Healing, Disease and Placebo in Graeco-Roman Asclepius Temples: A Neurocognitive Approach
By O. Panagiotidou (2022)
Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox, xiii + 213pp, 10 figures.

Reviewed by Paul Robertson

Healing, Disease and Placebo in Graeco-Roman Asclepius Temples contains both the promise and pitfalls of cognitive historiography. Approaching historical questions with tools from the cognitive and neurological sciences, cognitive historiography has the potential to open up new approaches, ask different kinds of questions, and provide novel descriptive and explanatory frameworks for familiar content. At the same time, attempting to unite cognitive and neuroscience with particular cultural-historical contexts runs the risk of manifesting a shallow mastery of both cognition and culture, doing neither proper justice. As a result, some of the conclusions and theoretical frames may be presented as advances, but in reality they simply re-tread old ground by using new language to restate familiar knowledge.

Cognitive historiography is a subfield of the cognitive science of religion (CSR), a relatively new, highly interdisciplinary, and non-unified field that approaches the numerous elements and manifestations of religion using tools and theories from cognition, evolutionary psychology, and philosophy, among others. From the perspective of CSR, Panagiotidou’s book comes out of the Religion, Cognition and Culture research unit at Aarhus University, which also oversees the Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion (JCSR) and is centrally involved with the International Association for the Cognitive and Evolutionary Sciences of Religion (IACESR). The university group, journal, and society have all been leaders in the field of

Affiliation
University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, USA.
email: paul.robertson@unh.edu

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CSR, responsible for a great many important advances, both conceptual and in terms of academic personnel. Panagiotidou's book can therefore be seen as representative of the type of work current in the field of cognitive historiography, here applied to her own research interest in the ‘Great Temples’ of Asclepius, the ancient Greek and Roman god of healing. The unique approach of this book, and therefore its central contribution, is its use of theories from cognition and neuroscience to help describe and explain both this historical-cultural religious phenomenon and the likely individual experience of those seeking to be healed.

The Introduction summarizes Asclepius and his cult of healing. Chapter 1 outlines theories from CSR and related fields, explaining their relevance and utility to historical questions. Chapter 2 explores how these CSR theories help us to understand the appeal and function of Asclepius and his divine healing. Chapter 3 situates Asclepius in the medical context of the ancient Greco-Roman world, and the social and cognitive processes that would lead someone to pursue healing there. Chapter 4 details the nature of the temple complex and how it created the conditions for healing. Chapter 5 delves into ‘incubation,’ the practice where patients spent the night in the temple’s abaton (inner room) and purportedly were visited by the god Asclepius to manifest their cure. A Conclusion speaks to the project in the broader context of cognitive historiography.

For those less familiar with CSR, Healing, Disease and Placebo provides a useful primer on some key ideas. The cognitive science of religion focuses on cognitive processes which are theorized to be universal across the human species, regardless of time and culture: the memorability of ‘minimally counterintuitive ideas,’ an innate theory of mind that detects and furnishes notions of agency, and a folk psychology that assumes that agents have minds, beliefs, desires, and intentions different from one’s own. Only relatively recently have these theories and approaches been applied to real historical and cultural case studies. In this respect, Panagiotidou’s work is a useful step forward. She shows, for example, how the healing god Asclepius would have been easily and naturally understood as a person-like agent of high memorability, and that by activating innate processes in the mind the miraculous cures purportedly manifested at Epidaurus can be explained through, among other things, the production of dopamine (pp. 104–8). Panagiotidou deserves real credit for linking together disparate subjects such as the neuroscience of dopamine production with the cultural forces present in Asclepius’ cult – no easy feat. It is a welcome feat, too, that engages the consilience of science and the humanities, instead of providing another highly specialized monograph around a very narrow cultural-historical question.
At the same time, the CSR theories in the book are dated and at times problematic. The foundational theories that guide Panagiotidou’s work are those that we might term ‘mind-centric’ or ‘belief-centric’ CSR, which focuses on so-called cognitive processes giving rise to particular types of ideas in an individual mind. These theories draw from Stewart Guthrie’s *Faces in the Clouds* (1993), and then subsequent elaborations such as Pascal Boyer’s *Religion Explained* (2001). While these are key texts, the field has seen a great deal of work and changes since the early 2000s, much of it testing, challenging, and notably departing from the mind-based, belief-centric early theories of CSR. Useful summary discussion of these developments can be found in Claire White’s recent *An Introduction to the Cognitive Science of Religion* (2021). Panagiotidou acknowledges this, but only very rarely and in passing (p. 43, f. 9), and then proceeds to mostly ignore these important, recent critiques of this older model (e.g., tcki and Willard, 2016).

Many other CSR frameworks apart from the mind-centric model are therefore absent. One might think, for instance, of a great deal of the recent work in cultural evolution and prestige (cf. p. 89; see Lenfesty and Morgan, 2019); or early CSR theories around transmission and memory (cf. p. 72; see any studies by Sperber, Whitehouse, McCauley, Lawson, or Dennett); or the important theories on fear, divine punishment, and death (cf. pp. 82, 84; for terror management theory, see Vail III et al., 2010; for punitive gods, see Johnson, 2016, and Purzycki et al., 2016); or recent work on the intersection of dreaming and CSR (McNamara and Bulkeley, 2015); and so on. A recent article of my own in *JCSR* further challenges the theory of hierarchical, ontological categories in favor of the notion of strategic salience (cf. p. 61).

Puzzlingly for a book published in 2022, there is little cited after 2016. Thus, a recent collection of foundational, empirical studies in CSR goes unmentioned (Slone and McCorkle, 2019). Likewise absent is much that is cutting edge in the CSR-allied journals *Religion*, *Brain & Behavior* and the *Journal of Cognition and Culture*. The same goes for Jennifer Larson’s *Understanding Greek Religion* (2016), a quality monograph that explores in depth the intersection of Greek religion, CSR theories, and cognitive historiography that should have been a central conversation partner in Panagiotidou’s work.

Problems around background and framing are also present in the lack of engagement with classicists. Panagiotidou prefers to use other work in cognitive historiography, instead of digging into specialists in this religious cult, time period, and broader cultural context. Sarah Iles Johnston receives a brief mention around the subject of divination, but there are not
many recent classicists or archaeologists even in the bibliography. Kerényi and Festugière make appearances, along with Burkert briefly; meanwhile, Mikalson is listed only in the bibliography, while Warrior is absent. Inter-disciplinarity admittedly requires trade-offs, and the book is (perhaps too?) short at 160 pages of text, but the result is a certain shallowness around ancient Greek and Roman religion.

This also results in some missteps. Panagiotidou asserts that the symbol of Asclepius is the ‘caduceus’ (pp. 44, 50), when in fact the Staff of Asclepius is different from the caduceus (Hermes’ double-snaked staff). Panagiotidou’s references to support this assertion (pp. 44–5, nn. 14–15) are far outside mainstream classics scholarship. Perhaps tellingly, and I emphasize perhaps, these references can be found on the Wikipedia page titled ‘Caduceus as a symbol of medicine.’ Yet even this page, it should be noted, explicitly notes that the caduceus properly belongs to Hermes and only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to be associated with Asclepius. Scholars make mistakes, of course, but it is baffling how a point of content so central to the cult of Asclepius escaped the notice of author, reviewers, and readers alike.

A similar combination of promises and pitfalls can be found in Panagiotidou’s discussion on placebo effects, which undergirds a key aspect of the book’s argument. This is one of the most interesting and promising sections of the book, as Panagiotidou nicely weaves together how placebo effects would be naturally and easily elicited through all the features of the Asclepian cult. Drawing from dream studies, natural human healing, the role of different parts of the mind in eliciting different physiological processes, and work around hypnotic states and suggestibility, Panagiotidou comes to the persuasive and detailed conclusion that the Asclepian cult and healing incubation were designed – intentionally or not – with all their components contributing to the successful stimulation of placebo-induced healing. Here, we see cognitive historiography at its finest, using the modern findings of cognition and neuroscience to explain why a particular cultural form took the place that it did, and how these forms functioned in the context of an individual’s likely experience.

Again, though, the theoretical frame here is a bit shallow. More usefully, Panagiotidou extensively engages the work of Ted Kaptchuk, Director of the Program in Placebo Studies & Therapeutic Encounter, a collaboration of Harvard Medical School and the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center. Kaptchuk’s work has been the subject of popular discussion around taking the placebo effect seriously, in order to marshal considerable intellectual, medical, and economic resources toward trying to harness the body’s natural healing powers, especially in situations of chronic pain. Kaptchuk
Review

and his collaborators have published extensively on the placebo effect and its positive outcomes (e.g., Kaptchuk et al., 2010). I am no medical doctor, so I tread lightly here, but at least it would have been useful to note that Kaptchuk’s conclusions (Panagiotidou mostly uses a 2002 study) have faced considerable pushback from other influential voices in the medical community. Some researchers have raised red flags especially around the crucial lack of non-placebo control subjects in decades of influential placebo studies, a potentially devastating critique (Hróbjartsson and Gøtzsche, 2001).

I will conclude by speaking to a broader issue in CSR, namely, the danger in simply restating the known, but in new cognitivist terminology. There is value in emplacing what we already know behaviorally or culturally in the empirically grounded findings of cognitive and neuroscience. But many skeptics of CSR argue that it too often fails to live up to its promise of radically rethinking and changing our current understandings. Such critiques find the mark severally in Panagiotidou’s book, for example, when she extensively engages cognitive theories to assert that ‘[t]hrough social interaction and various cognitive processes, humans are able to learn from others’ (p. 87); or that ‘social influence would to a great extent contribute to the rapid spread of knowledge about Asclepius and his rise in popularity in the Graeco-Roman world’ (p. 89); or that ‘narratives of autobiographical memories are influenced by the wider context in which they develop’ (p. 149); and so on.

Counting myself among cognitive historiographers, we need to be attentive to critiques which claim that relying too heavily or singly on CSR in isolation is a mistake. I recall an occasion at the 2018 International Association of the Cognitive Science of Religion in Cambridge (USA), where Wesley Wildman of Boston University concluded a talk with a piece of advice to a graduate student in attendance. The student asked how to proceed in CSR, given how many different disciplines were involved; it seemed impossible to master all of them, especially early on in a career. Wildman answered that you cannot master everything yourself, and so you should develop a specialty and then work with others from different disciplinary specialties, all the while familiarizing yourself enough with other disciplines, in order to work productively and collaboratively. If we in CSR want to advance knowledge and push different disciplines forward using our theories, we need to be very careful to develop a deep knowledge of our chosen field and/or cultural-historical period. In this vein, Panagiotidou’s work has some key areas of methodological weakness, even as she points us forward to the potential of this type of work, in using cognitive
historiography to rethink and understand anew how the cult of Asclepius worked for individual participants in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

References


