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THE CADUCEUS OF HERMES

Dear Friends:



In the United States, especially, the caduceus has become the generally accepted symbol of the medical fraternity. For some time, however, there has been some doubt as to the propriety of this insignia. Hermes (Latin, Mercury) was the messenger of the Olympian deities. His official position was that of Grand Herald, and the caduceus was his baton of authority. When Hermes traveled up and down the world, all beings, mortal or immortal, must respect this badge of his office. Various officials of both the Greek and Egyptian governments were supposed to be protected by their batons or scepters. Probably at the beginning the rods of office were believed to have magical powers, and the wrath of heaven descended upon anyone who injured a herald. A parallel among the North American Indians was the Peace Belt carried by the ambassadors of the great Iriquois League.

They could enter the most dangerous regions in perfect safety, even though the tribes inhabiting them might be considered enemies. A special Peace Belt was presented to William Penn as a bond of eternal friendship. These belts were decorated with wampum and bead work, and each had a special meaning of its own. The bishop's crosier proclaimed him to be a herald, or messenger of the Divine Will. In the Western church, the crosier was derived from a shepherd's crook, signifying that the prelate was the good shepherd of the Christian flock. In the Eastern church, a serpent was sometimes represented twisted about a gilded staff.

The earliest known representations of the wand of Hermes were rough sticks, either forked at one end, or split, somewhat resembling the branches held by dowsers searching for water. Such magic wands were believed to have peculiar spiritual virtues, and were carried by priests in the rituals of the Greek and Egyptian mysteries.

Before the establishment of the East Indian postal services, messages were carried by runners and the Chits, or letters, were inserted into the upper end of a forked stick. If a runner was carrying such a note visibly displayed he also enjoyed personal immunity from the dangers on his route. This may have special significance as it is now believed that the appearance of the caduceus was influenced by Oriental

customs.

In early Greek sculpturing the shape of the caduceus passed through several modifications. The branched end of the stick was decorated with leaves, and in time these branches were bent downward, and the leafy parts twisted around the central rod. No serpents were evident, but the entwined branches suggested a serpentine form. Wings were added because Hermes was usually represented with wings on his ankles and on the sides of his cap. Among all ancient peoples the wing was the symbol of motion, and the herald of the gods was expected to proceed with haste and faithfulness.

Among the Hindu esoteric cults there was, and still is, a curious diagram of the spinal column, around which coiled two serpents representing the sympathetic nervous system. The complete design pictures forth the ascent of the Kundalini upward through the spinal ganglia. It is significant that in Wagner's opera, Parsifal, the girl dressed in the skins of serpents should be called Kundry.

The Greek deity of healing, Asclepius, had the serpent as one of his most important emblems. When Rome was afflicted by a plague the Syballine Oracles ordered the cult of Asclepius to be established in the Imperial City. The god was brought to Rome in the form of a serpent, and a temple in his honor was erected on an island in the Tiber. Asclepius was born of a union of Zeus and the nymph, Caronis. He was educated in the medicinal arts by Chiron, the centaur. Asclepius had two daughters, Hygieia and Panacea, whose names have also descended to us as the basis of medical terms. In matters of healing this deity was so successful that few mortals died. This caused Hades, lord of the dead, to approach Zeus, stating that Asclepius was destroying the balance of Nature and interfering with the operation of Divine Law. Regretfully, therefore, Zeus destroyed his own son with a thunderbolt, and Asclepius came to be included among the deities of the underworld. As the serpent lived beneath the surface of the earth, it became an emissary of Asclepius. The same concept prevails among the Amerindian tribes of the American Southwest, where the snake brings messages from the gods beneath the earth.

The proper symbol of Asclepius in ancient art is a heavy, knotted staff or club, around which a serpent is entwined. Technically speaking it would seem that this should be the proper insignia of the medical profession. In art Asclepius is a tall and stately man in a long robe, and he may also carry a medicine bottle or other appropriate symbol of the healing art. He is of mature years with thick curly hair, and heavily bearded. Homer suggests that he was actually a mortal man who ministered to the wounded at the siege of Troy.

There is no indication that Hermes was a patron of medicine. He seems to personify the reasoning faculty of the human mind. He was patron of all forms of communication, oral or written. It has been said of him that he wrote all the books of the world under various names and at different times. Hermes has another peculiarity that appears to be worth noting. He was the patron of barter and exchange and was especially venerated by shopkeepers praying for profitable transactions. In addition to his rational powers Hermes (the human mind) engaged in strategy, sharpened the wits of mortals, and contributed to the advancement of stations and honors.

It would have been Asclepius, and not Hermes, who would have inspired the Hippocratic Oath. Even in the early days of Rome the physicians of this cult charged no fees and were subsidized by the State. In the fane of this deity in Rome were countless votary tablets attesting to the miraculous cures resulting from the intercession of Asclepius. Patients slept within the temple precinct, and the deity appeared to them

in dreams which were afterwards interpreted by the priests, who then gave the recommended remedies.

Hermes was recognized as the patron of alchemy, and the disciples of esoteric chemistry made many contributions to the pharmacopoeia which we use today. Actually, however, such discoveries were byproducts of the essential purpose of alchemy, which was the transformation of human society and the spiritual regeneration of the individual. To these scientific mystics the philosophical Mercury was the symbol of the power of the human mind to reconcile all opposites in nature and thus subdue the conflicts which divide the branches of knowledge and the religions of mankind. It is now generally recognized that the esoteric teachings of alchemy parallel very closely those of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Astrological symbolism is important as a key to the arts and sciences of antiquity. The planet, Mercury, was considered the ruler of Gemini and Virgo. In this arrangement Gemini signifies the mortal mind, and those arts and sciences which educated the person in the ways of physical existence. Virgo was associated with health problems, employment, and the conflicts between capital and labor. It was the sign of sickness and the causes thereof, including the psychological pressures over which Mercury also presided. In the religious mysteries, the house opposite to the one under consideration reveals the remedy, and in this case the means of restoring health. The twelfth house is the sign of the fishes (in a natural chart), and it is ruled over by Jupiter, but according to modern findings, Neptune shares rulership. Keywords for the twelfth house include hospitals, clinics, systems of psychotherapy, and places of worship. We must search here for the shrine of Asclepius, who is the personification of the healing power of his father, Zeus (Jupiter). Pisces, long associated with mysticism, has dominion over all types of therapy, including internal medicine and surgery, but also trances, visions, and mystical experiences, which directly or indirectly contribute to health. Neptune as co-ruler contributes metaphysical healing and the miracles of faith. Asclepius enthroned in the shrine in the sign of Pisces guides man's search for health today, as he did in the ancient sanctuary of Epidaurus.

The clinics of Hippocrates were patterned after those of Asclepius, and from them came hospitals as we know them today. With the fall of Greek or Roman culture, the great center of healing drifted to Baghdad and flourished under the wise leadership of the Caliph, el Rashid. All arts and sciences in Europe languished during the dark ages, and it may have been during this transitional period that the caduceus came to be accepted as the symbol of the physician. The hermetic arts as we know them today are said to have arisen in Egypt about the beginning of the Christian Era, and for a time, Hermes was regarded as the patron of all knowledge. Actually, however, medical colleges were established in Egypt not later than 3000 B.C. The history of Hindu medicine is of equal antiquity, and China traces the healing arts to the first emperor who flourished about 2500 B.C.. As Apuleius points out, the great secrets of eternal wisdom were communicated in subterranean chambers, and the hierophants of these rites were called serpents. It may be that the Asclepian staff is a subtle reference to the mysterious tree from which was suspended the Golden Fleece, guarded by a serpent or dragon. This Fleece is said to be an ancient book written on the skins of rams which contained the wisdom of the antediluvian world. Such speculations are intriguing and could be greatly expanded, but we have run out of space.

Always most sincerely,

Marly P. Hall

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