

Neoplatonic Asclepius

Eugene Afonasin

This article was originally published in

Platonism and its Legacy

*Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Conference
of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*

Edited John F. Finamore and Tomáš Nejeschleba

ISBN 978 1 898910 886

Published in 2019 by

The Prometheus Trust, Lydney.

This article is published under the terms of **Creative Commons
Licence BY 4.0**

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The Prometheus Trust is a registered UK charity, no. 299648

www.prometheustrust.co.uk

Neoplatonic Asclepius

Eugene Afonasin

*Phoebus gave to the mortals Asclepius and Plato,
the one to save their bodies, the other to save their souls.*¹

I

Asclepius is a relative newcomer to the Greek pantheon. In the time of Homer, it was Paeon, not Asclepius, who cured the wounds of the Olympic gods, while the mortals relied on the skills of Machaon, the son of Asclepius, and other healer heroes (Homer, *Iliad* 5.401 and 899; 11.518, etc.). This obvious fact allowed Theodoretus (*Grac. aff. cur.* 8.23) to argue that Asclepius was introduced as a god of medicine much later. Quite to the contrary, Pausanias (2.26.10) took it for granted that Asclepius was not a historical figure at all, being a deity already from the time of Homer, while Galen (*Protrepiticus* 9.22) preferred to suspend judgment on the issue. The majority of ancient writers, however, accepted the humanity of Asclepius and appreciated his difficult path towards deification (cf., for instance, Xenophon, *Cynegeticus* 1.6). He is an uncontested founder of rational medicine, the first to “cultivate this science as yet rude and vulgar” (Celsus, *De medicina*, proem. 2, T 244 Edelstein²). On the other hand, he is a healing deity, indeed the most famous one:

Apuleius, *De deo Socratis* 15.153

Naturally of daemons they deem gods only those who, having guided the chariot of their lives (*curriculo vitae gubernato*) wisely and justly, and having been endowed afterward by men as divinities with shrines and religious ceremonies, are commonly worshipped as Amphiaraus in Beothia, Mopsus in Africa, Osiris in Egypt, one in one part of the world and another in another part, Asclepius everywhere (*Aesculapius ubique*). (T 254 Edelstein)

¹ Olympiodorus, *Vita Platonis* 4.39 (tr. Edelstein); cf. Diogenes Laert. 3.45.

² A classical collection of literary and archaeological evidences about the cult of Asclepius is, doubtlessly, the one published by Emma and Ludwig Edelstein (1945). I utilize their translation, unless otherwise noted.

We observe that the figure of Asclepius had firmly established itself in the context of Greek religion at least starting from the Hellenistic times, and was given a distinct theological interpretation in Middle Platonic philosophy. This process deserves a separate study. In this paper, I would like to look at the last stage of this long development in order to trace the paths Asclepius traveled within the exceedingly sophisticated religion of the Last Hellenes. The place of the god of medicine within the universal divine order and his relationship with other divinities and powers, which inhabit the intelligible cosmos, are comprehensively described by Proclus. He adds a further theological twist to the traditional story:

Proclus, *In Tim* I 49A

...[as in mantics], so, too, in the medical art the Paeonian power itself must be assigned to the gods, while the function of serving and helping belongs to the demigods ... for just as there are many divinities associated with Eros, so, too, many are associated with Asclepius, some taking their place behind the god, others in front of him. But to mortals must be assigned the medical art resulting from theory and experience by means of which some master the divine art of healing to a greater, others to a lesser, degree. (T 312 Edelstein)

The Paeonian power, penetrating the whole world, pours in great abundance on the lower levels of being, having finally materialized in the form of vital healing crafts.

Gods rule the universe as a whole. The demigods and heroes, who follow their lead, do some sort of ‘mechanical’ work and indissolubly bind everything in the world with a continuous “chain” (Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 1.5.15–17; 17.8 ff.). They are followed by the purest souls (ἄχραντοι, Iamblichus, *De anima* fr. 27 Dillon–Finamore) – the ones who came to the world willingly in order to help people. This was the fate of Asclepius, who was born to Apollo by the mortal woman Coronis³. He devoted his life to practicing the art of medicine, and was killed by Zeus, who’s wrath was provoked, as they say, by the physician’s attempts to fool death and heal incurable illnesses. Subsequently, he was revived as a god (*in deum surgat*; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 23.7), but willingly “returned from the underworld

³ Apollodorus 3.10.3; Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.25; Ovid, *Met.* 2.543; Pausanias 2.11 and 26, etc.

with the permission of the Parcae” (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 251.2) to help people.⁴

The emperor Julian had developed a similar scheme and perceived the providential sense of these events as follows:

Julianus, *Contra Galilaeos* 200 A–B

I had almost forgotten the greatest of the gifts of the Sun (Heliuss) and Zeus... I mean to say that Zeus engendered Asclepius from himself among the intelligible (νοητοῖς) gods, and through the life of generative Sun (Heliuss) he revealed him to the earth. Asclepius, having made his visitation to earth from the sky, appeared at Epidaurus singly, in the shape of man; but afterwards he multiplied himself; and by his visitation stretched out over the whole earth his saving right hand. He came to Pergamum, to Ionia, to Tarentum afterwards; and later he came to Rome. And he travelled to Kos, and thence to Aegae. Next he is present everywhere on land and sea. He visits no one of us separately, and yet he raises up souls that are sinful and bodies that are sick. (T 307 Edelstein)

Asclepius extended the divine powers he received from the highest deities to people. Sufferers from the entire ancient world flocked to famous centers of healing such as the shrines in Epidaurus, Kos, Pergamum, Lebena, somewhat later Athens and Rome, asking the god for assistance. They received divine orders in dreams, esp. in the process of incubation in the temples, and all this was given to them *gratis*, as a gift (Julianus, *Epist.* 78, T 419B Edelstein).

Handing down some of his powers to his assistants,⁵ the “Neoplatonic” Asclepius keeps his status of a solar deity and ascends

⁴ On Asclepius’ deification see, particularly, T 232–336 Edelstein. The list of deified heroes is reproduced with occasional variants by numerous Greek and Latin authors and usually contains the names of Heracles, Dionysus, Asclepius, Dioscuri as well as the Latin Liber and Quirinus (Cicero, *De leg.* 2.8.19; Porphyry, *To Marcella* 7; Galen, *Prot.* 9.22, etc.).

⁵ According to Damascius (*Dubitationes et Solutiones* 245), “though inferior to Asclepius, Telesphorus, because he supplies the missing element which is not previously present in the Paeonian wholeness of Asclepius, is invoked in addition to Asclepius, and Telesphorus perfects the health of one who admits him properly (συμμέτρως).” (T 313 Edelstein; cp. Marinus, *Vita Procli* 7). In the same manner Asclepius’ wife Epione and his children, such as Hygieia, Panakeia, Iaso, Aceso, Aglaea, Podaleirios, Machaon and others assist him, thus locally contributing to his divine completeness.

to a still higher level of the “Paeonian” hierarchy.⁶ Interpreting Plato (*Symposium* 186d), who says that a good physician, following the example of the patron of medicine, knows “how to make the most hostile elements in the body friendly and amiable towards each other,” Aelius Aristides is sure that Asclepius “guides and rules the universe,” and that he is “the savior of the whole and the guardian of the immortals, or if you wish to put it in the words of a tragic poet, ‘the steerer of government’ (ἔφορος οἰάκων), he who saves that which always exists and that which is in the state of becoming” (*Oratio* 42.4; T 303 Edelstein). In another place (*Oratio* 50.56) he explicitly identifies him with the Platonic world soul (*Timaeus* 34b).

Macrobius says that Asclepius is the ‘power of health’ which comes from the solar essence; while Health (Salus=Hygieia) is essentially responsible for a lunar influence: “For this reason, therefore, images of serpents are attached to the statues of these gods, because they symbolize that human bodies, shedding the skin of infirmity, as it were, return to their original vigor, just as serpents grow young again

⁶ According to Julian, “since the Sun (Helios) fills the whole of our life with fair order, he begets Asclepius in the world, though he has him by his side even before the beginning of the world... The Sun (Helios) took thought for the health and safety of all begetting Asclepius to be the savior of the whole world...” (Julianus, *In Helium Regem* 144B and 153B, T 305–306 Edelstein). Similarly Sallustius the Neoplatonist says that “Gods contain the world in themselves in a primarily (πρώτως) sense, while the rest of divinities are considered to be contained in them, as Dionysus in Zeus, Asclepius in Apollo, and Graces in Aphrodite» (*On Gods* 6). According to Iamblichus, Asclepius emanated from Apollo (*In Tim.* fr. 19 Dillon; the text is quoted below); cf. also descending procession of Zeus, Hera, Poseidon and Hades in Iamblichus, *In Tim.* fr. 78 Dillon. In the same way, Proclus, following his teacher Syrianus, speaks about a multiplication of Apollo (*In Rep.* 147.6 ff.), three manifestation of Zeus (*Platonic Theology* I.lxv–lxvii praep.) and, on their levels of being, about a multiplication of Asclepius and other secondary divinities: “Or whence have the Asclepii and the Dionysii and the Dioscuri received their names? Just as in the case of the heavenly deities, then, so we must proceed in the case of those who are concerned with generation, that is, we must investigate in regard to each of them the number of messengers, demigods, heroes attached to them...” (Proclus, *In Tim.* V 290C, T 311 Edelstein). See as well his *In Crat.* 81, where it is said that Dionysii, Asclepii and also Hermes and Heracles arrived in specific countries in order to benefit them. It is clear that speaking about a descending of gods on the subsequent levels of being the Neoplatonists (at least Iamblichus and Proclus) do not speak about an actual “visitation” of gods, as it is natural for unsophisticated religion. Rather, they mean an advent of pure spirits, demigods and heroes, who serve as messengers of the gods. For details, see Finamore (1999).

every year by shedding the skin of old age” (*Saturnalia* 1.20.1–4; T 301 Edelstein). Therefore, concludes Macrobius, Asclepius is Apollo, “not only because he is supposed to have originated from him, but because the power of divination is also attributed to him” (*ibid.*).

Criticizing Porphyry, who, contrary to the common opinion, identifies Asclepius with Lunar Mind and Apollo with Solar Mind and ascribes the art of healing to Athena (also a Lunar deity), Proclus, after Iamblichus and in the context of interpreting of the Atlantis myth (*Timaeus* 49cd), restores the traditional scheme: the demiurgic role of the world soul is returned to Athena, Apollo rules the Sun in the capacity of its Mind, while Asclepius descends from him:

Proclus, *In Tim.* I 49C (=Iamblichus, *In Tim.* fr. 19 Dillon; T 304 Edelstein)

Porphyry says plausibly that medicine also comes from Athena, because Asclepius is Lunar Mind, even as Apollo is Solar Mind. But the divine Iamblichus attacks these (identifications)... since Asclepius also is to be located in the Sun and proceeds from him all about the realm of creation in order that, even as the Heaven, so the sphere of Becoming, may be held together by this divinity in accordance with a secondary participation (μετοχήν), being filled from it with symmetry and good temperament (εὐκρασία). (tr. Dillon)

Proclus repeatedly affirms that, out of the cosmic forces, Asclepius is mostly responsible for the preservation of a natural balance. He does not allow the world to “grow old and get ill” (*Timaeus* 33a), and its elements to “slacken indissoluble bonds” (Proclus, *In Rep.* I 69.7). He cures everything that has, for whatever reason, temporarily lost its natural condition (*In Tim.* III 159e; 63.29–64.2). Still, this type of health (according to the ‘theologians’, that is to say the Orphics) is secondary in relation to the primarily “demiurgic” health, present from the beginning of the world and associated with the goddess of persuasion, Peitho [Aphrodite] and Eros. Any disproportion and the lack of balance (say, an excess or a deficiency of the humors in an organism) leads to degradation. Ageing is the result of the weakening of our nature, developed in the process of its struggle with hostile external conditions. This is what Plato says in the dialogue (*Timaeus* 81d). Apparently, according to Proclus, this presupposes that the Demiurge possesses an unceasing source of the Paeonian power, which helps him to keep the world in good shape (*ibid.* 63.10–17), and the

durability of the world, provided by the Demiurge, depends on two kinds of health – “creative” and “restorative”. On the one hand, the Demiurge supports “indissoluble bonds” which preserve the integrity of the world; on the other hand, he constantly supplies resources for their renovation (“since their powers are limited”). In the commented passage (*Timaeus* 33a) Plato speaks of the first kind of health, sustained by the Demiurge’s providential care about the world. The second kind is illustrated by the image drawn in *Politicus* 273e, where the “divine skipper” takes in his hands the rudder of the world and saves the gradually degrading cosmos from sinking into the abyss of “primordial disorder” (ibid. 63.19–27). This second kind of health is Asclepiadic, although Demiurge is the source of both this and the highest demiurgic health (ibid. 64.6–10).⁷

On the practical level, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Proclus surpassed all the Neoplatonic philosophers in his devotion to the cult of Asclepius. Although the greatest scholar of the Academy had intimate relations with many gods,⁸ Asclepius seemed to assist our philosopher throughout his whole life: the young Proclus miraculously recovered when the son of Asclepius, Telesphorus, appeared to him in a dream; at a more advanced age the patron of medicine (“who came from Epidaurus”) saved him again, this time from arthritis; and it was

⁷ “... wherefore the theologians ascribe to Asclepius the one kind of health, namely that which results from the whole process of healing whatever is contrary to nature, checking whatever is contrary to nature either always or at times; the other kind of health they assume to have been created before Asclepius and to be coexistent with the creation of things; this health they derive from Peitho and Eros because everything comes from reason and necessity... The Demiurge, as it is clear from this, is the source of health, of the Asclepiadic as well as of the Demiurgic” (Proclus, *In Tim.* III 158E, T 314 Edelstein). See also a new commented translation of this passage by D. Baltzly (2007): 119.

⁸ According to Marinus (*Vita Procli* 16), the young Proclus, just arrived from Alexandria to Athens, surprised his future teacher Syrianus by his devotion to the cult of Selene. Actually, as John Dillon convincingly shows, his prayer to the moon-goddess went far beyond the traditional religious observance, since the Moon for the Neoplatonists represented the celestial level of the highest female principle of the Chaldean theology, Hecate. Besides, “if one turns to the Emperor Julian’s *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*, one finds another deity also, Cybele, the Mother of the Gods, identified as the highest member of the chain of which the Moon is the lowest (*Oratio* 5.166 AB)... So when the Neoplatonic philosophers saluted the moon, they were in fact doing reverence to the whole chain of generative female principles descending from Hecate or Cybele” (Dillon 2007, 118–119).

Asclepius who appeared to him as a serpent “in his final illness” (*Vita Procli* 7 and 31); the philosopher speaks about a vision of Asclepius in his *Commentary to Alcibiades* 166 (II 228–229 Segonds); Marinus tells the story about Proclus’ successful prayer to Asclepius, which resulted in a miraculous recovery of one Asclepigeneia (*Vita Procli* 29). Besides, he was probably involved in the process of establishing an Asclepeian cult while travelling abroad, and apparently his heir attached some importance to the episode (*Vita Procli* 16).

II

Leaving the acropolis under rather obscure circumstances,⁹ Athena personally requested Proclus to supply her with new housing. According to Marinus (*Vita Procli* 30), her messenger (“a woman of fair aspect”) appeared to the philosopher in a dream, saying that he “must have his house ready as soon as possible”, since “the mistress of Athens” desires to dwell with him. Marinus briefly describes the location of the house in question as follows: “it was a neighbor to the shrine of Asclepius celebrated by Sophocles, and [the shrine] of Dionysus by the theatre” (...γειτόνα μὲν οὖσαν τοῦ ἀπὸ Σοφοκλέους ἐπιφανοῦς Ἀσκληπιείου καὶ τοῦ πρὸς τῷ θεάτρῳ Διονυσίου), enigmatically concluding that “...someone standing on the Acropolis could see the house with some difficulty” (...ὀρωμένην δὲ ἢ καὶ ἄλλως αἰσθητὴν γιγνομένην τῇ ἀκροπόλει τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς...).¹⁰

Interestingly, a large building complex on the southern slope of the Acropolis, located between the Odeum of Herodes Atticus and the Theater of Dionysus, excavated in 1955, perfectly matches this description.¹¹ The excavators were the first to identify this house,

⁹ Probably the event coincides with a transference of the bronze statue of Athena from the Parthenon to the Oval Forum in Constantinople c. 465–470.

¹⁰ This phrase is difficult to grasp. For details, cf. Rosán (1949): 30, Frantz (1988): 43, Castrén (1991): 475, Karivieri (1994): 116–117 n. 11, Saffrey and Segonds (2001): 34. Mark Edwards (2000: 104 n. 329) suggests it to mean that the house became visible from the acropolis only when the shrine of Asclepius was destroyed (“seen, or if not it became visible, from the acropolis of Athena”). The idea seems attractive because it offers an indirect dating of the temple’s destruction. But this provokes a further question: why Marinus, having mentioned the demolishing of the temple in the same passage, did not simply state this?

¹¹ Unfortunately, the work was accomplished only partially and under extreme time pressure, before the Dionysiou Areopagitou Street was constructed over the site. For details, see Meliades (1955), Frantz (1988), Brouskari (2004) and Caruso (2013).

which was continuously inhabited until the fifth century, but abandoned in the sixth century CE, with the one owned by Plutarch's family and associated with the names of the founder of the Athenian school of Neoplatonism and his closest associates, Syrianus and Proclus. Indeed, in addition to the fact that it perfectly matches Marinus' description, it clearly belongs to the type of buildings used in Antiquity, as Frantz writes, "for the gathering of audiences and accommodating lectures and called generally 'philosophical schools'."¹² The identification is also confirmed by rich finds (artistic works and an inscription), illustrating religious and intellectual interests of its inhabitants.¹³

Near the entrance of the house, there was a small room that had been converted into a shrine. The wall of the room was decorated with a naïskos with the statue of the Mother of the Gods with a lion and a badly damaged relief plaque with a depiction of a partially preserved figure of a bearded man, a woman and a boy, leading a sheep as an offering to the temple (Karivieri 1994: 119; Eleftheratou 2015: 47). This resembles numerous votive offerings, found in the Asklepieions (for instance, a plaque in the form of the temple from the Athenian Asklepieion, c. 350–300 BCE). A funeral sacrificial table (*mensa*), dated to 350–325 BCE, was reused as an altar or a statue base. The reliefs represent lamentation, farewell and posthumous meeting of the deceased with philosophers. The room was too small to accommodate such a big altar, therefore only the last relief was visible.¹⁴

Another remarkable discovery from the house is a grave of a year-old piglet. For an unidentified reason the sacrificial knife was left in the neck of the victim and the grave was filled with other offerings, including a jug with one handle, seven ceramic cups, and an oil lamp decorated with an image of Running Eros. The find admits various interpretations. For instance, it could be related to the Roman ceremony of *Terminalia*, a ritualized setting of the boundary to the building. Also in the Roman context, it could be an offering to the

¹² "The house in question fits all the topographical specifications in the *VP*, and furthermore, its site, as far as it could be estimated from its scattered known parts, precludes the existence of anything comparable in the area..." (Frantz 1988: 43).

¹³ The objects are mostly kept in the Agora and Acropolis Museums; numerous illustrations are readily found in Frantz (1988), Camp (1990), Bruskari (2004) and Eleftheratou (2015).

¹⁴ The objects are exhibited in the Acropolis Museum. For an artistic reconstruction of the shrine, see Eleftheratou (2015): 47.

local *genii* on the occasion of, say, an important event or a safe return from a long journey. But it could well be a part of a rite dedicated to the Mother of the Gods, performed privately (or even secretly!), since an appropriate shrine is found in the house and, according to Marinus, the Neoplatonists worshipped the Mother of the Gods in her various hypostases (cf. *Vita Procli* 19). The blood of an animal was also a proper offering to the moon-goddess or Hecate,¹⁵ while according to Julian's *Oratio* 5.177B–C a pig could be an appropriate offering for the gods of the underworld.

Our narrative source will perhaps elucidate this last point. Although no instance of a piglet (or any other animal) sacrifice is recorded in Neoplatonic literature, Marinus informs us that Proclus personally experienced “the fiery apparitions of Hecate” (having learned the rituals from Plutarch's daughter Asclepigeneia) and

Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28

...actually caused rains by an apposite use of an iunx (ἰυνγία τινα), releasing Attica from a baneful drought. He also laid down defenses against earthquakes, and tested the power of the prophetic tripod, and produced verses on its decline. (tr. Edwards)

The ἰυνξ (*iunx torquilla*, wryneck) is a bird (in mythology, a daughter of Pan and Echo) which has long been associated with love-spells in magic. In order to influence an unfaithful lover the sorcerer would catch a wryneck, fix her to a wheel and rotate it.¹⁶ Later the term *iunx* and the magical procedures associated with it underwent some evolution. In the domain of love-magic it started to designate an appropriate instrument – the wheel – itself, while in the Platonic

¹⁵ For details, cf. Karivieri 1994: 135f.

¹⁶ In Pindar, Pythian 4.213–220 the rite is described as introduced by Aphrodite and the wryneck is poetically called “the maddening bird”: But the sovereign of swiftest darts, / Cyprogeneia, binding / the dappled wryneck / four-spoked upon an indissoluble wheel / first brought the maddening bird / to human kind and thus taught Aeson's son / skill in invocations and incantations, / that he might strip Medea of all reverence / for her parents and that Hellas, fiercely desired, / might set her whirling, as she blazed in spirit, / with the scourge of Persuasion. (tr. Steven J. Willett)

tradition it was understood symbolically as an Erotic binding force which links men to the gods.¹⁷

Rotating the wheel in the process of a theurgic rite, the sorcerer receives certain magical ‘names’ (fr. 87 Des Places), also called *iunges* (the divine messengers therefore are symbolically identified with the messages they brought from above). An *Oracle* states that the names, pronounced by those who understand the divine utterance, reveal to the theurgist their extraordinary powers (cf. fr. 150 Des Places).

According to Marinus, Proclus from time to time busied himself with practical religion, usually upon the request of others. His prayer “in the ancient manner” to Asclepius helped a woman to recover, and certain rites saved Attica from a drought and earthquake (*Vita Procli* 28–29, cf. 17). We cannot be sure from the text whether Proclus performed the rites in a physical or a symbolic manner, but the instance of the piglet’s sacrifice definitely suggests that real animal sacrifices were normal for the period and could be a part of the religious practice of the Neoplatonic school. Marinus seems to confirm this, saying that Proclus, otherwise a strict vegetarian,¹⁸ ate meat ‘for the sake of a rite’ (*Vita Procli* 12 and 19). It is quite possible therefore that in order to influence weather the Neoplatonic philosopher “in the ancient manner” had used a real bird rather than a clever planetary device of the sort described by Psellus as “a sphere embedded with sapphire and swung around by means of a leather strap” (PG 122.1133 A 8–9; Majercik 1989: 30).

But what if the philosopher was indeed waiting for Athena to arrive in his house (*Vita Procli* 30)? One would expect that, in the course of the preparation for this event, he could wish to establish a new shrine (or adopt an old one) and offer some sort of sacrifices to the goddess.

¹⁷ This interpretation is most famously found in the *Chaldean Oracles*, where the *iunges* (‘the magic wheels of Hecate,’ fr. 206 Des Places) are identified with the ideas (or thoughts) of the highest divine entity, the Father, while Eros (‘the first to leap from the Paternal Intellect,’ fr. 42 Des Places) is understood as a cosmic force which binds the worlds together and harmonizes the universe with the soul. The *iunges*, the lowest entities in the chain of being, acting as messengers and constantly moving from the Father to the material world, help the theurgist to connect the Primordial Triad of the Chaldeans with the rest of beings. Besides, the *iunges* are associated with some planetary forces, the ‘Intellectual pillars’ which support an ordered movement of the planets. They thought that the *iunges*, invoked by a theurgist, moved physically to an appropriate planetary sphere and provided a contact with the material world (fr. 77–79 Des Places). For more details, cf. Majercik (1989): 9–10, 16, 29, 171–172.

¹⁸ Cf. Damascius, *Philosophical History*, fr. 84D Athanassiadi (about mallow).

This idea was recently proposed by Ch. Wildberg (2017), who rightly notices that this sort of purification is indeed mentioned in literature, for instance, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (276 f.), where Orestes, before approaching Athena, purifies himself with the blood of a pig.¹⁹ One may observe however that this sort of purification is generally appropriate in the case of homicide (see, for instance, Apollonius, *Argonautica* 4.700–716, where Circe in a similar manner purifies Jason and Medea of their crime), and more typical for Phoebus (for instance, in this way once a month the priests used to purify the temple of Apollo in Delphi).

If not a coincidence, seven cups, no more and no less, used for this ritual also indicate the presence of Athena, since in a symbolic manner, motherless and ever virgin Athena has long been associated with “number seven, which neither generated any number, nor is generated from any” (Alexander, in *Met.* 38.8–41.2 = Aristotle, fr. 13 Ross; 203 Rose). This Pythagorean idea is verbally repeated by Proclus in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (1.151), and it is hardly a coincidence that he devoted to Athena his seventh hymn, in which he asks the goddess to grant “perfect health” (ἀπήμων' ὑγείην) to his enfeebled limbs (*Hymns* 7.43–46).²⁰

Besides, it is interesting to observe that, although in their hymns and prayers people almost universally ask gods for good health,²¹ in the *Hymns* of Proclus health is mentioned only twice: in the *Hymn to Athena* and, quite predictably, in the *Hymn to Helius* 1.21–23, where it is related that Paeonian power, which is health, fills the entire world with its healing harmony (πλήσας ἀρμονίης παναπήμονος εὐρέα κόσμον; cf. Proclus, *In Tim* I 49A, T 312 Edelstein, quoted above).

III

Let us return to the *Vita Procli* 29. Marinus pictures Proclus visiting the temple of Asclepius in Athens because of an unspecified illness of Asclepiogeneia. All hope had already been lost, and Asclepiogeneias'

¹⁹ “For the blood is slumbering and fading from my hand, the pollution of matricide is washed away; while it was still fresh, it was driven away at the hearth of the god Phoebus by purifying sacrifices of swine” (transl. by H. W. Smyth).

²⁰ Has this something to do with a known fact that he suffered from arthritis (see above)?

²¹ See, for instance the *Orphic hymns* to Zeus, Poseidon, Nereus, Demeter, Persephone, the nymphs and even Nature. An *Orphic hymn* to Athena also ends with a request for a happy life and a good piece of health.

father Archiadas asked the philosopher ('who was his final anchor or rather his benevolent savior') to ask the god on behalf of his only offspring.²² The god answered the prayer of Proclus and the girl quickly recovered. Clearly, Marinus sees this truly miraculous act as a sign of providence. And indeed, the episode is central in the history of the Athenian school of Neoplatonic philosophy: the girl, miraculously recovered with the help of Asclepius, married the archon Theagenes and later became the mother of the future Neoplatonic philosopher and the scholarch of the Academy Hegias (cf. *The Philosophical History*, 63B Athanassiadi). Had the girl died, the Golden chain of Platonic succession would have been broken. On the other hand, the grandmother of the saved girl, also Asclepigeneia, is known to have introduced Proclus to special rites, in the manner Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* introduced Socrates to the 'knowledge' of Eros. Some sort of secret (theurgic) knowledge, which she passed to him, she learned from her father and Proclus' spiritual 'forefather' (προπάτωρ) Plutarch, who, in his turn, acquired it from his father Nestorius. The name Asclepigeneia hints at some ties which existed between the family and the cult of Asclepius, and it is not altogether trivial that Plutarch had chosen to pass his knowledge of religious rituals not to his son, but to his daughter.²³ At any rate, with this successful act of theurgy Proclus repaid his debt, and demonstrated that he was a gifted student.

We may note in conclusion, that, for any inhabitant of Athens the cult of Asclepius seemed to connect with the patron goddess of the city. The shrine of Asclepius is located just below the temple of Athena and their close relations are well attested by votive reliefs, found in the Athenian Asklepieion.²⁴ We also observe that the Neoplatonic

²² Apparently, Proclus' abilities were already well known to his friends: "And if any of his associates was afflicted by illness, first he strenuously appealed to the gods on his behalf with words and hymns, then he attended the invalid solicitously, calling the doctors together and pressing them to exercise their skills without delay. And in these circumstances he himself did something extra, and thus rescued many from the greatest perils" (*Vita Procli* 17, tr. Edwards).

²³ Probably, as suggests J. Dillon (2007, 123 n. 16), because his son, Hierius, although a philosopher and a student of Proclus, was not, for some reason, a very satisfactory person for this purpose.

²⁴ On a relief, found in the Asklepieion in Athens and dated to c. 330 BCE, Athena grants the title of *proxenus* (consul) and benefactor to a citizen of Croton. The relief represents the Goddess Athena and, possibly, Asclepius. On another votive relief, dated to c. 350 BCE, Athena and Asclepius receive a suppliant in the temple. Both objects are displayed in the Acropolis Museum. To the best of

philosophers and, above all, Proclus radically rethought the traditional place of Asclepius in the divine order and, consequently, gave the concept of health a very distinct meaning:

Marinus, *Vita Procli* 3

People are inclined to make health the analogue to justice in the soul, saying that the former too is a kind of justice in the body as the latter is in the soul. For the habit of exercising the parts of the soul with the least of discord is nothing else than justice, while the sons of Asclepius also give the name of health to that which produces orderly and agreeable co-operation in the disorderly elements of the body. (tr. Edwards).

The Neoplatonic philosopher visits the shrine of Asclepius to pray to the god on behalf of others rather than for personal reasons, while Asclepius visits him in person and, as it seems, without an explicit request from the man; and sometimes gods ask the philosopher for help and protection.

Bibliography

- Athanassiadi, P., ed., tr. 1999. *Damascius. The Philosophical History*. Athens.
- Baltzly, D., ed. 2007. *Proclus. Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. Vol. 3. Book 3. Part 1: Proclus on the World's Body. Cambridge.
- Brouskari, M. S. 2004. Ανασκαφές νοτίως της Ακροπόλης, τα γλυπτά [The Excavations South of the Acropolis, The Sculpture] (*Archaiologikê Ephêmeris* 141, 2002, Fifth Period). Athens: Hetaireia.
- Camp, John McK. II. 1990. *The Athenian Agora. A Guide to the Excavation and Museum*. Athens.
- Caruso, A. 2013. *Akademia. Archeologia di una scuola filosofica ad Atene da Platone a Proclo (387a.C. – 485 d.C.)*. Athens: Scuola archeologica italiana di Atene.
- Castrén, P., ed. 1994. *Post-Herulian Athens. Aspects of Live and Culture in Athens, A. D. 267–529*. Helsinki.
- Dillon, J. M. 2007. “The Religion of the Last Hellenes”, *Rites et croyances dans les religions du monde romain: huit exposés suivis de discussions*. Genève: Fondation Hardt: 117–147.

my knowledge, Asclepius never accompanies Athena on similar reliefs from Pergamum, Kos, Epidaurus, or other Asklepieions.

- Dillon, J., ed. 2009². *Iamblichus. The Platonic Commentaries*. Brill, 1973; The Prometheus Trust.
- Edelstein, E. and L. 1945. *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*. 2 vols. Baltimore.
- Edwards, M. J., tr. 2000. *Neoplatonic Saints. The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students*. Liverpool.
- Eleftheratou, S., ed. 2015. *Acropolis Museum. Guide*. Athens.
- Finamore, J. 1999. "Julian and the Descent of Asclepius," *Journal of Neoplatonic Studies* 7.1: 63–86.
- Frantz, A., Tompson, H., Travlos, J. 1988. *The Athenian Agora. Results of Excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. Vol. XXIV: Late Antiquity, A. D. 267–700*. Princeton, N. J.; reviewed by P. Castrén in: *Gnomon* 63 (1991) 474–476.
- Hällström, G. af. 1994. "The Closing of the Neoplatonic School in A. D. 529: An Additional Aspect," Castrén 1994: 140–159.
- Karivieri, A. 1994. "The 'House of Proclus' on the Southern Slope of the Acropolis. A Contribution," Castrén 1994: 115–140.
- Majercik, R., tr. 1989. *The Chaldean Oracles*. Leiden.
- Marchiandi, D. 2006. "Tombe di filosofi e sacrari della filosofia nell'Atene tardo-antica: Proclo e Socrate nella testimonianza di Marino di Neapolis," *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene*, ser. III, 6.1, 101–130.
- Melfi, Milena 2007. *I Santuari di Asclepio in Grecia 1*. Rome.
- Meliades, J. 1955. "Ἀνασκαφαὶ νοτίως τῆς Ἀκροπόλεως [The Excavations South of the Acropolis]," *Praktika [ΙΙΑΑΗ]* (1955) [1960] 36–52.
- Oikonomides, Al. N., tr. 1977. *Marinos of Neapolis. The Extant Works, or The Life of Proclus and the Commentary on the Dedomena of Euclid*. Greek Text with facing (English or French) Translation, *Testimonia, De vita Marini*, an Introduction and Bibliography. Chicago.
- Petracos, B. 1995. *The Amphiareion of Oropos*. Clío Editions, Greece.
- Rosán, L. J. 1949. *The Philosophy of Proclus. The Final Stage of Ancient Thought*. New York.
- Saffrey, H. D., Segonds, A.-P., eds. 2001. *Proclus ou Sur le bonheur*, avec la collaboration de Concetta Luna (Collection des universités de France). Paris.
- Wildberg, Ch. 2017. "Proclus of Athens: A Life," *All from One: a Guide to Proclus*, edited by Pieter d'Hoine and Martijn Marije. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1–26.