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Sexual Healing: Gender, Sexuality, and the Balance of the Masculine and Feminine Creative Principles in the Healing Cult of Asclepius

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Oral Presentation O7.1

**SEXUAL HEALING: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE BALANCE OF THE
MASCULINE AND FEMININE CREATIVE PRINCIPLES IN THE
HEALING CULT OF ASCLEPIUS**

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The healing cult of Asclepius at Epidaurus flourished in the 4th Century BCE as droves of men and women made the pilgrimage to slumber in his temple, hoping to receive healing from the god in a dream. This study analyzes gender roles and sexuality within the cult of Asclepius through the analysis of inscriptions, medical texts, poetry, mythology, and art. I will argue that the ancient Greek understanding of gender identity and sexuality was so omnipresent that it permeated everything from the concepts of illness and health themselves, to the appearance of the deities, and even the way healing was administered and received within the sacred precinct. Also, I contend that Hygeia and Asclepius, representing health through harmony with nature and medical intervention respectively, were created and function in healing cults as an interdependent, inextricably linked sexual binary: health, equated with femininity and nature, and medicine, culturally constructed and masculine. Ultimately, I conclude that the balance and adequate influence of both the masculine and the feminine creative principles, embodied by the divinities of healing and represented by all actors and objects associated with them, must be present for healing to occur.