

SPECIAL ARTICLE ΕΙΔΙΚΟ ΑΡΘΡΟ

Larsen syndrome afflicted hands on an ancient anatomical relief from the Archaeological Museum of Paros?

An iconographic palaeopathological analysis of a votive anatomical relief, is presented coming probably from the site of Asklepieion on the island of Paros (Cyclades, Greece), dated presumably to the Hellenistic period (c. 323–31 BC). The artifact is currently housed in the Archaeological Museum in Parikia (inv. no 188). It is a marble slab depicting both hands. Although the state of preservation of this relief is, unfortunately, not good, some details of the hands, like the segmentation of some fingers into phalangi, were lightly indicated. However, the fingers of both hands clearly show specific deformations and particular health conditions which can, with a high level of probability, be identified. A possible condition that can explain most or even all symptoms could be Larsen syndrome, which is a rare genetic disorder.

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ΑΡΧΕΙΑ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ 2026, 43(2):263–267

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Σύνδρομο Larsen που προσβάλλει
τα χέρια σε αρχαίο ανατομικό
ανάγλυφο από το Αρχαιολογικό
Μουσείο Πάρου;

Περίληψη στο τέλος του άρθρου

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1. INTRODUCTION

The possibilities of healing in the ancient world were naturally limited due to the lack of knowledge about the human body, which was gradually developing. A sick person could go to a physician or healer, but usually only if they were able to pay for their services. If the economic status of the sick person did not permit it, or if the physician was unable to help them, the sufferer had only the sphere of religious healing to turn to. They thus depended on the help of a healing deity or demigod (heros). The main healing deity of classical antiquity was Asklepios/Asclepius (Latin: Aesculapius), who was worshipped in sacred precincts called “asklepieia” (sg. asklepieion), which served as religious precincts as well as medical and wellness facilities to which the sick came with a prayer for healing.^{1–3} The actual healing process there worked on the principles of rational basis, suggestion, and the placebo effect. There were at least several dozen of these precincts throughout the ancient world – the largest and most famous ones were in Epidaurus in Peloponnese, on the island of Kos, or in Pergamon

in Asia Minor.² One of the smaller asklepieia, although probably of comparatively ancient origin, is located on the island of Paros in the Cyclades. It is situated c. 3 km south of Parikia, the island’s capital, in the Agia Anna district, on two terraces of Arakas hill (43 m above sea level (fig. 1). The

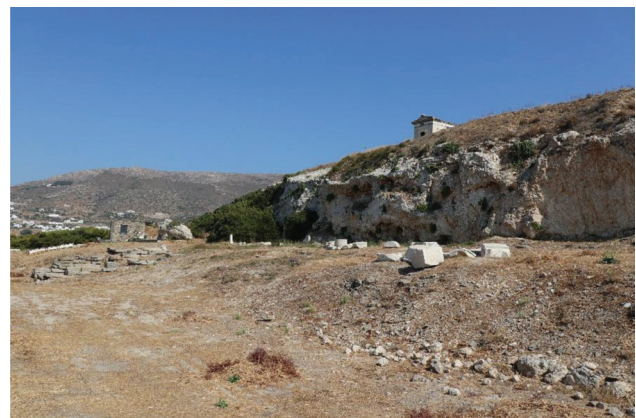


Figure 1. The site of Asklepieion of Paros, general view. Photo by author.

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site was partially excavated in 1898–1899 by the German archaeologist Rubensohn, who published the results of his excavations in a single, rather preliminary report in 1902.⁴ The architectural survey and limited excavations, on the upper terrace, were carried out here by a German team led by Gruben in the late 1970s and early 1980s.^{5,6}

Among the most characteristic types of artefacts found in these shrines are the so-called votive anatomical reliefs.^{7,8} They represent a part of the human body and the depiction sometimes bears an inscription. Among other things, it is an important source for understanding the details of the cult and healing at the site, as well as for the history of ancient medicine in general. These reliefs were intended as a gift to Asclepius, representing the afflicted part of the patient's body, which they had asked to be cured and which, as the inscription informs us in many cases, had usually been already successfully cured. Unfortunately, in those cases of reliefs without inscriptions, and sometimes even in those with inscriptions if they are very short, it is not possible to say clearly when the dedication took place: Whether before the cure (and thus it was a plea to the deity) or after the successful cure, which is more likely (thus it would also be to give thanks to the deity). The representation of the ears may have a symbolic aspect in addition to the practical one; that the god lent an ear to the request and cured the patient.⁷

The Parian Asklepieion is attributed with a total of 10 such reliefs, some of which have been found secondarily used in other buildings in modern Parikia. Except for the one depicting ears (Paros Museum, inv. no 697),⁹ all the others represent hands (4 reliefs: Paros Museum, inv. nos. 128, 187, 188 and 795; one more relief showing two hands with an inscription is now lost)^{8,10} and feet (5 reliefs, 4 of which bear an inscription: Paros Museum, inv. nos. 99, 184, 937, 944, 829).^{8,10} While some of the depicted limbs are not very accurately executed and their artistic quality is not very high (see e.g. the relief of the right (?) hand from the Hellenistic to Roman period, with an unnaturally long thumb – Paros Museum, inv. no 795),¹⁰ one representation of the left hand on a relief fragment from the Hellenistic to Roman period (Paros Museum, inv. no 187)¹⁰ is of good quality and accuracy, as it also shows the pattern of palm lines.

2. VOTIVE ANATOMICAL RELIEF PAROS MUSEUM 188 (figures 2–5)

Some votive anatomical reliefs even represent certain special features of the depicted body part, which in many cases can even be interpreted as specific pathologies. This

is the case, among others, of a votive relief from the Parikia area representing both hands (Paros Museum, inv. no 188; dimensions 37.5 cm high × 25 cm wide × 6 cm thick; dated to the Hellenistic period; figures 3–5).¹¹ The slab was made from fine to medium-grained white crystalline local marble. Most of the surface is now covered with a beige to ochre layer of secondary deposits.

This relief had already been mentioned by Loewy in 1887, who saw it in the house of Anastasios Karagamas in Parikia;¹² a drawing of it is also preserved in the notes in the estate of Rubensohn (Jewish Museum Berlin, Sammlung Otto Rubensohn, inv. no 2006/27/608; fig. 2). Its provenance is therefore unfortunately unknown but, given certain specific features of the depiction, it is fairly certain that it was originally displayed in the Asklepieion as a votive offering.

On this slab, with a relief c. 2.1 cm high, two hands which needed to be healed are represented, together with parts of the forearms, within a niche or a pictorial field,

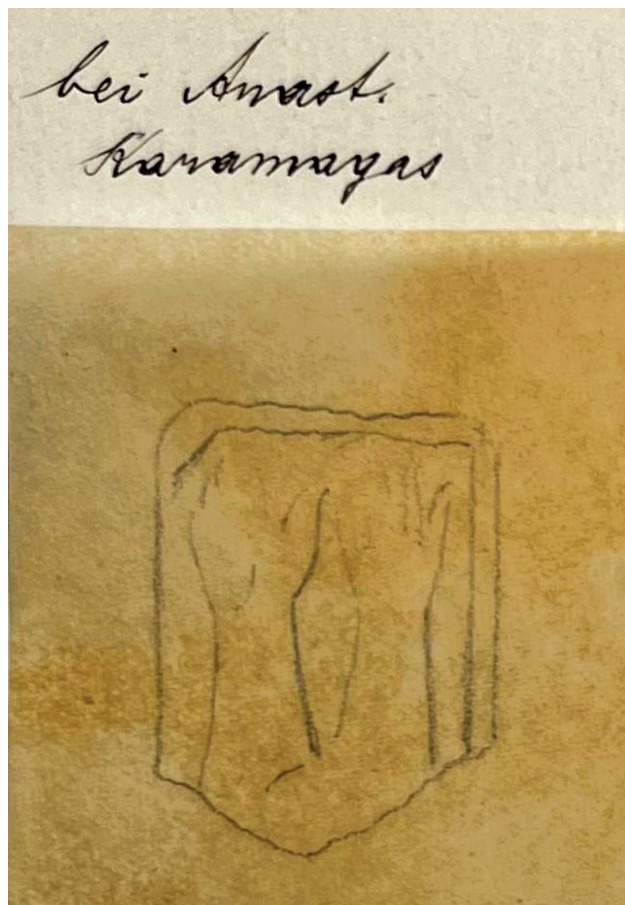


Figure 2. Drawing of the votive relief in the estate of Otto Rubensohn. Jewish Museum Berlin, Sammlung Otto Rubensohn, inv. no 2006/27/608. Courtesy of the Archive of the Jewish Museum of Berlin.

whose edges are clearly traceable along the bottom, right, and most of upper and left sides. The slab is damaged or broken in several places, especially around the upper left corner. Below the niche with the hands there is a flat area with a well-smoothed surface, but with visible traces of working. The underside is more or less flat, with a partially finished surface. Both lateral sides and an upper side are irregularly broken off or possibly cut, but more or less form an approximately flat surface (actually, the left side is made up of three surfaces – the corner is chamfered), perhaps with a slightly rounded profile at the transitional edge to the back. The reverse side is only very roughly chiselled to form a kind of a levelled surface and it also shows some secondary damage.

The surface of both hands and the background of the image field/niche are well smoothed. The right hand is depicted with a view to its backhand side, the left hand most probably showing the palmar side, but the first to third fingers are partially broken as the break line of the slab is here. Between the hands there is a piece of a stone



Figure 3. Votive relief with a representation of both hands. Paros Museum, inv. no 188. Photo by author.

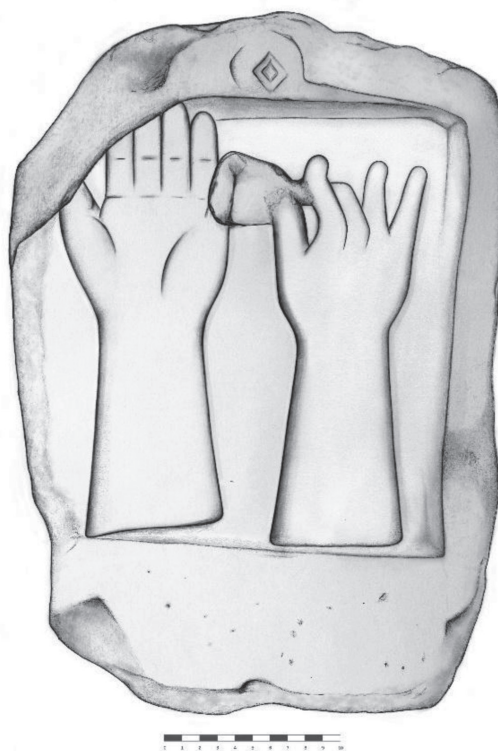


Figure 4. Drawing of the votive relief with a representation of both hands. Paros Museum, inv. no 188. Drawing by Pavla Alušíková Dostalíková.



Figure 5. Votive relief with a representation of both hands – detail of the fingers. Paros Museum, inv. no 188. Photo by author.

binding the two inner fingers (as they are depicted) of both hands together, thus making the details of their proximal phalangi rather vague. This piece was most probably left unfinished by the sculptor, but some details of the hands, like the segmentation of some fingers into phalangi, were lightly indicated. However, the fingers of both hands clearly show specific deformations and particular health conditions which can, with a high level of probability, be identified.

On the right hand, there is a hyperextension of the distal phalanx of the second finger possibly as a consequence of rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis deformans, or trauma. It is an abnormal third finger, with a missing (or short) last phalanx as a result of an amputation or trauma. There is also a short fourth finger where a hyperextension and or possibly missing or short last phalanx are evident, and the fifth finger has a slightly abnormal position, possibly caused by an ankylosis of its interphalangeal joints, which could stem from a congenital disorder or have a traumatic origin. On the left hand, despite an unclear rendering of the right edge of the palm and fingers, six (!) fingers are most probably represented, which is a condition known as polydactylia.¹³

The cause of these symptoms may vary. Except for traumatic or rheumatological origin of some of them, a congenital disorder is the most probable cause. A possible condition that can explain most or even all symptoms could be Larsen syndrome, which is a rare genetic disorder.^{14–16} Although it has been associated with a wide variety of different symptoms (some of them severe, such as dislocations of the large joints, skeletal malformations, and distinctive facial and limb features), the specific symptoms and their severity may vary greatly even among members of the same family. Some affected individuals manifest only a mild form of the disease, with no major anomalies and only short stature and minor features, such as short distal phalanges (toe and fingertip bones) and extra bones in the wrist and ankle (fig. 6).

3. CONCLUSIONS

It seems that the treatment of problems and diseases



Figure 6. Hands of a person with Larsen syndrome. Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0.

of the upper and lower limbs was the main “medical specialty” of the Parian Asklepieion. This is also suggested by the discussed relief depicting hands whose fingers show multiple types of pathologies or impairment which may be of post-traumatic origin, including a consequent arthrosis, or a manifestation of congenital disease. Although the preservation state of this representation does prevent a definitive identification of the disease, its symptoms can still be described in detail. If a traumatic origin of the deformities of the fingers of the right hand is excluded in the differential diagnosis, mainly because the patient with this diagnosis, or the consequent difficulties, would probably not have sought a divine cure in Asklepieion, the symptoms represented best correspond to the systemic disease: Larsen syndrome.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Σύνδρομο Larsen που προσβάλλει τα χέρια σε αρχαίο ανατομικό ανάγλυφο από το Αρχαιολογικό Μουσείο Πάρου;

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Παρουσιάζεται εικονογραφική παλαιοπαθολογική ανάλυση αναθηματικού ανατομικού ανάγλυφου, προερχόμενη ενδεχομένως από τη θέση Ασκληπιείο στο νησί της Πάρου (Κυκλάδες), που χρονολογείται πιθανόν στην ελληνιστική περίοδο (περίπου 323–31 π.Χ.) και εκτίθεται στο Αρχαιολογικό Μουσείο Παροικιάς (αρ. 18). Είναι μια μαρμαρίνη πλάκα που απεικονίζει και τα δύο χέρια. Αν και η κατάσταση διατήρησης αυτού του ανάγλυφου δεν είναι δυστυχώς καλή, κάποιες λεπτομέρειες των χεριών, όπως η κατάτμηση κάποιων δακτύλων σε φάλαγγες, εμφανίζονται αμυδρά.

Ωστόσο, τα δάκτυλα και των δύο χεριών εμφανίζουν ξεκάθαρα συγκεκριμένες παραμορφώσεις και ιδιαίτερες διαταραχές υγείας που μπορούν, με μεγάλη πιθανότητα, να εντοπιστούν. Η πιθανή πάθηση που μπορεί να εξηγήσει τα περισσότερα ή ακόμη και όλα τα συμπτώματα θα μπορούσε να είναι το σύνδρομο Larsen, το οποίο είναι μια σπάνια γενετική διαταραχή.

Λέξεις ευρητηρίου: Αναθηματικό ανατομικό ανάγλυφο, Αρχαία Ελλάδα, Παλαιοπαθολογία, Πάρος

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