporaries such people as Pericles, Sophocles, Socrates, Plato and Thucydides. He was born in Cos about 460 BC into a family of Asklepiads. His father, Heraklides, was also a physician; his mother was said to have descended from Herakles. He practiced in Cos, and taught, for fees, under his famous plane tree, but he also travelled widely and died at Larissa in Thessaly at a great age.

Hippocrates' two sons, and a son-in-law, carried on the family profession in what seems like an early medical school or teaching hospital. They were, perhaps, authors of parts of what is known as the *Hippocratic Corpus* – a collection of writings about the practice of medicine in Cos. These introduced the concept of an imbalance of humours, later elaborated by Galen, and laid the foundations of subsequent rational and ethical medicine. A monument of about 220 AD in the Asklepieion on the



**FIGURE 11** Alexander Ritchie's statue of Hippocrates, holding a volume of his works, beside the aedicule.

Acropolis in Athens reflects the Hippocratic ideal of the duties of a physician: 'He would be... saviour equally of slaves, of paupers, of rich men, of princes and to all a brother... For we are all brothers.'<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most familiar sentence from these writings is the start of the 'First Aphorism of Hippocrates': 'Life is short, the Art long, opportunity fleeting, experience deceptive, judgement difficult.'

The first six words, in Greek, are the motto of our sister college in London. Many graduands from medical schools still swear some version of the Hippocratic oath at their graduation ceremony.<sup>6</sup>

Hippocrates' statue, showing him holding a volume of his writings, stands beside the aedicule above the main entrance to the College (Figure 11), balancing that of Asklepios, and his face is centrally portrayed on a plaque in the frieze on the south side of the Great Hall. He is a supporter of the arms of several surgical associations and also those of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and the British Medical Association.



## CONCLUSION

One ascends the steps to the front door of the College, past the lantern cocks, beneath Alexander Ritchie's statues of Asklepios, Hygieia and Hippocrates. Between the rods of Asklepios on the lanterns and flanking the main door, one enters the vestibule, with more cocks, around and overhead. One sees from the bottom of the staircase the bust of Asklepios above the Great Hall door. Snakes abound and Cheiron is around. It is hard not to feel that this building is not just No. 9 Queen Street, Edinburgh, but also an Asklepieion in the Athens of the North. This feeling is further strengthened when one enters No. 8. On the ceilings of the Orde Room on the ground floor, two oil-painted panels by William Kay<sup>7</sup> sum up the elements of the Asklepiian cult. Apollo stands beside the navel-stone of Delphi. Although Cheiron's legs are all equine he wears a cloak. Asklepios's statue includes his snake-wreathed staff, and a dog is nearby. His daughters Hygieia and Panacea prepare to sacrifice a cockerel offered by Iaso.

On the other hand, the purpose of an Asklepieion was the healing of the sick, and the College is neither a hospital nor a surgery. But it was not always so, as the *College Minutes* tell. At the first recorded quarterly meeting in 1682, it was decided that 'some persons be appointed by the College to be phisytians for the poore'. In 1705, the RCPE

'unanimouslie agreed ... That tue of their number shall attend at their place of meeting every Munday, Wednesday and ffryday betwixt thrie and four in the afternoone for giveing advyce to the sick and poore Gratis.'

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Dr John Drummond was president when the RCPE promoted the building of an infirmary, and in 1729 he was the first Fellow to attend it as physician, the College having agreed 'to attend the Infirmary in yr turns.' By 1730 medical care for the poor was provided in both the infirmary and the College Hall. In 1749, the Fellows decided that

'in place of the Colledge their giveing attendance upon poor patients at their own hall twice a week They will be pleased in time Coming in their turn to attend the poor out patients at the Infirmary.'

So, before the infirmary was built, patients came to the College Hall, were treated by physicians and, doubtless, some were healed. These past College activities may perhaps help to provide the remaining part of the similitude I have tried to indicate. The answer to the question posed in the title of my attempt lies, gentle reader, with you.

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