

THE GOLDEN WAND OF MEDICINE _____

A History of the Caduceus
Symbol in Medicine

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Summary

This essay is an attempt to answer the question of how a particular object, the caduceus, came to symbolize a particular activity, medicine, especially when there is no evident connection between the two.

The first step in accomplishing this is to define the object. This is of considerable importance in this study because there are numerous examples in which this object has been confused with another which, indeed, has a clear association with medicine, the staff of the Graeco-Roman demi-god of medicine, Aesculapius. In this essay the caduceus, unless otherwise specifically stated, is the wand of the Greek god, Hermes (the Roman god, Mercury), and basically consists of two entwined serpents encircling a short rod.

The origin of the caduceus is not known, but even the theories that have been offered to explain its beginnings have lacked good evidence that it was, in some manner, uniquely linked to medicine. The earliest objects that were clearly caducei were short rods which had an 8-shaped figure with the upper circle of this open at the top. It was only later that the 8 became entwined serpents and, even later, that wings were added.

Because the caduceus was a more-or-less unique possession of Hermes, the special attributes of this god need to be carefully evaluated. Did he have a particular association with medicine? No. His relation with medicine was very tenuous. However, since many people now believe this god's unique possession is a symbol of medicine, are his other attributes those which the medical profession would find complimentary or disparaging? Both.

Hermes was considered wise, at least in the sense of being prudent and having good judgment; he was a good craftsman and was inventive, most notably in regard to music. He was a bringer of good luck. He was eloquent in his role as the messenger of the gods. At least some physicians would appreciate his being the patron, god or inventor of sports, most particularly wrestling.

On the other hand, Hermes was a crafty liar and thief, a trickster. He was the patron or god of commerce and merchants; the etymology of the words merchant and commerce is the Latin name of this god, Mercury. Too, he had a reputation for having a degree of dishonesty in his business dealing. He was the psychopomp, the one who took the soul of the dead to the underworld; this is a questionable reflection on the work of physicians. Hermes was sexually promiscuous; this is not very distinctive among the ancient gods, but he appears to have exercised this characteristic to an even greater extent than most of his peers.

These are the attributes of Hermes that have come down to us in classical mythology and may be referred to as a description of Traditional Hermes.

Beginning by the fifth century B.C. and becoming more evident during the following four or five centuries, Hermes became confused with an Egyptian god, Thoth. This confusion of Traditional Hermes with (Hermes)-Thoth was based on the Greeks identifying their gods with Egyptian gods.

Why the Greeks chose to relate Hermes with the Egyptian god, Thoth, is not at all clear. Thoth was a contrast to Traditional Hermes; he was a grave, wise in the sense of acquiring great knowledge, elderly man who was the essence of "right and truth" and who, rather than being a psychopomp, was the one who weighed a dead soul's value once this soul had come to the underworld. Since he was said to have invented all things, which included medicine, the Egyptian god Thoth can be reasonably linked to medicine. However, this still does not link the caduceus with medicine since Thoth was not associated with this particular wand!

The confusion about Hermes was further compounded around the beginning of the Christian era. The Egyptians were in the habit of praising Thoth by adding to his name the term "great" several times. Starting about the second century B.C., the Egyptians began referring to their god Thoth as three-times great, which in Greek is Hermes Trismegistus. Then about the second century A.D. the name Hermes Trismegistus began to be applied to an entirely new figure, someone other than Thoth or (Hermes)-Thoth three-times great. This person was said to be the author of a number of religious/philosophical tracts which were neoPlatonic in nature, as well as works on alchemy and astrology. These writings may well have been the product of a number of different authors who elected to write under the name of Hermes Trismegistus. This name may have been selected because of Hermes Trismegistus' reputation for great wisdom and inventiveness. I have distinguished this person(s) as pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus.

Medieval and Renaissance alchemists were referred to as the sons of Hermes because of the belief that it was Hermes who had invented this particular art. This Hermes, that is pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus, can be reasonably linked with medicine since alchemy played an important role in sixteenth and

seventeenth century medicine. However, it seems unlikely that this was the major reason Hermes, or his caduceus, subsequently became associated with medicine.

In the Renaissance, Hermes, and along with him, Traditional Hermes' unique identifying possession, the caduceus, became identified with wisdom, an attribute of Traditional Hermes (prudence as wisdom), and (Hermes)-Thoth (knowledge as wisdom), as well as pseudo-Hermes Trismegistus. However, as an attribute it was certainly not specific for members of the medical profession.

Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, for reasons which are not evident, examples began to appear in which the caduceus was adopted as a symbol for medicine per se. This was in addition to the more common use of the caduceus as a symbol of merchants and commerce.

It was recognized by some, perhaps by the end of the eighteenth century, and surely by the end of the nineteenth century, that the use of the caduceus as a symbol for medicine was inappropriate; the more correct symbol was the staff of Aesculapius with its single entwined serpent. One plausible explanation for the erroneous adoption of the caduceus as a symbol for medicine is that some, including members of the medical profession—perhaps particularly members of the medical profession—had forgotten, or, more likely, never knew which of the serpentine objects was connected with medicine. In any case, the popularity of the caduceus as a medical symbol grew to some extent during the nineteenth century, although it never reached the degree of popularity that has occurred in the twentieth century.

Another reason why medicine may have adopted this symbol, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, was that it appeared on the title page of many medical books. This was because a number of American medical book publishers began using a caduceus in their printer's marks. This can be traced to the use of such a mark by the English medical publisher, John Churchill, who, in turn, probably adopted it because it was used by the famous sixteenth century, nonmedical printer, Froben. Froben's use was based on the idea that Mercury was the commercial conveyer of messages.

It seems likely that the main reason why the caduceus has now become such a widely used symbol of medicine was that the United States Army Medical Department adopted it as their insignia in 1902. Although various explanations were used to defend this selection, it is evident that a major reason why the Army adopted this figure was because it was confused with the staff of Aesculapius.

At the present time the caduceus is a commonly accepted symbol of medicine, although it is used more widely by commercial than professional medical organizations.

Hence, although some legitimate connections can be made between one or several of the Hermes and medicine, these particular Hermes had very little relation with the Hermes who is commonly described in classical mythology

Traditional Hermes; he is the only Hermes linked with the caduceus. It seems most likely that the caduceus became associated with medicine because of two errors: confusion of Traditional Hermes with other Hermes, and lack of recognizing or knowing the difference between two distinct serpentine objects, Traditional Hermes' caduceus and Aesculapius' staff. The result is that present-day medicine, particularly in the United States, often shares the same symbol with merchants and commerce. Although, unfortunately, many lay people may think this is appropriate, it seems unlikely that most medical people, if they understood the underlying meaning of this object, would find it suitable.