

Aesthetic Presences within Greek Asclepieion Hospitals

Phillip G. Mead

Univ. of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho (USA)

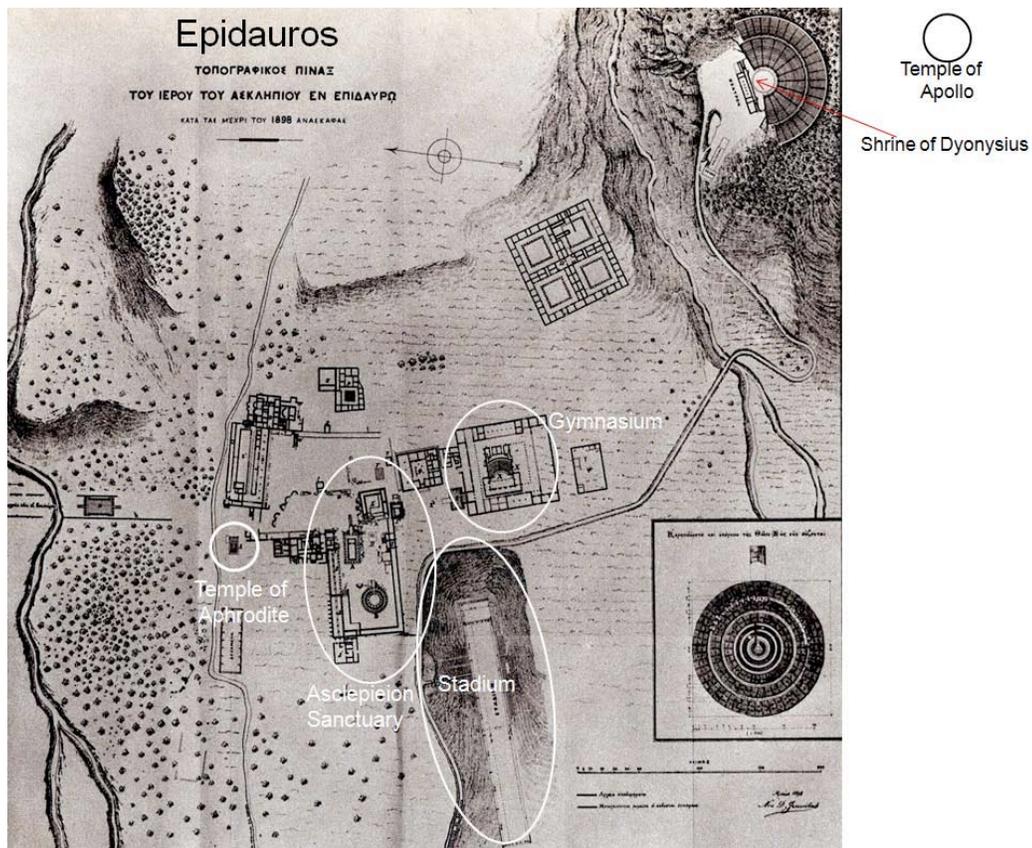
pmead@uidaho.edu

This paper continues a line of research that examines the kinds of environmental factors that contribute to a sense of well-being. Although the bulk of wellness research focuses on the body's need for light, air, views and exercise; here the focus shifts to the study of an historical building complex that helped users transcend harsh human conditions through physical relief and psychic ecstasy. In particular, this investigation questions the environmental significance of healing and wellness related gods whose temples and shrines were present at Greek Asclepieion sanctuaries. In examining the significance of these gods and their particular qualities, this paper draws from two definitions of health and well-being that relate to the environment. First, the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health is one of "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease."¹ This definition associates health with a sense of well-being and implies that psychological and cultural presences like art and architecture may play a role in affecting ones health. It also implies that well-being relates to one's quality of life for which architecture plays a significant role. Robin Kearns further elaborates on WHO's definition: "...health is the presence of a sense of well-being."² The word *presence* is significant here because environments may display transcendent presences through symbols and metaphors that can associate with ideal states of being.

The Asclepieion hospital/sanctuary type was one of the first building complexes to provide a place of inclusive worship that afforded multiple ways to seek relief from life's oppressive conditions while offering opportunities to connect with ideal states of being.^{3, 4} Through the presence of programmed building elements like baths and gymnasiums, as well as temples dedicated to healing and aesthetic oriented gods, these elements acted as bridges that led to idealized states of being and their accompanying states of ecstasy.

The most significant Asclepieion Hospital complexes were located at Epidaurus, Kos, Pergamon, Corinth and Athens. In addition to housing gods that facilitated healing and pain relief (Asclepius, Hygeia and Panacea), these sanctuaries contained gods strongly associated with *aesthetic* qualities that could lead to ecstasy. These gods typically included Apollo, Dionysus and Aphrodite. Mircea Eliade noted that Apollo and Dionysus, whose shrines or temples were most prevalent in the Asclepieion hospitals, are the only two gods associated with ecstasy.⁵ Apollo, who fathered the healing god Asclepius and was himself a god of healing, had prominent temples in Epidaurus, Cos and Corinth. As a god of

light and reason, he is also associated with the aesthetics of music and poetry and the ecstasies associated with each. His counterpart, Dionysius made his presence most known within the theatres that accompanied many sanctuaries such as Epidaurus, Pergamon, Athens and Cos.⁶ The largest theatre in the Ancient Greek world is in Epidaurus where 14,000 spectators could participate in mass Dionysian ceremonies and Greek plays. Eliade noted that the “Dionysian ecstasy means above all, surpassing the human condition, the discovery of total deliverance...”⁷ Historically, Dionysus compliments Apollo as he was the god of chaos, wine, communal ecstasy and the theatre.⁸ The Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic is well covered by: Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*, Eliade in his *History of Religious Ideas* and Eco in his *History of Beauty*. In Delphi, the two gods were worshipped together where they were portrayed on opposite ends of the Temple of Apollo. However, beyond these two, there was often a third aesthetic presence that was also associated with ecstasy... Aphrodite/Venus. Her presence within Epidaurus, Cos and Corinth may have played a significant role in healing and well-being through her role as the goddess of beauty and love.



Asclepieion Sanctuary Complex in Epidaurus

Although wellness and ecstasy are associated with these aesthetic gods, how did they interact? Friedrich Nietzsche noted in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "...the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian and Dionysian* duality... involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations."⁹ Does intervening reconciliations in art equate to wellness and ecstasy or is the state of wellness the ability to harness and regulate the chaotic forces of Dionysus, which is where Nilsson believe was Apollo's real talent.¹⁰ Aphrodite's talents may be similar. As the goddess of love, Aphrodite/Venus's presence varies widely from goddess of prostitutes to that of a sacred mother earth and Mother Mary figure. According to Varro, Venus (love) is a force that *binds*; it is a force of *coherence* in the origin of all life to include the formation of community.¹¹ Architects are more familiar with the concept of beauty through *Venustus* as written by Vitruvius where her presence binds through calculated symmetries of component relationships and correct proportions.¹² In this case, her role is similar to Apollo's ability to lend order through regulation. However with Aphrodite, her power may be more magnetic in her ability to *bind* and lend creative *coherence* to the entropic forces of Dionysus.

Conclusion

If the aesthetic presences inside Asclepieion Hospital complexes were seen as medicinal, did these same aesthetic presences play a similar role in other historical building types associated with wellness? Since art, beauty and communal ecstasy were also present in similar building types like Roman baths, Christian monasteries and educational institutions, were Asclepieion presences also meaningfully present there? Furthermore, could these presences play a role in the programming and design of today's building types that also aspire to nourish both the body and mind? Answers to these questions may more convincingly demonstrate art's ability to influence our sense of well-being.

Notes

1. World Health Organization, *Constitution*, New York: World Health Organization 1946
2. Robin Kearns, "The Place of Health: Toward a Reformed Medical Geography." *The Professional Geographer* 1991, 45: 139-47
3. Most Greek temples only allowed high priests to enter while Asclepieion hospitals were open to anyone who could afford the price of a rooster to enter and like Christian basilicas and mega churches today, contained places where hundreds, if not thousands of people could worship at once.
4. Luthor asserts that the Asclepieion hospital sought to heal an existential malaise and its physical symptoms. Luthor, Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, 1987, New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1987, p. 51
5. Eliade, Mircea, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 181.
6. Hatzivassiliou claims that the theatre is yet to be unearthed while Sherman – White claim that no theatre was needed because the town of Cos which had its own theatre was

- close enough to be used by the hospital. Hatzivassiliou, Vassilis, *The Asklepieion of Kos*, M. Georvasakis, Pasakaki, 1997, p. 37,47
7. Eliade, Mircea, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 181
 8. The theatre at Epidauros (which is sited within the largest and best known Asclepieion hospital) was dedicated to Dionysius and could seat 14,000 making it the largest theatre in the Greek world.
 9. Nietzsche, Friedrich *The Birth of Tragedy*, selected text in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, eds, Hofstadter, A. and Kuhns, R. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964
 10. Nilsson, Martin, *A History of Greek Religion*, London, Oxford Press 1925, pp. 205-208
 11. Kagis McEwen, Indra *Vitruvius, Writing the Body of Architecture*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003, pp. 200 -01 quotes Varro *De lingua latina* 5.61-62 and Cicero, *De oratore* I.188:
 12. Ibid. p. 200