

Peregrinus



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Isola Tiberina, Island of the Tiber, is a mere 220 feet wide by 890 feet long. It sits mid-river in the heart of old Rome. Modern Epicureans commend its excellent restaurant. Ancient stone bridges connecting it to the city attract street performers most evenings. Arriving via Rome's oldest bridge, the Ponte Fabricio, the first building on the left was once the city's original Jewish hospital. Walking farther past the small piazza where the statue of St. John of God has replaced the ancient Roman obelisk, a pharmacy is on the right, and a passage to a courtyard where medical offices surround a fountain. After walking 50 yards from the bridge, approaching the far bank, there may be an ambulance unloading at the entrance to *Ospedale Fatebenefratelli*, (literally "hospital of the do-gooder brothers"). Founded by monks in the 16th century, it was re-sanctified through courage and deceit in the 20th century. On the edge of its grounds, if the gate is unlocked, one can descend the stairs and through the centuries to the river's edge.

pilgrimage

pil-grim-age

noun

- 1: a journey of a pilgrim
especially: one to a shrine or a sacred place
- 2: the course of life on earth

—Merriam-Webster.com¹

A pilgrimage

That was the path my wife and I took early one February morning in 2023 on my first visit to the Eternal City. Previous days of visiting museums, ruins, and beautiful churches had left me pleased and impressed, yet somehow spiritually unstirred. I am an internist and pediatrician who specializes in infectious diseases at a teaching hospital in North Carolina. Three difficult years immersed in COVID-19 care, the untimely deaths of two revered mentors, and the prolonged cancer illness and death of my mother had tired me and threatened to deplete my enthusiasm for teaching and practicing medicine.

Peregrinus

The city of Rome has been considered sacred ground to the Romans since its foundation. As Livius wrote, “There is not a spot of it that is not full of religious rites and of gods.”² It has drawn *peregrini*, or pilgrims, for centuries. They have come to seek papal blessings, to view great works of art and historical ruins, and to purchase fashionable footwear. This was a long-anticipated vacation trip for our family, and I wanted to add a small personal and professional pilgrimage of my own.

We descended to the concrete skirt that rings the *Isola Tiberina*. Walking just above the water’s edge and enjoying its babble as the sounds of the awakening city receded, we made our way around the island to the downstream corner nearest the left bank. There, we found our goal: a ship’s gunwale rendered in marble, and clearly visible above it, two millennia after its carving, the staff and serpent of the god, Asclepius.

Asclepius

Before he was a Roman god, before he was deified anywhere, Asclepius was a mortal physician in Greece, hundreds of miles to the east. He was said to be a son of Apollo, and tutored by the centaur Chiron. Known as “Asclepius of the gentle hands,”^{3,4} his healing skills were reputedly so extraordinary that he could resurrect the dead. He taught his students to use “first the word, then the herbs, last the knife.”^{3,4} His medical feats earned him the ire of the underworld ruler, Hades, who complained to Zeus that this upstart mortal doctor was depopulating his realm. Zeus felled Asclepius



Isola Tiberina, ship’s gunwale rendered in marble, with the staff and serpent of the god, Asclepius. Alamy



View of the Temple of Asclepius in Villa Borghese. Istockphoto

with a thunderbolt, but eventually repented and restored him, first as a constellation in the night sky, and, eventually, to the godhead.⁴

After his ascension as the god of medicine, temples were established throughout the Greek world, notably at Epidaurus, Cos, and Pergamum. Typically built around a healing spring—analogous to a modern health spa—those with ailments received what today might be called hydrotherapy, aromatherapy, nutritional guidance, and talk therapy. The highest level of the temple experience was the practice of supplicants sleeping within a special chamber, or *abaton*, often surrounded by the sacred temple snakes, and hoping to be granted a healing kiss from the serpents, or a healing visitation from the god in their dreams.^{3,4} The snakes’ ability to shed their worn skins for new and healthier ones made them symbols of regeneration and healing.

At the center of each temple would be a statue of Asclepius, always depicted holding the walking staff of the itinerant physician, entwined with the sacred serpent.⁴

Distinct from the temple’s priests and priestesses but aligned with them were medical practitioners known as the Asclepiad, meaning children of Asclepius. The earliest of these were Asclepius’ literal children. Later tales would assign the god five daughters, each named for an aspect of healing (Hygeia, Panacea, Aceso, Iaso, and Aegle).⁴ However, the first recorded mention of the mortal Asclepius comes by way of his sons, Machaon and Podalirius. They appear in Homer’s *Iliad* as warriors and skilled doctors, taught by their “unfailing healer” father.⁵

Asclepius’ tutelage was evident when Machaon, “healer of the

traumas” per Homer, was called to tend the wounded Menaleus, husband of Helen.⁵ Machaon skillfully withdraws an arrow from his flank and dresses the wound with a poultice. This is history’s first recorded surgical intervention.⁶

Later, the term Asclepiad was broadened to include all those Greeks schooled in the healing craft. Some of these practitioners settled in place, whereas others travelled the Mediterranean world plying their skills, secure in their knowledge of the universality of human pathology and therapeutics.⁴

Hippocrates

The most renowned of the ancient Asclepiad was Hippocrates, said to be the god’s 17th great-grandson. He was born, and studied, in Cos, Greece, but in his lifetime he traveled and practiced widely.⁷ Hippocrates’ gifts to his descendants included the prime directive of medicine, “First, do no harm.”⁷ He warned all who would seek to be healers that, “Life is short, and art is long.”⁷ His Oath, sworn by physicians to this day, enjoins us to treat all patients ethically, without regard for wealth or rank.⁷

Hippocrates also composed the earliest model of homeostasis, postulating that health and disease reflected the balance of four basic humors of the body: blood, phlegm, and yellow and black bile. This was the dominant Western medical paradigm well into the 18th century.⁷

A Roman temple

So well regarded was Asclepius, and to a lesser extent his children, that it was to him that the fledgling republic of Rome turned in its hour of need and set in motion the events that led me to this spot. In 293 BC, with a war ongoing and a plague assailing the city, the senate asked their priest to consult the Sibylline books of prophecy, who then told them to seek the aid of divine Asclepius at his temple in Epidaurus, Greece.

Reluctant to appeal to foreigners, the Romans dithered and sought a second opinion from the oracle at Delphi, who rendered the same advice.⁸ Finally, in 291 BC, a ship set out from Rome with a delegation bound for Epidaurus to seek the god’s favor. After arriving with entreaties and generous offerings, the god appeared and spoke in the form of a snake. Asclepius agreed not only to aid the Romans, but to accompany them back to Rome to live in a new temple they would build.

As the delegation sailed home up the Tiber, the god-serpent uncoiled from his perch around the ship’s mast and swam to the island in the river’s center. Having

chosen his Roman home, the temple was constructed around him, and the plague ceased.⁸

As the temple expanded over the years, the spindle-shaped island itself was adorned with marble sculptures at each end forming the bow and stern of a ship, with a grand obelisk rising in the center for a mast, to recall the god’s salutary arrival.

For centuries, as Republic gave way to Empire, this island in the Tiber remained the focus of healing in the great city. The island’s spring provided the temple clean water for drinking and bathing. Supplicants were comforted, prayed over, and calmed.⁸ So sacred was the temple, that Roman laws of sanctuary were written to protect those seeking healing from prosecution or arrest while within its environs.^{8,9} The popularity of the site and its use is known from written records and from thousands of votives, often small statues of afflicted body parts, that were left within and around the temple as testaments of gratitude from those healed.^{8,10,11}

Healing powers

If the rituals at the temple of Asclepius were the metaphysical heart of Roman medicine, its more prosaic activities took place on the temple’s outskirts and at sites near the island where the Asclepiad, often trained in the Greek traditions of practice, would ply their trade. Many early members of the Asclepiad were happy to adopt the Latin term, *medicus*, rather than emphasize the foreign origins of their craft.⁴ The Asclepiad apparently gained enough popular credibility by the late Republic that more foreign physicians were desired. Julius Caesar, in a move with modern echoes, looked explicitly to immigrants to address the shortage, and in 46 BC granted citizenship to all foreign physicians practicing in Rome.¹² Caesar’s adopted son, Emperor Augustus, even exempted physicians from taxes in 10 AD.¹²

In the later years of the Roman Empire, worship of a different healer born to a divine Father began to supersede that of Asclepius.^{3,4,8,12} Yet, if Jesus displaced Asclepius as the reigning deity on the island, their priests and medical practitioners kept the same working address. The Catholic saints Cosmas and Damian ‘The Unmercenary’ were twin brothers and physicians from Syria who travelled widely, curing the sick and refusing all payment until they were martyred under Emperor Diocletian in the third century. The brothers were reputed to have visited Rome and practiced on Tiber Island.^{12,13} Whether or not the tale of their Roman mission is factual, it suggests that the tiny island remained a site of care for the ill during the early Christian era.

More clearly historical was the establishment of a hospice in 900 AD by Benedictine monks, who made use of the ancient temple's spring. They built the Church of St. Albert (later renamed for St. Bartholomew the Apostle, whose bones it contained) on the site of the old Asclepian temple, almost certainly using some of its marble.^{4,13} The church of St. Bartholomew still stands, as does the marble well cap built over the sacred well in the 13th century AD. Its rim still shows the grooves where ropes were used to haul up the healing waters countless times.

The island and its spring's healing powers were utilized by the 12th century English monk, Rahere, who sought treatment there for his malaria while on his own pilgrimage to Rome. Fortified by the water and doctored by the monks, he recovered quickly and had a vision on his return journey of St. Bartholomew, who instructed him to establish a hospital in England. He did so, and "St. Bart's" in London opened to patients in 1129 AD, where it remains that city's oldest hospital.¹⁴



View on *Isola Tiberina*, the Tiber River Island, and Fatebenefratelli Hospital. Istockphoto

In 1584, the Benedictines were replaced on the island by the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God. These monks were known as the "Do-Gooder Brothers," *Fatebenefratelli*, and the next year they established the island's current hospital and flagship for their global mission to serve the sick and afflicted.⁸ During the plague outbreaks of 1656-57, their hospital cared for patients quarantined there.¹⁵ A travel narrative from 1873 praised the "modern hospital... into which all comers are received, of whatever nationality."¹⁶

For more than 400 years, from their headquarters on the island, the Brothers have expanded their health and social service activities in 46 countries, notably losing

three members of their Order and 16 staff to Ebola during the outbreak in West Africa in 2014.¹⁷

Continuing the caring tradition, in 1911 the Roman Jewish community's 200 years of health services in the ghetto where they had been confined on the river's left bank were consolidated in the construction of the Israelite Hospital on the island's northern edge. In addition to its medical services, provided free for destitute Jews, the building also housed a shelter for "poor and disabled Israelites."¹⁸ Today the *Ospedale Israelitico* spans several sites across the city and is integrated into the public health system, but still has its outpatient clinics at its original *Isola Tiberina* site.

Syndrome K

The 20th century brought terrible evil to that same Roman Jewish community. Never were the island's traditions of care and sanctuary more notable than in 1943 during the Nazi occupation. As thousands of Italian Jews were being seized and sent to death camps, an unknown number, perhaps as many as 100, sought the safety of the *Ospedale Fatebenefratelli*. There, under the care of surgeon Giovanni Borromeo, and anti-fascist leader and doctor Adriano Ossicini, many were diagnosed with the lethal, contagious, and completely fictitious Syndrome K (named for Rome's hated SS chief Herbert Kappler).¹⁹ Signs were posted on rooms warning of the risk to all who entered. Jewish children were taught to cough loudly whenever soldiers were in the hospital. The Gestapo declined to inspect those wards too closely.

Dr. Borromeo died in the hospital in 1961, and he would later be recognized as one of the "righteous among nations" by the Israeli government, and the entire hospital declared a "House of Life" by the Raoul Wallenberg Foundation.¹⁸

A sacred place

Today, the church of St. Bartholomew still stands over the site of the old temple, with its well cap over the healing spring just before the altar, while in the island's central piazza, a statue of St. John of God cradling a sick patient in his arms has replaced the Roman obelisk. The current 270-bed hospital is renowned in Rome for orthopedics, gastroenterology, and especially for its excellent (and busy) obstetrical services.

As I stood on the river's edge, looking at the temple remnant of a nearly forgotten god, my pediatrician's heart smiled to imagine the new babies beginning their pilgrimages, the course of their lives on Earth, in one of the world's sacred places. This site has been consecrated

by 23 centuries of unbroken care, healing, courage, effort, and sanctuary. Which is to say, by love.

I found myself not immune to the island's healing powers. Communing there with my colleagues, known and forgotten, who over the centuries proved their worthiness to serve the suffering, I felt my spirits rise.

Our lives can be diminished by malign societal and economic forces, by the usual human weaknesses and vices, by avarice, or callousness, or plain exhaustion. Perhaps we go to sacred places to find or connect to better versions of ourselves, to inch closer to our idealized characters, to imagine better societies and worlds. At least that has motivated my attendance at the churches of my religious tradition. I assume it is similar for my neighbors in their mosques, synagogues, and temples.

Or, maybe we seek stories of heroes. I imagine every faith has its heroes and saints, those who embodied its tenets in an exemplary fashion. Like many, medicine has been a calling for me, and an affinity for reading history has enlarged my personal medical pantheon. My life, and my practice, have been greatly enriched by the examples of Rudolph Virchow, Ignacius Semmelweis, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Francis Peabody (AΩA, Harvard Medical School, 1906), to name only a few.

By sharing this experience of a tiny island and its extraordinary medical history, I hope physicians reading it might feel a greater kinship with the best of our collective past, and present. Our shared experience of attempting to heal our fellow humans with imperfect knowledge and skills connects us across geography and time. Perhaps my surgeon friends can relate to the deft hands of Machaon on the battlefield, withdrawing the arrow and tending the wound. Together, we all can admire the bravery and moral clarity of Borremeo and Ossicini, and hope, when tested, to find some of their courage. We can recognize and strive for the brilliance and wisdom of Hippocrates. In our savagely unequal world, I believe we must not only honor but seek to emulate the unmercenary examples of Cosmas and Damien, who modeled the practice of caregiving without regard for wealth or rank.

These connections to our ideals and to each other, wherever in the world we can feel them, can help restore us when life feels too short, and the art too long. Whatever our settings and specific skills, we are all still the children of Asclepius and share the same mission: to heal with gentle hands.

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