

Neoplatonic Asclepius: Science and religion at the crossroads of Aristotelian biology, Hippocratic medicine and Platonic theurgy

Eugene AFONASIN¹

Abstract. *In the first part of the paper, I will briefly discuss certain peculiarities of the medical profession in antiquity. In his Philosophical History (fr. 80–84 Athanassiadi) Damascius narrates about a philosopher, named Asclepiodotus, whose interests ranged from Platonic philosophy to Aristotelian natural sciences. Asclepiodotus' instructor in medical matters, a son of a doctor from the island of Rhodos, Iacobus, is pictured by Damascius as an exemplary figure (fr. 84), who, unlike many of his contemporaries, always tested the opinions of others and gained a reputation of an extremely successful physician, although the methods of treatment, ascribed to him by Damascius, are highly reminiscent of those presented as the Pythagorean by Iamblichus (On the Pythagorean way of life 244). In this respect both Iacobus and Asclepiodotus are conformed to the best standards of medical ethics, and pass the test set by Galen in his "On examination by which the best physicians are recognized", except perhaps by the fact that they preferred to base their activities on such authorities as Aristotle and the Methodist Soranus rather than on a list of the "dogmatists" proposed by Galen. In the second part of the paper, dedicated to the cult of Asclepius in Late Antiquity, I will look at various kinds of evidence taken from the Neoplatonic philosophers. Having discussed first the principal philosophical interpretations of Asclepius found in Apuleius, Aelianus, Macrobius, Julian, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius, etc., we turn to Proclus' attitude to Athena and Asclepius as reflected in Marinus' Vita Procli and finally discuss the cult of Eshmun as found in Damascius. The textual data are supported by archaeological evidence from the "House of Proclus" in Athens.*

Rezumat. *Prima parte a lucrării prezintă o serie de lucruri mai puțin obișnuite legate de profesia de medic în Antichitate. În Istoria filosofică, Damascius narează despre un filosof, Asclepiodotus, ale cărui interese mergeau de la filosofia platonică la științele naturii ale lui Aristotel. Iacobus, instructorul lui Asclepiodotus, este zugrăvit de Damascius ca o figură exemplară. Acesta și-a câștigat o reputație de foarte bun medic, deși metodele sale de tratament sunt remissive ale celor prezentate de Iamblichus ca fiind pitagoreice. Astfel, atât Iacobus, cât și Asclepiodotus se conformează celor mai bune standarde ale eticii medicale. În a doua parte a lucrării, dedicată cultului lui Asclepius în Antichitatea târzie, autorul vorbește despre diferitele tipuri de mărturii preluate de la filosofi neoplatonici. După ce discută principalele interpretări filosofice ale lui Asclepius la Apuleius, Aelianus, Macrobius, Julian, Porphyrius, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius, se revine la atitudinea către Atena și Asclepius reflectată în Vita Procli a lui Marinus.*

Keywords: the Aristotelian tradition; medicine in Late Antiquity; medical ethics Academy at Athens; Proclus; Damascius; Neoplatonism; classical archaeology.

¹ Novosibirsk State University; Institute of Philosophy and Law Sib RAS; Email: afonasin@gmail.com

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

Diogenes Laert. 3.45;
Olympiodorus, *Vita Platonis* 4.39 (Eldeinstein, T. 322).

I

In his *Philosophical History* (PhH), Damascius narrates about a philosopher, named (after Asclepius) Asclepiodotus, whose interests ranged from Platonic philosophy to natural sciences and medicine.² Unfortunately, nothing of his hand came down to us. From his childhood, Asclepiodotus was interested in various arts and crafts (*tekhnai*), such as mixing colors; he studied the properties of stones and herbs, and reached some advance in various areas of Aristotelian science, such as the natural history of plants and animals:

“...he examined closely those [animals and plants] that he could cast his eyes on, and those which he could not find he investigated at great length through hearsay, also collecting whatever the Ancients had written about them” (PhH, fr. 80, transl. P. Athanassiadi).³

It is possible that a still extant sundial in Aphrodisia is his creation.⁴

Asclepiodotus’ instructor in medical matters, a son of a doctor from the island of Rhodes, Iacobus, is pictured by Damascius as an exemplary figure (PhH, fr. 84). He learnt the art of medicine from his father Hesychius, who traveled for many years across the Mediterranean from Italy to Constantinople, practicing medicine and acquiring new knowledge. Having finally arrived back to Constantinople Iacobus’ father discovered that the majority of local doctors possessed no first-hand medical experience and based their treatments on various books and summaries, never testing the opinions of others (fr. 84A–C).⁵ Hesychius considered

² A student of Proclus and a teacher of Damascius’ predecessor Isidorus, Asclepiodotus fled from Alexandria to Aphrodisia to avoid a fierce Christian prosecution. On his way from Alexandria to Athens, Damascius enjoyed his hospitality in his home in Aphrodisia and later defined him as a philosopher of “uneven intelligence, especially when it comes to the divine matters,” “extremely sharp in raising questions,” “the best among his contemporaries in the natural sciences,” who tends to “pack everything together and bring it down to the level of the physical world” (PhH, fr. 85A). Details of his career concern us only partially. For a fuller account, cf. ATHANASSIADI 1999, 37 f. and 348–349.

³ For text and translation, see ATHANASSIADI 1999; I use her translation of the *Philosophical History* with occasional adaptations, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ ATHANASSIADI 1999, 203 n. 205, with a reference to P. Pattenden.

⁵ This definitely corresponds with the real situation in late antiquity: a doctor in the fifth-sixth centuries Constantinople in the best case possessed the encyclopedic medical outlines of such scholars as Caelius Aurelianus,

this inappropriate and taught his son real practical techniques. Apparently both the father and the son were acclaimed by the contemporaries as skillful practitioners, although the methods of treatment, scribed to them by Damascius, are highly reminiscent of these presented as the Pythagorean by Iamblichus (*On the Pythagorean way of life* 244). Our physicians rejected surgery (“the operations with flame and knife”) and bloodletting (cautery), having prescribed instead a diet, purgatives and cold baths. Because of the latter Iacobus was nicknamed Psychristus (“The Chillest”). The methods were allegedly effective enough to deal with the most severe ulcers (fr. 84D). In Athens, Iacobus prescribed Proclus to abstain from cabbage and use instead mallow as a laxative. The remedy, however natural for a doctor, had proven to be impossible for the philosopher, who did not obey the physician’s advice because of the Pythagorean dietary prohibition.⁶ One may also note that following the lead of his teacher, whom he placed next to Hippocrates and Soranus (fr. 85E),⁷ Asclepiodotus “re-established the long-lost use of the white hellebore, which even Iacobus had not been able to recover, and through it he remedied incurable diseases against all expectations” (fr. 85D).

Iacobus’ conduct conformed to the best standards of medical ethics: he was quite content with his municipal salary (δημοσία)⁸ and never charged money for his service (fr. 84G), “more than any of his contemporaries he had a soft and tender heart towards those in need” (fr. 84H), “he used to say that the perfect doctor must either give up hope of curing the disease or, having taken on the patient, improve his condition forthwith and leave him only once he is in a more tolerable state; otherwise he should not abandon him” (fr. 84E), the patients loved him and trusted his words, calling him the saviour (“as Asclepius was called in the past”, fr. 84E), and even erected statues of the doctor in Athens and Constantinople (fr. 84I).⁹

Finally, he was a devotee of ancient religious rites and, as Proclus (below), enjoyed personal relations with the deity:

“He had such confidence in himself and in his own methods of cure that if, upon visiting a patient and diagnosing the disease from its symptoms he declared that the man would live, everybody was filled with the hope that recovery would follow, but if not, they expected death... However doctors never stopped discrediting and abusing him for being not a doctor

Oribasius of Pergamon, Aetius of Amida or Paul of Aegina. For a concise description of the situation cf., for instance, NUTTON 1984 and 2004, 293 ff., esp. 304–305. Clearly, Iacobus’ father was an exception to the rule.

⁶ The Pythagoreans were not allowed to eat mallow, “because it is the first sign of the sympathy between heavenly and earthly beings” (Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean way of life* 109, transl. G. Clark; cf. the *Chaldaean Oracles* 210a).

⁷ One perhaps would expect Hippocrates and some ancient names from Galen’s list (such as Diocles, Praxagoras, Herophilus, etc.), but for some reason a Methodist doctor of the first century AD is chosen instead. Probably, this has something to do with the obvious empirical inclinations of Asclepiodotus, who wanted to try everything himself. This can also reflect a reaction to all-consuming “Galenism” of late antiquity (TEMKIN 1962 and, in greater details, TEMKIN 1973).

⁸ In Constantinople, he was an *archiaterus* (Malalas 14.38, 292 Thurn; ATHANASSIADI 1999, 207 n. 210).

⁹ Clearly, our physicians are conformed to the best standards of medical ethics and pass the test set by Galen in his “On examination by which the best physicians are recognized” (ISKANDAR 1988; NUTTON 1990).

but a holy man and a favorite of gods. And what they say was true... the soul of Iacobus was Asclepeian, endowed by nature with healing powers (κατὰ φύσιν Παιώνειον, cf. Proclus, *In RP* II 118 and *In Tim.* I 49A, below). Moreover he had that passionate attachment to his calling which is particularly apt to draw the craftsman nearer to the patron god of his art, creating a true intimacy between the two” (fr. 84E).

Similarly, an eminent physician and a student of the Neoplatonic philosopher Ammonius, active in Alexandria in the early sixth century, Gessius¹⁰ is reported not only to “achieve a greater degree of precision than any of his contemporary doctors and iatrosophists”, but also to possess a sort of Asclepeian wisdom (PhH, fr. 128).

But probably it will not be an exaggeration to say that Proclus surpassed all of them in his devotion to the cult of Asclepius. Although the greatest *scholarchus* of the Academy had intimate relations with many gods,¹¹ Asclepius seemed to assist our philosopher all his life: the young Proclus miraculously recovered when the son of Asclepius, Telesphorus, appeared to him in a dream; in a more advanced age the patron of medicine (“who came from Epidaurus”) saved him again, this time from arthritis; and it was 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 Segons); Marinus tells the story about Proclus’ successful prayer to Asclepius, which resulted in a miraculous recovery of one Asclepigeneia (*Vita Procli* 29, to be discussed later). 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). It is against this background that one may look at the Neoplatonic attitude to medicine.

II

“...[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

¹⁰ For a fuller account, cf. ATHANASSIADI 1999, 291 n. 342.

¹¹ 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 a 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).

master the divine art of healing to a greater, others to a lesser, degree” (Proclus, *In Tim* I 49A, Asclepius T 312 Edelstein).¹²

In this way, according to Proclus’ imagination, the art of medicine originated among men. The Paeonian power, penetrating the whole world, pours in great abundance on the lower levels of being, having finally materialized in the form of healing crafts, so vital for good living of the mortals.

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.). The purest souls (ἄχραντοι, Iamblichus, *De anima* fr. 27 Dillon–Finamore)—the ones who came to the world willingly in order to help people—follow them. This was the fate of Asclepius, who was born to Appollo by a mortal woman Coronis,¹³ devoted his live to practicing the art of medicine, and killed by Zeus, whose wrath was provoked, as they say, by the physician’s attempts to fool death and heal incurable illnesses. Subsequently, he revived as a god (*in deum surgat*; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 23.7), but willingly “returned from the underworld with the permission of Parcae” (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 251.2) to help people.¹⁴

Asclepius is a relative newcomer in Greek pantheon. In the time of Homer, Paeon, not Asclepius, cured the wounds of the Olympic gods, while the mortals relied on the skills of Machaon, the son of Asclepius, and other heroes-healers (Homer, *Iliad* 5.401 and 899; 11.518, etc.). This obvious fact allowed Theodoretus (*Grac. aff. cur.* 8.23) to say that Asclepius had not yet been deified in antiquity and was introduced as a god of medicine much later. Quite on the contrary, Pausanias (2.26.10) took it for granted that Asclepius is not a historical figure at all, being a deity already from the time of Homer, while Galen preferred to suspend the judgment:

“Asclepius at least, and also Dionysus, whether they were men formerly or whether they were gods from the outset, are deemed deserving of the highest honors, the one by reason of his medical art, the other because he taught us the art of the vine” (Galen, *Protrepticus* 9.22, T 245 E.).

The majority of ancient writers, however, accepted the humanity of Asclepius and appreciated his difficult way to deification:

“Asclepius raised dead and cured sick—says Xenophon—, and for these things being a god he has everlasting fame among men” (*Cynegeticus* 1.6, T. 243 E.).

¹² A classical collection of literary and archaeological evidences about the cult of Asclepius is, doubtlessly, the one published by Emma and Ludwig Edelstein (EDELSTEIN, EDELSTEIN 1945). I utilize their translation, unless otherwise noted.

¹³ Apollodorus 3.10.3; Pindar, *Pyth.* 3.25; Ovidius, *Met.* 2.543; Pausanias 2.11 and 26, etc.

¹⁴ On Asclepius’ deification see, particularly, T 232–336 E. 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.).

He is an uncontested founder of rational medicine, on the one hand:

“Hence Asclepius (Aesculapius), since he is celebrated as its most ancient founder and because he cultivated this science as yet rude and vulgar, with a little more exactness, was numbered among the gods” (Celsus, *De medicina*, proem. 2, T 244 E.).

On the other hand, he is a healing deity, indeed the most famous one:

“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)” (Apuleius, *De deo Socratis* 15.153, T 254 E.).

Now, the emperor Julian perceived the providential sense of these events as follows:

“I had almost forgotten the greatest of the gifts of the Sun (Helius) and Zeus... I mean to say that Zeus engendered Asclepius from himself among the intelligible (νοητοῖς) gods, and through the life of generative Sun (Helius) 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» (Julianus, *Contra Galilaeos* 200 A–B, T 307 E.).

The divine powers, received from the highest deities, Asclepius extends to peoples. Sufferers from the entire ancient world flock around such famous centers of healing, as the shrines in Epidaurus, Kos, Pergamum, Lebona, somewhat later Athens and Rome, asking the god for assistance. They receive divine orders in dreams, esp. in the process of incubation in the temples, and all this is given to them as a gift, free of charge (Julianus, *Epist.* 78, 419B).

Asclepius’ wife Epione and his children, such as Hygieia, Panakeia, Iaso, Aceso, Aglaea, Podaleirios, Machaon and Telesphorus and others assist him, thus locally contributing to his divine completeness:

“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)” (Damascius, *Dubitationes et Solutiones* 245; cp. Marinus, *Vita Procli* 7; T 313 E.).

Handing down some of his powers to his assistants, the “Neoplatonic” Asclepius keeps his status of a solar deity and ascends to a still higher level of the “Paeonian” hierarchy.¹⁵

¹⁵ According to Julian, “since the Sun (Helius) 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 (Helius) 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

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 (*Oratio* 42.4; T 303 L.) is sure that Asclepius “guides and rules the universe, 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». In another place (*Oratio* 50.56) he explicitly identifies him with the Platonic world soul (*Timaeus* 34b).

Macrobius (*Saturnalia* 1.20.1–4; T 301 E.) 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 every year by shedding the skin of old age” (ibid.).

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”.

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:

“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

153B, T 305–306 E.). 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 E). 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 natural for unsophisticated religion. Much rather they mean an advent of pure spirits, demigods and heroes, who serve as messengers of the gods. For details, see FINAMORE 1999.

(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 [or, maybe, mild climate?] (εὐκρασία)” (Proclus, *In Tim.* I 49C; 159.25, Asclepius T 304 E.; Iamblichus, *In Tim.* fr. 19 Dillon; Dillon’s transl.).

Proclus repeatedly affirms that, of the cosmic forces, Asclepius is mostly responsible for 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, which, for any reason, has 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 weakening of our nature developed in the process of its struggle with the hostile external conditions. This is what Plato says in the dialogue (*Timaeus* 81d). Apparently, according to Proclus, this presupposes that Demiurge possesses unceasing source of the Paeonian power, which helps him to keep the world in good shape (ibid. 63.10–17), and durability of the world, provided by Demiurge,



Left: Athena grants the title of *proxenus* (consul) and benefactor to a citizen of Croton. The relief represents the Goddess Athena and, possibly, Asclepius, c. 330 BC. Right: Athena and Asclepius receive a suppliant in the temple. Votive relief, found in the Asklepieion in Athens, c. 350 BCE. Acropolis Museum, Athens. Author’s photographs.

depends on two kinds of health — “creative” and “restorative”. On the one hand, Demiurge supports “indissoluble bonds” which preserve the integrity of the world; on the other hand, he must constantly find 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 gradually degrading cosmos from sinking in 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).¹⁶

III

Leaving the acropolis under rather obscure circumstances,¹⁷ Athena personally requested Proclus to supply her with a new housing. Namely, 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. This story told by the biographer seems to be substantiated by the archaeological data, and in a very remarkable way. But let us first look at another story, which appears in Marinus just before this passage. Summoned by his benefactor Theagenes, Proclus came to the Athenian Asklepieion in order to ask Asclepius to save Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Archiadadas:

“Taken with him the great Pericles of Lydia, a man who was himself no mean philosopher, Proclus visited the shrine of the god to pray on behalf of the invalid. For at that time the city still enjoyed the use of this and retained intact the temple of the Savior. And while he was praying in the ancient manner, a sudden change was seen in the maiden and a sudden recovery occurred, for the Savior, being a god, healed her easily... Such was the act he performed, yet in this as in every other case he evaded the notice of the mob, and offered no pretext to those who wished to plot against him.

The house in which he dwelt was in this respect of great assistance to him. For in addition to the rest of his good fortune, his dwelling too was extremely congenial to him, being also

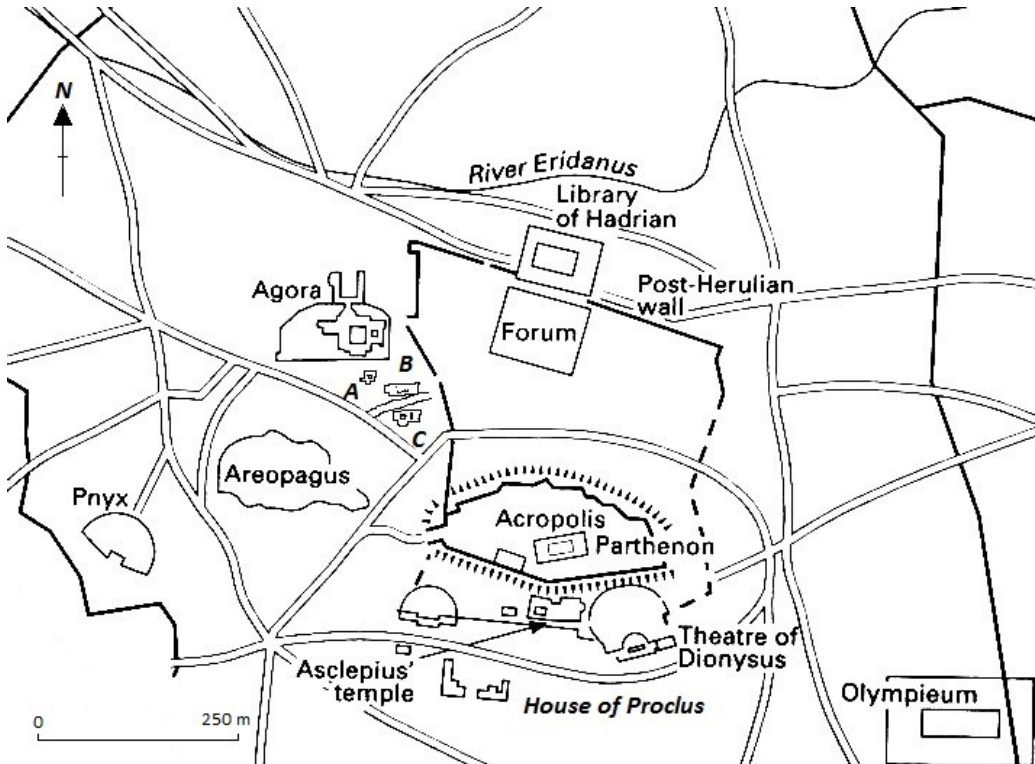
¹⁶ “... wherefore the theologians ascribe to Asclepius the one kind of health, namely that which results from the whole process of healing whatever is contrary to nature, checking whatever is contrary to nature either always or at times; the other kind of health they assume to have been created before 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 E.). See also a new commented translation of this passage by BALTZLY 2007, 119.

¹⁷ Probably the event coincides with a transfer of the bronze statue of Athena from the Parthenon to the Oval Forum in Constantinople c. 465–470.

the one inhabited by his ‘father’ Syrianus and by Plutarch, whom he himself styled his ‘forefather’” (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 29, transl. by M. Edwards).

Then he briefly describes the location of the house as follows: “it was a neighbor to the shrine of Asclepius celebrated by Sophocles, and [the shrine] of Dionysius by the theatre (...γείτονα 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 (...ὁρωμένην δὲ ἢ καὶ ἄλλως αἰσθητὴν γιγνομένην τῇ ἀκροπόλει τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς...”.¹⁸

M. 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?



A plan of Athens in the 5th century CE.

¹⁸ This phrase is difficult to grasp. For details, cf. ROSÁN 1949, 30; FRANTZ, TOMPSON, TRAVLOS 1988, 43; CASTRÉN 1991, 475; KARIVIERI 1994, 116–117 n. 11; SAFFREY, SEGONDS 2001, 34.

Interestingly, a large building complex on the southern slope of the Acropolis, located between the Odeum of Herodes Atticus and the Theatre of Dionysus, excavated in 1955, perfectly matches this description.¹⁹

The excavators were the first to identify this house, 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'."²⁰

The identification is also confirmed by the reach finds (artistic works and an inscription), illustrating religious and intellectual interests of its inhabitants. Apart of the shrine of Cybele and various religious objects, numerous objects of everyday use have been excavated in the building itself. Within a close vicinity, the archeologists also discovered numerous statues of the gods (including a statue of Isis); a portrait, tentatively identified as this of a philosopher; and an inscription with the words σοφίης and βίον. The head of a philosopher (some speculate of Plutarch, the teacher of Proclus) dated to the fifth century is also said to come from the vicinity.²¹

A grave of a year-old piglet, found in the 'House of Proclus', is a truly remarkable discovery. 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 boundary to the building. Also in the Roman context, it could be an offering to the 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

¹⁹ Unfortunately, the work was accomplished only partially and under extreme time pressure, before the Dionysiou Areopagiu Street was constructed over the site. For details, see: MELIADES 1955; FRANTZ, TOMPSON, TRAVLOS 1988, BROUSKARI 2004; and CARUSO 2013.

²⁰ "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, TOMPSON, TRAVLOS 1988, 43).

²¹ The objects are mostly kept in the Agora and Acropolis Museums; numerous illustrations are readily found in: FRANTZ, TOMPSON, TRAVLOS 1988; CAMP 1994; BRUSKARI 2004; and ELEFATHERATOU 2015.



«House of Proclus». Near the entrance of the house, there was a small room, converted into a shrine. The wall of the room was decorated with a *naiskos* with the statue of the Mother of the Gods (cf. an example, middle row, right, Cybele with a lion, Athens, c. 4 cent. BC) 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 (cf. above a plaque in the form of the temple from the Athenian Asklepieion, c. 350–300 BC). Funeral sacrificial table (*mensa*), dated to 350–325 BC, was reused as an altar or a statue base. The reliefs represent lamentation, farewell and posthumous meet of the deceased with philosophers. The room was too small to accommodate such a big altar, therefore only the last relief was visible. Acropolis museum, Athens. Authors' photographs.

or Hecate,²² 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 inform us that Proclus personally experienced “the fiery apparitions of Hecate” (having learned the rituals from Plutarch's daughter Asclepigeneia) and

“...actually caused rains by an apposite use of an *iunx* (ἰυνγὰ 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” (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28, transl. by M. Edwards).

The *iunx* (ἰυνξ, *junx 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.²³ 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—itsself, while in the Platonic tradition it was understood symbolically as an Erotic binding force which links men to the gods.²⁴

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*

²² For details, cf. KARIVIERI 1994, 135f. See also our study AFONASIN, AFONASINA 2014.

²³ In Pindar, *Pythian* 4.213–220 (transl. Steven J. Willett) 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.*

²⁴ 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.

28–29, quoted above; 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 the 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,²⁵ 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 a 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 preparation for this event, he could wish to establish a new shrine and offer some sort of sacrifices to the goddess. This idea was recently proposed by Ch. Wildberg²⁶, who rightly notices that this sort of purification is indeed attested in literature, for instance, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (276 f.), where Orestes, before approaching Athena, purifies himself with the blood of a pig.²⁷ 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 *Meth.* 38.8–41.2 = Aristotle, fr. 13 Ross; 203 Rose). This Pythagorean idea is verbally repeated by Proclus in his *Commentary in 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" (ἀπλήμον' ὑγείην) to his enfeebled limbs (*Hymns* 7.43–46).²⁸

Besides, it is interesting to observe that, although in their hymns and prayers people almost universally ask gods for good health,²⁹ in the *Hymns* of Proclus health is mentioned only twice: in the *Hymn to Athena* and, quite predictably, in the *Hymn to Helios* 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, Asclepius T 312 Edelstein, quoted above).

²⁵ Cf. *PhH*, fr. 84D (about mallow), referred above.

²⁶ Cf. WILDBERG 2017.

²⁷ "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).

²⁸ Has this something to do with a known fact that he suffered from arthritis (see above)?

²⁹ 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.

IV

Let us return to the initial passage (*Vita Procli* 29). Marinus pictures Proclus visiting the temple of Asclepius in Athens because of an unspecified illness of Asclepigeneia. All hope had already been lost, and Asclepigeneas' 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.³⁰ 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 become the mother of the future Neoplatonic philosopher and the scholarch of the Academy Hegias.³¹ Should the girl die the Golden chain of Platonic succession would break. On the other hand, the grandmother of the saved girl, also Asclepigeneia, is known to introduce Proclus to special rites, in the manner Dyotima 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.³² At any rate, with this successful act of theurgy Proclus repaid his debt, and demonstrated that he was a gifted student.

We have seen that Proclus and other Neoplatonic philosophers radically rethought the place of Asclepius in the divine order and, consequently, gave the concept of health a very distinct meaning:

"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" (Marinus, *Vita Procli* 3, transl. by M. Edwards).

³⁰ 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, transl. M. Edwards).

³¹ Cf. ATHANASSIADI 1999, *The Philosophical History*, 63B.

³² 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.

The Neoplatonic philosopher visits the shrine of Asclepius to pray the god on behalf of the 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.

References

- AFONASIN, E.V., A.S. AFONASINA 2014. The houses of philosophical schools in Athens. *Schole* 8(1), 9–23.
Online: www.nsu.ru/classics/schole/8/8-1-afonasin.pdf (accessed: 10.11.2017).
- 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. Oi anaskafes notios tis Akropolis, ta glypta. *Archaiologikê Ephêmeris* 141, 2002, Fifth Period. Athens.
- CAMP, J. McK. II 1994. *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.
- CASTRÉN, P. 1991. Review of “A. Frantz, H. Tompson, J. Travlos, The Athenian Agora. Results of Excavations conducted by the Americal School of Classical Studies at Athens. Vol. XXIV: Late Antiquity, A.D. 267–700”. *Gnomon* 63, 474–476.
- CASTRÉN, P. (ed.) 1994. *Post-Herulian Athens. Aspects of life and culture in Athens, A.D. 267–529*. Helsinki.
- DILLON, J.M. 2007. The religion of the last Hellenes. In: J. Scheid (ed.), *Rites et croyances dans les religions du monde romain: huit exposés suivis de discussions*, 117–147. Genève.
- DILLON, J. (ed.) 2009². *Iamblichus. The Platonic Commentaries*. Leiden.
- EDELSTEIN, E., L. EDELSTEIN 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., H. TOMPSON, J. TRAVLOS 1988. *The Athenian Agora. Results of excavations conducted by the Americal School of Classical Studies at Athens*. Vol. XXIV: Late Antiquity, A.D. 267–700. Princeton (N.J.).
- HÄLLSTRÖM, G. 1994. The closing of the Neoplatonic School in A.D. 529: An additional aspect. In: CASTRÉN 1994, 140–159.
- ISKANDAR, A.Z. 1988. *Galenus De optimo medico cognoscendo* (CMG suppl. orient. 4). Berlin.
- KARIVIERI, A. 1994. The ‘House of Proclus’ on the Southern Slope of the Acropolis. A Contribution. In: 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, M. 2007. *I Santuari di Asclepio in Grecia* 1. Rome.

- MELIADES, J. 1955. 'Anaskafai notios trijs 'Akropoleos. *Praktika*, 36–52.
- NUTTON, V. 1984. From Galen to Alexander, aspects of medicine and medical practice in Late Antiquity. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38, 1–14.
- NUTTON, V. 1990. The Patient Choice: A new Treatise by Galen. *Classical Quarterly* 40, 236–257.
- OIKONOMIDES, A.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*. Athens.
- ROSÁN, L.J. 1949. *The Philosophy of Proclus. The final stage of ancient thought*. New York.
- SAFFREY, H.D., A.-P. SEGONDS (eds.) 2001. *Proclus ou Sur le bonheur*. Paris.
- TEMKIN, O. 1962. Byzantine medicine: tradition and empirism. *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16, 97–115.
- TEMKIN, O. 1973. *Galenism*. Ithaca–London.
- WILDBERG, C. 2017. Proclus of Athens: a life. In: P. d'Hoine, M. Marije (eds.), *All from one: a guide to Proclus*, 1–26. Oxford.



© 2017 by the authors; licensee Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza din Iași. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons by Attribution (CC-BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).