

THE USE OF MERCURY'S CADUCEUS AS A MEDICAL EMBLEM

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The use of the caduceus of Hermes, or Mercury, as an emblem of the medical profession has been a source of much perplexity both to scholars and to physicians interested in the history of medicine. In her book on *Classical Myths* Miss Sabin¹ notes: "Just why the wand of Mercury with its *two* serpents . . . was selected as a symbol of the medical staff of the army is hard to understand, and no one seems to be able to explain it to the entire satisfaction of scholars."

One of the strongest apologists for the use of the caduceus is Fielding H. Garrison, Lieutenant Colonel, U. S. Army. In a series of articles he summarizes the early history of the use of the caduceus as a medical emblem and argues for its retention, at least in the army.²

The first instance of the *kerykeion*, or caduceus, of Mercury in association with medicine is that of the great Swiss medical printer, Johann Froben (1460-1527), who used the caduceus with entwined serpents, not winged, but surmounted by doves and the inscription in Greek: "Be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

The first medical man to use the caduceus was Sir William Butts, physician to Henry VIII. In 1556, two years after the death of Butts, John Caius (1510-73), author of a famous tract

¹ Frances Sabin, *Classical Myths That Live Today*: New York, Silver, Burdett and Co. (1927), 112 f.

² F. H. Garrison, "The Use of the Caduceus in the Insignia of the Army Medical Officer," *Bull. Med. Lib. Assoc.* ix (1919-20), 13-16; "The Babylonian Caduceus," *Mil. Surg.* XLIV (1919), 633-36; and "A Letter to the Editor," *Am. Med. Assoc. Jour.* LXXXII (1919), 1483.

on sweating sickness, presented upon a visit to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, a cushion, a silver caduceus, a book, and a seal, emblems which were carried before him in procession upon his next visit to the college in 1558. In his *Annals* Caius thus speaks of this silver caduceus: *Nam caduceus, sive virga argentina, regenda significat mitius et clementius, contra quam solebant olim, qui virga regebant ferrea. Prudenter autem regendum agendumque docent serpentes, prudentiae indices.* The silver caduceus is still in existence.

The next mention of the caduceus is in 1844, when it appears on the title pages of books of the medical publisher, J. S. M. Churchill, of London. In 1856 the caduceus was used on the chevrons of hospital stewards in the U. S. Army. Later it was used in the insignia of the U. S. Public Health Service, and in 1902 was first used on the uniforms of the U. S. Army medical officers. In 1901 the French periodical of military medicine was named *Le Caducée*.

For a time the caduceus was used as an emblem by the American Medical Association, but in 1912 after considerable discussion the official emblem embodying the Aesculapian rod was adopted and is still in use.

The chief defender of the caduceus is Colonel Garrison, in articles already mentioned. He bases much of his argument upon an article by A. L. Frothingham, "Babylonian Origin of Hermes the Snake-God, and of the Caduceus" and upon a publication of the Carnegie Institution.³ From these articles and other references Colonel Garrison accepts the Assyro-Babylonian origin of the caduceus, the first specimen of which Dr. Ward discovered on a libation vase of 3500 B.C. which was found at Lagash and is now in the Louvre. The emblem represents the god Ningishzida, messenger of the mother goddess Ishtar, and awakener of life and vegetation in the spring. From this proto-Hermes, invariably a snake-god, Colonel Garrison derives the general processes of healing, medicine, fertility, and potency.

³ Cf. *Am. Jour. Arch.* xx (1916), 175-211; and W. H. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia*: Washington, Carnegie Institution (1910).

Though referring to the medical aura surrounding the Babylonian origin of the caduceus, Colonel Garrison emphasizes much more another phase of the symbolism of the caduceus — its use as a sign of neutrality. He mentions references by Livy to the *caduceator*, or peace commissioner, and its use as a badge by secret societies in ancient Rome. The late Colonel John Van R. Hoff is given the main responsibility for introducing the caduceus as a badge for medical officers, and is said to have had the symbol of neutrality especially in mind. Colonel Garrison concludes that the caduceus, representing a god some of whose functions were medical, is a practical symbol for medical officers on active duty. He wishes to retain the Aesculapian staff on the Medical Corps coat of arms in order to symbolize the purely medical activities as distinguished from the administrative and military functions of the medical department of the army.

Another historian ⁴ traces the wings of the caduceus to the hawk wings of the Egyptian sun god Horus, with whom the serpent was often united. He thinks that the story in which Hermes received from Apollo the caduceus in exchange for the lyre shows an old association with the sun-god, as does also the fact that the hawk was a sacred animal of Apollo.

Again, an effort ⁵ is made to summarize any healing functions that Hermes may have had: he was deity of the gymnasium and guardian of health, aided Athena in curing the daughters of Proetus of madness, performed a Caesarian operation on Semele at the birth of Bacchus, averted a plague by carrying a ram on his shoulders about the city walls of Tanagra, and is sometimes associated with Hygeia as her husband.

By two historians ⁶ Hermes is identified with the Egyptian Thoth, to whom were assigned the earliest Egyptian works on medicine, the so-called "Hermetic books."

⁴ R. Wilson, "The Caduceus and Its Symbolism," *Annals Med. Hist.* iv (1922), 301-03.

⁵ Cf. W. A. Jayne, *The Healing Gods of Ancient Civilization*: Yale University Press (1925), 331-34.

⁶ Cf. E. Berdoe, *Origin and Growth of the Healing Art*: London, Sonnenschein (1893), 150 f; and Wilson, *op. cit.* 302 f.

On the other hand, S. P. Gerhard⁷ objects to the use of the caduceus as a medical emblem, assigning its use to merchants and steamship or railway companies. He pleads for the use of the knotty rod and serpent of Aesculapius — the knots to indicate the many difficult problems of the physician, the serpent to symbolize power, wisdom, and health.

Again, Colonel McCulloch⁸ calls the whole significance of the caduceus uncomplimentary to the doctor; he traces its use to the Public Health Service and to Churchill. He alleges the adoption by army surgeons of ancient times of the caduceus as a badge of neutrality, but is unable to quote an authority.

The editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*⁹ agrees with objectors to the caduceus, the use of which he thinks a reflection upon the interest which our nation takes in things classical. He mentions the uncomplimentary phase of Mercury as conductor of souls of the dead. He sees confusion of the caduceus with medicine through the sleep-producing qualities of Hermes in the Greek poets and through the opiate rod mentioned by Erasmus Darwin.

In this connection two English physicians¹⁰ do not look kindly upon Mercury, conductor of the dead and holder of the full purse. They urge the universal adoption of the official emblem of the American Medical Association, the rod of Aesculapius, and the abandonment of the caduceus. But on the cover of the second publication cited appears the figure of the caduceus.

The majority of medical opinion now favors the use of the Aesculapian rod as a medical symbol. This is now the emblem of the American Medical Association, the Royal Army Medical Corps, and the French Medical Military Service; and it appears on the coat of arms of the U. S. Medical Corps, though the

⁷ Cf. *Am. Med. Jour.* LXXII (1919), 1243 f.

⁸ Cf. "The Coat of Arms of the Medical Corps," *Mil. Surg.* XLI (1917), 137-48.

⁹ Cf. "Comment," LXXII (1919), 1244.

¹⁰ W. Hattie, "The Caduceus," *Canad. Med. Assoc. Jour.* XVIII (1928), 79 f; and Karl Zwick, "The Origin and Significance of the Medical Emblem," *Bull. Soc. Med. Hist. of Chicago* IV (1928), 94-105.

caduceus is still used on the collar of medical officers. Perhaps because of a caricature by Charcot of his colleagues in the Paris Medical Faculty, the caduceus is still attached to this body of physicians.¹¹

The use of the caduceus in our army I believe to be due chiefly to the late Colonel Hoff, who has emphasized the suitability of the caduceus as a badge of neutrality. Colonel Garrison urges the retention of the caduceus in order to differentiate our emblem from those of military medicine in other countries.

The argument for the caduceus as a badge of neutrality is open to question. This phase of the symbolism of the caduceus, discussed very fully as it is in Farnell, would seem more appropriate to diplomacy and to embassies.¹² Colonel Garrison wishes to limit very strictly the medical interpretation of the caduceus, since he rejects the phallic symbolism traced by Farnell and Frothingham as being too apt to the psychoanalyst.

The use of the caduceus in medicine I believe to have originated in a confusion between it and the Aesculapian rod. A short article in a French medical journal¹³ points out the obvious commercial phases of Mercury and the caduceus. The author sees in the entwined serpents of the caduceus a purely ornamental motif developed by the Greeks from oriental figures, whereas the single serpent about the rod of Aesculapius symbolizes the wisdom of the serpent and the god's metamorphosis at Rome. Later commentators have attributed to the ornamental motif of the caducean serpents the symbolism of the single Aesculapian serpent.

Without such an arbitrary explanation of the confusion between the two symbols, the question still remains of how the caduceus came to be used as a medical symbol by Froben and Butts early in the sixteenth century.

¹¹ Cf. Garrison, *Mil. Surg.* LVIII (1926), 244 f in a review of Lenoury, *Le Caducée au Cours des Ages*.

¹² Cf. *Cults of the Greek States*: Oxford, Clarendon Press (1909), V, 20 f.

¹³ Cf. M. Boigey, "On Confond le Caducée de Mercure et le Baton Serpenteire d'Esculape," *La Presse Medicale* xxxii (1924), No. 12, p. 235 f.