

1

The Language of Asclepius

The Role and Diffusion of the Written Word in—and the Visual
Language of—the Cult of Asclepius

J.M. van der Molen



It is well-known that across history, people painfully confronted with their mortality would often seek out the divine in hopes of ameliorating their ailments. To this day even, almost constantly pilgrims from all corners of the earth depart for the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes to wade into the supposedly healing waters of the Grotto of Massabielle. Like them, when in sickness or distress, people during more archaic times would turn to certain cults and their sanctuaries, believing their dedication might guide them back to health.¹

One such cult in particular was that of the medicinal deity Asclepius. In examination of Asclepius' cult, scholars have looked to the sanctuary at Epidauros for its corpus of 'healing inscriptions' (ιάματα, transl. as *iamata*; sing. *iamata*) that document the cult's presence and activities in detail.² The Epidaurian *iamata* offer an interesting glance behind the scenes of Asclepius' healing cult.

This essay will discuss and inspect the role of the written word and visual language within the Asclepieian cult by looking at two aspects of its healing inscriptions. First to be considered is the way the *iamata* were compiled and *created*—specifically those from Epidauros. Secondly, this essay will consider what *function* the *iamata* would have had or, alternatively put, what role they played in the workings and spread of the cult. In addition, the essay will explore in what ways these aspects can be further explained through the concepts of *speech act theory*.

¹ M. P. J. Dillon, "The Didactic Nature of the Epidaurian *Iamata*," *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik* 101 (1994): 239–240. JSTOR.

² Published as *JG* IV² 1, 121–24.

Before I delve into these aspects, the relevance and nature of said theory ought to be briefly addressed. When in 1955 philosopher J.L. Austin delivered his lectures at Harvard University, he introduced us to a host of notions that pertain to the study of what he calls ‘speech acts’.³ These speech acts, or utterances, Austin posits, may be identified according to what act or ‘force’ such an utterance exerts or ‘performs’ on whomever is on the receiving end. Austin makes the distinction between what he calls the locutionary force of an utterance (its ‘surface meaning’; that which is literally stated)⁴, the force of an illocutionary utterance (having intention: *to warn, to promise, to urge* etc.) and that of the perlocutionary utterance (having *effect* upon one’s feelings, mindset, thoughts etc.).⁵ In short, the theory resolves the misconceived assumption that an utterance could only serve to describe a state of affairs—meaning that not all ‘sentences’ are mere ‘statements’.⁶ These ideas fit into this essay’s examination of the Asclepieian healing inscriptions, in that they may provide a better understanding of how the iamata were possibly *interpreted* and *used* to ‘communicate’ the beliefs and effectiveness of the Asclepieian cult to its sanctuaries’ visitors.

Which returns me to the iamata in question. As to the first aspect to be discussed, the process whereby the iamata stelai at the Asclepieion of Epidauros were produced is by no means apparent. In fact the Epidaurian iamata abstain completely from clearly indicating which individuals or sources were involved in their creation.⁷ The approximately 70—sometimes fragmentary—inscriptions in total (that are legible), were dispersed across four stelai (‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ & ‘D’) made of greyish limestone. The iamata were produced in *stoichedon* (style of engravement whereby letters would be aligned both vertically and horizontally) during the late 4th century BCE.⁸ Supposedly, the iamata were not all original tales when inscribed in the stelai at the Epidaurian sanctuary, but rather writings based on earlier inscriptions and—relocated⁹—votive offerings that were deemed worthy of preservation and thus transferred onto the stelai. (Just like the iama of the five year pregnancy indicates¹⁰: ‘...the fortunate woman *inscribed*’—on another votive plaque.) Oral traditions may also have had an influence on the formation of the stelai’s iamata.¹¹

³ John Langshaw Austin. *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Ed. J.O Urmson and Sbisà Marina (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), Oxford Scholarship Online.

⁴ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 94-95.

⁵ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 100-102.

⁶ Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 1-2.

⁷ Lynn R. LiDonnici, “Compositional Background of the Epidaurian ‘Iamata,’” *The American Journal of Philology* 113, no. 1 (1992): 28. JSTOR.

⁸ LiDonnici, “Compositional Background,” 25-26.

⁹ F.T. van Straten, “Votives and Votaries in Greek Sanctuaries (with Discussion),” in *La Sanctuarie grec*, ed. Albert Schachter, 247-290. *Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique* 37 (Geneva, Switzerland: Fondation Hardt, 1990), 253-254.

¹⁰ Stele A, iama I.

¹¹ LiDonnici, “Compositional Background,” 29, 35.

What may be inferred from the Epidaurian iamata more clearly, is the role or function of the iamata within the cult of Asclepius. The healing inscriptions deal with a voluminous diversity of issues, mostly related to health, from a simple cough to blindness and injured limbs, but also something as seemingly arbitrary as advice on where one should sail.¹² To illustrate how these inscriptions present themselves, I take the iama of Pamphaes¹³ as an example:

Pamphaes of Epidauros, having a cancerous sore inside his mouth. This man, sleeping here, saw a vision. It seemed to him the god opened his mouth with his hand, took out the sore, and cleansed his mouth, and from this he became well.

At any rate, the iamata may have had the function of preparing those in need of healing for the ritual of *enkoimesis* ('incubation'), which would take place in a section of the sanctuary called the *abaton* (or *koimeterion*).¹⁴ Enkoimesis meant a person would go to sleep (or be put to sleep artificially) in hopes of being visited and (surgically) cured by Asclepius in their dreams.¹⁵ Various iamata allude to this process.¹⁶ According to Pausanias¹⁷, the iamata recorded the names and plights of those who had successfully been cured of their illnesses by the god Asclepius—a perspective that suggests the iamata to have functioned as testimonies to put patients' minds at ease. Moreover, as three out of four of the iamata stilai were placed in close proximity to the abaton, it was ensured that patients could prepare themselves as to what to expect once in enkoimesis.¹⁸ In this sense, the iamata were not just attestations of healing procedures, but ritual inscriptions of a *perlocutionary* nature, setting visitors (patients or, 'supplicants') up with the right mindset. This could in turn have led the iamata to have had a placebo effect on Asclepieian pilgrims, as their very expectations alone might have had 'curative value'.¹⁹

Feats of healing described by the iamata could also function as a 'propaganda tool of

¹² LiDonnici, "Compositional Background," 26.

¹³ Stele C, iama XXIII.

¹⁴ S.M. Oberhelman, "Anatomical Votive Reliefs as Evidence for Specialization at Healing Sanctuaries in the Ancient Mediterranean World," *Athens Journal of Health* 1, no. 1 (2014): 49.

¹⁵ Helen Askitopoulou, Eleni Konsolaki, Ioanna A. Ramoutsaki, and Maria Anastassaki, "Surgical Cures Under Sleep Induction in the Asclepieion of Epidauros," *International Congress Series* 1242 (2002): 12. Elsevier ScienceDirect.

¹⁶ Stele A, iama III, IV, VI, XI, XII, XII and others.

¹⁷ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* I, Books 1-2 (Attica and Corinth), trans. W. H. S. Jones (Loeb Classical Library, LCL093. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918), 392-393.

¹⁸ LiDonnici, "Compositional Background," 27-28.

¹⁹ Askitopoulou, Konsolaki, Ramoutsaki, and Anastassaki, "Surgical Cures," 12-13.

the divine'²⁰—bridging the divide between rational medicine and miracle-working, attracting visitors that no 'ordinary' doctor could help. In fact it is no unpopular suspicion²¹ for the iamata to have functioned in such a way, as crediting miracle healings to Asclepius would have increased the sanctuary's renown—leading to the desire for people elsewhere to have access, and thus the spread of the cult²² and, indeed, establishing a 'Hellenic wide clientèle'²³. However, not all cures the iamata describe can possibly have been real, as demonstrated by the aforementioned iama of Kleo's five year pregnancy, or the man without eyes that woke up able to see.²⁴ As such, the tales the iamata tell may also have served to represent the beliefs held by the cult of Asclepius.²⁵

Looking at the whole of healing inscriptions produced by the Asclepieian cult at Epidaurus, one may notice that the iamata can be put into two categories²⁶: those that describe the plights of the ill and the miracle healings performed, and those that describe people's emotions or reactions to the events that take place. The latter for example being the case in the iama of the mute boy²⁷, wherein the utterances both perform an *illocutionary* (narrating devotion; 'I promise') as well as a perlocutionary force onto the reader (who, then, may be incentivized to express perseverance). Something the iamata are unique in conveying, as for example a votive relief could really only clearly capture an event or experience, and not impress particular implications.²⁸

On the basis of the iamata's functional faculties, one could infer that they played a tripartite role in the cult of Asclepius, firstly as advertisements showcasing its accomplishments, secondly as a language inspiring confidence in Asclepius' healing capabilities and the rituals of its sanctuaries, communicating hope to the ill and distressed and thirdly, as the main contributors to the cult's divine status reputation and its diffusion across the mediterranean area, much like the roman empire's infrastructure impacted the spread of Christianity.

²⁰ Clarisse Prêtre, "The Epidaurian Iamata: The first 'Court of Miracles'?" In *Recognizing Miracles in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Maria Gerolemou (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 17-18.

²¹ Dillon, "The Didactic Nature," 240.

²² Themistius, *The Private Orations of Themistius* 27, trans. Robert J. Penella (University of California Press, 2000), 166. ACLS Humanities E-Book (HEB).

²³ Dillon, "The Didactic Nature," 240.

²⁴ Stele A, iama IX.

²⁵ Dillon, "The Didactic Nature," 243-244.

²⁶ Prêtre, "The Epidaurian Iamata," 19.

²⁷ Stele A, iama V. Take also note of 'illocutionary performatives' in other Epidaurian inscriptions, whereby not patients but the Asclepieian clergy is urged or directed to act in a particular way: CGRN 64, 1-2.

²⁸ Van Straten, "Votives and votaries," 257-261.

Notes — Bibliography

- Askitopoulou, Helen, Eleni Konsolaki, Ioanna A. Ramoutsaki, and Maria Anastassaki. "Surgical Cures Under Sleep Induction in the Asclepieion of Epidauros." *International Congress Series* 1242 (2002): 11–17. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0531-5131\(02\)00717-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0531-5131(02)00717-3).
- Austin, John Langshaw. *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Edited by J.O. Urmson and Sbisà Marina. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962.
https://pure.mpg.de/rest/items/item_2271128/component/file_2271430/content.
- Carbon, J.-M., S. Peels and V. Pirenne-Delforge, *Collection of Greek Ritual Norms (CGRN)*, Liège Université, 2015. Accessed October 2019. <http://cgrn.ulg.ac.be>.
- Delling, Gerhard. *Antike Wundertexte*. Zweite, völlig neu gestaltete auflage des vorher von Paul Fiebig bearbeiteten heftes, in *Kleine Texte Für Vorlesungen Und Übungen* 79. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018. 19-24.
- Dillon, M. P. J. "The Didactic Nature of the Epidaurian Iamata." *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik* 101 (1994): 239–260. www.jstor.org/stable/20189109.
- LiDonnici, Lynn R. "Compositional Background of the Epidaurian 'Iamata.'" *The American Journal of Philology* 113, no. 1 (1992): 25–41. www.jstor.org/stable/295123.
- Oberhelman, S.M. "Anatomical Votive Reliefs as Evidence for Specialization at Healing Sanctuaries in the Ancient Mediterranean World." *Athens Journal of Health* 1, no. 1 (2014): 47-62.
- Pausanias. *Description of Greece* I, Books 1-2 (Attica and Corinth). Translated by W. H. S Jones. Loeb Classical Library, LCL093. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918.
<http://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL093/1918/volume.xml>.
- Prêtre, Clarisse. "The Epidaurian Iamata: The first 'Court of Miracles'?" In *Recognizing Miracles in Antiquity and Beyond*, edited by Maria Gerolemou, 17-30. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110563559-004>.
- Themistius. *The Private Orations of Themistius* 27. Translated by Robert J. Penella. The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, 29. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
<https://hdl-handle-net.proxy-ub.rug.nl/2027/heb.08320>.
- Van Straten, F.T. "Votives and Votaries in Greek Sanctuaries (with Discussion)." In *La Sanctuarie grec*, edited by Albert Schachter, 247-290. *Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique* 37. Geneva, Switzerland: Fondation Hardt, 1990.