

ARTICLE · CULTURA & SAÚDE

Who Was Asclepius?

The Greek myth of the god of Medicine and the origin of the staff with the serpent

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ABSTRACT

The text recovers the myth of Asclepius, in Greek mythology, or Aesculapius, in Roman mythology, the principal god of Medicine. It tells how Coronis, a mortal, became pregnant by Apollo but married Ischys; after a sequence of deaths, Apollo saved his son Asclepius and entrusted him to Chiron, who taught him the art of healing with medicinal plants. So skilled that he could raise the dead, Asclepius was struck down by Zeus, concerned for the natural order, and was later elevated to divinity. The author describes his symbolic family: Epione, Hygieia, Panacea, and Telesphorus, associated with the relief of pain, prevention, treatment, and convalescence. He explains the origin of the serpent on the staff as the symbol of Medicine and of the cup of Hygieia as the symbol of Pharmacy, noting that Hippocrates is said to be the nineteenth descendant of Asclepius.

KEYWORDS: *asclepius; greek mythology; history of medicine; symbol of medicine; hygieia; hippocrates*

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Asclepius, in Greek mythology, or **Aesculapius**, in Roman mythology, is the principal god of Medicine. The story goes that the beautiful Coronis, a mortal, gave herself to the sun-god Apollo and became pregnant. But she married Ischys, to whom she had been promised. Apollo killed Ischys, and his sister, Artemis, killed Coronis. Before Coronis's body was cremated, Apollo snatched Asclepius away and entrusted him to the care of Chiron. Chiron was responsible for the boy's education and upbringing, and Asclepius learned all the secrets of the healing art with medicinal plants. When he grew up, Asclepius became so skilled that he was able to raise the dead. Concerned about the depopulation of the "beyond" and the natural order of things, Zeus, the chief god of Olympus, killed Asclepius with a thunderbolt, but in recognition of him he took him up to the heavens and

made him a divinity. His wife, Epione, soothed pain; his daughter Hygieia symbolized the prevention of disease; another daughter, Panacea, symbolized the treatment of disease; his only son, Telesphorus, symbolized convalescence. Whenever a plague or epidemic struck a region, physicians would go out to kill the snakes, for they believed that these demonic creatures were the cause of disease. With the snake coiled around his staff, Asclepius holds dominion over disease, curing his patients. Over time, the serpent on Asclepius's staff became the symbol of Medicine, while the cup and the serpent of Hygieia came to symbolize Pharmacy. According to some authors, the great Hippocrates is the nineteenth descendant of Asclepius and the twentieth counting from Zeus. Hippocrates's grandfather, also a physician, was named Hippocrates, but he never attained the fame of the one who became known as the "father of medicine."