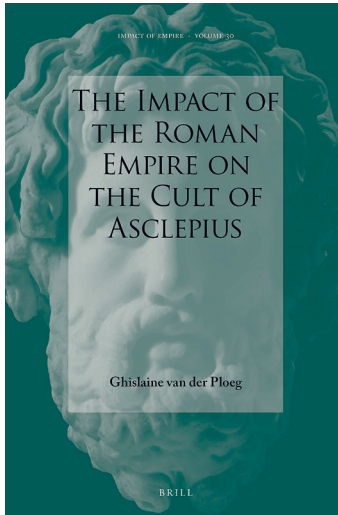


## THE IMPACT OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE ON THE CULT OF ASCLEPIUS




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THE BOOK *THE IMPACT OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE ON THE CULT OF ASCLEPIUS*, written by Ghislaine van der Ploeg and published by Brill, comprises a significant contribution to the study of the Asclepius cult, examining the spread and flourish of the cult in the Roman Empire, which has not been subject to extensive historical research. The author traces this gap in modern literature, which mainly examines the Asclepius cult in the Classical and Hellenistic eras, and provides a thorough study of the agents and ways of dissemination of the cult in Rome and the Roman provinces as well as the forms that the cult took in different regions through interaction between regional and global elements. The increased mobility as well as the connectivity between the capital city of Rome and the periphery of the Roman provinces, which facilitated the diffusion of the Asclepius cult throughout the Roman Empire, are recurrent themes in this study, which explores the impacts of the new sociopolitical conditions on both the global development of the cult and its local differentiations.

In particular, the author examines three kinds of agents whose movements and connections with both the central administration and peripheral communities contributed to the dissemination of the Asclepius cult in the Roman Empire and the establishment of new cult places: the emperors, the courtiers and the permanent army. He further explores the processes through which local variations emerged as a response to global features of the Asclepius cult, reflecting the need for regional differentiation and resistance to globalization and homogenization within the vast Empire.

The historical and theoretical framework for the study of “Mobility and Connectivity in the Cult of Asclepius” is defined in Chapter 1. The author first provides a brief outline of the historical transition from Republic to Empire and of the main factors which affected and modified multiple aspects of the perceived reality and people’s lives. Then, he overviews the history of research and the current approaches to the Asclepius cult in order to justify the focus of his own study. Aiming to explore the ways global and regional dynamics interwove in the Roman Empire and affected religious and cultic formations, he chose to provide a case-study of the Asclepius cult, which those dynamics greatly influenced, modifying both its general and local characteristics. For his study, he transferred and adapted the modern notions and theories of globalism and regionalism to the Roman world, and explored the ways increased connectivity among the Rome and the provinces generated awareness of regional identities and the perception of Roman globalism as a result of both global interactions and local competitions among the different parts of the Empire.

The study of the global Asclepius cult and its regional differentiations consists of sub-case-studies, which are thoroughly presented in the subsequent chapters. Each of these chapters has a specific structure (introduction, main study, conclusion) and relies on the available epigraphic, literary, iconographic, and numismatic evidence in order to examine the ways the Roman Empire impacted and transformed the cult of Asclepius, increasing its popularity and attractiveness for the residents of different regions.

Before proceeding to the study of the Asclepius cult in the Roman imperial period, Chapter 2 provides an overview of the emergence and dissemination of the cult in the Classical and Hellenistic eras. The main goal of this chapter is to outline the historical background of the cult for better understanding its development, diffusion and ramification during the Roman imperial period. In this framework, early literary evidence about the figure of Asclepius is examined, which indicates the processes of his deification and of his increased popularity as a divine physician. Despite the testimony for an early cult of Asclepius in Thessalian Tricca, Epidauros is presented as the actual motherland of the cult, which formed its major

components and was the original node from which the cult spread and was transplanted to other regions, such as Athens, Cos and Pergamum as well as Rome. The chapter discusses the appearance and main features of the Asclepius cult in these regions, although it is not clear why these sanctuaries were chosen by the author, briefly mentioning others, such as the sanctuary at Lebena on Crete that enjoyed great popularity in the area, or the asclepieion in Corinth that shared regional characteristics with that in Athens. Examining the Asclepius cult in the pre-Augustian period, the author points out the role of external factors, such as of the Delphic Oracle, for the dissemination and popularity of the cult, which preceded and reflect the impacts of similar factors, such as the Emperors, during the imperial period. The chapter closes with an examination of the epithets ascribed to Asclepius, the iconography that framed his cult, and a brief overview of the rite of incubation and the divine epiphanies expected during this ritual.

In the following chapters the author proceeds to the examination of the Asclepius cult in the Roman imperial period. Each chapter focuses on different agents of dissemination and further on the imperial influences and regional interactions that mediated the diffusion and establishment of the Asclepius cult in the Roman provinces.

Chapter 3 explores the impacts of the Roman emperors' attitudes towards Asclepius and of the imperial patronage of his cult on the modifications and flourish of his local temples. In particular, the author examines the role of influential courtiers on the emperors' interest in the Asclepius cult, providing a case-study of the relationship between Claudius and his personal Coan physician, Gaius Stertinius Xenophon, which led to granting privileges to the island and to increased prominence of the imperial doctor in his motherland. He further examines the impacts of imperial travels and visits to local temples, which contributed to the latter's flourish and exerted extensive influences on contiguous regions, focusing on the results of Hadrian and Caracallas' visits to the Asclepius sanctuary at Pergamum. Then, he explores the ways the bestowal of imperial rights to local sanctuaries generated competitions between neighboring cities and contributed to the salience of these sanctuaries and of their unique regional features. This chapter provides vital insights into the ways imperial actions and benefactions generated regional responses that led to intensification of local characteristics and predominance of specific sanctuaries over others in wider regions.

Chapter 4 explores the impacts that the creation of permanent imperial army by Augustus had on the cult of Asclepius. In particular, the author focuses on the Balkan, Danubian and Thracian provinces, and explores the transportation and ramification of the Asclepius cult in these areas after the Roman conquest. The mobility of the Roman army generated a constant field of interaction between global imperial culture and regional needs and circumstances. In this wider con-

text, the global cult of Asclepius was addressed to the shared need of Roman soldiers for safety and survival, that made his worship an appropriate way for evoking divine protection. Although this common need and pursuit generated an adherence of the Roman army to Asclepius and mediated the dissemination of his cult in the Roman provinces, the forms that the cult took in different regions resulted from mobility among the provinces, adaptations to local environments, and regional preferences and demands.

The role of army for the dissemination of the Asclepius cult in the Roman provinces, and the cult diversity, which was generated by the interaction of moving Roman officials and administrators with local populations, is explored in Chapter 5, which comprises a case-study of the associations between the Third Augustan Legion and Asclepius in Roman North Africa. In this chapter, the author compares the case of Africa Proconsularis, in which a cult of Asclepius pre-existed the arrival of the Roman army and was syncretized with the god Eshmun, with the transfer of the cult to Numidia by the Roman legion. His study provides significant insights into the ways the global cult of Asclepius was transplanted in different regions, with the figure of the deity and his worship to take different forms being adapted to the needs, beliefs, and habits of both moving and local populations.

The book provides a wide overview of the ways Roman Empire took, used and transformed a pre-existed Greek cult to serve the purposes of central administration, and further to cover the needs of both its moving agents and regional populations. In this framework, this multifaceted study highlights the pericentric dynamics and the mutual influences and interactions between Rome and the provinces, which were facilitated by the increased connectivity and mobility achieved in the age of Roman Empire, and generated a religious and cult diversity that covered the multiple and variable needs and preferences of the vast and varied populations of the Empire.

The author relies his study on abundant epigraphic, iconographic and numismatic material as well as on architectural remains, and accompanies his references to the sources with figures and tables which aggregate the preserved evidence. He uses the source material to support his historical arguments about the regional variations of the Asclepius cult and to indicate varied worship elements and practices. However, in this study, he does not extensively deal with the rituals and specific cultic elements that would have been vital for the cult and would have contributed to its attractiveness, diffusion and development. A more general shortcoming of the volume could be considered the many restatements and repetitions of the main aims, goals and conclusions of the study throughout the chapters.

In any case, this volume provides valuable evidence for the cult of Asclepius in Rome and the Roman provinces and the variations of the major cult features in different regions. Although the book could not easily introduce someone to the study of

Asclepius and his cult, it would be a necessary reading for those who are interested in the Roman history of the cult and its development in the Graeco-Roman era. The theoretical and methodological approach employed by the author provides a valuable paradigm for further studies on Asclepius as well as on other Graeco-Roman cults which will not be limited to a specific cult-centre but will trace connectivities, interactions and dynamics that co-modified the multifaceted religious world of the Roman Empire.