

Christian Transformation of Pagan Cult Places: the Case of Aegae, Cilicia

Ildikó Csepregi*

The history of incubation, sleeping in a sanctuary to obtain healing, offers various models for dealing with the memory of the ritual attached to a cult place.¹ In this paper I aim to highlight one of the methods of gradual transformation: how the emerging Christian Church coped with the popularity of incubation practice, especially at famous cult sites. Temple sleep is all the more exemplary in this regard, because the whole process of Christian continuity or Christian destruction of the practice had to take into account several elements: the cult site itself, the healer-figure, the very ritual of sleeping in the sanctuary, the dream as medium, as well as the oral and written traditions that carried the memory of the successful miraculous cures. Temple sleep was not only deeply rooted and popular but it answered an elemental human demand: namely healing. These factors made it impossible for the early Christian Church to simply ban it as a pagan practice. The Christianisation of incubation had its attempts at demolishing the cult sites, banning ritual sleep, or reusing the buildings, and competing with the cult predecessors, but the most successful process was by conquering this pagan ritual through a new Christian narrative. The Church created her own Christian doctor saints who cured sick worshippers in dream visitations.² Not only the incubation ritual became attached to these saints, but some important incubation places also entered into the hagiography of the Christian dream healers. Destruction and continuity are both part and parcel of this process of creating new narratives, by taking over what a cult place could offer – its fame for thaumaturgic powers – and annulling the pagan healer by promoting new, Christian, miracle workers instead, often with similar attributes, in order to fulfil a similar function. The town of Aegae in Asia Minor will be my case study in this present enquiry.

The essence of incubation practice was that the sick persons or those who wished to receive an oracle went to the sacred place of the divinity with the explicit goal of sleeping there and experiencing in a dream the epiphany of the god. There

were several healing deities, heroes, and locally worshipped healing cults³ (many of which claimed widespread fame, such as Amphiaraos in Oropos, Trophonios in Lebadea), yet healing incubation was primarily within the cult of Asclepius⁴ (and later of Isis and Serapis).

The rising Christian Church had to tackle quite a number of challenges regarding incubation. One was the popularity of Asclepius, who was by no means one of the fading deities of Greek mythology but an active and functioning god, whose relationship to his worshippers was one of a personal deity.⁵ The forms of invocation or epithets of Greek deities always emphasise the nature of the god. Asclepius (whose name might contain the word *epios*, gentle) was called Σωτήρ, the Saviour, φιλόανθρωπος or φιλόλαος, the lover of people, at Epidaurus he was known as Συγγνώμων, the Considerate, and in Hellenistic times he was also called also Asklepios Παῖς, both for his regard to children in his healings as well as an expression of the worshippers' tenderness towards his figure.⁶ His mythology (being born to a god and a mortal woman, being killed by Zeus and resurrected as a god), his immense popularity attested by hundreds of sanctuaries well beyond the frontiers of the Greek speaking world, and mostly his attributes of Soter-Healer-Deliverer rendered him a powerful opponent of Christ.⁷

Similarly, cults like those of Isis or Serapis, deities who also functioned as healers and integrated incubation, were a constant challenge to ecclesiastical authorities. When falling ill, the patients continued to turn to celebrated shrines, to the healer who was regarded as the most effective. A further peculiar feature of incubation, both pagan and Christian, was that the ritual was linked to the place itself, rather than to the healing figures. The importance was in

³ Jayne 1925 and Farnell 1921.

⁴ For the testimonies on Asclepius cf. Edelstein and Edelstein 1998 (T in what follows refers to the testimonia in this volume); Girone 1998; on his temples: Melfi 2007.

⁵ Festugière 1960.

⁶ From the 2-3rd century AD we have records of a statue by a certain Boethos (2nd c. BC) representing Asclepius as a new-born infant: T 599 (=IG XIV 967a) mentions 'the divine child, [...] who has just been borne by his mother'; cf. T 600. For the artistic borrowings for Christ's figure from Asclepius cf. Dinkler 1980. For the significance of the statues of Asclepius to Christians cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*. VIII, 18 and the Passio IV SS Coronatum in *Acta Sanctorum* November 3; the interconnectedness of the representation of Asclepius and Christ is well illustrated also by Mathews, 1993, 69-72, with images of Jesus healing in figures 35-45.

⁷ First Harnack 1892, 89ff and more recently Rüttimann, 1986, Krug, 1985, 120-187; Justinus, *Apologia*, 22, 6 (T 94), 21, 1-2 (T 335), 54, 10 (T 332); Justinus, *Dialogus*, 69, 3 (T 95), *Acta Pilati*, A. 1, 216 = T 334; T 584, T 818, Lactantius *Divinae Institutiones* IV, 27, 12 (T 333), Clemens of Alexandria, *Stromateis* V, 1, 13 (T 336); Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes*, I. 49 (T 584); Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Vita Constantini* III, 56 (T 818); Eusebius Hieronymus, *Vita Hilarionis* 2 (T 818a).

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¹ The most useful literature on Greek incubation is still Deubner 1900, Hamilton 1906 and Meier 1989.

² The most important ones are Sts Cosmas and Damian (the Greek edition of the miracles: Deubner, 1907); St Thecla (Dagron, 1987); Sts Cyrus and John (Fernandez Marcos, 1975). French translation of the miracles of Thecla, Cosmas and Damian and excerpts from Cyrus and John: Festugière 1971 and Cyrus and John: Gascou 2006; for the present study I leave aside other incubation cults as those of Artemios and Febronia, St Therapon, St Demetrios, St Dometius, or Isaiah, Michael, or St Menas.



Map: Roman provinces of Asia minor in the 2nd century AD; Source: Hartwin Brandt/Frank Kolb, *Lycia et Pamphylia. Eine römische Provinz im Südwesten Kleinasiens. Orbis Provinciarum*, Mainz 2005.

being there, in the temple or within the church, and when it was impossible, the patient had to send a proxy who went there and slept on his behalf, instead of invoking the healer. It is precisely because of the site's importance that the previous cult place, the temple buildings, and the memory attached to the place deeply influenced the Christianisation of this ritual.

In 435 AD, Emperor Theodosius II issued the edict that determined the fate of incubation temples—as well as of other pagan cult sites. It ordered the destruction of those pagan temples and cult buildings which were still partly standing or even intact: ‘cunctaque eorum fana templa delubra, si qua etiam nunc restant integra, praecepto magistratum destrui conlocationeque venerandae Christianae religionis signi expiari praecipimus.’⁸ Although the actual impact of this order is dubious, the edict itself employed the significant phrasing, *praecepto magistratum*, that is, leaving the fate of the edifices to the discretion of the executing magistrates. Other considerations were probably added to this condition, depending on the geographical, topographical locations of the buildings, on their material value or their state of preservation as well as factors such as the way the cult site was used or the presence of cult statues. Thus, the fate of the cult buildings could be varied: on the rarest occasions the buildings, left in their original state, came to be used as Christian places of worship.⁹ However, the complete and systematic destruction of temples was similarly exceptional (such as the Asclepeia in Corinth (397) and Pergamon (324/5), or the infamous

plundering of the Alexandrian Serapeion in 391 AD).¹⁰ More often, temples that had already ceased to be used as cult places and begun to fall into ruin were transformed into Christian cult sites. This could happen long after they had been abandoned.¹¹ Even in such cases, the Christian buildings were generally erected only partly above or near the former cult places and not directly above them, often using the building material of the previous sanctuary. An exception from the realm of incubation buildings is the Christian basilica of Dor, some thirty kilometres south of Haifa, established in the middle of the 4th century AD and rebuilt over the same plan during the 5th century.¹² The excavation identified a Christian incubation hall in the western part of the church related to a cult of two “unnamed” saints. It also revealed that the church had been deliberately erected precisely over a Greek temple, which itself fell victim to a fire. The excavator of the site, Claudine Dauphin, seems to indicate that this fire was the result of Christians’ destruction of the temple, similar to the looting of pagan temples in Byzantine Palestine, such as that of the the Marneion in Gaza in 402 AD described by Mark the Deacon.¹³ She also offers an attractive hypothesis about cultic and ritual continuity, which is, however, difficult to prove. She suggests Asclepius as the missing link between the two phases of the cult complex for which we have

⁸ Codex Theodosianus, XVI. 10. 25.

⁹ For examples from Greece for all the variants see Speiser 1976.

¹⁰ Speiser suggests that Christians were particularly hostile to *soter* deities like Asclepius, Serapis and Isis exactly because of the importance of the cult. See also De Waele 1933.

¹¹ Cf. the Asclepius temple in the Tiber Island in Rome: Brandenburg 2007.

¹² Dauphin 1999, for recent publication see the homepage of the ongoing excavation <http://dor.huji.ac.il/>.

¹³ Dauphin 1999, 406.

solid archaeological evidence: the cult of Apollo from the Classical and Hellenistic periods and Christian incubation practice within the cult of the two saints whose names we cannot learn from the remains. According to Dauphin, the mid- or late 3rd century BC was the time when Asclepius could have replaced Apollo in Dor, possibly together with the introduction of incubation and with the addition of an incubation hall to the temple complex.¹⁴ She concludes that “One trait particular to the Byzantine ecclesiastical complex at Dor was intimately connected with sickness and the recovery of health. This was the practice of incubation, adopted by Christianity from the rites of divine healing as practised in the temples of Asclepius. The Graeco-Roman God of Medicine thus provides the missing link at Dor between the cult of his father Apollo and that of his own rival and successor, Christ.”¹⁵

There are two other examples of Christian use of pagan cult places worth mentioning, since in all likelihood they attest the continuity of healing cults and perhaps in both cases the continuity of healing incubation. One case is that of the Asclepeion near Athens in Piraeus, the site that most probably served as the setting for the incubation scene described in Aristophanes’ *Plutus*, the first written description of the ritual that survives.¹⁶ Here a church dedicated to Cosmas and Damian was erected over the Greek sanctuary. The other, more famous one, is the fate of the Athenian Asclepeion on the Acropolis, which from the beginning had an exceptional status among the cult places of Athens.¹⁷ Christian architects in Athens seem to have deliberately avoided the city centre and especially the sites of previous temples for their building projects. With the Christian takeover of the city, a Byzantine church, first probably dedicated to Saint Andrew, was erected on the site of the Asclepeion in the 5th century AD.¹⁸ The Christian construction incorporated the entire temple precinct of the Asclepeion, with its incubation hall, along with the sacred spring. St. Andrew himself was regarded by the Late Antique Greek Christians as a patron of healing.¹⁹ Although opinions concerning the fate of the Asclepeion differ, scholars agree that the Christian practice replaced the ancient cult, more or less, over a single generation. T.E. Gregory has suggested that both the healing aspect as well

as the incubation practice survived without interruption.²⁰ Between the 6th and 7th centuries, a large basilica of the *Hagioi Anargyroi*, the physician saints who heal free of charge – in this case probably Sts Cosmas and Damian – was erected over the site of the former Asclepeion, replacing the smaller church.

As the above examples illustrate, the Church, when establishing the cult of physician saints, had to counter not only the previous pagan healing figures but the sacred site itself (which could be not only a prominent cult building but also a dramatic natural phenomenon like a cave, a rock or a spring). To the sacred place several cult associations were attached, not just in the form of cult memory, with miraculous cures embedded in the oral tradition around the sanctuary but recording the cure was a ritual obligation and incubation temples stored these records, either or both in the forms of inscriptions and votive objects.

Often we are not dealing with a direct continuation of cult practice. Instead, the transformation of the existing pagan practice into a Christian one may have taken place over the long term, and often meant the Christianisation of the cult site, the ritual (incubation), the function (healing), the medium (dream) and, perhaps quite surprisingly, even the way the incubation miracles were recorded.

During this long journey of establishing Christian incubation, or, more precisely, letting it gradually develop and take shape, there were various attempts to mitigate the pagan heritage and to handle existing cult memories. Destroying the temples was perhaps the less frequent method, and, in certain respect, the less successful one. While destruction and cultic continuity were previously favoured topics in Late Antique studies, more recent scholarship, both in hagiography and archaeology, have given expression to more nuanced views, pointing out the gradual transformation of cult sites and the alternative modes of Christianizing cult practices.²¹

The beginnings of Christian incubation cults: the case of St Thecla

The earliest written collection of Christian incubation miracles is that of St Thecla from the 5th century AD that survived in Byzantine codices under the name of Basil of Seleucia, although he is certainly not the author.²² It records Thecla’s incubation miracles performed in Cilicia, in a town called Seleucia and in nearby Aegae. In Seleucia Thecla took over the cult of a previous pagan incubation healer, Sarpedonios. Because of the short time span between the

¹⁴ Dauphin, 418, 424.

¹⁵ Dauphin, 417.

¹⁶ Aristophanes, *Plutus* 633-747, cf. Melfi 318-319.

¹⁷ Frantz 1965.

¹⁸ The dating for the building of the Christian basilica varies greatly: from the second half of the 5th century, mid-5th century, before the end of 5th century and after 529, see Melfi 405.

¹⁹ Gregory 1986. Gregory claimed that Christians destroyed the temple, while A. Frantz saw a gradual process in the demise of the Asclepeion: ‘More probably, the Temple of Asklepios, under pressure of the imperial edicts, was deconsecrated, but not yet destroyed, shortly before Proclus’ death in 485, and its destruction, whether at the hands of the Christians, by earthquake[yet this is refuted by Frantz herself], or from natural decay, occurred toward the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth, to be followed after the closing of the schools in 529 by the construction of the church in the midst of the temple’s ruins’, Frantz 1965, 195.

²⁰ Gregory’s conclusion is convincing: ‘Chronological considerations allow us to be certain that the pagan associations of the place were still alive when the church was built and the architectural and epigraphic evidence suggests that healing was still carried out in the same place.’ Gregory 1986, 239.

²¹ Two examples with relevance to incubation are found in Brandenburg 2007 and Grossmann 2007.

²² For the Greek edition and modern translation of the text with excellent commentary see Dagron 1987. MT in what follows refers to *Miracula Theclae*.

cults, it is very likely that the memory of the pagan healer was still alive in the minds and stories of the local people, just as it was plausible that many of the inhabitants were still pagan as well.²³ Following his conversion, one of these became Thecla's anonymous 5th century hagiographer.²⁴ Our hagiographer was a man of Greek learning, and appears to have known of the miraculous cures attributed to Asclepius. He mentions Epidaurus, Pergamon and Aegae – of the latter he probably had close knowledge, both because of the vicinity to Seleucia where he was writing and most likely from the stories still in circulation about Asclepius' abilities.

At this point it is important to examine just how Thecla obtained her incubation cult and her martyr shrine in Seleucia. In the earlier version of her legend, the *Acta Pauli et Theclae*²⁵ from the 2nd century, there is no mention of her martyrdom (or any association with healing, for that matter). Instead, she is described to have died a peaceful death and been buried in Seleucia. When the *Acta Thecla* became independent from the *Acta Pauli*, it conformed to an important hagiographic demand: the importance of being a martyr. Additionally, the *Acta Thecla* successfully incorporated the heritage of the place itself. Thus in this new version of Thecla's *Life*, she is described as having disappeared into the ground above a cave that previously hosted the chthonic hero Sarpedonios.²⁶ The fact that the ground opened and swallowed the saint provided a natural explanation for the absence of her relics as well as references to this particular spot as Thecla's dwelling place. As one of the most important of the early saints, she was not driven by chance to places with such cultic significance. Her presence was meant to neutralise the previous ritual traditions and incorporate these healing sites into a new, Christian geography of holy places. It is worth noting that Thecla's other cult predecessor in Aegae, Athena, exercised her function as *soter* or protectress of the community/town and not as a deliverer of individuals.²⁷ It is precisely these features that are seen in the story of Thecla taking up arms and fighting for Seleucia in its

moment of peril, while her additional characteristics such as her patronage of literature and typically feminine tasks are also reminiscent of the Greek virgin-warrior.

Thecla's multiplicity explains the complexity of her incubation cult, since she was not only a healer-saint but even *soter* in a wider sense of the word.²⁸ Although she absorbed many other 'saving' roles from the cultic environment, her name and her cultic function here was associated with healing, as attested to by a grave-inscription of 'Thecla, the physician' from Seleucia.²⁹ While Thecla was worshipped in numerous places of both the Eastern Mediterranean and the West, she was associated with incubation only at Seleucia, Aegae and, later, in Constantinople, where she had a church in the Blachernai quarter, an area of the capital that hosted several other incubation saints at that time. It is safe to suggest that Thecla 'took over' the incubation function when she took over these cult sites, as incubation had played an important role there previously.

Instead of treating the pagan deities as inconvenient rivals, the hagiographer exploits the memory of the pagan cult to the utmost in his work. He starts with the figures that occupied the site before Thecla: the healing hero Sarpedonios, the divine Athena, Aphrodite and Zeus (and perhaps Artemis as well). First of all, he depicts a battle-scene between Thecla and the older deities in which Thecla triumphs and physically chases them away from the cult site. This gives Thecla a legitimacy and credibility, thus almost automatically and unquestionably transferring the efficacy of the cult site together with the healing powers of Sarpedonios' cave, Athena's patronage over the region or even Aphrodite's feminine concerns to Thecla, making her the new mistress of the cult site to her fullest potential. The hagiographer also incorporates into his narrative repertoire the contrasts between the old and new faith as represented between generations, spouses, lord and servant. Thus, in one such narrative, while the grandmother whose children were already Christians turns to Sarpedonios to cure her grandson, it is Thecla who heals the boy as a reward for the parents' faith.³⁰ Another story describes how the daughter of a tolerant pagan family is healed by Thecla and thus won for Christianity.³¹ Yet another narrative describes how the pagan husband of a devotedly Christian wife was converted by Thecla in reward for the woman's faith.³² Elsewhere, a Christian servant is in a position to teach a lesson to his master, as so often in Christian miracle collections, a particular miracle may affect both a rich and poor person simultaneously,³³ or Thecla can reinforce a sceptical Christian's belief by healing his sick horse.³⁴

²³ For a detailed examination of temple conversions and their variants in the specific case of Cilicia see Bayliss 2004.

²⁴ Dagron 1974.

²⁵ *Acta Pauli et Theclae*, BHG 1710-1716; critical edition: *Acta Apostolorum Apochrypha*, eds. R. A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet, 3 vols, repr. (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1959); English translation: *The Apocryphal New Testament*, M. R. James, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

²⁶ The change of the narrative was followed by the actual occupation of the site. For its archaeological analysis see Bayliss 2004, 89-90; the same anonymous hagiographer who collected the miracles in the 5th century also wrote Thecla's *Life*, relying on earlier legends. For the Greek and French text with introduction and commentary cf. Dagron 1987.

²⁷ For Dagron 1987, 84-85 Athena was a literary *topos*, the real rival was Sarpedonios, while Ernst Lucius regarded Thecla much more the heir to Athena. See Lucius 1908, 286. Athena clearly had connections with healing, as her name Athena Hygieia also attests (*Suda* s.v. *Athena Hygieia* and Pausanias, I, 23, 5.). Athena of Health was represented as a running figure with a serpent on her shield (Levi 1971, vol. 1, 65, note 134). One sculpture of Athena Hygieia is known from 5th century BC Athens, and three Roman replicas are in the Museum of Naples (the Athena Farnese), (formerly) in the Hope Collection in England, and in Civitate Camuto (Museo Archeologico della Valle Camonica). Regarding the importance of Athena in Aegae in the 4th century on the evidence of coins, see Lucius 1908, 279.

²⁸ I expand the connection between saviours and healers in Csepregi 2011.

²⁹ CIG IV, 9209, Linda Honey called attention to this testimony in her Review of Scott Johnson's book: *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, August 19, 2006. <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2006/2006-08-19.html>.

³⁰ MT 11.

³¹ MT 18.

³² MT 14.

³³ MT 17.

³⁴ MT 36.

One of the protagonists in Thecla's miracles is Isocasios, a famous rhetor and court official under Leo I (457-474).³⁵ From other historical sources we know that in 467, Isocasios was arrested and accused of being pagan, but eventually he was acquitted. As we learn from the miracle story he could turn to Thecla and benefit from her miracle without converting to Christianity – all the saint did was scold him for being a pagan. This miracle took place not in Seleucia but in Aegae, where Isocasios' career as a grammarian and Sophist began, and from where he was sent out to Antioch and Constantinople. His relationship with Aegae, together with the town's pagan flavour, contributed to the hagiographer's choice of this story. Aegae was famous for its cult and temple of Asclepius, where incubation had been practiced for centuries. The hagiographer mentions another of Thecla's miracles related to Aegae, and his description of the place is most interesting: he praises Aegae as a town famous for its piety. Is this to be interpreted as the worship of Asclepius? Or is this some new, *Christian* association?

Aegae

Aegae (Cilicia, in modern Turkey) was a noted pilgrim site, and the fame of its Asclepius temple in the Roman period rivalled that of Pergamon in the Greek Near East. In the Asclepeion at Aegae the miraculous dream cures of the god were recorded in the temple in inscriptions.³⁶

The Asclepius temple at Aegae figures in the story of the Life of Apollonius of Tyana, the wonderworker of the 1st century AD: The Sophist Philostratus writes that Apollonius, from Tyana in Asia Minor, chose this temple for his apprenticeship and that Asclepius himself expressed how he was pleased by Apollonius' presence.³⁷ Philostratus himself was in the company of the emperor Caracalla and Julia Domna in 215 when, following a visit to Pergamon, they visited Aegae and made a sacrifice to Asclepius. In the 3rd century, Aegae appears to have been a bustling pilgrim centre where both the tourist business and cultural activity were booming. The emerging Christian Church had to face the challenge this site presented. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, the Christian historian Sozomen attributed the destruction of the temple to Constantine in the year 331 AD, noting that the temple (together with that of Aphrodite Aphaca) '...had been the most distinguished and venerable to the ancients. As to the Aegeatae, they boasted that with them those sick in body were freed of their disease since at night the demon appeared and healed.'³⁸

Almost a century earlier, Eusebius wrote the following about Asclepius and this temple: '...with thousands excited over him [sc. Asclepius] as if over a saviour and physician, who now revealed himself to those sleeping [in the temple at Aegae], and again healed the diseases of those ailing in

body'³⁹ and it was he who described in great details the destruction of the Asclepeion:⁴⁰ 'For since a wide-spread error of these pretenders to wisdom concerned the demon worshiped in Cilicia, whom thousands regarded with reverence as the possessor of saving and healing power, who sometimes appeared to those who passed the night in his temple, sometimes restored the diseased to health, though on the contrary he was a destroyer of souls, who drew his easily deluded worshippers from the true Saviour to involve them in impious error, the emperor, consistently with his practice, and desire to advance the worship of him who is at once a jealous God and the true Saviour, gave directions that this temple also should be razed to the ground. In prompt obedience to this command, a band of soldiers laid this building, the admiration of noble philosophers, prostrate in the dust, together with its unseen inmate, neither demon nor god,

but rather a deceiver of souls, who had seduced mankind for so long a time through various ages. And thus he who had promised to others deliverance from misfortune and distress, could find no means for his own security, any more than when, as is told in myth, he was scorched by the lightning's stroke. Our emperor's pious deeds, however, had in them nothing fabulous or feigned; but by virtue of the manifested power of his Saviour, this temple as well as others was so utterly overthrown, that not a vestige of the former follies was left behind.'

It is doubtful whether the above happened in such a way or happened at all – some scholars think that if Constantine actually destroyed the temple, he did so for political reasons, as Aegae had allied itself with his rival, Licinius.⁴¹ However, at this point it must be emphasised that although we do not know whether the Asclepeion was actually destroyed or not, the act of describing its destruction became a powerful narrative tool to proclaim the victory of Christianity over the old religion. Whatever had happened to the building itself by the 350's, the healing shrine continued to function – even if only in reduced circumstances. This is attested to by a late inscription from Epidaurus of 355 AD that records the dedication of Mnaseas, priest at the Asclepeion of Aegae of Cilicia.⁴²

Soon, however, the events in Aegae took a turn and the town witnessed a second intellectual and cultic revival. When Julian became emperor in 360 AD, on his way to Constantinople he officially declared himself to be a follower of the old pagan gods. During his short reign (360-363) he tried to turn back the Christianisation of the empire, yet in his attempts he remained what he had been before coming to power: a writer and philosopher, a Greek thinker, who likened Asclepius to Christ:

³⁵ MT 39; Dagron 1987, 91-92.

³⁶ On the Asclepius cult in Aegae in general see Ziegler 1984, for the analysis of some particular inscriptions see Robert 1973.

³⁷ Vita Apollonii I, 8.

³⁸ Sozomenus, Ecclesiastical History 2.5; written in the mid-5th century, probably from 443 and onwards.

³⁹ De Vita Constantini 3. 56.

⁴⁰ De Vita Constantini 3. 56.

⁴¹ See Steger 2004, 100 and footnote 168.

⁴² Inscriptiones Graecae, IV² 438: Ἀσκληπιῶι Αἰγεάτῃ ὁ ἱεροφάντης καὶ ἱερεὺς τοῦ σωτήρος Μνασεῆς Ἐρμιονεὺς κατ' ὄναρ τὸ ν σλβ. This is actually the latest surviving inscription about Asclepius' cult.

Asclepius, having made his visitation to earth from the sky, appeared at Epidaurus singly, in the shape of a man; but afterwards he multiplied himself, and by his visitations stretched out over the whole earth his saving right hand. He came to Pergamon, to Ionia, to Tarentum afterwards; and later he came to Rome. And he travelled to Cos 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.⁴³

Julian's devotion to Asclepius went hand in hand with his plan to restore important cult buildings: during the spring of the year 362, the emperor's uncle (Count Julian), outlined a plan in a letter to the emperor for the restoration of the temples in the East. Julian agreed to all of the suggestions, stipulating that the shrine of Apollo at Daphne should take precedence over everything else.⁴⁴ His uncle proceeded vigorously with the repossession of stolen temple property and the reconstruction of Asclepius' temple in Aegae, which soon must have been able to operate normally, as indicated by records of patients practising incubation from this time. Among these patients was Libanius, one of the most eminent intellectuals of the 4th century (c. 314-394), a friend of the emperor Julian and the teacher of John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. In his 30th Oration, *For the Temples*, Libanius laments the 'injury done to the place'.⁴⁵ From his letters we learn more about his attachment to Asclepius and the pagan intelligentsia that flourished around the place. This pagan revival also inspired Libanius's Sophist friends in Tarsus, Demetrius, who composed two orations on Asclepius, and Acacius, who composed another such oration. Libanius himself was keenly interested in these activities at Aegae, partly because of his close connections with the extended familiar of Demetrius and Acacius, but more importantly because of his intimacy with the god of healing due to his chronic migraines. This can be seen in a request made by Libanius to Demetrius to seek a dream oracle on his behalf, at the same time as he sent the latter copies of the two orations on the god.⁴⁶ In the late winter or early spring of 362 AD, Libanius' brother also travelled to Aegae in the hope of receiving an 'oracle' from the god, that is, medical advice normally resulting from incubation.⁴⁷

Libanius himself also visited the Aegae temple during his illness in 367,⁴⁸ and one of his letters testifies to its restoration under Julian in 362 AD.⁴⁹ Another – Christian – account, by the 12th century Byzantine historian Zonaras, relates the events of that year with a different emphasis that makes the fate of the temple emblematic of Julian's whole

reign. The History of Zonaras relates the events of 362 with the following words:⁵⁰

He (Julian) set his army in motion against the Persians and arrived at Tarsus, a famous city of Cilicia. When he had arrived there, Artemius, the priest of Asclepius, approached him – for in Aegae (this, too, a city of Cilicia) there was a renowned temple of Asclepius – and requested that he restore again to the temple of Asclepius the columns which the archpriest of the people of the Christians had removed and upon which he had built his church. The transgressor straightway commanded that this be done at the bishop's expense. Then, the Hellenes, when they, with much labor and with the greatest cost, had barely taken down one of the columns and moved it with machines as far as the threshold of the door of the church, even after a great length of time were unable to get it outside. They abandoned it and departed. And after Julian had died, the bishop easily righted it again and returned it to its spot.

After Julian's death, Christian local authorities reverted back to methods that had proven more successful than the destruction of cult buildings. At several sites, new Christian saints replaced the old healers either spontaneously or even purposefully, orchestrated by the Church. All the variants of using the former buildings can be observed in these instances: from moving into the existing building, to reusing the older building material and erecting a new church near the temple site.

One of the most striking examples of such a takeover was the incubation cult of Isis (and nearby Serapis) practiced in Egyptian Menouthis, near Alexandria: the initial attempt to ban the cult and convert the temple into a church, proved unsuccessful, and sick people, including Christians, continued to turn to Lady (*Kyra*) Isis for healing, whose ritual was by then relegated to a private house.⁵¹ Therefore, a pair of brand new saints was created and introduced to the people. They were St Kyros/Cyrus and his equally shadowy saintly friend John, both put forward by Cyril of Alexandria (patriarch of Alexandria between 412 and 444) to attract Christians. These saints were invented by Cyril and this is the first time they are mentioned. A shadowy and general life-story was created for them, and eventually the existence of some bones was also indicated to Cyril in a dream. This led to the unearthing of St Kyros – it is hardly surprising that the name recalls that of Lady Isis, Kyra, and took up the extra bones to form the saint's companion, St John, very much modelled after the already widely popular pair of doctor saints, Cosmas and Damian. Initially, as Cyril stated in the sermons he composed for and delivered during the *translation* – the journey of their relics from Alexandria to Menouthis – he intended to do away with the incubation ritual as well. However, the incubation mode of healing was so strongly attached to the cult site that it was soon reinstated, now under the auspices of the Christian

⁴³ Julian, *Against the Galileans*, 200B.

⁴⁴ Julian, Letter 29.

⁴⁵ Libanius, Oration 30. 39: 'And now the people whom their illnesses, that require the hand of Asclepius, attract to Cilicia...'

⁴⁶ Libanius, Letter B 146, and Letters B 147 and 148 also concern the Asclepeion of Aegae.

⁴⁷ Libanius, Letters 707-708.

⁴⁸ Libanius, Oration 1. 143.

⁴⁹ Libanius, Letter 695.

⁵⁰ The History of Zonaras, 13, 1-19. (Banchich and Lane, 2009, 174).

⁵¹ Herzog 1939.

doctor-saints. It is significant that Saints Cyrus and John were called into existence solely as the new patron saints of the cult site, and that there is no trace of their legend before this time. They were clearly created for the sole purpose of offering a Christianised version of healing, later returning to the traditional dream-healing for which the place was already long famous.⁵²

In the case of Aegae, we are dealing with what can be considered a gradual transmission of cult memory, as Thecla's hagiographer of the mid-5th century still seemed to be aware of the records of the Asclepius temple mentioned by Libanius in his Letters.⁵³ Thecla's hagiographer did not treat the cult site's pagan past as an inconvenient rival, nor did he dismiss it as godless nonsense. Instead, by including the traditions of Aegae and Thecla's other cultic predecessors in his writings, he managed to turn their pagan background into a positive hinterland, a source of legitimacy and credibility for Thecla's miraculous powers. In this way, Saint Thecla could nicely fit her own cult activity into the long-established cult traditions of Aegae. However, in Christian hagiography, Aegae was not famous for Thecla.

Aegae and Saints Cosmas and Damian

A town of great symbolic significance because of its connection with Asclepius and incubation, Aegae became emblematically attached to the healing brothers Cosmas and Damian, the doctor-saints and incubation healers par excellence.⁵⁴ The earliest version of their legend (*The Vita Asiatica*) places them in Syria, in their hometown of Cyrrhus – which also became the place of their peaceful death and burial. In this early version of the legend, they were both healers and miracle workers, but as of yet not martyrs. This soon changed due to a growing hagiographic demand that depicted the saints as martyrs. This new twist in their legend, both narrative and theological, meant the introduction of Aegae to their story: Aegae under the rule of Prefect Lysias during the reign of Diocletian (284-305) became the scene of their martyrdom.⁵⁵

Cosmas and Damian are not the only Christian healer saints who were connected to Aegae. Similar to them is the pair of saints, Zenobius and Zenobia, who were also martyred at Aegae by the same Lysias and were also regarded as siblings and incubation healers.⁵⁶ Their legend must have had a great impact on the formation of the Cosmas and

Damian martyr legend.⁵⁷ It was this version of the Life of Cosmas and Damian (the *Arab Vita*) which appears to be more closely related to the martyr-literature, to which their famous miracles were attached. Asclepius' celebrated cult in Aegae doubtlessly influenced both narratives. And it was from Aegae that the cult of the saints Cosmas and Damian started to spread, to the whole Eastern Mediterranean and Rome.⁵⁸

Yet another holy doctor is linked to Aegae, St Thalelaïos,⁵⁹ allegedly a physician from Lebanon, who during his lifetime cured the sick using both his medical skills as well as his miraculous powers (very much like Cosmas and Damian in their first legend). Upon his capture in Cilicia he was brought to Governor Theodore of Aegae, where he was beheaded in 284 AD and became numbered as one of the holy *anargyroi*. This epithet in Byzantium was attached to those saints who cure without receiving money, like saint Cosmas and Damian or Cyrus and John.

Conclusion: Re-writing traditions

It is partially true that the early Christian Church felt a natural animosity towards incubation. Incubation was a pagan ritual, and even in its Christianised form it retained many elements that were more characteristic of Greek religion than Christian worship. In spite of this, pagan deities, sites and associations were often given a new narrative role in Christian miracle stories: these provided the background against which the new saints' power grew more visible and which legitimised their role as the new patrons of the site, its function or the thaumaturgic and miracle-working qualities associated with the place.

The example of Aegae shows how a city, long famous for its ritual healing and incubation miracles could enter and become attached to the new Christian saints, who were to replace the healing gods and carry on the Christianised version of temple sleep. Making the city the place of the saints' martyrdom is another clever move: even if we are not dealing with historical persons, healers like Cosmas and Damian or Thecla already had a narrative tradition attached to them, with their places of birth and burial, or places where they were active during their lifetime. In these legends a new element had to be introduced, without deconstructing the already existing elements too much. The place of martyrdom is also often the area where the first memorial building was erected in the saints' honour and from where their cult started to spread.

In the Christian incubation miracle stories the pagan background, challenging the authority of the previous cult

⁵² See Sansterre 1991, Takács 1994, Montserrat 1998.

⁵³ Libanius, Letter 695. 2.

⁵⁴ On the different versions of the Lives of Cosmas and Damian see van Esbroeck 1985; the Greek edition of the miracles: Deubner 1907; French translation of the miracles of Thecla, Cosmas and Damian and Cyrus and John: Festugière 1971.

⁵⁵ They were among other saints who were reported to suffer martyrdom at Aegae, by the order of Lysias: Sts Claudius, Asterius, Neon, Domnina, and Theonilla. Cf. *Acta Sanctorum* August 23.

⁵⁶ *Acta Sanctorum* Oct 13, 259-273.

⁵⁷ Ludwig Deubner and Ernst Lucius long debated which Vita had had been the model for the other, i. e. the legend of which pair of saints came into being first. Both scholars however were in agreement about the impact of Asclepius. Deubner 1907, 64, Lucius 1904, 260.

⁵⁸ Ernst Lucius and Alfred Maury both identified the beginnings of the saints' cult in Aegae. In Asclepius both of them saw the catalyst of incubation healing (Lucius 1908, Maury 1849).

⁵⁹ On his cult see Brocker 1976.

figure and the confirmation of the new healer's power were skilfully used by the hagiographers, both to persuade the non-Christian worshippers but also to enrich their stories for their Christian audience. The mention of a famous patient or site in a Christian miracle story could help the relevant miracle survive and spread. In this respect, one should not forget that saints' lives and miracle collections were also entertainment literature.

Instead of downplaying the importance of Greek ritual healing or turning a deaf ear to it, Christian hagiography was able to use the fame and associations attached to a cult place in a manner akin to the reuse of marble slabs from Greek temples for Christian basilicas.

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