CURE AND CULT AT THE ASKLEPIEION OF LEBENA IN CRETE

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The site of ancient Lebena, present-day Lendas, is located in the central part of the south coast of Crete (Fig. 1). Its topographical location makes it one of the best harbours of the south coast of the island, nested as it is in a bay sheltered on both sides by two high promontories. The toponym is associated with the local harbour of the city of Gortyna by most of the ancient sources.[1] Scattered remains of the ancient settlement extend from the two hills dominating the bay to the beach, and even to the sea. They consist mostly of structures of Roman times and none of them can be today directly connected with sanctuary or harbour functions.[2]

The excavation of the site of the sanctuary of Asklepios, placed high on the west hill, were carried out by the Italian Archaeological School in Athens between 1900 and 1911, but they were never fully published, save for the inscriptions that attracted a great interest at the time of their discovery (Fig. 2). They were carried out by Federico Halbherr and later entrusted for publication to Luigi Pernier, who produced the first interpretive plan of the complex, to be published only much later in a small guide-book to the Italian excavations in Crete.[3] In 1999, when I was given the opportunity to re-study the sanctuary, by the then director of the Italian School of Archaeology in Athens, Antonino Di Vita, the sanctuary had not changed much from the early excavations: it mostly appeared as a complex of the Roman imperial period, made of bricks and concrete, articulated in terraces and centred around an impressive temple for the god, with two monolithic columns still standing. The results presented below are mostly based on the campaigns of survey, clearance and documentation carried out on site in the years 1999-2001.

The Hellenistic Asklepieion

Although preserved mostly in its Roman phase, the story of the Asklepieion of Lebena goes much further back in time. The sanctuary was allegedly founded as 'colony' or filiation of the most famous sanctuary at Epidauros in the Peloponnese. From the second half of the 4th century BCE and throughout the Hellenistic period, in fact, some 300 sanctuaries of Asklepios were founded all over the Greek world. These were mostly filiations of the

[1] Melfi 2007a, 115-117.
[2] Melfi 2006.
[3] Pernier- Banti 1947, 67-65; Halbherr 1890, 720-735; Id. 1901, 300-306. The inscriptions were later published by Margherita Guraducci in *IC* I, xvii.

Epidaurian sanctuary and as such they reproduced Epidaurian structures, images and rituals.[4] The sources preserve a number of tales of foundation in which either a delegation of Epidaurian priests or an individual healed by Asklepios, led a 'colonial' expedition, often by travelling with the snake sacred to Asklepios or with objects linked to his cult. For example, the disembarkation of the snake of Asklepios in Epidauros Limera, in the south Peloponnese, led to the foundation of altars and a cult for the god (Paus. 3.23.6-7). In Pergamon, an Archias, son of Aristaichmos, after having been injured while hunting on the Pindasos and eventually healed by the Epidaurian Asklepios, brought the cult of the Peloponnesian god in the same way (Paus. 2.26.8–9).[5] Even in Rome, Asklepios was imported at around 291 BCE, in response to a plague, following a similar procedure. Ambassadors sailed to Epidauros and brought back to Rome the sacred snake of Asklepios, that got off the ship and chose Tiber Island as the designated place for the foundation of a sanctuary (Livy 10.47.6–7; Ov, *Met.* 15.622–744).

A similar tale of foundation for the cult at Lebena is contained in a fragmentary inscription, reconstructed from three blocks, placed in the 2nd cent BCE on the walls of the portico for the incubations.[6] The inscription reads as follow:

Theon son of Anthotas, of Lebena, [---] was healed at Epidauros [---] and brought the god, having his own boat, and [---] the inhabitants and succeeded [---] and healed in the manner that (the god) had tought[---]to sail homeward [---].

[---] the snake on the prow [---] near the helmsman [--] they sailed [---] straight to Lebena [---] with good auspices [---] the landing [---] towards pre-existing structures [---] the altars of Hermes [---]

and (the altars?) of the Nymphs and Acheloos [---] where the Lebeneians still sacrifice today, according to an ancestral law, to Acheloos a pig, to the Nymphs a kid [---] Asklepios sent from Epidauros to Lebena and [---] the god ordered [---]

Although the text is very incomplete, we understand that an individual named Theon, from Lebena, who had been healed in Epidauros, brought the god in his own ship to his mother city in Crete, and introduced there the cult of Asklepios. The god was transported in the usual form of a snake. The site chosen by the snake after disembarking, was already home to a pre-existing cult place, originally dedicated the Hermes, the Nymphs and Acheloos. This is not surprising, considering that, similarly to Asklepios, the Nymphs and Acheloos, often in

[4] Melfi 2007b, 507-513

[5] Melfi 2016, 90-91.

[6] Melfi 2007a, 164-167, inscription no. 10.

association with Hermes, were divinities connected to water, and that the site was characterized by the presence of a natural spring.[7]

Although the tale seems to preserve a straightforward Epidaurian foundation, the origin of the cult at Lebena is still under discussion. Pausanias, in fact, lists Lebena as an affiliation of the Asklepieion of Balagrae in Cyrenaica, founded by Epidauros (Paus. 2.26.9), therefore implying a sub- or secondary colonization.[8] There can, nevertheless, be no doubt on the importance of the sea in the transmission of the cult of Asklepios, which seems to follow a well-known natural route emanating from Epidauros towards the southern coasts of Laconia. Since Asklepieia foundations are attested in Megara, Phlious, Sikion, Pellene, Aigion, Argos, Gytheion, Epidauros Limera, Kyphanta e Boeai it is not unlikely that the cult would have follow up south, by reaching the coasts of both south Crete and north Africa.[9] It is evident that in the 2nd cent. BCE, at the time of the redaction and display of Theon's inscription, it was specifically the Epidaurian nature of the cult of Lebena that was being emphasized.

The earliest structure found on the site, possibly corresponding to period following the foundation of the cult, is an underground well, identified as a *thesauros*, or treasury box, made of ashlar blocks bearing the letter A (for Asklepios, according to Guarducci), and originally closed by a heavy lid (Fig. 3). The treasury box was used to keep the wealth and precious offerings of the sanctuary, and was part of a larger complex of which only the remains of a wall in well-dressed stones, few meters to the east, were found. Also the lower blocks of the front wall of the spring can be attributed to this phase, as a first attempt at monumentalize one of the main features of the cult place. The presence of a spring constitutes an important prerequisite for the installation and running of a cult of Asklepios, that normally relies on water for the performance of the healing practices. On the other hand, the provision of a *thesauros* implies a certain wealth of the cult place, where healing practices were paid for by pilgrims and worshippers visiting the sanctuary.[10]

The treasury box was covered, by the mid 3rd cent BCE, by a high-quality mosaic in pebbles and tesserae representing a sea-horse (Fig. 4). This operation did not necessarily mean that the thesauros went out of use, but its opening was certainly modified. Both the mixed technique and the style of the mosaic find the closest comparisons in Alexandria, and are easily understood at the time when Crete was part of the Ptolemaic kingdom. The iconographical choice of a sea-horse, symbol of the sea, widespread in many Phoenician

[7] Melfi 2007a, 121-122 and Ead. 2008.
[8] Melfi 2007a, 151 and Renberg 2018, 562-563
[9] Melfi 2007a, 124.
[10] For the use of *thesauroi* in sanctuaries, and specifically in healing sanctuaries, see Melfi 2000a.

towns, such as Biblos, Tyre and Arados, all similarly subject to Ptolemaic control, further confirms the importance of the prominent coastal location of the sanctuary and its reliance to the contemporary sea networks.[11] The prominence and the decoration of the room where the mosaic belonged suggests a special function, and it is not unlikely that it marked the site of the earliest temple for Asklepios. In the earliest phases of the temple of Apollo Pythios, at neighbouring Gortyna, a *thesauros* was similarly placed in the cella.

The construction of the first phase of the portico defining the northern border of the sanctuary must have been roughly contemporary to that of the mosaic room (Fig. 3). To the 3rd century BCE can be, in fact, dated an epystile bearing the dedication of the 'stoa and the wall' by one of the sanctuary officers.[12] The portico (ca. 18 m long, and 4.50m wide) was connected to the sacred spring, and must have been equipped with beds.[13] Here the healing ritual of the incubation took place, where the sick spent the night lying in beds and waiting for the oracular dream in which the god Asklepios appeared and restored their health.[14] The water of the spring must have played an important role in both preliminary and healing rituals.[15]

Although the main elements of the cult were already in place (temple, incubation stoa and spring), a further revamp of the sanctuary took place in the later part of the 2nd century BCE. At this time, a sizeable number of epigraphic texts were inscribed on the building blocks of the back wall of the north portico, suggesting that this was being entirely reconstructed (Fig. 5). The inscriptions include the retelling of Epidaurian foundation mentioned above, and the institution of a catalogue of *sanationes*- or healing stories—under the auspices of Gortynian religious and civic officers.[16] Similarly to Epidauros, where large stelai containing healing tales were displayed in the incubation stoa, in Lebena, the stories of those who were healed by the local Asklepios were inscribed on the back wall of the portico where the incubation took place.[17]

These inscriptions constitute a coherent cycle of tales, all transcribed at the same time from a collection of stories previously recorded on wooden tablets (*sanides*).[18] This procedure is otherwise known from both the Amphiaraion of Oropos and the Asklepieion of Epidauros, and guaranteed to the faithful the antiquity and reliability of the sources.[19] The aim was, as in

[11] Melfi 2007a, 77-78.
[12] Melfi 2007a, inscr. No. 4.
[13] Melfi 2007a, inscr. No. 6.
[14] More recently on incubation see Renberg 2017 and von Ehrenheim 2015.
[15] Melfi 2007b, 566-567.
[16] Melfi 2007a, iscr. Nos. 10 and 10a.
[17] Renberg 2017, 130-131, with previous discussions.
[18] As specified in Melfi 2007a, inscr. No. 10a, ll. 3-4.
[19] Melfi 2007a, 165.

many other sanctuaries of the god, that of advertising and confirming the power of the god to the sick searching a cure, in the very place where the healing took place. But the peculiarity of the Lebenean epigraphic *corpus* consists in the association of the healing tales with the history of foundation of the sanctuary, as both part of an uninterrupted narration, aimed at emphasizing in the late Hellenistic period those Epidaurian connections that might have been forgotten over time.

Although found displaced at the time of the excavations, the healing tales of Lebena must have been ordered in columns, following a a sequence, judging from the disposition of the texts and the presence of letters in the blanks (probably to aid the sequence), and must have amounted to at least 22 in number.[20] Many of the texts are very similar to those of Epidauros: they start with the name of the supplicant, including patronymic and city of origin, describe first the problem and then the cure, until the final, miraculous healing. The god is the only healing entity, working alone, without any assistant, and the healings are performed in the sanctuary, during the patient's sleep, and in the very incubation building (*adyton* or *abaton*) where the texts are to be read, as, for example, the tales of healing of Demandros and Phalaris[21]:

To Demandros son of Kalabis, of Gortyn, who suffered from sciatica, the god commanded to come to Lebena so that he could treat him. Immediately upon his arrival the god performed an operation on him in his sleep and he became healthy.

To Phalaris son of Eutychion, of Lebena, who he had no children though was already fifty years old, (Asklepios) commanded to send his wife to do the incubation, and when she entered the adyton *he placed a cupping instrument on her stomach and instructed her to leave quickly, and she became pregnant.* (Transl. G. Renberg 2017)

Somehow in contrast with these tales of Epidaurian tradition, some of the other texts do not contain the account of miraculous cures, but rather long lists of medical prescriptions, allegedly revealed by the god during the incubation. Within this category falls the testimony of Kladon from Gortyna[22]:

Kladon [---] from Gortyna, having pain in the stomach, went to incubate having arrived with a thiasos *and having vowed an altar to the god [---] he was taken by the sleep [---] and ate [---] the nature of the blood [---] and he was healed [---].* (Transl. G. Renberg 2017)

[20] Melfi 2007a, inscr. nos. 10-19.
[21] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 13.
[22] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 11.

Klados was suffering from a stomach ailment and received in his sleep the prescription of something to eat (unfortunately lost in the text), that allowed him to regain his health. The practice seems to be preserved in other inscriptions of the corpus, unfortunately very fragmentary, where recipes based on cardamom, corn, probably hibiscus, myrtle berries, peppered wine, figs, lettuce, crushed laurel, and other ingredients can still be discerned.[23] In the same context an inventory of objects used in the sanctary that contains basic containers, made of pottery and more rarely of metal, and a few cutting instruments, should be read.[24] This appears, in fact, as a list of equipment useful for administering pharmacological remedies, such as those prescribed to Klados. It therefore further confirms the practice of medicine within the sanctuary, and within the incubatory practice, at least in the 2nd century BCE. It is, nevertheless, not clear who was in charge of the medical practice, whether the yearly religious officers, the *nakoroi*, or itinerant doctors– whose presence is similarly attested in several Cretan localities in the Hellenistic period.[25]

It is important to notice that the sanctuary in the Hellenistic period seemed to have had a fundamentally local reach: the customers came only from Gortyna and from the surrounding region. The administration and the centralised recording system for the healing tales were also entirely regulated by Gortynian officials. The Hellenistic sanctuary of Lebena appears, therefore, to be a state sanctuary of the Gortynians, and plays a role in the administration and consolidation of the territory of Gortyna from the centre to the south coast of the island.[26] This all seems to change in the Roman period, when the sanctuary opens up to a larger network of contacts and individuals from different parts of the Mediterranean.

The sanctuary in the Roman period.

The first century BCE was a complicated period of nearly uninterrupted warfare for the island of Crete, terminating eventually with the establishment of the Roman province in 67 BCE. The progressive erosion of the power of Gortyna as the main polis of the area, and the disjoint between the sanctuary and the central administration is signalled by a fundamental change in the way the operations of the Asklepieion are recorded. The official list of healings compiled by the Gortynian officers of the cult is replaced, starting probably from the Augustan period, by individual stelai and private dedications.

[23] Melfi 2007a, inscr. nos 11, 14 and 20. See the commentary to the inscriptions for the possible medical uses of the various ingredients.
[24] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 7b.
[25] *IC*, I, viii, 7, and IV, 168, for example.
[26] Melfi 2007a, 139.

The best-known examples are two long stelai, that probably represent the most detailed dedications from the sanctuary, both commissioned at the god's command (*kat'epitagen*) by a Roman citizen named Publius Granius Rufus after he had been cured from different, though possibly related, ailments at the end of the first century BCE. In one of these inscriptions, Rufus reports to have been healed from his chronic tuberculosis (or a similar respiratory problem) by using a list of plant and food-based medications:[27]

To Asklepios, Publius Granius Rufus.

Since he was incessantly coughing for two years, spitting blood and flesh all day long, the god gave (the prescription) to nibble on rocket after fasting, then to drink peppered Italian wine, then to have starch in hot water, then a powder from the sacred ash and sacred water, then an egg and pine resin, and again moist pitch, then iris with honey, then a Cydonian apple and petty spurge (peplis?) boiled together—and to drink [the juice(?)] but [to nibble(?) on] the apple—[and then to eat] a fig mixed with [sacred] ash [from the] altar where they sacrifice [to the god(?)]. (Transl. G. Renberg 2017)

In the other inscription, the god treats him from some ailment of the shoulder, with a topical application made from barley-meal, wine, ground pine- cone, olive oil, and other substances.[28]

To Asklepios, Publius Granius Rufus.

Since the right shoulder had formed scrofulous swellings and gave me a terrible pain. The god instructed to remain strong, and provided a treatment: having made a paste of barley meal (mixed) with old wine and having ground up a pine-cone with olive oil, to apply them, along with a fig and goat fat(?), and then milk, pepper, wax-pitch(?) and olive oil all boiled together [---] on soft linen(?) having broken to pieces [to apply it(?) ---]. (Transl. G. Renberg 2017)

These various ingredients appear frequently in medical writings and confirm that the Asklepios at Lebena, or the physicians in residence at the sanctuary, actually issued prescriptions typical of contemporary rational medicine.[29] Still we have good reasons to believe that such prescriptions were provided during the incubation ritual, therefore played a part within a more general pattern of temple medicine.[30] This is also evident from another contemporary stele, dedicated by a woman who had been suffering from a malignant finger

[27] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 29.
[28] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 30.
[29] For a discussion of the ingredient used and their occurrence in medical treatises see Melfi 2007a, 181-184, and Renberg 2017, 233-235.
[30] On the interrelation between the two see Gorrini 2005.

sore and was healed by using a mixture crushed oyster shell and other complex ingredients.[31] Here the god is said to have been the one who ordered the worshipper to write her story of healing, implying a form of communication that we can only imagine in the oneiric dimension, that is to say during the incubation.

The opening up of the sanctuary to a foreign clientele in the Roman period eventually led to a further enlargement and monumentalisation of the Asklepieion. In the course of the 2nd cent CE, the sanctuary was completely rebuilt and the older structures obliterated by a new complex. Among the earlier buildings only the stoà *abaton*, indispensable for the cult practice, was preserved and incorporated into the new project.

The new complex spanned across the different levels of the hill, expanding towards the south were the new temple was built. It was articulated on at least two terraces covering a difference in height of ca 6 m (Figs. 3 and 6). For those approaching from the south-east, where the entrance was located, it presented a long facade, oriented north-south, with a monumental staircase. The latter consisted of nine steps and allowed one to reach the higher level onto which the main buildings, a single-room, barrel-vaulted temple with two central columns, and a less-preserved portico, opened (Fig. 7). At the same time, the staircase gave access to the north, to some of the structures surviving from the Hellenistic phase: the incubation stoa and the adjacent fountain house (Fig. 8). The irregular open-air area in front of the staircase was paved with stone slabs and probably used for ritual practises or theatrical performances, for which, the staircase would have provided a large cavea.[32]

The date of this reconstruction must be placed in the Antonine period, most likely in the third quarter of the 2nd century, because of the masonry and architectural style of the temple, and because of the find of an important dedication inscribed on the base of the cult-statue.[33] The inscription informs us that an individual named Xenion offered the *agalma*, the statue, to the god. The dedicant is to be identified with a Titus Flavius Xenion from Gortyna, mentioned in several inscriptions belonging to the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, known as *archon* of the Panhellenion between 165 and 169, and shortly thereafter benefactor in the sanctuary of Eleusis and in his hometown of Gortyna.[34] Both the connection with the Panhellenion and the intervention in Eleusis can be considered acts of high symbolic value in the cultural milieu of the 2nd century, and qualify the Xenion from Gortyna as member of an

[31] Melfi 2007, inscr. no. 32.
[32] For a complete discussion of the various elements of the complex and their chronology see Melfi 2007a, 88-98.
[33] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 38.
[34] Melfi 2004.

educated elite belonging to the highest ranks of contemporary society.[35] Precisely in the same period Pausanias (2.26.9) includes the sanctuary of Lebena in his list of the most famous – *ta epiphanestata*—Asklepieia of the Greek world, together with Athens, Pergamon and Smyrna. Slightly later Philostratus (*VA* 4.34), describing the visit of Apollonius of Tyana to Lebena, compares the sanctuary to that of Pergamon. In the text of Philostratus the Asklepieion is treated as an extremely venerable site, and for this reason it is touched by the travels of the 'philosopher-saint' Apollonius of Tyana. This implies that the sanctuary was, therefore, placed in the routes of contemporary philosophical and religious pilgrimages.[36] The concentration of highly influential benefactions and the attention of contemporary sources, ultimately conjure up the image of the Asklepieion of Lebena as a very networked and relevant sanctuary for the later 2nd century.

In this period, the site must have looked like a truly extraordinary complex and reached the peak of its success and frequentation. Although we do not have prescriptions or healing tales left for this phase, the many dedications to the god still imply the practice of incubation. Asklepios is often evoked with epithets such as *soter* (the saviour) and *epekoos* (the one who hears), all frequently used in the contemporary cult of the god at Pergamon.[37] In two cases, Asklepios and Hygiea are also called *synodoiporoi*, travel companions, that might suggest either the accomplishment of a pilgrimage to reach the sanctuary, or the end of a metaphorical route to healing.[38]

The most representative inscription of this phase is an epigram inscribed on a tall statue base in the third century CE. It records the dedication of two statues of Oneiroi, the dreams, to Asklepios the saviour, by a Diodoros who had regained the sight in both eyes, after receiving one dream for each eye.[39] The text reads as follow:

Two Dreams Diodoros has dedicated to you, the Saviour, for his pair of eyes, having enjoyed the light.

The elegant poetic text must have been accompanied by two statuettes (possibly in bronze?) representing the dreams, the symmetrical marks of which are still left on the top surface of the base. At the same time as informing us of the illness of the dedicant, the inscription confirms the practice of the incubation, at the end of the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd century

[35] For the background of Xenion within 2nd century culture and the cult of Asklepios see also Melfi 2007c.
[36] Melfi 2000b.
[37] Melfi 2007a, *soter* nos. 43 and 46; *epekoos* nos. 40-41
[38] Melfi 2007a, inscr. nos. 45-46.
[39] Melfi 2007a, no. 43. The base with the inscription is kept in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge [The Fitzwilliam Museum (2024) "Stele" Web page available at: https://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/65560 Accessed: 2024-12-08 21:11:48].

CE. The fact that two dreams were sent by the god, might also imply a long-term residence of the patient, comparable to what is known at the same time from the Asklepieion of Pergamon from the tales of Aelius Aristides.[40]

Besides recording the act of healing, the dedication is highly representative of Antonine culture because of its choice of text and object. Philostratus, again, in his third-century *Imagines*, describes in detail a painting of the Amphiaraon at Oropos, where healing incubation was practiced, and among others was Oneiros:

(...) and the gate of dreams, for those who consult the oracle must sleep, and Oneiros himself is depicted in relaxed attitude, wearing a white garment over a black one, I think representing his nocturnal and diurnal work (transl. Fairbanks)

The association of the act of healing with the personification of the dream suggests that Diodorus might have come from the same cultural background as Philostratus, where a proper iconography for Oneiros existed or was being created. It is not surprising that Philostratus would be the author who put this in writing, because of his great admiration for Asklepios and for his healing skills.[41]

Dedications in the sanctuary seem to continue until the end of the 3rd beginning of the 4th century CE: they mention healing and sleep, but never contain any more precise prescriptions or healing tales.[42] After little more than a century, a Christian basilica was built on the hill east of the sanctuary. Several architectural members and inscriptions of the Asklepieion were transported on site and re-used in the building of the church, including the ionic bases and capitals of the incubation stoa (Fig. 9). The lager church was replaced in the 15th or 16th century, by the little chapel still present on the site and dedicated to St. John.[43] The replacement of sanctuaries of Asklepios with Christian cult-places is a well-known phenomenon, attested in many other sites. In some of these, healing remained one of the main attractions of the cult and incubation might have continued in a different form.[44] In the case of Lebena, we have no data to support an eventual healing vocation of the superseding Christian cult. The water of Asklepios, though, continues to run through the site: the aquifer re-discovered during the Italian excavations was channeled and made available through a fountain first in 1932, and again in 1998, and still serves the needs of the local village.

[40] Melfi 2016. On the presence of oneiros in association with incubation see also Renberg 2017, 677-688.

[41] Melfi 2007c.

[42] Melfi 2007a, inscr. no. 48 is the last datable inscription, probably of Severan period.

[43] Melfi 2007, 147-149.

[44] Renberg 2017, 745-806.

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