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The differences between the healing stories from Epidaurus and from the Gospels

Różnice między opisami uzdrowień z Epidauru i z Ewangelii

Abstract. In Epidaurus, the main ancient sanctuary of Asclepius, important inscriptions from the fourth century B.C. were found. Their texts were based primarily on earlier traditions on healings. They tend to exaggerate and to promote the sanctuary. Their main feature is incubation followed by vision and healing, usually in a dream. It is assumed that there are some similarities and some differences between the healing stories from Epidaurus and from the Gospels. However, the similarity consists only in generic features: they are both healing stories and can be labeled miracle stories (but “miracle” is a notion we have constructed). Similarities in details between single stories are secondary and only few. Some health problems in the stories, as blindness, are the same, but it is rather banal, because they were both frequent and difficult to treat. Laying on hands and touching in the Gospel stories are perhaps inspired by Greek worldview, but they do not occur in Epidaurus. Other features are different. The healings are named differently. Stories are built in a different manner. Epidaurus stories stem mostly from votive inscriptions and reliefs (adorned with fantasy), the Gospel stories stem from oral traditions. Epidaurus stories concentrate on the sick persons, the Gospel stories on the healer. Jesus in these stories appears as a powerful human being. Epidaurus healings result from a theophany or sometimes occur through sacred animals, serpents and dogs. Epidaurus stories are most often related to oracular dreams, what never occurs in Jesus stories. Visions from Epidaurus involve surgical operations and many medicaments, both absent in the Gospels. The Gospel miracles had no sacral context. Epidaurus stories were transmitted in the context of a particular sanctuary, the Gospel stories in the context of a community. These descriptions of healing miracles seem quite dissimilar.

Streszczenie. W Epidaurze, głównym antycznym sanktuarium Asklepiosa, znaleziono ważne inskrypcje z tekstami z IV wieku przed Chr. Oparte były one zasadniczo na tradycjach wcześniejszych na temat uzdrowień. Skłonne są do przesady i mają za cel promowanie sanktuarium. Typowym ich rysem jest inkubacja z wizją i uzdrowieniem,

zwykle już we śnie. Uważa się, że zachodzą podobieństwa i różnice między opisami uzdrowień z Epidauru i z Ewangelii. Podobieństwo polega jednak na cechach gatunkowych: są to w obu przypadkach opisy uzdrowień i można je nazwać opisami cudów (aczkolwiek „cud” to pojęcie ogólne przez nas skonstruowane). Podobieństwa szczegółowe między pojedynczymi opowiadaniem są drugorzędne i nieliczne. Pewne problemy zdrowotne w opisach, jak ślepotą, są te same, ale jest to okoliczność banalna, gdyż były one częste i trudne do wyleczenia. Nakładanie rąk i dotykanie w opisach ewangelicznych były być może inspirowane przez poglądy greckie, ale nie zachodzą w Epidaurze. Inne rysy są odmienne. Uzdrawienia są inaczej nazywane. Opowiadania mają inną budowę. Opisy z Epidauru pochodzą najczęściej z inskrypcji wotywnych i reliefów (uzupełnionych przez fantazję), opisy ewangeliczne z tradycji ustnej. Opisy z Epidauru skupiają się na chorych, opisy ewangeliczne na uzdrowicielu. Jezus w tych opisach jawi się jako nadzwyczajny człowiek, gdy uzdrawienia z Epidauru miały następować w wyniku teofanii a czasem przy pomocy sakralnych zwierząt, węży i psów. Opisy z Epidauru są najczęściej powiązane z wróżebnymi snami, co nigdy się nie zdarza przy cudach Jezusa. Wizje w Epidauru dotyczą często operacji i leków, nieobecnych w Ewangeliach. Cuda z Ewangelii nie miały kontekstu sakralnego. Opisy z Epidauru były przekazywane w kontekście konkretnego sanktuarium, a opisy z Ewangelii w kontekście wspólnoty. Te opisy cudownych uzdrowień wydają się więc całkiem niepodobne.

Keywords: Epidaurus; miracles of Jesus; healings; Bible and Hellenism; New Testament background; Gospels.

Słowa kluczowe: Epidaur; cuda Jezusa; uzdrowienia; Biblia i hellenizm; tło Nowego Testamentu; Ewangelie.

This article is an effect of my book on Epidaurus and related Greek inscriptions I have recently prepared in Polish.¹ This book covers many aspects of these important texts. In this article I shall pursue this research under the angle of the relation between the Gospel miracle tradition and the Epidaurus inscriptions.

Epidaurus was the most famous sanctuary of Asclepius, the main Greek healing god. Four extant long inscriptions found more than hundred years ago, two of them well preserved, contain seventy texts with descriptions of healings, in Greek *iamata*, and of other miraculous events.² They were made in the fourth

¹ M. Wojciechowski, *Inskrypcje*, With a bibliography, which is published also in the web (pages: academia.edu, ResearchGate).

² Earlier editions are IG IV 1 (two subsequent editions), easily accessible through <http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/>. R. Herzog, *Wunderheilungen*: with German translation and rich commentary. The best one: L.R. LiDonnici, *Epidaurian*, 1995, with an

century B.C. and refer to things that would have happened to the pilgrims coming to this sanctuary from all Greece.

It is the only such collection found in the Greek world. We have some descriptions of extraordinary healings from other sources, but they are less numerous.³ A major group of inscriptions was found in Lebena on Crete, with about twenty events. These other inscriptions are later and less interested in the miraculous side of the healings.

The inscriptions from Epidaurus are partly damaged and in some texts only a couple of words can be identified. The editors were guilty of adding too much to them. The texts are written in the Doric dialect and seem to be an edited version of many earlier sources. Accordingly, the events they describe are quite diverse.

1. The features of the Epidaurus texts

a) *Contents.* In most texts the central motive is incubation, sleeping in a sanctuary in order to obtain an oracle in dream. The oracles from Epidaurus most often concerned healings. It seems that Epidaurus was basically an oracle sanctuary, as Delphi, but specialized in advice concerning diseases.

However, some texts describe strange events happening in the day, sometimes outside Epidaurus. Apart from the main god, Asclepius, other persons also appear in these dreams. The name of Asclepius repeats on the stele B, but elsewhere is usually omitted, he is called just god, *theos*. The healings happen in a dream, after awakening, or later. Most of the healed had believed in their future healing, but some had doubted; the same is true for witnesses. There is a liking for shocking details. Rituals before and after incubation are mentioned. Gifts to the sanctuary are often recommended.

Quite often in a dream, or later, a medical treatment is applied. Most surgical operations concern stomach or eyes. There are various drugs (for eyes, texts 4 and 9; for hair, text 19; against ulceration, text 17; for wounds, texts 40 and 53?). Asclepius was believed to invent many drugs.⁴ These data reflect most often the ancient medical knowledge, but transmitted to the sphere

English translations I quote and a rich commentary. Epigraphic notes: cf. works of Peek. With French translation and a medical commentary: C. Prêtre, P. Charlier, *Maladies*. A summary of research: H. Solin, *Inschriftliche*.

³ To be found e.g. in: E.J. and L. Edelstein, *Asclepius*, vol. 1; C. Prêtre, P. Charlier, *Maladies*; M. Girone, *Guarigioni*; M. Guarducci, *Epigrafi*.

⁴ D. Goltz, *Die Rolle*.

of dream and fantasy. In the context of divine miracles, the function of medical treatment seems decorative. Medical interventions appear to be vehicles or external signs of miraculous healings. It is also the case of some miracles of Jesus (the use of saliva: Mark 7.31–37; 8.22–26; John 9.1–7).

b) Form. The first words of Epidaurus texts mention the name of a sick person and his or her illness, but there are some exceptions (the names of children are absent). A narrative introduction can appear. There is a standard terminology, with *afiketo* (came), *enkatheudo* or *enkatakoimaomai* (sleep), *opsin* (vision) or *enyprnion* (dream); *edokei hoi ho theos*; *hameras de genomenas hygies exelthe*; *ek toutou hygies egeneto*. Series of infinitives occur, *optativus obliquus* is relatively frequent.⁵

Most often we read that Asclepius healed a sick person in his or her sleep. Some of the elements listed above can be missing, and some others can be added. The healing can be completed after a snake or a dog has licked the wound. The healing can result from actions recommended in a dream. The dreams were sometimes completed by further events. The sick person could be represented by a relative. Asclepius could intervene outside the sanctuary. Some miraculous events consisted in finding something and not in a healing.

c) What was the origin of the Epidaurus texts?⁶ And their evolution? The first text of the first stele quotes an earlier votive tablet. It happens only once, but probably the main source for the inscriptions were such short tablets, *pinakes*, collected in the sanctuary. An oral transmission was also possible, but we have no confirmation for it. The analogy with the Gospel tradition is not a proof and can be risky. Some Epidaurus traditions could have been pure inventions, created in order to raise the importance of the sanctuary. As the healings were often represented in art on reliefs, some texts could have been interpretations of pictorial presentations.

The history of these traditions seems hardly possible to reconstruct. Between the initial sources and the final redaction of inscriptions we may postulate a priestly tradition in the sanctuary. Some traditions could have been grouped earlier (e.g. stele A, texts 1–10; 11–17; 18–20).

Some earlier traditions were repeated without many changes. It explains why some texts are much shorter and rather terse. Some traditions stemmed directly from the healed persons, others were transmitted through the witnesses. Figures on reliefs were interpreted, quite often too literally or with exag-

⁵ J. Méndez Dosuna, *Loptatif*.

⁶ Cf. L.R. LiDonnici, *Epidaurian*, pp. 50–75; cf. M.P.J. Dillon, *Didactic*.

generation. A symbolic sculpted representation of the divine help could be easily understood as a personal appearance and miraculous intervention. It would explain some flagrant exaggerations in the texts. For example, a tablet with eyes could be understood as a memorial of restoring of sight, whereas it meant originally something less.

Which elements can be explained as the results of the editorial activity of Epidaurus priests – apart from unification of style, putting texts in order and so on? They could insist on collecting miracles occurring to the pilgrims from as many places in Greece as possible. The healed persons were of different sex, age and social status. Final exhortations concerning gifts for the sanctuary and occasional mentions of the divine punishment on unbelievers stem apparently from the priestly circles. The portrait of Asclepius emerging from the stories probably reflects a theology from Epidaurus, portraying him as a friendly and powerful saviour.

The longer stories contain element of fantastic exaggeration, making some miracles funny. As it has been mentioned, text 1 quotes the original votive tablet. It says that “Kleo bore a burden in her stomach for five years, until she slept here, and he made her well”. However, the inscription begins “Kleo bore [= was pregnant] for five years”. The new born son supposedly washed himself and walked around.

For the text 15, about Hermodikos of Lampsacus, we can confront it with his own inscription.⁷ It seems that the sick with ulcers and weakened hands was healed after some time and put the stele as a memorial of this event, but it was interpreted as if he had been paralyzed and immediately after the healing brought a giant stone to the sanctuary. It suggests that many events were similarly distorted.

However, if no healings took place in the sanctuary, it could not reach such popularity. It seems that some healings took place indeed: through spontaneous improvement, with the help of medicine, for psychological reasons. They were certainly inspired by the religious feelings, as for the ancient mentality natural and miraculous were not strictly opposed. Healing divinities to some extent symbolized the natural healing forces. Dreaming about Asclepius and healing was possible in his sanctuary.

Some healings are described cautiously. Texts 5, 12, 14, 16, 44 (cf. 26) present situations that are medically possible and do not attribute any role to dreams. Further texts involve dreams but the diseases are curable (3, 8, 15, 17,

⁷ IG² IV 1, no. 125. E.J. and L. Edelstein, *Asclepius*, 1, text 431; C. Prêtre, P. Charlier, *Maladies*, 116–119; M. Girone, *Guarigioni*, 53–57.

19, 23, 28, 30, 31, 34, 39, 41, 42, 64, 66, cf. 24, 46, 63). Most of the diseases were long-lasting and made lame, but not really dangerous.

The Epidaurus inscriptions as a whole seem an amplification and embellishment of earlier traditions. It does not imply that the author(s) of the inscriptions wanted to mislead the pilgrims, talking to them about fake miracles. As religious people they believed that an improvement of health could be caused by Asclepius. They wanted to move the imagination of the pilgrims, give them an interesting lecture, and raise hope in them. The inscriptions were a piece of didactic literature.

In Greek religion of this period there was no disciplined theology and the writings about gods were full of mythological fantasy. The readers accepted such approach and usually did not expect the inscriptions were strictly factual. They can be compared to the later lives of the saints – and indeed such lives were often inspired by similar Greek traditions, included incubation healings etc.⁸

2. The Gospel miracles compared with the Epidaurus texts

Comparing the Gospels and Epidaurus inscriptions is not a popular subject. Even in the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which sometimes looked for the Hellenistic inspirations for the miracles of Jesus,⁹ it was hardly noted.¹⁰ The atheistic literature mentions their supposed similarity, but only occasionally. Comparing Jesus with Asclepius had happened in antiquity, but was only sporadically recalled more recently. In the rich literature on the miracles of Jesus, some Epidaurus texts are quoted for comparison, but without far-going conclusions.¹¹ The research on Epidaurus rarely refers to the Gospels, and mainly in relation to the mechanisms of transmission of traditions concerning miracles.

Some scholars just avoid entering other field and taking an interdisciplinary approach. However, the main reason for abstaining from such comparisons seems quite simple and objective. The texts from Epidaurus and from the Gos-

⁸ E.g. A.J. Festugière, *Types*; T. Pratsch, ...*erwachte*; lot of material collected by R. Herzog, *Wunderheilungen*.

⁹ E.g. O. Weinreich, *Antike*.

¹⁰ An older summary of the research, C. Clemen, *Religionsgeschichtliche Erklärung*, skips the subject of healing miracles.

¹¹ Cf. M.E. Boring, K. Berger, C. Colpe, *Hellenistic*: six times.

pels are rather dissimilar.¹² Both can be classified as ancient miracle stories and put together in an anthology.¹³ However, the notion of a miracle, an extraordinary event with religious causes and contents, is our creation. It is wider than the ancient notions. The features of both groups of texts are quite different. An influence of Epidaurus on the Gospels is not possible to trace.

Nevertheless, comparing them is useful. From the historical point of view they are the biggest ancient collections of texts about the miraculous healings. Other comparable traditions are dispersed. If both collections, belonging to the same wide genre, differ in many respects, it is worth showing.

In spite of the generic analogy, the detailed properties of both groups of texts are different. Let us start with terminology. In the Asclepius tradition healings are called *iamata*, the term absent in the Gospels.¹⁴ They use *dynamis*, sometimes *ergon* and *semeion*; other biblical texts also *terata*. Other names imply different interpretations. The vocabularies of both collections are unrelated, there are no common words occurring more often.

The forms of stories are different. Sometimes they were classified together as healing stories,¹⁵ but it results from the similarity of contents, not form. Both in Epidaurus and in the Gospels we have to do with fixed small literary forms, but they are rather different. In the Gospels, the typical order is as follows: coming or bringing of an anonymous sick person; the disease; asking Jesus; act of healing through word and sometimes gesture; quick effect; interdiction to talk about the miracle.

In Epidaurus the basic scheme is different. It contains the name and origin of the sick; the disease, a dream in the sanctuary; a vision with a treatment; a drug (sometimes a theophany in the day or meeting with a sacred animal); the healing discovered in the morning; gifts for the sanctuary. In Epidaurus, the secrecy and the repeating of the news are not mentioned. In the Gospels Jesus never asks for a fee. The name of the disease, the fact of healing and the presence of a healer are common points, but they are necessary in any story referring to any healing, miraculous or not. The analysis of the literary form can be pushed further with the same results.¹⁶

The Epidaurus texts adopt the point of view of the sick, from his coming to his healing. They reflect his or her impressions. In the Gospels the healer was

¹² Short list of differences: J.M. Van Cangh, *Santé*; literary features M. Wolter, *Inscriptfliche*.

¹³ W. Cotter, *Miracles* (Epidaurus), pp. 17–22).

¹⁴ New Testament: 1 Cor 12.9,28,30 in relation to the *charismata*.

¹⁵ K. Berger, *Hellenistische*, p. 1216.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Wolter, *Inscriptfliche*.

in the centre, in his life sick persons regularly appeared, and they were healed by his power. The Gospel stories reflect the witnesses' perception of such events.

The context of events is different. The Gospel miracles were related to the whole life of Jesus and happened in many, mostly unnamed, places. Healing in Sabbath day implies rejecting sacral precepts. The Gospel miracles are done by man Jesus, living among humans, whose divinity was recognized later. The Epidaurus texts refer to the divine, not earthly Asclepius. The common point is that both fulfill the function of a powerful, divine healer.

In the Epidaurus sanctuary, cult, and oracles are necessary background of healings. The incubation is the central and decisive feature of the Epidaurus texts, whereas the Gospels ignore it completely. No Gospel miracle has happened in the night. Most Epidaurus healings were performed through a divine theophany in a sleep, only sometimes during the day. The sanctuary is the typical place of healing. It is not certain whether Jesus made any miracle in the temple,¹⁷ and only some of them in synagogues.

Asclepius acts sometimes through sacred animals, snakes and dogs, both evil and impure in the biblical tradition. He has human assistants (texts 23, 25, 28). The miracles stories other than healings (mainly findings) have no correspondents in the Gospels. Jesus has never punished a sick for the lack of faith, and only disputed with enemies. In Epidaurus punitive measures occur quite often (texts 4, 9, 11, 18, 20, 22, 32, 40, 55, 65, 69, 74).

The histories of transmission of these texts are different. In the Gospels they originated from the oral tradition in Christian communities making appeal to the witnesses. The healing stories, which were included into the biographies of Jesus, are rather short, without many editorial embellishments (with the exception of narration from Mark 5.1–20). They are near to the witnesses' accounts.

In Epidaurus votive tablets and reliefs were a typical starting point, perhaps supplemented by oral sources. Nearly all stories originated from one sanctuary and its tradition. The stories were often heavily edited from the priestly point of view and fancy developments or interpretations were added. The Gospels, even if they tell about the events impossible in nature, show much more moderation.

¹⁷ Matt 21.14 says: „The blind and lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them”. This sentence contains no details and belongs to the *summarium* genre. If it is not a legendary tradition, it possibly refers to the healings near the temple or on the court of Gentiles, outside the sanctuary itself. The access of handicapped people into the temple was certainly limited, although we do not know the details (cf. Lev 21.16–23 on priests; 2 Sam 5.8; Acts 3.2,8; Deut 23.2; 11QTemple 45.12–14).

The Epidaurus texts usually made appeal to medical knowledge and medical procedures, even if they are not correctly presented. Asclepius acted through chirurgical interventions and drug applications. It seems that medical procedures were transformed into dreams (even more in Lebena inscriptions). In the Gospels Jesus does not perform medical procedures. He heals through word and sometimes through a symbolic gesture (touching or laying hands on); the use of paramedical saliva is an exception (Mark 7.33; 8.23; John 9.6).

Only some diseases from both collections are the same. In particular, we encounter some cases of blindness. The reasons are probably two: it occurred more often than now, and the healings were perceived as sensational. The story of a blind from birth from John 9 offers the closest parallel to the Epidaurus texts.¹⁸

Paralysis also occurs several times, but the terms used in both collections are different and an exact diagnosis seems impossible. There are single cases of dropsy, epilepsy and deafness. Other diseases are different: in Epidaurus there was no leprosy, fever, bleeding, hump, and first of all no mental disorders or “possessions”. In the Gospels there are no parasites, lameness, wounds, stones, ulcers and tumours.

Similarities in details between single stories are secondary and only few. Text 3 contains the word *apistos* as John 20.27. Text 18 and Mark 8.24 tell about the healed blinds, who see trees. A hidden treasure appears in text 46 and in Matt 13.44. Outside the Gospels, text 21 contains the popular motif of double vision, as Acts 9.10–16; 10.1–11.8.¹⁹

Some general analogies can be traced between Jesus and Asclepius, both being healers friendly to mankind. This functional analogy,²⁰ as other analogies between Jesus and ancient personalities (Socrates, Heracles), results probably from two factors. The ancient world perceived salvation as a healing, physical or spiritual. Next, in the New Testament we encounter a half-conscious use of ready models taken from the Greek world – among them a model of a divine hero.²¹

Some hidden references to Asclepius in the Fourth Gospel were proposed: the name of *Soter*; mentions of water sources (John 4–5; cf. J 13.20), which

¹⁸ M. Adinolfi, *Il cieco*.

¹⁹ Cf. A. Wikenhauser, *Doppelträume*.

²⁰ Cf. J.L. Wolmarans, *Asclepius*. Early Christian views in Edelstein, *Asclepius*, 2, 132–138.

²¹ I have written more about it in my book in Polish on the Greek influences in the Bible: Wojciechowski, *Wpływy greckie*, pp. 211–225.

were present in Asclepius' sanctuaries; Jesus as snake (John 3.14).²² More can be said about the healing on the pool in John 5.1–18. In this story, there are some analogies with the language of healing in the Greek world (v. 6: *hygies genesthai*, as in the Epidaurus texts). Sick persons crowded in expectation of healing, as in Greek sanctuaries. Even if this place was not a pagan sanctuary yet (as it became after the fall of Jerusalem), the attitudes of these people were far from the Jewish orthodoxy and religiously syncretic.²³

If we look for the Hellenistic elements in the miracles stories in the Gospels, we may hint at the healing gestures: touching and laying on hands. They were factors of healing in some Greek beliefs²⁴ – but not in Epidaurus. The saving hand of Asclepius was believed to heal Theopompos the Athenian (*par-esteke de ho theos kai oregei hoi ten paionion cheira*).²⁵ Many reliefs present such divine touch. Some divine names are associated with hand, *cheir* (Chiron, Asclepius' teacher). A later inscription from Epidaurus, written by Apellas, mentions touching in dream.²⁶

In spite of the similar subject, the miracle texts from Epidaurus and from the Gospels are not similar as stories. It results from the fact that the Gospel tradition stems from the biblical world, even if confronted with the Hellenistic expectations. The Epidaurus inscriptions remain in the circle of ancient Greek oracle shrines. In the Bible, God enters the world with all his power, in Greece divinities communicate the fate through oracles. They reveal either through the natural forces, or through visions, omens and dreams.

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²² Rengstorf. Association of snake with Satan can explain Rev 2.13 as an allusion to the Asclepius sanctuary in Pergamon.

²³ A. Duprez, *Jésus*; S.M. Bryan, *Power*.

²⁴ O. Weinreich, *Antike*, pp. 1–62.

²⁵ *Suda* lexicon, quoting Aelianus.

²⁶ IG IV² 1, 126; E.J. and L. Edelstein, 1, text 432.

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