

THERMAL WATER HEALING PRACTICES IN THE ANCIENT GREEK WORLD: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Corresponding author: mantouma@med.uoa.gr

By MARIA NTOUMANI, KONSTANTINA GONGAKI, & HELEN SOULTANAKIS

INTRODUCTION

Since antiquity, hydrotherapy has stimulated the interest of many civilizations from East (Sumerians, Hittite, Egyptians) to West (Greeks, Proto-Germanic tribes) (Frazer, 1925). Specifically in Greece, it had various applications according to mythological and linguistic sources (Gongaki, 1993; Mitta, 2000). In Minoan times healers were called Paeans, a title of a priest, and in the Hellenistic, period were called Asclepiads. The cult of Paian and Asclepius was strongly connected with physical and moral catharsis - correlated to tree cults on caves (Stergianni, 2018; Gongaki, 2003; Huxley, 1975). Cretan lustral basins and Mycenaean balneum simulated the healing environment of sacred caves (Marinatos, 1941), where water may be used as a kind of passageway into the “netherworld” for foreshadowing the future.

PUPROSE

We aim to investigate the meaning of thermal water healing practices in the ancient Greek world.

METHODS

The base of this research was the philosophical method. Descriptive design (Thomas & Nelson, 2003) enriched with historical and archaeological sources were being used to enlighten some aspects of hydrotherapy, likewise its religious and scientific frame (Andre, 2003; Redon, 2007; Burkert 1985). To conclude advisory philosophy was used (Quinn 2008).



RESULTS

Thermal water healing practices were discriminated into two categories: dynamic exercise (*γυμνάσια*) and light exercise-graded immersion (*ἀποθεραπεία*). To this point, it is necessary to clarify that *ἀποθεραπεία* had a dual meaning; it was both the last part of training and also a different kind of non-intensive exercise. Both of them were characterized by a certain duration, intensity and rest period given by Galen on *De Sanita* and Philostratus on *Gymnasticus*.

DISCUSSION

The thermal effects during water immersion, especially in medicinal springs (Hierapolis, Cutiliae, Baiae etc.), were already observed on activities such as swimming (*νήξις*), stream and steam bathing (*λουτρά*) - in combination with manual therapy (Stavrakakis, 2016). In addition, open water swimming was suggested also for cure prevention and swimming in thermal or medicinal springs was appropriate for rehabilitation in many pathological conditions like digestion (cold water) and neurological problems (warm water). These hydrotherapeutic practices were a crucial element for ancient Greek rituals (Larson, 2007).

CONCLUSION The present study enlightens the variety of thermal water healing practices in ancient Greece, both as a cathartic activity of the human being inextricably linked to his religious traditions, as well as part of a daily habit crucial to his health and wellbeing.

