



*Historical Research*

**Hydrotherapy in Ancient Greece**

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### Abstract

**Water is the basic element of the human body. It also plays an important role in philosophy, the legislation regarding hygiene and the therapeutic practice. Ancient Egyptians regarded water as the basic element in practicing hygiene, but only of priests. Also, according to Hebrew sanitary legislation, water was important in the hygiene of all people. Medicine in Ancient Greece is interrelated with medicine and philosophy of the people in the eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Thales regards water as the basis for everything in the world and Plato perceives water as one of four of the body humors. The treatment in the temples of Asclepius included bathing. Hippocrates, in his book “on airs, waters and places” examines the effects of water on the body and its health.**

**Keywords: hydrotherapy, ancient Greece, water, treatment**

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### Introduction

“Hydrotherapy” -or else, “bathing”- is the methodical application of water in its various conditions, such as fluid, ice and in steam [1]. Already since the primitive times of his life, man had water as his first refuge in case of injury. This way, water is intrinsically connected to philosophy, the legislation about hygiene and the therapeutical practice of people through ages, like the ancients Greeks [2]. Besides, most civilizations were born and developed around water. Especially on the Mediterranean coasts were the most important ones who append, like the Minoans, the Persians, the ancient Greeks,

the Phoenicians, Egyptians and Romans [3].

The importance of the vital role of water can be found in myths of various peoples, like Aphrodite’s emersion from water - she was the goddess of love, reproduction and life inside water-. Water as source of life, aimed at the purification of humans and was used as sacrificial power. The ancient Egyptians regarded water as a basic element for exercising hygiene, concerning the priests though, which had to take a bath twice a day, daily, and twice a night. Besides, in Egyptian mythology, the river Nile together with the sun, were their most important deities [5]. Also, in Hebrew legislation, water played an important role in people’s hygiene. The priests were strictly abiding by all the rules connected to bathing and purification just like those connected to cold showers of the face, the hands and the feet in the morning, as well as of the hands and feet in the evening. According to the Bible, it is strictly forbidden to Jewish citizens to enter the Temple, without bathing beforehand. Indeed, they had to merge the whole body in the water and, before that, remove all their clothes and jewelry and clean the body personally [6].

Especially in Medicine of the people in ancient Mesopotamia, the doctor was called “a-zu”, which meant “the water connoisseur”. The aim of the present thesis is to record the meaning of hydrotherapy in ancient Greece and how it influenced people’s health in those days [7].

### Material and Method

Articles, studies and texts related to this subject have been used. As to the archiving of the material a system of evidence classification according to source

of origin, alphabetical and chronological order has been employed.

### Hydrotherapy in Ancient Greek Mythology

The Greeks have always had a special relationship with water. This relationship is documented through mythology: the world of those “living” was separated from the world of the “dead” by a river, a fact that highlights the importance of water in the Greeks’ view of the world.

In ancient Greek mythology the spring water and that of rivers is the water of life as well. It is the water found and given to Alexander the Great by his mermaid sister, who, since then, roams in the seas [8]. Ancient Greeks honored the waters like deities and imaged the Ocean as a huge river flowing around the earth. The Ocean had 3,000 nymphs and 3,000 rivers as his children. Many of the nymphs, like the Naiads, afforded magical and revitalizing powers and were found in rivers, springs and in mountains from which rivers originated [9].

In the Greek Mythology there is also reference to Ganymedes, prince of Troy and cupbearer of the gods in mountain Olympus, as the God of Nile’s springs who was made a constellation. He is the Aquarius of the zodiac circle and personifies the water in clouds that fertilizes the earth [10]. We can also see that mythological heroes and Gods, too, owe their special abilities to water. So, Hercules bathes in the sacred springs of Aedipsos, in order to retain lost physical powers; goddess Hera bathes in the Karpathian spring so that she could retain her virginity every year and goddess Thetis, who baptized her son Achilles in the waters of lake Styx so as to make him invulnerable. The top God of the aquatic element in the Greek Mythology, though, was Poseidon. For the continental regions,

he was the god of the rivers, which water and fertilize the land, and the god of the springs who also had the lakes in his sovereignty [3, 9].

### Hydrotherapy

Homer and other ancient poets, called the sea sacred ‘άλαν δίαν’ (of Zeus), while its water was used in purifications, because the sea “πάντα τ’ ανθρώπων κλύζει κακά” (always cleanses evil from humans) [11]. In Homeric epics the use of water is frequently mentioned, the cleansing of the body stated health, of hands and youth, the washing of hands and bathing stated expression of respect but also an action of welcoming the guest, where foot bath, which replaced the general bath when its preparation was not feasible, was utilized.

Among the Ionian philosophers, Thales regards water as the primary principal for everything in the world. The whole life ends up in water, as whatever perishes, either dies or transforms into fluid –water, that is-. After all, Plato regards water as one of the four elements of the body, while Empedokles, one of the four elements of the world [12].

Furthermore, all ancient Greek philosophers and doctors highlighted the value of hot and cold baths for one’s health, hygiene and entertainment. This results in the incorporation of baths in Gymnasiums, as an intrinsic feature of their everyday life. Plato in “Politeia” encourages the weakest and the patients to take hot baths. Aristotle recommends bathing in cases of fever, nasal haemorrhage, as well as worn out bodies [13].

As far as bathing in ancient Greece is concerned, it was not just a means of cleansing and cure but also a feature of religious ritual and entertainment. All these are depicted through painting that have been found e.g. in vessels. Herodotus is

considered to be the first to make observations concerning the bathing therapy, which are acceptable even today, like the time one could stay in baths daily, as well as the time one could stay there each season. That is, three times a week during spring in hot baths and three times a week during the summer in cold baths. However, Homer also frequently mentions the use of baths in his works. Moreover, all ancient Greek philosophers and doctors highlighted the value of hot and cold baths for good hygiene; in his work “about winds, water and lands”, studies the influence of water in the body and the harmful effects on health by stagnant water and swamps.

According to Hippocrates, too cold water could cause serious intestinal disorders, while too hot or stagnant water often causes fever. He also knew about the advantages of clean and boiled water for the wound therapy and gave major therapeutical value to marine baths. In his work «Περὶ διαίτης οξέων» (On the diet during acute diseases) Hippocrates describes the routine of bath therapy in way that does not differ from today’s one. He specifically mentions: “Bath does good to many diseases, sometimes continually or even sporadically. There is the case though that its use must be limited, when it comes to people who have no facilities at home. The houses with such facilities and the servants to offer such convenience are indeed few. If the sick man’s bath does not take harm to the sick is not minor” [13, 16]

The temples of Asclepius also included treatment and baths. There the abundant waters, fertile land and spas favorably predisposed patients. A source of clean water was the necessary complement of Asklepios [17]. Public and private facilities were found in Knossos, Trinytha and Pergamon with many venues for spa massage and drinking cures. The baths were predominantly a medium for physical and mental therapy; apart from

bath, diet was imposed in combination with other mental instruments [18].

The liquid element and the baths were also used in sports. From the early 5th century, athletes were known to cleanse the body after exercise. Before the 5th century there were no baths in gyms and the athletes used to throw water on each other [19]. The so-called “baptismal fonts”, the forerunners of today’s swimming pools were also known, where athletes used to swim. In baths and sports facilities there were people whose job was to help the athletes, called “sindonoros” mainly heating the water in a furnace [20]. Towards the end of the 6th century BC, it becomes shallower with secure high wooden beams, takes animal form and evolves in a kind of shower [13, 19].

## Conclusion

The ancient Greeks used the water for drinking, as a cleaning agent, but also as a means of exercise in “fonts” [13]. Hydrotherapy is also used for health, wellness and against combat fatigue of the organism [3]. Originally, cold water was used, later on hot and in vapor form. Remarkable is the reference in water’s healing properties, as reported even by the ancient Asclepieia, which were therapeutic centers of the ancient times.

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