

Asclepius' miracles have so far been known only through epigraphic evidence. The recently published *P.Mil.Vogl.* VIII 309 containing seven epigrams grouped under the heading Ἱαματικά provides a fascinating source of direct literary treatment of the subject. Posidippus seems to have been aware of the shrine Ἱάματα and have drawn inspiration from both their lexical and thematic repertory when composing his poems.

Although at first sight these epigrams are real aretalogies, a closer analysis supports the conclusion that Posidippus was not interested in actively supporting Asclepius' cult. Immediately apparent are the anomalous features of the first and the last poem which do not describe miraculous healings. The *ouverture* text pivots on a highly eulogistic framework aimed at presenting Medeios of Olynthus, a famous Alexandrian physician and eponymous priest of Philadelphus, as an infallible doctor, a worthy successor of Asclepius (95 AB). Only apparently linked to the theme of τὸ κάλλιστον, the last epigram represents a device for Posidippus to address Medeios again (101 AB), thus conferring a Ptolemaic colour to the whole: an unmistakable homage paid by the court poet to the sovereigns.

If the Ptolemaic layout represents the key to reading this section, the nature of these poems and their function in 3rd century BC Alexandria is not immediately clear. In 99 AB the deaf Asclas obtains the power to hear even through brick walls: this is, of course, a mockery whereby Posidippus mimics the temple *Chronicles*, none of which show a worshipper gaining 'super-powers'. Also, the Ἱαμα happens during the προθύεσθαι phase, *i.e.* before, and apart from the healing dream. Such precocity represents a striking, twofold transgression of the ritual, as all the miracles occurred in the sacred precinct and, more importantly, during the *incubatio*. Consequently, to record a healing taking place somewhere else and earlier, is to undermine the foundations of the cult itself. Likewise 96 AB, where Antichares regains the ability to walk while making his offering, again during the preliminary phase. The last case even invites scepticism: already eighty years old and about to die, Zeno recovers his sight, having been blind for twenty-five years, but dies only two days later (100 AB). The poem contains the three basic elements of a Ἱαμα – miraculous healing, sleep, vision of the god – but this incubatory colouring becomes the opposite, as the miracle is sandwiched between, and near-obliterated by, two allusions to the protagonist's death. Then, while the faithful await the ritual dream during which they meet the god who will cure them, Zeno is about to sleep the eternal sleep of death and the *visio dei* he gets does not concern Asclepius, but Hades.

To conclude, these seven Ἱαματικά do not represent the official worship of Asclepius. They rather reveal the existence of an Asclepius *alter*: there was an official Asclepius, the one of the sanctuaries, of the devoted faithful and of the miracles, and another one, the 'Ptolemaic' Asclepius, who represented a learned pretext for variation and originality.