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Plague, Politics, and the Peloponnesian War: The Arrival of Asklepios in Athens

The importation of Asklepios-cult to Athens from Epidauros in 420/19 BC has long been explained as the result of the plague that devastated Athens ten years earlier. This explanation, however, is problematic for a number of reasons including the ten-year lag between cause and effect and the absence of any association between Asklepios and the Athenian plague in ancient sources. The one ancient source that documents the arrival of Asklepios—the so-called "Telemachos monument" of c. 400 BC (IG II2 4961 + 4960)—suggests instead that the immediate factor motivating the importation of Asklepios was Athenian imperial interest in this Epidaurian cult at the time of the Peloponnesian War. Implications for the understanding of Asklepios-cult are great: no longer the interest solely of ailing and alienated private individuals, Asklepios proves to have played a significant role in the politics of Athens beginning already in the 5th c. BC.

Although the Telemachos monument chronicles the efforts of the private individual Telemachos to bring Asklepios to Athens and to establish his sanctuary there, several details point to Athens' immediate political interests in the cult. First, the cult is closely aligned with Athens' own state-controlled and increasingly imperial cult of Eleusinian Demeter (IG I3 78): Asklepios arrived in the midst of the Greater Mysteries (lines 10-11) and was housed temporarily in the Eleusinion in Athens (11-12). Second, the cult was soon moved to its permanent home on the south slope of the Acropolis (12-15). This sanctuary, constructed in the shadow of the expansive Periklean building program on the summit, was integrated by default of its location into the syntax of newly reorganized sacred space—space which broadcast Athenian imperialism via, e.g., the publication of tribute quota lists. Moreover, placement of Asklepios next to the theater of Dionysus and synchronization of the Asklepieia (a festival of Asklepios) with the proagon to the City Dionysia—the stage for the presentation of imperial tribute—wove Asklepios more securely into the fabric of imperial associations overlying the Acropolis.

All of these details demonstrate Athenian political interest in the cult from the moment it arrived in Athens. The origin of the cult, moreover, is significant: although Asklepios could have been imported from a number of other cities, the cult came from a city of strategic importance to Athens. Controlling access to the Peloponnese, Epidauros was a target of repeated Athenian attacks during the war (Thucy. 2.56.4; 5.53-58). That Athens chose to memorialize the cult's Epidaurian origins in the name of another festival of Asklepios integrated into the Eleusinian Mysteries (the Epidauria) suggests that Athens imported the cult as a way of securing the good will of Epidauros during the Peace of Nikias in 420 BC.

The timing of the cult's arrival in the thick of the Peloponnesian War, and its situation within the sacred space of the city alongside two of Athens' imperially-oriented cults—Dionysus and Demeter—indicate an interest in the cult that has little to do with plague, as scholars have assumed, and much to do with empire. The arrival of Asklepios, one of antiquity's most popular healing deities, thus met the political needs of the Athenian state along with the needs of her sick