

The Rod of Asclepius – symbol of healing

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Abstract. The study of the Rod of Asclepius explores the significance of the symbol of healing in the medical and mythological context, providing an in-depth understanding of its role in the development of medicine throughout history. The Rod of Asclepius, representing a staff coiled by a single snake, is not only a symbol of healing, but also a symbol deeply related to divinity, regeneration and the power to face death. In Greek mythology, Asclepius, the god of healing, acquired supernatural abilities from the centaur Chiron, being a symbol of a medical practice that transcended human boundaries, connecting the divine world with the earthly one. The importance of this study lies in understanding the interconnection between mythology, religion and medical practice. By deepening the study of the symbol of Asclepius, not only the deep roots of modern medicine were discovered, but also the universal meanings of regeneration and protection against diseases. The Rod of Asclepius, brought into the contemporary world through various emblems and health institutions, is a symbol of scientific knowledge and a tradition that continues to influence global medical practice. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance of symbols in building the professional identity of physicians and in understanding the evolution of medicine as a discipline related not only to scientific knowledge, but also to cultural beliefs and traditions. The Rod of Asclepius remains a bridge between past and present, a symbol that reiterates the idea that healing is a complex process, which transcends the limits of man and is connected to higher forces and nature itself.

Keywords: the Rod of Asclepius, medicine, symbol, healing, mythology, actuality.

Toiagul lui Asclepius – simbol al vindecării

Rezumat. Studiul despre Toiagul lui Asclepius explorează semnificația simbolului vindecării în contextul medical și mitologic, oferind o înțelegere aprofundată a rolului său în dezvoltarea medicinei de-a lungul istoriei. Toiagul, reprezentând un baston încolăcit de un singur șarpe, nu este doar un simbol al vindecării, dar și un simbol profund legat de divinitatea, regenerarea și puterea de a înfrunta moartea. În mitologia greacă, Asclepius, zeul vindecării, dobânda abilități supranaturale de la centaurul Chiron, fiind un simbol al unei practici medicale care depășea granițele umane, conectând lumea divină cu cea pământească. Importanța acestui studiu constă în înțelegerea interconexiunii dintre mitologie, religie și practică medicală. Prin aprofundarea studiului simbolului lui Asclepius, s-au descoperit nu doar rădăcinile profunde ale medicinei moderne, dar și semnificațiile universale ale regenerării și protecției împotriva bolilor. Toiagul lui Asclepius, adus în contemporaneitate prin diverse embleme și instituții de sănătate, este un simbol al

cunoașterii științifice și al unei tradiții care continuă să influențeze practica medicală globală. Astfel, acest studiu subliniază importanța simbolurilor în construirea identității profesionale a medicilor și în înțelegerea evoluției medicinei ca disciplină legată nu doar de cunoștințele științifice, dar și de convingerile și tradițiile culturale. Toiagul lui Asclepius rămâne o punte între trecut și prezent, un simbol care reiterează ideea că vindecarea este un proces complex, ce transcende limitele omului și care se află în legătură cu forțe superioare și cu natura însăși.

Cuvinte-cheie: Toiagul lui Asclepius, medicină, simbol, vindecare, mitologie, actualitate.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Rod of Asclepius, an iconic symbol of medicine, has its roots in Greek mythology and ancient religious traditions. Associated with the god Asclepius, the protector of the healing arts, this staff coiled by a snake has crossed the millennia, being recognized today globally as a sign of the medical profession and authority in the field of health. Although it is often confused with the caduceus of Hermes, the symbol of Asclepius is much more closely related to the principles of regeneration, healing, and balance between life and death.

This symbol has a similar meaning in both human medicine and veterinary medicine. In ancient times, veterinarians (or hipiatriști) were closely related to human medicine, and treatments for humans and animals were often the same. The snake, a symbol of healing, was also associated with the care of animals, being frequently found in the temples dedicated to Asclepius, where healing rituals were practiced for both humans and animals.

This article aims to explore the mythological origins of the Rod of Asclepius, its multiple meanings in different cultures and traditions, as well as its impact on contemporary medical practice. We will look at how this symbol has evolved and how it continues to be relevant in the current context, where medicine and spirituality often intersect. Through this historical and symbolic journey, we will better understand how the Rod of Asclepius remains a symbol of great importance for modern medicine and the principles of healing and ethical responsibility that guide it.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopts a multidimensional and qualitative methodology to explore the meaning and use of the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius in the medical field, focusing on its role

in promoting health for humans and animals. The approach combines two main methods: the inductive method and the synthetic method.

The inductive method is used to analyze particular observations and reach general conclusions about the evolution of the symbol, its application in various contexts, and the impact on the image of health institutions and professionals. In parallel, the synthetic method integrates information from diverse sources, such as scientific articles, research reports, and historical documents, to build a coherent view of the significance of the Rod of Asclepius in the modern context.

The literature review plays a pivotal role in this study, as it provides a solid theoretical basis and details the use of the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius in history. Academic studies and expert reports are examined to understand both the mythological origins of the symbol and its subsequent reinterpretations for the purpose of promoting health.

The study is exploratory and aims to open new research directions in relation to the cultural and ethical significance of the Rod of Asclepius, as well as its impact on public perception in the field of health.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. The Symbolism of the Rod of Asclepius in Ancient Culture and Medicine

Greek mythology is the key to understanding the origins of the Rod of Asclepius and its significance. Asclepius was not only a deity of healing, but also a symbol of regeneration and the balance between life and death. The mythological history underlying this symbol illustrates the depth of ancient understanding of healing, wisdom, and the dual nature of life [1, 27].

Asclepius is the son of Apollo, the god of light and arts, and the nymph Coronis. The place of his birth remains a subject of debate even today. According to the Delphic tradition (Delphi – an important religious center of ancient Greece), Asclepius was born in the temple of Apollo, while another version suggests that he was born in Epidaurus. According to Strabo and other sources, Asclepius' birthplace is considered to be Tricca. According to mythology, his birth was accompanied by divine signs, and his healing talents were clear from childhood. Asclepius was raised by Chiron (son of Cronus and Philyra), who, unlike the other centaurs, was wise and possessed advanced knowledge of the art of healing. Chiron, a remarkable teacher of many heroes of Greek mythology such as Jason, Theseus and Achilles, shared with the young Asclepius the secrets of healing and healing plants, a teaching that would later allow him to banish pain from the bodies of the sick and regenerate the parts affected by the disease.

Chiron was known for his medical knowledge and gentle nature, which contrasted with the often-savage behavior of other centaurs. Chiron gave Asclepius not only medical teachings, but also a profound insight into the balance between life and death, an essential theme in his practice as a physician [15], [18].

Asclepius, endowed with extraordinary abilities, was able to cure serious diseases and even raise the dead. The latter was a controversial ability, which brought him into conflict with Zeus, the god of the sky. Zeus, fearing that Asclepius might disturb the divine order of life and death, killed him with lightning, ending his life. However, thanks to the intervention of his father, Apollo, Asclepius was brought back to life and transformed into a god, but with restrictions on his powers. Thus, he was condemned not to be able to resurrect anyone without Zeus' permission [15].

This transformation of Asclepius into a healing deity was accompanied by the establishment of a cult around him, and temples dedicated to him became important centers for medical and religious practices.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Asclepius' mythology is his connection to the serpent. In a famous legend, it is said that a snake licked Asclepius' ears, thus giving him the secret knowledge of healing. In many ancient cultures, the snake was seen as a symbol of wisdom, regeneration, and transformation. The peeling of the snake's skin has been seen as a metaphor for the healing and rebirth process, being associated with its ability to regenerate and face death [9, 10].

In Greek mythology, the serpent symbolized the dual nature of healing, at the same time capable of bringing both life and death. Thus, the serpent in the Rod of Asclepius becomes a representation of the god's power to restore life and health, but also of the dangers and limits that any medical process entails. This ambivalence was reflected in the Greek concept of "pharmakon," which means both "cure" and "poison." Therefore, the snake becomes a symbol of therapeutic power but also of the danger that accompanies the use of remedies in the healing process [21, 22].

Another variant of the myth that emphasizes the importance of the snake in the symbolism of Asclepius is related to his encounter with a snake during a mission to resurrect Glaucus, son of King Minos of Crete. According to the legend, Asclepius was called to resurrect a deceased young man, and at the moment when he was in meditation, a snake approached his staff. In a moment of distraction, Asclepius struck the snake with his staff, killing it. After this incident, another snake appeared, carrying a plant in its mouth and placing it on the body of the dead snake, thus bringing it back to life. Amazed by this miracle, Asclepius used the same plant to resurrect Glaucus, which gave him divine status, now having the power to heal and restore life [9, 10].

Following this miraculous discovery, the Aesculapian snake (*Zamenis longissimus*), a species of non-venomous snake widespread in central and southern Europe, including the Republic of Moldova, was named in honour of the god Asclepius. So, the snake has become a symbol of its power to heal and bring to life.

In Greek mythology, the plant associated with the resurrection of the serpent and, implicitly, with the restoration of life is referred to as "herba" or "relative", being identified in some sources with veronica (*Veronica officinalis*). Other variants of the legend suggest that this plant could be the "salamander", a symbol of regeneration and healing. According to Greek myths, Asclepius, the god of healing, would have used the "dandelion" (*Taraxacum officinale*) to treat various ailments. Another legend mentions the use of "milkweed" (*Asclepias*), a perennial herbaceous plant associated with Asclepius due to its medicinal properties. Plants of the Asclepiadaceae family are frequently linked to the activity of this god, being considered beneficial for the regeneration and healing of the body. However, these details vary depending on the source, and in different versions of the myth, the herb associated with Asclepius' healing power is different. This story emphasizes the role of the snake in ancient medicine, as a symbol of regeneration and healing power. At the same time, the plant used for the resurrection of the snake became an important remedy in the medical practices of the time, being related to the idea of cure and transformation [23, 25, 27].

Beginning in about 400 B.C., the cult of Asclepius experienced rapid development, becoming extremely popular throughout Greece. The temples, known as Asclepia, were erected in places such as Epidaurus (IV B.C.), Kos (III B.C.), Pergamum (II B.C.), and Trikala (I B.C.) being centers dedicated not only to physical healing, but also to spiritual processes of regeneration [18]. In these sanctuaries, the sick sought healing through a process called "incubatio", which involved spending a night in the temples consecrated to Asclepius, in the hope that the god would appear to them in a dream to give them advice and treatment. This ritual emphasized the deep connection between spirituality and medicine in the ancient vision [17]. In this context, the staff was not only an object of worship, but also a representation of the connection between the divine and human worlds, being a symbol of protection and guidance in the healing process.

Also, the Rod of Asclepius was used as a mark of the professional belonging of doctors, who, as a sign of respect for the divine, adopted it as a symbol of their expertise and competence in the field of health [18]. In many ancient iconographic representations, doctors and priests were depicted with such a staff, signifying their essential role in healing the sick.

The symbol of the Rod of Asclepius was often depicted in ancient art, including on vessels, coins, and sculptures. One of the most notable uses of this symbol appears on the coins of Epidaurus, where the serpent is clearly seen wrapped around a staff [9], [10]. These coins were often used to celebrate divinity and encourage people to visit shrines where sacralized medicine was practiced. In addition to its religious meanings, this symbol had a practical function, being a way to mark the legitimacy of a doctor or a cult dedicated to healing.

In sculptures, the staff was frequently depicted as an object that the god Asclepius held with dignity, symbolizing his power to restore health. However, some representations were less directly religious, and the symbol of the staff was used mainly as a sign of the authority and medical knowledge of the doctors of the time.

The cult of Asclepius was largely absorbed into Roman culture, and the symbol of his Rod continued to be associated with medicine during the Roman period. After the Hellenistic period, the Romans adopted the god Asclepius and built temples dedicated to him, continuing medical practices based on his teachings. The staff has remained the central symbol of the medical profession and healing power.

The Romans also transformed medical practice into a more formalized profession, and the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius became a universal mark of this profession. In ancient Rome, doctors signed their treaties and official documents using this symbol, which made direct reference to the divine healing power. In addition, medical care at that time was closely linked to the understanding of man as a whole: body, mind and spirit [18].

The staff of Asclepius continued to be a symbol of medicine long after the end of the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, especially in Islamic and Christian traditions, the symbol was maintained in various representations of medical practice, often being associated with monks and doctors in monasteries who cared for the sick. However, during this period, symbolism evolved and the image of the snake was reinterpreted in different spiritual and religious contexts [15, 16].

3.2. The Symbolism of the Rod of Asclepius in Modern Medicine

In modern times, the Rod of Asclepius has been widely adopted as a symbol of the medical profession. This symbol is still associated with medicine and the essential role that doctors play in healing and caring for the sick. Even though medicine has evolved significantly in technological and scientific terms, the symbol continues to emphasize the humanistic nature of the profession, based on empathy, dedication and trust between the patient and the doctor.

Today, the Rod of Asclepius appears on the emblems of many international and national health and medical organizations, including the logos of the World Health Organization (WHO), the American Medical Society, and the Colleges of Veterinarians. In many countries, this symbol is associated with the doctors' oath and the ethical principles of the profession, representing responsibility towards patients and respect for the art of healing.

We find it on official documents, uniforms and websites of medical institutions, emphasizing the connection between modern medicine and ancient traditions. It is also used on university degrees and academic seals, symbolizing belonging to a respected profession with a long history. At the same time, the Rod of Asclepius reflects society's trust in health professionals and their essential role in protecting life [19].

Furthermore, in many facilities, the Rod of Asclepius is used to symbolize the commitment of public health institutions to provide quality care, safety, and empathy, and is often integrated into the architectural design of healthcare facilities, whether in the form of statues, panels, or decorative objects. This symbolism is a landmark for patients and medical staff that the healing process is not only a physical one, but also one in which spirituality, ethics and compassion play an essential role.

The staff of Asclepius is an emblem and symbol also used by other health professions. In many cultures, a snake wrapped around a staff is no longer only a sign of healing, but also of balance and responsibility towards the sick, indicating that health care is a complex process that includes physical, emotional, and psychological aspects.

In addition, the meaning of the symbol has also extended in the context of new medical practices, including alternative medicine, where the snake can represent the renunciation of old habits and the regaining of a balance in health and life [14]. Thus, the Rod of Asclepius is seen as a symbol of divine authority in the healing process and as a symbol of an integrative and personalized way of approaching the sick.

Also, the "One Health" concept integrates human medicine, veterinary medicine, ecology and public health. This modern vision continues the ancient principles of Asclepius, who did not make a rigid distinction between treatments for humans, animals, and the environment.

Currently, technological advances have radically changed medicine, offering new solutions for diagnosing and treating diseases. Technologies such as advanced imaging, robotic surgery, gene therapies and personalized medicine have opened innovative perspectives on the healing process. In this context, the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius remains current, combining medical tradition with new scientific discoveries.

The staff of Asclepius, a symbol of knowledge and healing, can be interpreted today as an expression of the balance between traditional methods and modern technologies.

For example, robotic surgery, which allows high-precision interventions, continues the ideal of perfect healing, present in the symbolism of the staff since ancient times. At the same time, new diagnostic techniques and personalized treatments transform medicine into an act increasingly adapted to the needs of each patient, emphasizing the connection between science and care for humans.

The snake coiled on the staff, associated with regeneration and healing, may symbolize this ever-deepening connection between traditional methods and modern technologies that are revolutionizing medicine. In times of global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or other public health threats, the Rod of Asclepius takes on additional significance – it becomes a symbol of hope, resilience and human solidarity.

The snake, seen as a sign of cleansing and regeneration, may represent the need to protect ecosystems and public health, while the staff symbolizes the unity of health professionals. Global crises are also opportunities to re-strengthen the connection between human, animal, environment, and science, while the Rod of Asclepius reflects this essential interconnectedness.

A significant aspect in the modern use of the Rod of Asclepius is the frequent confusion with the caduceus, another symbol that is often associated with medicine but has a different meaning. The caduceus, which represents a staff surrounded by two snakes and is associated with the god Hermes (Mercury in Roman mythology), is usually used to symbolize trade, negotiation, and exchange. Wrongly, many seals and insignia of medical institutions adopted the caduceus instead of the Rod of Asclepius, and this led to significant confusion among the general public. Thus, in modern medicine, it is important that the Rod of Asclepius be correctly identified and used to emphasize its authentic connection with the medical profession, while the caduceus remains linked to commerce and not to health [24].

Another important aspect of the Rod of Asclepius in modern medicine is its connection to the ethical and philosophical aspects of the medical profession. In Greek mythology, Asclepius healed not only the body, but also the soul, and this reflects an integrated view of health, which remains valid today. In an era where technology and medical science are advancing rapidly, it is important for doctors to remember their responsibility to the sick from a broader perspective, which includes not only treating the symptoms, but also supporting the patient in their psychological and emotional process.

Another important aspect of the use of Asclepius' Rod in modern medicine is in the field of education. In this context, the Rod symbolizes the healing and prevention of diseases through education, a healthy lifestyle and access to correct information.

Global public health promotion organizations and campaigns use symbols associated with the Rod of Asclepius to encourage healthy behaviors. This symbol can thus be seen as a sign of the evolution of medicine towards a proactive approach, which emphasizes the prevention of diseases and not just their treatment.

In contemporary culture, the Rod of Asclepius is, in many ways, the symbol of an ideal – that of finding the balance between technology and humanity, between science and spirituality. Although it is used predominantly in the medical field, the symbol has acquired a universal character, having meanings that go beyond the limits of the medical professions [2].

3.3. The symbolism of the Rod of Asclepius in the religious and spiritual context

The staff of Asclepius is not only a symbol of medicine, but also an element with a deep spiritual and religious charge. Rooted in Greek mythology, this symbol took on a broader meaning with the spread of Greco-Roman culture, being associated with the idea of healing through divine intervention. In ancient Greece and Rome, Asclepius was worshipped as a god of healing, and the temples dedicated to him, called Asclepieia, were not only places of treatment, but also sacred spaces where people sought comfort for both body and soul.

His symbol, a snake coiled around a staff, was considered a sacred instrument through which he manifested his healing powers and through which people sought relief for both physical and spiritual suffering. In this context, medicine was a science, a sacred act and a process in which human knowledge was intertwined with divine forces and the serpent was associated with wisdom and hidden knowledge, symbolizing regeneration and transformation. At the same time, it represented the renewal of life, the continuity and cyclicity of nature, invoking the divine forces of life and death.

The doctors in the healing temples of the Asclepieia under the protection of the god Asclepius were often considered intermediaries between the world and the divinity, having the gift of treating diseases through divine consent. The sick prayed to the god Asclepius to heal their sufferings and, in many cases, they had visions or dreams during the night that offered them solutions or remedies for their ailments. Thus, in this religious tradition, healing was not only seen as a medical act, but also as a sacred act, a divine gift that manifested itself through symbols and rituals.

In the Greco-Roman religious vision, the Rod of Asclepius symbolized the connection between divinity, man, and animal, representing the harmony between health and spirituality. It was a symbol of divine power, accessible only to those who sought healing not only of the body, but also of the soul. This is a vision that emphasizes the importance

of balancing the physical and the metaphysical, between the tangible and the immaterial [11].

In Eastern religious traditions, such as Hinduism, the snake holds a deep spiritual and symbolic significance. It is associated with Kundalini, the latent spiritual energy at the base of the spine, which, when awakened, leads to enlightenment and self-discovery. The rod of Asclepius, through its serpent, can be interpreted in these traditions as a symbol of spiritual ascent, inner transformation and awakening of consciousness.

In Buddhism, the symbolism of the serpent is related to the wisdom and protection provided by the teachings of the Buddha. Some of the greatest spiritual masters are often described as having teachings that are hidden or esoteric, but which, once discovered, lead to the complete realization of truth and freedom from suffering. Thus, the Rod of Asclepius in these traditions could signify the path to wisdom and spiritual enlightenment, a symbol of a journey that includes both physical healing and inner evolution [28].

In Christianity, the symbolism of the serpent has traditionally been associated with evil and temptation, especially in the biblical context of the "Fall" in the Garden of Eden, where it was the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve. However, within mystical Christian traditions and Gnostic theology, the serpent can also be seen as a symbol of divine wisdom and knowledge. An example of this is the Old Testament story of Moses and the brazen serpent, who was lifted up on a rod and had the power to heal those bitten by venomous snakes. In this context, the snake is rather a symbol of divinity that brings salvation and protection.

At the same time, in contemporary Christianity, the Rod of Asclepius can be interpreted as a symbol of divine healing and consolation offered by God in the face of physical and spiritual suffering. Thus, in many churches and charity hospitals, the symbol of the serpent wrapped around the staff can be seen as a sign of hope and reconciliation between suffering and salvation, being a bridge between pain and salvation, between death and life.

Alchemy, as a spiritual philosophy and occult practice, was strongly influenced by mythological and esoteric symbols, and the Rod of Asclepius has an important significance in this context. In alchemy, the snake is often the symbol of transformation, regeneration, and purification. Alchemists believed that the raw material of the world could be transformed through a process of purification, and the serpent coiled around the staff could represent the process of "elevation" of the human spirit from a lower to a higher state, similar to the physical evolution of the snake shedding its skin.

In occult philosophy, the Rod of Asclepius can symbolize the initiatory path of a person who goes through multiple stages of self-knowledge and inner transformation, seeking to

reach a state of spiritual enlightenment. Thus, the symbol can be interpreted as a guide for those who seek to discover the truth hidden in their own existence and to reach the essential understanding of the universe [13].

In contemporary culture, the Rod of Asclepius has been reinterpreted as a symbol of regeneration, balance and reconnection to our inner nature. In an era marked by stress, anxiety and health disorders, this symbol was taken up as a reminder that healing does not only involve external interventions, but also a restoration of harmony between mind, body, and spirit.

Today, the Rod of Asclepius continues to play an important role in modern spirituality, especially in the context of New Age movements and integrative healing practices. In these traditions, the symbol is often associated with healing through balance between mind, body, and spirit. In this context, the snake is no longer seen as a simple symbol of illness or danger, but as a symbol of vital energy and the process of continuous regeneration.

Many of the healing traditions and energy therapy (such as Reiki or other similar practices) consider the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius to reflect the balance between the cosmic and natural forces of the universe. Also, in these practices, the snake that coils around the staff is seen as a symbol of the flow of vital energy through the human body and the necessary balance between the opposing but complementary forces of life and death.

Thus, the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius, which began as a sign of physical healing, has become a universal symbol of hope, regaining balance, and enlightenment in the face of contemporary challenges, having meanings that go beyond the boundaries of medicine and touch the spheres of human spirituality and philosophy.

3.4. The Symbolism of the Rod of Asclepius in Modern Culture

The symbolism of the Rod of Asclepius has profoundly influenced literature, especially in works that explore themes of suffering, healing, and the struggle against fate. In many literary works, the serpent that coils the staff is used as a symbol of regeneration or a dual force at the same time, signifying danger and lessons of learning from suffering.

For example, in novels that address topics related to frontier medicine or scientific research in the field of health, the Rod of Asclepius becomes a symbol of the balance between science and ethics, between the desire to understand the sick body and responsibility towards the patient. These themes are visible in works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where science becomes both a creative tool and a huge danger, and the symbols associated with medicine can be seen in the protagonist's struggle with his own inventions and understanding of human limits.

In literature, the symbol of the Rod has also been used in more philosophical contexts, such as in the works of Carl Jung, where the serpent is often associated with archetypes of the unconscious, and the rod reflects the power to confront human nature and seek healing through self-discovery.

The rod of Asclepius, a symbol of Greek mythology and medical practice, has also been used in movies, cartoons, video games and TV series, becoming a symbol strongly associated with healing and responsibility towards cosmic and natural forces. In movies and books that explore superhero or fantasy themes, The Rod of Asclepius is often used to emphasize the idea of healing power and to highlight the characters' responsibility to powers that transcend natural limits.

The symbol is frequently found in productions that address health themes or time travel, emphasizing the importance of balancing science and spirituality. For example, in the series "Grey's Anatomy", the hospital and medical professionals are often portrayed as being in a transitional zone between science and the miraculous, with the Rod of Asclepius appearing in logos and sets. Here, the symbol reflects not only traditional medicine, but also the idea of miracles or supernatural solutions that can intervene in healing processes.

In the Marvel universe, the Rod is used to mark characters like Doctor Strange, whose healing abilities are linked not only to science, but also to supernatural powers, which go beyond natural limits. Also, in comics and superhero movies, the symbol is associated with characters who have the responsibility to protect life and heal, emphasizing the ethical and scientific role of these heroes in the face of destructive forces. In "X-Men," for example, characters such as Jean Grey and Storm, who possess healing or protective abilities, are associated with the Rod of Asclepius, emphasizing their symbolic connection to the power to restore balance and protect life.

In video games, the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius is often used to represent healing elements or special powers that help characters heal their wounds or illnesses caused during the game. For example, in role-playing games (RPGs) or strategy games, players can use the "staff" or "healing stick" as items that provide the power to heal, protect, or resurrect characters that have taken damage. Also, the snake that wraps around the staff can be a symbol of regeneration and a new beginning in games that are based on the cyclicity of characters' death and rebirth.

Today, the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius has a strong cultural relevance and continues to be a reference point in modern culture. In the world of emerging technologies and global health concerns, this symbol is often brought up in various contexts, from meditations on bioethics to discussions of mental health and social responsibility in the face of global diseases.

Thus, the symbol of the Rod remains a sign of human complexity, of the desire to find a balance between science, ethics and responsibility, being a deeply integrated element in fiction and mythology. Bringing it constantly into modern culture helps to perpetuate the link between humanity's healing ideals and the contemporary realities of medicine, technology, and man's spiritual evolution.

3.5. The Symbolism of the Rod of Asclepius in Romanian Folk Culture

In Romanian culture, the symbolism of the staff and the snake is deeply rooted in traditions, myths and popular beliefs. Although the figure of Asclepius is not directly mentioned in Romanian folklore, the fundamental elements of this symbol - the rod and the snake - are found in different forms in traditional medicine, beliefs about healing and even in pastoral customs [3, 4, 6].

In Romanian folk mythology, the snake is considered a being with magical powers, protector of the house and symbol of longevity and regeneration. It was believed that a snake that lives under the hearth brings good luck to the family. This snake becomes the "snake of the house", the protector of the family and the household, and its killing brings bad luck and disease [5]. In some regions, snakes in certain sacred places were said to possess healing powers. This view of the snake as a beneficial symbol is similar to its image in the Greek tradition, where it was associated with healing and medicine [3, 4].

Moreover, in traditional Romanian medicine, snake venom was sometimes used for therapeutic purposes, and the belief that "venom can also be a cure" reflects the homeopathic principle according to which a harmful substance in small doses can have beneficial effects on the body [7]. This idea is also found in the use of snake venom in modern medicine, where it is used in treatments for neurological and rheumatic conditions.

In many Romanian villages, there were practices of "incantations" in which women-healers used the symbolism of the snake to treat snake bites, fever or other diseases. It was said that only the one who saw the "white serpent", a symbol of supreme wisdom, could become a true healer. This myth is reminiscent of Asclepius' initiation into the art of healing. Also, in some areas, people wore dried snakeskin as a talisman against disease, a custom that once again emphasizes the belief in the healing properties of this reptile [8].

In Romanian popular culture, the snake is also a symbol of occult knowledge and of the passage between worlds [26]. It was believed that an "enchanted snake" could bring good luck or reveal hidden mysteries. This perception resonates with the image of Asclepius' staff, where the serpent is not a symbol of fear, but of regeneration and wisdom. Moreover, in some Romanian fairy tales, the hero must obtain a magical staff

or defeat a dragon (a mythical form of the snake) in order to gain power and knowledge, similar to the mythological attributions of Asclepius as a god of healing and medical wisdom [20].

The snake has also been associated with fertility and nature's cycles. It was believed to be related to underground forces, having an influence on soil and crops. In some regions, the presence of a snake around the household was considered to bring abundance [12].

The staff of Asclepius, as a symbol of medicine, essentially reflects a close connection between practical knowledge and spirituality, a duality that is also found in Romanian folk medicine. In the past, medicine was practiced not only by doctors, but also by priests, monks or women-healers who used both natural remedies and rituals of protection and incantations. This overlap between science and faith is visible in many traditional practices, such as anointing with holy herbs, using enchanted water, or consulting dreams as diagnostic methods. Thus, it can be said that, as in the case of Asclepius' staff, Romanian folk medicine combines the tangible aspects of healing with a spiritual dimension.

The staff in Romanian popular culture, symbolizes wisdom, power, and social status. Over time, it was more than just a tool for shepherds – it also had a sacred dimension, often being encrusted with protective signs. In many rural communities, village elders, healers or priests were depicted with a staff, a sign of their authority and connection with the higher forces.

This symbolism is also found in folk medicine, where medicine men and "enchanters" used special staffs, considered endowed with healing powers. It was believed that touching it with such a staff could ward off disease, and in some regions, priests used it to bless water during consecration services.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between the staff of Asclepius - the universal symbol of medicine and the traditional shepherding practices in Romania. Shepherds resorted to herbal remedies and incantations to treat animal diseases, and sometimes used a staff adorned with protective symbols to "drive evil" from the flock. This gesture is reminiscent of the mythological role of Asclepius' staff, considered an instrument of healing.

In traditional Romanian veterinary medicine, animal healers combined rituals, medicinal plants, and symbolic objects to protect herds from disease. In some regions, a carved stick or knotted string was thought to have defense powers against ailments. All these practices reflect a deep cultural heritage, in which caring for animals was an economic necessity and a spiritual aspect of pastoral life.

More than just a tool, the staff has always been an essential element of the shepherd's universe, having both practical and ritual functions. By marking animals with sacred signs

or by using it in moments of protection and healing, the staff has become a symbol of the connection between man, nature, and supernatural forces. This intersection of popular beliefs and veterinary medicine underscores the profound importance of traditions passed down through generations.

Although the staff of Asclepius was not a symbol specific to Romanian traditions, its fundamental elements – the snake as protector, healer, and symbol of wisdom – are deeply rooted in the local popular culture. Traditional Romanian medicine, like the ancient art of healing in ancient Greece, understood the complexity of the connection between body and soul, between science and faith. This fact underlines a deep connection between Greek mythology and Romanian traditions, highlighting a common cultural heritage in terms of medical wisdom and respect for nature. This dual symbolism remains relevant to this day, reflecting universal human conceptions of health, regeneration, and knowledge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of the meaning of the Rod of Asclepius reveals the complexity and depth of this symbol, which transcends the field of medicine to connect with fundamental aspects of spirituality, religion, and culture. From its mythological origins, in which the Rod of Asclepius was associated with the divine power of healing, to subsequent adaptations and reinterpretations in various religious and spiritual traditions, this symbol has evolved into a sign of the balance between science and spirituality.

The study pointed out that, in Greek mythology, the Rod of Asclepius reflected a covenant between the god Asclepius and the sick who sought healing, the snake being a symbol of regeneration and divine wisdom. In the temples dedicated to him, healing was not only seen as a medical act, but also as a profound religious ritual, in which divine intervention was sought to restore health.

The symbol has also been adopted in other cultures and religions, becoming a meeting point between mystical and scientific traditions. At the level of modernity, the Rod of Asclepius continues to be relevant, often being used in the context of integrative healing and contemporary spirituality, where it is seen as a symbol of harmony between mind, body, and spirit.

The study of the Rod of Asclepius reveals that its symbolism goes beyond the boundaries of human medicine and extends to veterinary medicine. From ancient hippiatrists to modern veterinarians, the principles of healing have been based on the same philosophy - health must be understood as a balance between humans, animals and the environment. The Rod of Asclepius continues to be a powerful symbol of this tradition, having a significant relevance in the field of medicine.

Thus, the Rod of Asclepius is a symbol that has continuously evolved, reflecting the changes in our understanding of health, but also of the connection between divinity and humanity. This remains an example of how mythology, religion, and science can coexist, each complementing each other in the quest for understanding and healing. Therefore, the symbol of the Rod of Asclepius is not only an essential element of medicine, but also a metaphor for the balance between the natural and divine forces that govern health and existence.

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