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## Editorial Introduction

**How to Cite:** Pachis, P 2016 Healing Gods, Heroes and Rituals in the Graeco-Roman World. *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(1):e14, pp.1–10, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/olh.105>

**Published:** 10 May 2016

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## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

# Healing Gods, Heroes and Rituals in the Graeco-Roman World

Panayotis Pachis<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle of Thessaloniki, GR  
pachisp@me.com

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This editorial introduces the articles published within the OLH Special Collection, 'Healing Gods, Heroes and Rituals in the Graeco-Roman World'. The first two articles in this collection interrogate the figures of specific healing gods. Olympia Panagiotidou's article 'Asclepius' Myths and Healing Narratives: Counter-Intuitive Concepts and Cultural Expectations' focuses on the curative features that defined the image of Asclepius, the most famous of the healing gods. The next article in the collection, 'The Fate of a Healing Goddess: Ocular Pathologies, the Antonine Plague, and the Ancient Roman Cult of Bona Dea' by Leonardo Ambasciano, interrogates the religious figure of another healing agent: the Italian goddess Bona Dea who was particularly venerated in Rome and in the region of Latium and whose cult reveals the way in which ancient Roman androcentric control over women was institutionalised through religious figures.

The third article in the collection, Audrey Ferlut's 'Goddesses as Consorts of the Healing Gods in *Gallia Belgica* and the *Germaniae*: Forms of Cult and Ritual Practices' considers the impact that cults dedicated to gods and goddesses had on populations in the wider area of the Roman Empire, focusing on the Northern provinces of the Western Roman Empire (*Gallia Belgica* and the *Germaniae*). The collection's final article, 'From Textual Reception to Textual Codification: Thessalos and the Quest for Authenticity' by Spyros Piperakis, moves the discussion from the question of cult practices to 'alternative' healing therapies in antiquity. Piperakis deals with astrological medicine, one of many alternative therapeutic methods that became popular during the Hellenistic and Roman period.

Taken together, the articles in 'Healing Gods, Heroes and Rituals in the Graeco-Roman World' demonstrate that we need to approach the study of ancient myths and cults within their socio-cultural context. These articles thus challenge traditionalist approaches to the history of religion and reveal the richness of interdisciplinary approaches in the twenty-first century: offering new paths of inquiry that could help us to extract new data and shape a new interdisciplinarity in the current and future research of the religions and cults of Antiquity.

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## Article

Infliction by an illness or a disease constitutes one of the most common experiences humans encounter at some point in their lives, in all places and times. However, the ways in which people perceive, conceive and conceptualise health and sickness as well as the practices and means they use for health restoration are deeply influenced by the wider cultural and social contexts in which they live and act. During the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman era, illnesses and diseases were perceived as a special kind of adversity caused by a personified understanding of Fortune, whose unpredictable nature was held responsible for human suffering. Contrary to the Greek perspective of the archaic and classical age, according to which diseases came from the gods who wanted to punish people for their profane and unholy deeds, the Graeco-Roman belief that impersonal and superhuman forces pervading and controlling the world caused disease and suffering changed the way people explained their illnesses to themselves. Therefore, mortals had the strong feeling that they were amenable to unpredictable forces and random events that could happen to them unexpectedly, interrupting their normal, internal biological functions, and impacting upon their plans and future actions. In this way, they stopped attributing their afflictions to their own actions since they did not feel responsible for them.

Within this broader conceptual relevance of divine intervention, several gods initially related to human health and well-being continued to enjoy a high esteem as the marvellous agents of healing from classical times onwards. Among them, the most famous superhuman healer, who offered help to anyone seeking treatment, was Asclepius. During the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman period, most cities of the *oecumene* erected new temples to his honor or renovated his old sanctuaries, which became major healing centres attracting numerous supplicants. Although gods and deities were mostly presented as intervening in supplicants' lives and performing miraculous cures for them in several ways, the ritual of incubation, employed mainly in the *asclepieia*, constituted the most popular healing ritual during which divine cures were performed. In order to participate in the incubation ritual, the worshippers of Asclepius prepared themselves to enter the *abaton* of his temples where they

were going to stay overnight. When night fell, the incubants entered the *abaton*, laid on pallets and remained silent, expecting to fall asleep and experience a dream or vision in which Asclepius would reveal himself and perform or prescribe a treatment. Therefore, it was during incubation that the supplicants expected to have direct communication with the healing deity, which they believed would immediately save them from suffering or reveal the means of salvation from their health problems.

In her article, 'Asclepius' Myths and Healing Narratives: Counter-Intuitive Concepts and Cultural Expectations', Olympia Panagiotidou focuses on the curative features that defined the image of Asclepius; on the contemporary beliefs of people living in the Graeco-Roman world in his healing powers and the activities he was believed to perform to supplicants during incubation—as depicted in the healing inscriptions at the *asclepieia* of this period—which would have mediated the popularity of his cult and directly contributed to the attraction of numerous supplicants to his temples. In particular, she explores those cognitive and psychological processes that would have made mythical sagas and beliefs in Asclepius' healing powers particularly attractive to, and memorable for, the people of the Graeco-Roman era. Her innovative contribution to the study of the Asclepius cult consists in the way in which she brings modern cognitive theories of religious ideas and beliefs to the specific historical context of the Graeco-Roman world. In doing so, Panagiotidou thus traces the cognitive processes underlying mythical stories and healing narratives concerning Asclepius and his superhuman, supernatural healing deeds.

Furthermore, Panagiotidou employs Guthries' (1992) theory of anthropomorphism in order to explain how the anthropomorphic perception of Asclepius would have mediated his image as a benevolent, divine doctor by his contemporaries. In employing Boyer's (1996; 2002) theory of religious ideas, she suggests that the violation of certain intuitive expectations pertaining to the *ontological category* of such religious figures would have increased Asclepius' divine reputation, making the stories about him which circulated at the time memorable to supplicants, or 'attention-grabbing'. Panagiotidou also refers to the recent research of Porubanova-Norquist and her colleagues (2013; 2014) to suggest that in addition to the violation

of intuitive expectations, people's cultural expectations would also have been challenged by a figure such as Asclepius, which further increased the god's attractiveness to supplicants in terms of his perceived healing powers. In this way, Panagiotidou suggests that both intuitive and cultural expectations may be violated by figures such as Asclepius, which serves to increase the memorability and attractiveness of certain religious ideas and may be understood as contributing to their widespread transmission the Graeco-Roman period.

The next article in this Special Collection, 'The Fate of a Healing Goddess: Ocular Pathologies, the Antonine Plague, and the Ancient Roman Cult of Bona Dea' by Leonardo Ambasciano, interrogates the religious figure of another healing agent: the Italian goddess Bona Dea who was particularly venerated in Rome and in the region of Latium. Bona Dea was the 'Good Goddess' as well as the institutionalised symbol of the ancient Roman androcentric control over women. Her 'goodness' was deemed necessary insofar as it provided an acceptable behavioural template for women under the social vault of patriarchal relations. The mythological variants of her cultural biography revolve around her unlawful consumption of wine and/or the sexual violence committed by her husband, the mythical Latin King Faunus. As far as we know from the available evidence, Bona Dea's cult was celebrated on two separate occasions: on the Kalends of May at the Aventine temple of *Bona Dea Subsaxana* and on the night between the third and fourth day of December, in the house of the magistrate *cum imperio*. While the former remains largely unknown, the latter has been recorded in ancient literary sources because of its exceptional nature: women performed a ritual sacrifice (usually strictly reserved for men) and celebrated all night long with music, dancing, and wine. Male exclusion from the cult fuelled curiosity in Roman writers and has ignited speculative interpretations of all sorts about the cult in both ancient and modern sources. Yet, this was only one aspect of her worship. It is known from the available literary and epigraphic records that the Bona Dea cult also featured a specific healing activity, particularly concerned with ocular healing. In this sense, her role and her iconography bear a striking resemblance to other Graeco-Roman healing cults, such as the faith inspired by Asclepius and Hygieia

(whose name, in a literal translation, means 'Health'). Like other ancient cults concerned with health, the presence of snakes and herbal medicaments is also attested in reports of worship dedicated to Bona Dea.

Ambasciano's contribution to the present collection ties all these remarkably different aspects of the cult of Bona Dea by bringing into the spotlight its cognitive underpinnings. In particular, his article offers a tentative explanation of the demise of the cult in the aftermath of the so-called Antonine plague (c. 165–190 CE), specifically focusing on the long-term repercussions of ancient outbreaks of disease on religious beliefs and behaviours. Such an approach is useful in understanding the psychological assumptions that these cults developed as part of a broader strategy of disease-avoidance through worship and dedications to the healing gods and goddesses.

Cults to gods and goddesses of nature also had a large impact on populations in the wider area of the Roman Empire and especially in the Northern provinces of the Western Roman Empire (*Gallia Belgica* and the *Germaniae*). Audrey Ferlut's article 'Goddesses as Consorts of the Healing Gods in *Gallia Belgica* and the *Germaniae*: Forms of Cult and Ritual Practices' focuses on the ways in which people in these Northern provinces performed cult practices to goddesses who were consorts of healing gods, and, more particularly, celebrated their role as goddesses of spring and water. Ferlut's approach in this article is firstly to identify these deities, their roles and their actions, in order to establish who their dedicants were and to show how the ritual practices of their dedicants were performed according to Roman custom. Ferlut thus identifies those criteria which enable us to define the special status of a healing god's consort in the provinces under consideration: provinces that had been organised collectively before the new provincial division made by the Flavians. She also examines the architectural bipartition of the sanctuary between its sacred and profane spaces, revealing how the offerings that have been unearthed during archeological excavations shed light the healing process. Through her analysis, Ferlut reveals how this healing process occurred within the sanctuary in the provinces of *Gallia Belgica* and the *Germaniae*, and also reflects upon the particular characteristics

associated with divinity at the time, which are attested in the goddesses' representations and/or inscriptions.

Since the enumeration of all the goddesses worshipped at this time is, in itself, insufficient to help us understand the form of these cults in antiquity, Ferlut's article also considers the relevant ritual practices that reveal the special relationship between mortals and gods. These practices indicate that, even though the goddesses were mainly of Celtic origin, the rites performed by the dedicants seem to be related to Roman practices and habits. Finally, Ferlut's survey of these goddesses' dedicants confirms the importance of *Romanitas* to the local population, as well as the interesting fact that the majority of dedicants were male. This survey also reveals that contrary to other goddesses' cults worshipped in this region, the majority of dedicants were not members of the local municipal elite as we might expect, but were in fact people of Celtic origin.

Cult practices were not, of course, the only means of healing in antiquity. 'Alternative' therapies were also practised – something which is examined in 'From Textual Reception to Textual Codification: Thessalos and the Quest for Authenticity' by Spyros Piperakis. Piperakis deals with one of many alternative therapeutic methods that became popular during the Hellenistic and Roman period, that is, astrological medicine. Horoscopic charts cast by professional astrologers were used to indicate the diseases and afflictions caused by the star signs, and provided many people with a means of treatment for various illnesses. Gemstones engraved with the symbols of stars and planets became phylacteries believed to protect the wearer from harm and were credited within healing numerous diseases, whilst marvellous herbal medicaments were prepared with carefully selected ingredients: using certain astral herbs and plants, which had to be collected at a particular time and under specific astral conjunctions.

In his article, Piperakis studies this latter aspect of astrological medicine. In particular, he explores the ways in which ancient rhizotomic and astrological knowledge was accumulated, organised and transmitted in the second century CE, according to an astrological herbal treatise entitled *De Virtutibus Herbarum* and attributed to

someone called Thessalos. A close study of the *De Virtutibus Herbarum* unveils its intrinsic dependence upon pre-existing botanical and astrological writings. This body of knowledge is recontextualised in the opening section of the text, which is presented in the form of a letter written by Thessalos addressed to the Roman Emperor. In this letter, the main corpus of the work is introduced as the revealed divine wisdom of Egypt (and more particularly of Asclepius/Imhotep; the latter was a popular healing god of Egypt that was identified with the Greek god Asclepius), and is compared with the astrological manual of Nechepsos, which is similar in content but not fully complete despite the general perception of Nechepsos as a highly esteemed astrologer.

The narratological interplay of the figures of Asclepius and Nechepsos displayed in Thessalos' text has a two-fold aim: firstly, to create a conceptual gap within the pre-existing knowledge systems that Thessalos' work draws upon and, secondly, to introduce his way of thinking as an authentic "superior" product of Egyptian culture, in comparison with the inferior therapeutic knowledge of Nechepsos and, by extension, that of the Empire. Thus, the article offers an insight into the way in which the author of the *De Virtutibus Herbarum* appropriates and recasts the meanings of a specific legendary astrologer and healer (i.e. Nechepsos) in order to give a new identity and meaning to his text.

Although it does not cover the full range of healing deities and practices in the Graeco-Roman world, the present collection of articles provides a valuable exemplar of how different approaches can be employed in the study of religious beliefs, traditions, and cults of antiquity. The different theoretical approaches followed by the authors show that traditional historical study, which focuses on the integration of a particular religious tradition within its specific cultural, social, political and intellectual context, remains valuable, but that this traditionalist approach can also be enriched by the methodological tools and recent findings of other disciplines which enable a multivalent, interdisciplinary investigation of past practices and beliefs.

In particular, the contributions of Panagiotidou and Ambasciano can be identified within the developing field of Cognitive Historiography, which promotes the collaboration between historians and researchers from the wide spectrum of cognitive



sciences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the people of past eras—their choices, beliefs, attitudes, emotions and ways of thinking. These articles thus make use of recent cognitive theories to provide scholarly insights into the ways in which religious beliefs in figures like Asclepius and Bona Dea emerged, were formulated and transmitted between local populations in the Graeco-Roman period, and examine how such beliefs contributed to the flourish and decline of these cults. The case studies of Asclepius and Bona Dea, in particular, indicate that there is a need for an interdisciplinary collaboration in investigating the historical and cultural significance of such religious cults. Such an approach could offer new paths of inquiry within the field of the history of religion, could help us to extract new data, and shape a new interdisciplinarity in the current and future research of the religions and cults of Antiquity. Similarly, Ferlut's contribution in this collection focuses on a topic largely neglected by historians, indicating the inexhaustible field of historical research. With the help of two other disciplines, archaeology and sociology, she sheds light on the healing aspect of goddesses worshipped in the Northern part of the Roman Empire. Ferlut's work reminds us that the multiplicity of human culture and the multilaterality of human thought, behaviour and activity throughout history never cease to reveal new aspects of cultural production and reproduction that are amenable to, and demand, further historical analyses to help us understand our own past in more detail.

Finally, Piperakis' article represents an important and new way of reading a text that has been well studied in recent years: Thessalos' *De Virtutibus Herbarum*. He explores the intratextual relation between the *Herbarum's* introductory letter and the main corpus of Thessalos' work, as well as the intertextual ways in which knowledge is organised and transmitted through this text. In so doing, Piperakis interrogates how ancient texts responded to pre-existing knowledge systems, reminding us that we should understand the processes of systematisation and organisation of fluid bodies of knowledge in the Graeco-Roman era as embedded within the intellectual and social context of the time: all of which can be knitted together to provide an analytical framework for the examination of Thessalos' purposes and aims in *De Virtutibus Herbarum*.

*Last but not least*, from this short editorial to the collection we should reflect upon the fact that the study of any historical period is a challenge for the modern researcher. A basic prerequisite for research is the appropriate assessment of factors (religious, political, economic and so on) that shape the context of the period. Ancient myths, narratives, rituals and their social context adjoin each other and it is not feasible to isolate any single aspect or activity in order to understand it; rather, as the articles in 'Healing Gods, Heroes and Rituals in the Graeco-Roman World' demonstrate, we need to approach the study of such ancient myths and cults as part of a socio-cultural whole, as part of a system. Current trends in historiography and interdisciplinary studies in the twenty-first century are essential for unveiling aspects of the history of religious practices that classical theoretical approaches have largely neglected. This could become the starting point and a desideratum in the world of science for generating new perspectives in contemporary research.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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**How to cite this article:** Pachis, P 2016 Healing Gods, Heroes and Rituals in the Graeco-Roman World. *Open Library of Humanities*, 2(1):e14, pp.1–10, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/olh.105>

**Published:** 10 May 2016

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