

The Temple Offerings to Aesculapius

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When we attempt to trace the heredity of the curious custom of offering in the temples of Æsculapius images of the diseased organ in gratitude to the god for relief from the affliction which had been cured by the more or less direct assistance of the divinity, we meet with a noteworthy but not insurmountable difficulty in clearly associating its origin with some of the rituals of black magic, widespread among primitive men, which formed such an important part of their contact with supernatural powers. These offerings were acts of gratitude or propitiation, as we gather from ancient records. The direct descent from the witch work of the tribal wizard is not, so far as I have been able to judge, demonstrated with entire satisfaction, but I have no doubt of their affiliation of thought with that part of it sometimes called sympathetic or homeopathic magic. In Queen Elizabeth's day it was still not infrequent for an enemy to make a dough image of the hated person. A bodkin was thrust through the region of the heart or other suggestions made to the evil powers of what was hoped would happen to him. Lead, too, was a convenient material and, still more adaptable, wax was used to make the image or whatever other object, which in the art

of the mischief maker was supposed to suggest the object of his hate. It is more often reported in the preceding reigns but it is even said that in the early years of the good Queen Victoria such witcheries were plotted against the sovereign. Occasionally we read accounts of such things nowadays among the negroes of our own southern states and still more of Hayti and they are commonly enough reported by modern travelers among primitive people.

The wax or dough or lead manikin or other witch stuff is not exclusively employed in working evil upon enemies. Far from it; white magic makes use of the same agencies to altruistic ends. Such things are used among the Malays (1) to decoy wandering souls back to the body, the image having been connected, in some direct or indirect way, with the person suffering from bodily afflictions due to a wandering soul. There has apparently to be some sympathetic influence established between the witch stuff and the patient or victim, as the case may be. Nail parings and the shorn hair are the common objects of materia medica for the wizard and it is to the way he uses them that is usually ascribed the beneficent or maleficent effects. We get the drift of the primitive man's pantheistic idea. Influence

the power in these for good or evil and through the spirit which pervades the universe the influence seeks its like and helps or harms its affinity. They do not reason things out by such abstractions, but that is the instinctive underlying sentiment. Savage people are apt to think of almost anything as having an affinity, anything the person may have touched for instance has been imbued with the effluence from his embodied spirit, but of all things an image of the person is full of it; a drawing, on the cave walls, for example, of an animal is helpful to the primitive hunter of it. He acquires some influence over it. A man's shadow is his ghost, the

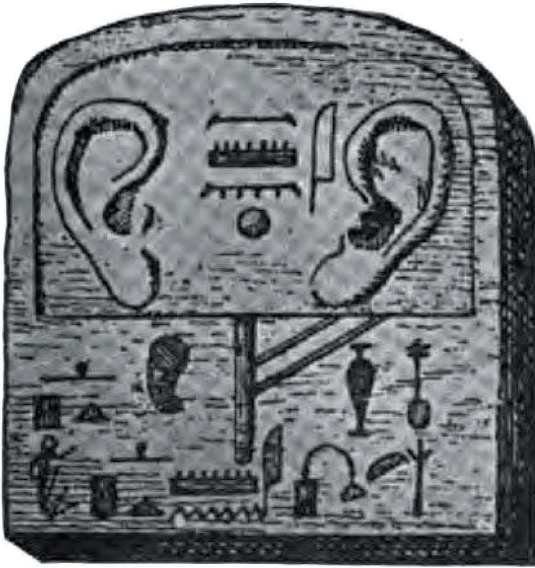


FIG. 1.—Offerings to Ra in return for successful treatment recorded on a stele 1500 B. C.

effluence of his soul. You tread on the shadow and you insult or hurt the man it belongs to.

Out of these fundamental tenets of primitive thought springs the belief that he who can cure disease can cause it. We see it is all quite logical and we see we differ from primitive man only in the nature of our theories. Many of us if forced to choose are still pantheists silent or avowed. Now if we could suppose these temple images were a contribution to the cure and after it was effected were left behind in gratitude to the god who cherished them, to help him with the next case, we would get a clue to the further working of the human mind, beginning to be tintured with modern altruism, but we must be chary of accepting this for antiquity. It began late. How, too, are we going to imagine that any god of good taste would care for a lot of old images of cancers and crooked limbs hung along his temple walls? Man has always made his god, and the common idea of primitive man and of men of the ancient civilizations was at the very best the gods had only a languid interest in the happiness and welfare of mankind, many insisted none at all. However, I do not think that can be accepted too absolutely. We have to suppose something of the kind behind white magic even and the gods had their favorites. Zeus was the father of many of them and the rest of the divinities had their share in the parentage of heroes and were interested in them; but this ascription of uni-

versal benevolence to Æsculapius is not to be lightly undertaken.

It is extremely difficult to force the explanation of these offerings into the limits of Miss Harrison's "do ut des" principle (2)—"I give to the god that the god may also give to me what I desire." We may indeed give to the god something he wants for chasing away something we do not want, but what is there in it for the god of antiquity to have a lot of graven plaques on the walls of his corridors? We, as Christians, say God so loved the world He sent His only Son to save it, and we can easily imagine Him pleased with a helpful spirit as He might be in our supplying a god with talismans to cure disease according to the primitive pantheistic principle, but that is an assumption for which we have otherwise little warrant in ancient theology. For the most part the Olympians resented such interference. Zeus struck several, men, heroes, even gods, for doing too much for man, giving him fire, restoring him to life, and what not.

There is a book of Coan Prenotions in the Hippocratic Corpus. Many if not all the maxims therein found are said to have been engraved on temple walls at Cnidos and Cos. Hippocrates is supposed to have got some of his education from them. What were they for? Inscriptions for gods or men? Are we permitted to imagine that these representations of tumors and ailing ears belonged in the same category? We can scarcely avoid the inference as to this any more than as to their earlier affiliation with witch stuff. These ancient temples, in which the Æsclepiadæ found a home and an employment, some of the shrines only we may assume, are said to have been gradually turned into *latria*, a sort of combination of dispensary and doctor's office. In other words, they began as temples of religion and became temples of science. This is in accord with all we know of the evolution of primitive medical thought. We may thus imagine the temple offerings and the inscriptions of case records on the walls mark the path entered on the road to such changes. But these votive offerings as I have already more than intimated surely go back into the mists of primitive life for their origin. In principle the same may be said for the inscriptions. Those at Epidaurus were most of them records of medical miracles, though some of the Coan prenotations contain the vision of the ages, and these pictures of pathology are indeed humble ancestors for the glories of modern pathology. We cannot avoid thinking of Lourdes and its cures, but it was through such gropings that the Æsclepiadæ finally found the way that led to Rokitanski and Virchow and Pasteur.

As has been said the witch can use the image for black magic or white, the doctor can use his strychnine for a tonic or a poison. The medicine man can use the image to get the soul back or sticking a pin into the liver it becomes malevolent in the etiology of hepatic disease. The Malay bad man crones out in a ditty the rationale of his performance:

"It is not the wax I slay,
But the liver, heart and spleen of so and so."

Yet the image, too, he uses as a love charm. He floats the portrait of his lady from the bough of a tree and by winding it with a thread of seven

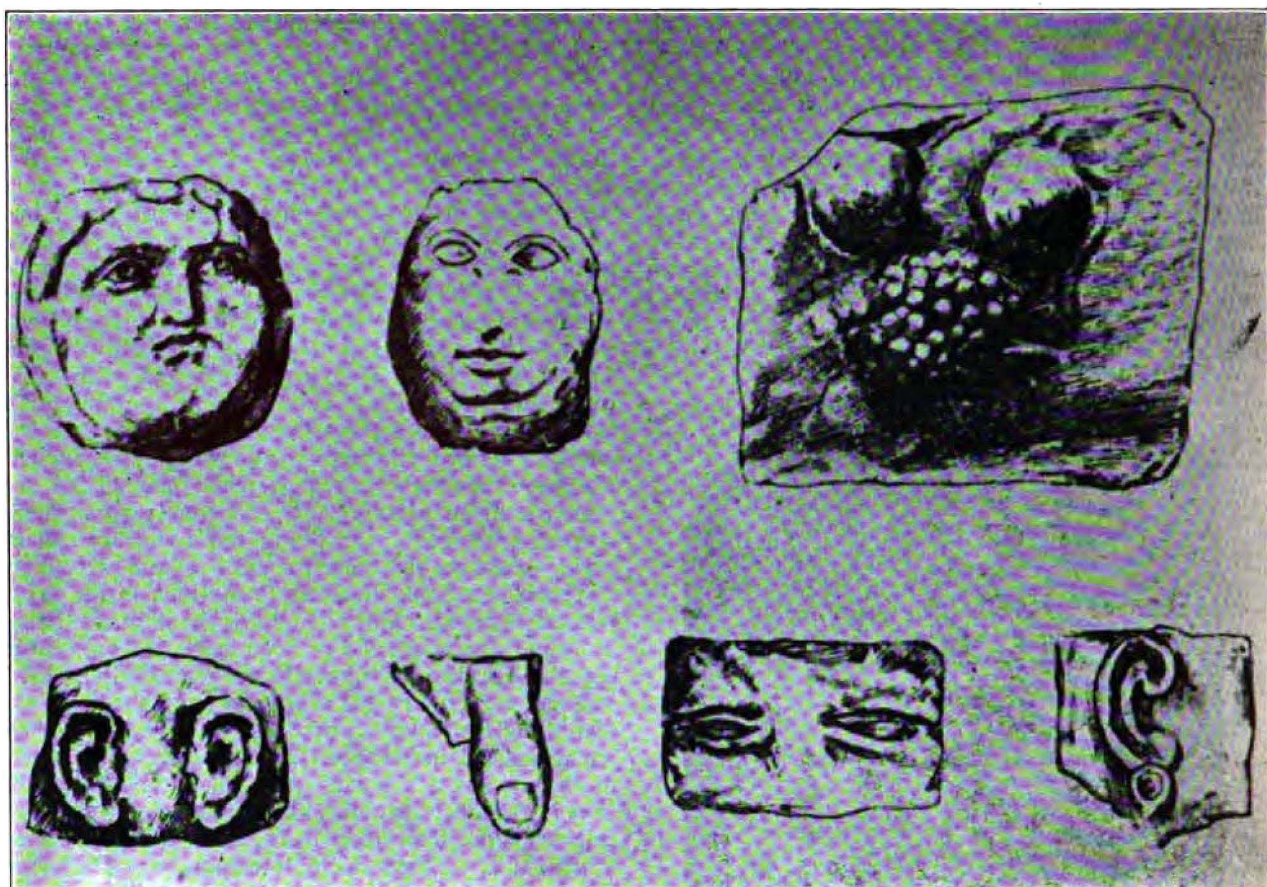


FIG. 2.—Greco-Roman votive offerings, given in a spirit of gratitude to the god, in commemoration of his many triumphs.

strands of seven colors he causes her heart to yearn in love for him. It is a love charm and a soul enticer and a deadly menace according as it is manipulated. By it he can become triumphant over the difficulties and perils of life, among them disease.

Everything in the mind of the first reasoners was referred to general causes. Did a man cut his foot? It was through the black magic of an enemy, perhaps putting glass in his footsteps behind him, that brought it about. It was not the thorn in front of him; that was the proximate cause, perhaps, but back of it lay the magic. Could the primitive mind be satisfied long to regard the image of a whole man properly representing an ulcer of the shin? The man was otherwise very well. If the ulcer does not get well we must turn to something more efficient. If the ulcer is to be treated you must capture the local power that resides in it. A local manifestation necessarily calling for a local cause does not appeal very strongly to the modern medical mind but it made still less of an appeal to the primitive mind until advancing differentiation had reached a certain point and then doubtless it was too often in the sequel that general systemic causes were neglected. We get such a hint again in the Malay Peninsula. One of the highly prized articles of female attire are large hair combs, somewhat such as our great grandmothers wore, if we are to believe the old prints. But these are valued not so much for their ornamental attractions as for their magic or talismanic powers. Some are formed in panels,

each one of which may represent some part of the body that may be affected.

In Egypt in early legends we find the same primitive thought. Isis makes a clay image of Ra out of mud, in her struggle to usurp his divine power (4), mixing it with her spittle which is a part of the magic of the upper Nile tribes today, but as early as 1500 B. C. we find recorded on a stele an offering to Ra of the figure of an ear (Fig. 1) in return for the success of the god in treating it. In setting up such figures, as in statues today, the very act of setting them up is an honor, testified before men, and doubtless this came to be also a motive in the desire to placate or in gratitude to the god, thus commemorating one of his many triumphs, and this must not be lost sight of in a study of the Greco-Roman votive offerings (Fig. 2). But in Egypt it was eye disease which, through all the ages of prehistoric and of historic times, has been preeminent in the annals of Egyptian medicine. The young god Horus in a battle with the old god Set lost an eye and the eye was thus symbolized in legend, without doubt because of the endemic trachoma. Prosper Albinus said hundreds of years ago that when a west wind blew, half of Egypt wept. How much of this is due to the blowing sand and how much to something else we will not stop to inquire. Suffice it to say that the eye of Horus entered into all the incantations and other magic rituals in Egypt whereby eyes were to be cured. The fame of the Egyptian eye doctors in the

remotest times spread to Babylon (5), but there as in Egypt the earliest images were those of devils who typified a general power over the system of man for good and for evil (6), at least until the rise of hepatoscopy when images of the liver begin to appear.

While, therefore, we have been able to trace in outline the evolution of thought inherent in the temple offerings back to the early ideas of primitive man and have found traces of them in the older civilizations we are for the most part thrown upon the archeological evidence of its much greater prevalence in Graeco-Roman temple practice. Evidently the underlying idea of demon possession, or at least its anthropological embodiment became, with the advent of Greek thought, much obscured. We find no trace of it in the Hippocratic Corpus, except in the bitter diatribe of the Sacred Disease and but for this we would not understand what Hippocrates in the more genuine treatise of *Ancient Medicine* has in mind in one or two of the sentences. In some of the manifestly spurious books, such as that on dreams, we get the superstitious side of Greek medicine, but it is astonishing how little we get in the books which for other reasons are regarded as genuine. We can, indeed, trace many ideas even of our own back to those of primitive man, but his ideas in no way obtrude themselves in the works of Hippocrates in such an evident manner as these temple images. These, for the most part, we owe to archeological research and the dreams in the temples are referred to chiefly by nonmedical writers, until Galen treated them seriously, but Hippocrates, before whose eyes on temple walls these images as well as the instruction of the inscriptions must have daily presented themselves, ignores them. They stood with him very much as they stand with us, relics of superstition or the aberrant vagaries of untrained and low grade minds. Before his day, however, the differentiations of organic pathology had begun in this crude way. To what a height that differentiation effloresced in the fertile Greek mind along with much else that is not wholly dross in the evolution of medical thought and which received so mighty an expansion from Greek genius, is to be seen in the better works of the Hippocratic Corpus.

In the temple of health at Palaikastro (7) in Crete there were ex voto figurines found, some perhaps offered to the divinity by patients with breast cancers and some representing paralysis. The ruin of Cretan civilization and the destruction of Knossos took place before the Trojan war and probably some two hundred years only after the date ascribed to this Egyptian offering (Fig. 1). In the time of Solon (600 B. C.), the Greek cities are said to have sent to Crete for the thaumaturge, Epimenides (8), who rendered great service in amending their laws and religious rites, and Thaletas, Cretan born, carried the music of his native land to Sparta, according to Plutarch, and put an end to a terrible epidemic among the Lacedaemonians (9). We know that temples and palaces flourished in the Cretan civilization nearly a thousand years before Solon, so the temple offering Erman reproduces as an indication of life in Egypt in 1500 B. C. had its counterpart in the land whence, according to its own legends, Greece drew upon the arts of medicine, music, and religion.

As was shown for the serpent of Æsculapius (10), we are justified from archeological records in surmising many of the characteristics of the Greek temples came from Egyptian and Babylonian sources, but if we think of such things springing from any one or more centres we must suppose Crete was one of them, closely affiliated with the others or possibly acting as a stepping stone across the intervening sea from the other continents of the eastern hemisphere to Europe. Paleology teaches us that the current of ideas and of race migration was perhaps not always in this direction, and we must get away from the thought that migration and the diffusion of civilization took place under the terms of these conceptions. It was a slow process. Its tide ebbed back and forth and for thousands of years we must think of an Ægean civilization as only a part of the culture which covered the basin of the Mediterranean. Perhaps never before the era in which we are living was there as much disparity as now exists among the nations dwelling around it. In this sense, then, serpent worship and temple offerings may be looked on as chthonic, springing out of the soil of Greece itself, rather than carried thither by any surge of population across the sea or around its land stretches.

Egypt owes its reputation for antiquity largely to its climate and its geography, not in the sense of its evolution of civilization so much perhaps as in the durability of conditions of sky and land and the unchanging temperaments of its dwellers which preserved the records for us. Beneath the ruins of Palaikastro in Crete lay buried the temple offerings and the image of the Snake Goddess almost as long as the record of this ear offering to Ammon-Re. Whatever such things may have been in the beginning, though they may once have been mere magic stuff for the wizards of primitive man, though they may have hung up in the temples of the gods or the palaces of kings to glorify the works of a god, we must look upon them since the Hippocratic era as in a degree affiliating themselves with the temple wall inscriptions as instructions to succeeding generations. With the rise and diffusion of the art of book making their importance declined gradually, but they were extinguished as characteristics of the temples of Æsculapius only when his cult disappeared before the advancing triumph of the religion of Christ in the cradle of civilization in the basin of the middle sea.

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