The Staff of Aesculapius

by John A. Ey, Jr.

In PROSIT No. 73, September 1983, "Doc Joe's Mirror" article relating to brass steins and caducei warrants a few additional comments. True, the caduceus in the lid inlay of the Mettlach book stein 2001-K (Figure 2) dedicated to commerce is entirely appropriate. The caduceus closely resembles that of Hermes, the Greek god of commerce and merchants, whose most frequent appearances are as a messenger or guide. Hermes' caduceus in its earliest form was a rod ending in two prongs, and later with two serpents with heads meeting at the top. A pair of wings were sometimes attached to the top of the staff. This style caduceus had absolutely nothing to do with medicine. Generally, Hermes was represented as a young man with a broad-brimmed hat, winged sandals and bearing the caduceus.

Mercury was the counterpart of Hermes in Roman mythology, and was the patron of Roman merchants and traders. He was also the messenger of the gods, particularly Jupiter. However, the caduceus was nonexistent in Roman art, and the portrayal of Mercury carrying a caduceus, whether by the FTD flower people or anyone else, is infringing on the prerogatives of Hermes.

One of the original Greek gods, Hermes was one of the Twelve Olympians who dwelled with their lord, Zeus, on Mount Olympus. As an additional note, Hermes' caduceus is most frequently seen as an emblem of the medical profession and as the insignie of the U.S. Army Medical Department. When the adoption of Hermes' caduceus became such an emblem and insignie of medicine, which was believed to hold many curative powers, and was synonymous with wisdom. The Greeks even ate snake meat to acquire proficiency in the healing arts—and even immortality!

The Aesculapian staff has often been confused with the caduceus, the "Herald's Wand" used by Hermes to open doors between god and men—but the Aesculapian staff entwined by one snake is regarded by classicists as the true symbol of the medical profession. Those Mettlach artists knew what they were about; they were right on the staff!

References:

* "Dictionary of Mythology," Bergen Evans, 1970
* "Greek Mythology," Richard Patrick, 1972
* "Roman Mythology," Peter Croft, 1974
* "A Pictorial History of Medicine," Betteman & Hench, 1956
* "Encyclopedia Britannica," 1959

The Author Replies:

The author of the original article, "Doc Joe's Mirror," Dr. J. Joseph Hersh, agrees with the foregoing and adds the following additional material:

The lid on stein #2001-B is the true physician's sign, attributed to Aesculapius. In turn, the incorrect sign, Hermes' caduceus, was accepted as the symbol of the U.S. Army Medical Corps—which had its beginning in the Civil War. The caduceus is (and wrongfully so) also the insignie of the Canadian Medical Corps and until the year 1972, the sign of the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps. The latter adopted the staff of Aesculapius in 1972.

That serpent-adorned staff also was adopted by the American Medical Association in 1910: "When the Father of Medicine was enshrined in the beautiful temple of Aesculapius, he carried the knotty rod, symbol of support for the weak and of the difficult problems in medicine, and the entwined serpent, the ancient symbol of health. Thus the present (emblem) is the original symbol of the healing art." [Ref. The Journal of The American Medical Association, vol. 79, no. 24.]

Finally, Joe thanks John Ey for providing the additional background and for his excellent research.