

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Gods and heroes of Medicine in Greek mythology

Emmanouil Magiorkinis¹, Aristidis Diamantis¹, George Androutsos²

1. Office for the study of history of Hellenic Naval Medicine, Naval Hospital of Athens, Greece

2. Department of History of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Athens University, Greece

ABSTRACT

The Greek mythology is characterized by a large corpus of narrative texts describing the adventures and life of a constellation of gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines as well as various mythological creatures. The purpose of this article is to present gods and heroes which were considered to practice medicine. A thorough study of ancient texts of the Greek and Roman literature, revealed that Greek mythology abounds with examples of Gods such as Apollo, semi-gods such as Asclepius and Ampiaurus, and creatures such as centaur Chiron who practiced and taught medicine in pre-historical times in Greece. In general, the chronological order of the appearance of those figures in Greek mythology depict the course of transformation of Medicine from divine gift to practical art.

Keywords: *mythology, medicine, ancient Greece.*

INTRODUCTION

One could define the beginning of Myth in the fiction of human mind during the early times of human history, which originates from dream activity and breaks out in symbolic form. The word “μύθος” (mythos) in Greek is totally different by the word “παραμύθι” (fairy-tale): the second is a compound word of the word “παρα” and the word “μύθος” which literally means “on the side of myth” or alternatively “a story very close to that of myth” (“παρα το μύθον”), whereas the former implies also the allegoric narration of real events.

It is true that in the past, what was unable to be explained by reason, was attributed to transcendental entities, which had either a human or animal form. Natural phenomena were deified, whereas everything that happened in the world was accredited to the will of Gods; in that way, pantheism was a natural outcome, since a constellation of Gods satisfied primitive desires, successes and failures. The innate inability of the individual as a unit or within the family or the tribe led man to device different means with the superior, invisible deities, giving birth, in that way, to Magic and Ritual.



Figure 1. Apollo.

PAEON (PAION) AND APOLLO: HEALERS OF THE GODS

Ancient Greeks, as all people in the world during the Antiquity, believed that Gods sent disease and provoked death, punishing “Υβρις” (hubris) and injustice. All disease could be healed by the process of propitiation of the Gods through sacrifices and other rituals. Only the chosen ones could communicate with the Gods; they were people who were worshiped after their death as deities and were undertaking the task to mediate between the patient and the God for the sake of the first.

Even the Gods were vulnerable to disease and could be wounded; according to the Greek Mythology, the healer of the Gods, “Παιών” (Paeon or Paion) treated the wounds of Mars and Ades using various ointments and remedies.¹ His name comes from the word “παίω” which means “heal the disease by a magic hit”, whereas the word “Παιάων” was used to name the military lied of victory, connecting the music and healing properties of Paion. During the classic years, the word Paeon became

Address for correspondence: E. Magiorkinis BSc, MD
L. Aianteiou 3, PB 1541, 18900,
Salamina, Greece
Tel: +30-210-4677549
e-mail: mayiork@med.uoa.gr