

Patera in Aère ***Symbols of the goddess of health*** ***on coins and medals***

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Summary

The numismatic record, coins and medals, portrays many of the symbols of health. The oldest symbol which portrays health, as a positive state of physical well-being, is the patera. First associated with Hygeia, it extended to that of the Roman Goddess of Health, Salus, imparting to the concept of health the additional themes of safety and security. Ancient and modern coins and medals, which portray the patera, are included in this account.

Résumé

Les archives numismatiques, pièces de monnaies et médailles, montrent beaucoup de symboles liés à la santé. Le plus ancien, le patera, considère la santé comme un état positif de bien-être physique; d'abord il était associé à Hygie et, plus tard, il fut associé à Salus, déesse de la santé, donnant à l'idée de santé les thèmes de la sûreté et de la sécurité. Des pièces de monnaies anciennes et les médailles montrant le patera sont reprises dans ce manuscrit.

Symbols portray much of the image of health. Those who identify with medical and health themes use health symbols to establish, reinforce and signal such identity.

The importance of health, and its portrayal in symbolic form, are to be found in its earliest written records. It is not surprising that the symbols used to signal medical and related disciplines are both long-standing and enduring. Such symbols are found extensively in the numismatic and medallic record (Figures 1 and 2)

Modern medicine makes the distinction between medicine and health. Medicine is the science and art of the healing of disease, and also of its prevention. Health is not simply the absence of disease, but as defined by the World Health Organisation in 1947 is :

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- *fig. 1 : The penny token of «Holloway's Pills and Ointment». The reverse portrays Hygeia, the Greek Goddess of Health, with the Aesculapian snake drinking from a patera - this latter object itself evolving to portray the concept of health. Minted in London, issues included both penny and half-penny tokens (1875, 1858). The issues were suppressed in England, but were exported in their thousands to Australia and to New Zealand (6). In the context of the scarcity of coinage in nineteenth century Australia, they were used and circulated extensively. Unworn specimens are uncommon.*



Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (1).

As the symbols of health have been portrayed extensively in the numismatic record, it is fitting that the first written concept of health dates from the Greek statesman, Pericles (495-429 BC).

Pericles wrote :

«Health is that state of moral, mental and physical well-being which enables a man to face any crisis in life with the utmost facility and grace».

Classic symbols which portray medical themes include the Red Cross, the staff of Aesculapius with its entwined serpent and the figures of Aesculapius, Hygeia and Hippocrates. To these might be added the Florence Nightingale Lamp, now the universal Western emblem portraying the profession of nursing; the mortar and pestle signifying the pharmaceutical sciences; and the dragon, signifying dental science and art, which was slain by Cadmus and whose teeth were planted to produce warriors which comprised the Spartan race.

The oldest symbol portraying health, as a positive state of physical well-being, is the patera, «a saucer-shaped vessel or dish of earthenware or metal used since Roman times for libations; and from which a supplicant might drink during religious observance, obeisance, offering or sacrifice» (2).

The patera was first associated with the Greek Goddess of Health, Hygeia, the daughter of Aesculapius, the Greek God of Medicine. She is often portrayed in ancient statuary; and in modern times in armorial bearings, paintings, and on postage stamps. The cult of Hygeia arose in Titane, west of Corinth; and spread to

- *fig. 2: The presentation medallion, in bronze, of the Societe de Medicine Legale de France, struck in Paris in 1868. The obverse portrays an assemblage of the symbols of science, medicine and the legal profession. It also includes a rare portrayal of the two symbols of medicine and health - the Aesculapian snake entwined about the staff of Aesculapius; and the patera of Hygeia, with her snake (of health) drinking therefrom. From the author's collection.*



Epidaurus from which in 293 BC it was introduced to Rome. Hygeia became identified with the Roman Goddess of Health, Salus, this Latin deity imparting to the concept of health the additional themes of safety and security. Hygeia, and subsequently Salus, are often portrayed with the snake of Aesculapius, adopted as her own.

Roman portrayals of Salus, on coins and medals (3) (4), almost always depict her with the patera, the libation saucer (Figure 3). By a process of association, the patera itself came to

fig. 3a : The Roman one denarius coin minted 161-180 AD; the reverse portraying Salus, the Roman Goddess of Health, seated left and feeding the Salutean snake from a patera. This coin, commemorates Faustina Augusta (125-176 AD) (4), wife of Marcus Aurelius, with Salus as bergenia (3).



Today, the use of the patera is increasing in contemporary graphic art, in the context of logo portrayal of corporate identities and in badges and on medical, nursing and pharmaceutical emblems. It has a wide use in the badges and logos of pharmaceutical societies, of guilds and of commercial businesses which have health or health products as part of their core business. Its use is particularly current in disciplines cognate to the manufacturing pharmaceutical industry, and is increasing. The patera has been used on a number of medallions (Figures 4 and 5) where it is an object of elegance and simplicity, albeit one which imparts a sense of action - the acts of libation to the Goddess of Health - to the scene portrayed.

be associated with the primary concept of health; and so it remains today. This is the process of metonymy - the portrayal of one object or concept by an «accompaniment or significant adjunct" (5).

• fig. 3b : The Obverse of the coin shown in figure 3a portraying Faustina Augusta (125-176 AD), wife of Marcus Aurelius. Before his reign (161-180 AD), Faustina (the Younger) accompanied her husband from 170-174 AD on his campaigns against the Germanic tribes. She was known as the »Mother of the Army«. She died on campaign in Halala in the Taurus Mountains. She was deified and associated (as genia or spirit) with Salus, the Goddess of Health.



• **fig. 4 : The Medallion of the French National League Against Alcoholism : the obverse, designed by Oudine. Issued in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the medallion portrays Hygeia crowned by a laurel wreath, holding a patera from which is drinking the snake of Aesculapius (and by derivation, of Hygeia). Hygeia is portrayed also holding a lance, victorious over and impaling the dragon of alcoholism (from the author's collection).**



From Victorian times, the symbol of the patera is often combined with that of the Salutean or Aesculapian snake, the latter drinking from the pateric saucer of health itself.

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• **fig. 5: A French medallion of the Royal Society of Medicine, minted in bronze circa 1805. It portrays Salus, the Roman Goddess of Health (right) bestowing the laurel crown of health on a pupil holding the lamp of knowledge. The busy Goddess is also feeding a Salutean or Aesculapian snake from a patera in her left hand. The motto encapsulates the essential ethos of health as a positive state (1), not simply as the absence of disease. It reads «it is not sufficient simply to live, but to be fit and healthy».**



Biography

Major General John Ream is the Surgeon General of the Australian Defence Force and is the Deputy Head of the Graduate School of Medicine at the University of Queensland. He is a member of the Executive of the International Society of the History of Medicine and is the author of more than a dozen books on the history of medicine and health in Australia.