



Caduceus, the Herald's Staff (with two snakes)



Staff of Aesculapius (one snake)



In Mythology, the wand or staff carried by Hermes or Mercury having **two serpents** entwined around it and surmounted by two wings. Used as the medical insignia of certain medical groups such as the U.S. Army Medical Corps. Even though it is sometimes used to symbol the medical profession, the staff of Aesculapius, q.v., Roman god of medicine, is usually considered to be the more appropriate symbol.

In Greek and Roman mythology, a magic wand consisting of a rod topped by wings and intertwined by two snakes (kerykeion, caduceus in Greek; kerykeion skeptron meaning "a heralds wand"; keryx meaning announce or herald) was depicted as a medicinal or magical tool symbolized to indicate healing and immortality in literature and drawings from the era before Christ. The fabled wand or rod, the caduceus, was carried by Hermes in Greek myths and Mercury in Roman mythology as the messenger of the gods. Originally, the caduceus was represented as a simple staff wound about with two white ribbons. It is a figure that consists of two entwined serpents encircling a wand or rod. It was a symbol of authority and inviolability and protected the herald who carried it. In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the caduceus is often mentioned as a type of magic wand by which Hermes opened and closed the eyes of mortals. It was therefore connected with death and the journey through the underworld. Later myth says Hermes once threw his magic wand at two snakes fighting on the ground. The snakes became entangled in the magic wand and have been attached to it ever since. The wings at the top were added in later Greek and Roman art. In Virgil's *Aeneid* (book 4) the caduceus is said to have been given to Mercury by Apollo in exchange for Lyre. Milton, calling it Hermes' "opiate rod" in *Paradise Lost* (book 11.133), refers to the belief that the caduceus is associated with medicine because it was one of the symbols of Aesculapius, the god of medicine for the ancients. Le Sage, in *Gil Blas* (1715) writes; "I did not think the post Mercury-in-chief quite so honorable as it was called... and resolved to abandon the Caduceus [give up the medical profession] for ever."

And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand and caught it and it became a rod in his hand. (Exodus 4:2-4)

And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten [by a serpent], when he looketh upon it, shall live. Numbers 21:8.

When the young reforming king Hezekiah came to the throne of Judah in the late 8th century:

"He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan." 2 Kings 18:4.

Apparently an Israelite cult subsequently formed worshipping Nehush'tan, the serpent Moses made (apparently twin snake images were inscribed on standards of the time) but the cult was eventually suppressed (over 600 years later) by King Hezekiah

In the Gospel of Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist calls the Pharisees and Saducees visiting him a `brood of vipers`. Later in Matthew 23:33, Jesus himself uses this imagery, observing: *"Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of Gehenna?"* ("Hell" is the usual translation of Jesus' word *Gehenna*.)

Jesus made a comparison between himself and the setting up of the snake on the hill in the desert by Moses:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:14-15).

"The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray..."

"And these signs shall follow them that believe: In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." (Mark 16:17-18)

"Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you." (Luke 10:19)

Caduceus: [From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#)

The symbol's origins are thought to date to as early as 2800 BC in Mesopotamia, and there are several references to a caduceus-like symbol in the Bible, namely in Numbers 21:4-9, and 2 Kings 18:4. During the Exodus, Moses was instructed by God to fashion a pole upon which he was to position a serpent made of brass; when looked upon, this Nehushtan, as it was called in Hebrew, would spare the lives of the Israelites stricken by venomous snake bites. The intent was that people would look upward

and be reminded to pray to God, but eventually the meaning was forgotten and this symbol was apparently worshiped by the Hebrew people until the reign of Hezekiah as described in 2 Kings 18:4.

Professional and patient centered organizations (such as the NZMA, in fact most medical Associations around the world including the World Health Organization) use the "correct" and traditional symbol of medicine, the staff of Asclepius with a single serpent encircling a staff, classically a rough-hewn knotty tree limb. Asclepius (an ancient Greek physician deified as the god of medicine) is traditionally depicted as a bearded man wearing a robe that leaves his chest uncovered and holding a staff with his sacred single serpent coiled around it, (example right) symbolizing renewal of youth as the serpent casts off its skin. The single serpent staff also appears on a Sumerian vase of c. 2000 B.C. representing the healing god Ningishita, the prototype of the Greek Asklepios. However, there is a more practical origin postulated which makes sense [See *Dracunculus medinensis*].

The etching "The Brazen Serpent" (to the right) by Schnorr von Carolsfeld shows this as only one snake, suggesting he interpreted this as a medical rather than mystical or magical symbol.

Now just in case you thought you had it all sorted out about which was the "good" symbol.... nothing is that simple, take a look at this interesting painting of Adam & Eve.....



The Brazen Serpent



The Blue "Star of Life" -- The Emergency Medical Care Symbol



CMA



NZMA



Medical Council



WHO



Medcorp



IUPS



Pagan symbol