

The Rod of Asclepius and the Caduceus – A Serpentine Story

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The Rod of Asclepius, acrylic on canvas painting by Stanley M. Aronson, MD. [2014, RHODE ISLAND MEDICAL JOURNAL]

The Caduceus

The Caduceus, which depicts two intertwined snakes encircling a winged staff, is also used as a medical symbol. In the ancient world, this staff was a symbol of the messenger god, Hermes, or Mercury in Roman terms. The word Caduceus is derived from the Greek word *kērykeion*, which meant the herald's staff.

In Greek mythology, the winged Hermes was an intermediary between the gods and humans, and a guide to the underworld. In one account, he is given the staff by Apollo. "In another version, he receives the staff from Zeus, the king of the gods, entwined with two white ribbons. The ribbons were later replaced by serpents, as one story tells that Hermes used the stick to separate two fighting snakes, which then coiled around his staff and remained there in balanced harmony," writes Biggs B, Remy M, in their article, "Why is the medical symbol a snake on a stick?"²

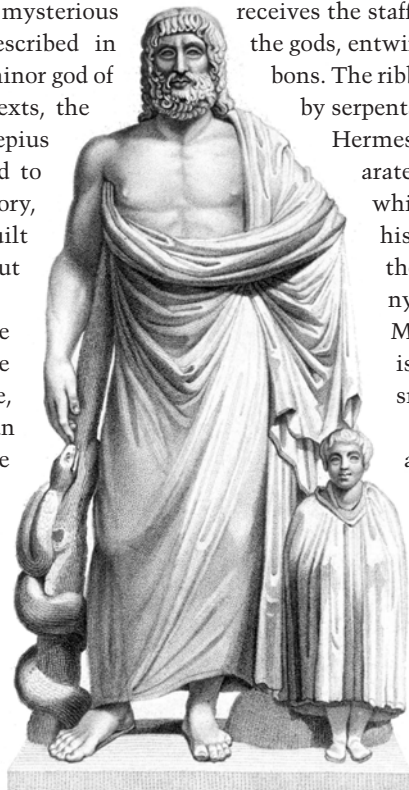
It probably was first used as a medical emblem in the 16th century, suggests Shampo MA, Kyle RA, in "Medical symbols: the Caduceus." These authors note it is also a symbol of peace and commerce, "apparently serving to protect the

A staff and a snake – or two – have been symbols of medicine from ancient to modern times. A painting by the late **STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD**, former editor-in-chief of RIMJ, depicts the Rod of Asclepius – a rough piece of bark entwined by a single serpent – against a fiery background.

Asclepius, in Greek mythology the son of Apollo, was the god of medicine and thought to be a historical figure renowned for his healing arts. An illustration of a marble statue, circa 1860, in the Louvre, shows Asclepius with his rod. Standing beside him is a small mysterious figure, Telesphoros, described in Greek mythology as a minor god of healing, and in some texts, the son of Asclepius. Asclepius was ultimately elevated to divine status in history, and healing temples built in his name throughout the Mediterranean.¹

In the modern era, the Rod of Asclepius became a symbol of medicine, used by the American Medical Association, the World Health Organization, and others.

Asclepius, from the marble statue in the Louvre. Engraving by Jenkins (London, circa 1860) [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE]



The Rod of Asclepius is on the insignias of the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization. [AMA, WHO]



The Caduceus was a symbol of Hermes, or the Roman Mercury, who was primarily a messenger god, or herald, linked with commerce. [NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE]

bearer by indicating that he was engaged in a peaceful mission. Originally, the Caduceus may have been an olive branch with three leaves, an important Greek symbol of peace.³

The United States Public Health Service used the Caduceus on its insignia as early as 1798, when marine hospitals opened.