

Cupping in Greece

Some Personal Explorations of Cupping in Greece

Excerpt from an upcoming book on Traditional Cupping

by Bruce Bentley

Despite encroaching modernity, cupping continues to be a popular treatment method, passed down from generation to generation as a family tradition throughout Greece. While some people do report it fading, especially in the big cities, others, at least those practitioners I met in rural districts and less populated areas are convinced it is, “in the Greek blood and will never disappear.” Its practice has diminished however, from around the 1960’s onwards, according to Associate Professor John Laskazatos, during an interview conducted in his office at the History of Medicine Department at Athens University. John said until then, “cupping was very widespread, and was the initial response employed in the home to treat fever and common cold.”

Even before embarking in 1998 on a busy research trip to Europe to investigate traditional cupping practices, I had decided the place I would go and to take time out was to be Meteora (meaning in Greek “suspended in the air”) in central mainland Greece. I had marveled at photos of Orthodox monasteries perched on top of massive sheer rock outcrops, and in the flesh, the grandeur of the region proved even more remarkable. Later in the afternoon on my fourth and final day, I strolled into the local town of Kalambaka for a meal, and on a spur of the moment I couldn’t resist trying my luck at a tad of research. I tapped on the door of a local doctor to see if he might have time to talk about cupping. A very friendly and mild mannered Dr Konstantinos Manzanas MD, aged 71, answered and invited me into his general practice, where we had an illuminating discussion for the next few hours.

Dr. Manzanas recalled early childhood memories of his mother cupping everyone in his family using ordinary coffee cups. As well, he remarked, “in every household throughout this rural region, at least one family member can perform it”; so he finds there is no need to utilize cupping in his own clinic. Dr. Manzanas said, when he was a medical student from 1952 until 1959, cupping was not taught in the curriculum, but it was discussed by some of his lecturers who “had a good opinion of it, especially for common cold, pneumonia and bronchitis.” The older professors even



strongly recommended it, in stark contrast to the medical books that stressed that antibiotics were far more effective and scientific. In addition he held the view that cupping was not instructed, because the lecturers all realized that most of the students had already been shown how to perform it by family members at home.

Dr Manzanas went on to say, and other Greek nationals in Greece and in Australia have confirmed this, that Greek cupping is used mostly to treat respiratory

conditions. He said, "Greek people recognize the major benefit of cupping is to cure the lungs, by decongesting phlegm from the lung tissue and take out coldness." Dr. Manzanas cautioned however, "it is only beneficial in treating common cold so long as the patient stays at home in the warm for at least 12 hours after treatment. Otherwise to go outside when the skin pores are open means the condition can become worse, because the cold can enter into the body." Whenever I hear this requisite, it always makes me think how well cupping lends itself to be a home based treatment because the patient has no need to go elsewhere and can stay warm, cozy and protected.

It is intriguing to think how and when cupping became a commonplace lay household practice with an emphasis on treating respiratory ailments. In Greece around 400 BC, according to the eminent classical scholar W.H.S Jones (1959, xii), "the most important diseases of the Hippocratic age were the chest complaints, pneumonia and pleurisy (pulmonary tuberculosis was also very general) and various forms, sub-continuous and remittent, of malaria." Yet surprisingly, within the sixty odd scholarly volumes of the Hippocratic Corpus, there is no recommendation made for cupping as a treatment for pulmonary conditions, although it does get mentioned as a treatment for other conditions such as staunching excessive menstrual bleeding and for correcting certain spinal misplacements. By contrast, in the Greek folk medical tradition, treating common cold and other respiratory conditions is almost *the* staple for cupping; in much the same way it is a folk treatment norm elsewhere throughout Europe. We can only presume its practice by ordinary householders has been performed for centuries. However for precisely for how long seems impossible to verify, due to a lack of textual records available. Oral histories certainly take us back a few generations, but beyond this things get hazy.

In Greek practice, cups are usually applied to the skin surface for only a short period of time, and then reapplied elsewhere in a progressive sequence. Apparently, the initial few seconds of a cup placed on the skin surface are the most critical in effectively withdrawing illness causation factors from the body. In most practices I have observed, the cups are even “slapped” onto the body surface with a loose flick of the wrist to dramatically impact on the flesh, thus quickly drawing coldness and any other congestive pathogens from the lungs. People think mostly about cold as the basic reason. According to Dr. Manzanas, the most important etiological factor causing respiratory disease is climatic or environmental cold entering inside, either by the ‘breath’ (via inhalation), or more significantly, through the pores of the skin, particularly at the back of the neck and upper back. In his opinion, people think mostly about the cold as the basic reason for illness because, as a subjective feeling, “it feels more obvious than the others.” However, as significant as it is, when associated with wind, it is deemed even more pernicious, as the wind unsettles the protective skin layer to allow the cold to be driven further into the body. Dr. Manzanas elaborated that the most invasive and damaging combination of weather factors occur “when cold, moist, windy weather all combine together”. After forty years of clinical practice, he is convinced that “cupping takes these out from the body better than any other treatment”. As a result “we can say therefore, that traditional aetiologies for respiratory diseases and other conditions which respond to cupping are good and true explanations.”

Dr Manzanas also talked about other reasons for applying cups. He recommended cupping treatment for all kinds of pain in the stomach, including dyspepsia, vomiting, nausea and pain due to coldness. His treatment advice, other than directly cupping the upper back extensively, was to place a cup over the navel for half an hour or longer to “take out the store of cold.” He also recommended cupping for stiffness of the lower back, as well as throughout the legs to promote blood circulation. While his understanding was fostered first by his mother, throughout his long medical career, he also came to be convinced of the value of the traditional Greek cupping approach, which was of course a very different approach to treatment he was taught in medical school. The proximity of these indigenous Greek medical ideas with traditional Chinese medicine is quite remarkable. When I heard him speak, at one point I happened to enquire whether or not he was familiar with traditional Chinese medicine and he answered, “No.”

Finally I asked him if the young doctors he knew held positive views about cupping. He replied, “Unfortunately not. I believe it has to do with big business, pharmacies making money and not being impressed about people being able to treat themselves.” Throughout our talk I was charmed by Dr Manzanos, who incidentally was the only person I met in Greece who referred to cupping as *sikia*, the original Greek word used by Hippocratic physicians, instead of the Latin *venoduses*, which has it seems has become universal parlance. When I commented on this, he smiled and said he prefers the original.

When it was time to say goodbye and thank Dr Manzanas, he presented me with a gift of a votive replica from an eighth century BC Asclepian sanctuary, dedicated to Asclepios, the God of Medicine and Healing. Depicted is a venerable bearded man in classical robes, holding an enlarged lower leg. Detail on the leg shows an enlarged vein running medially downwards, which probably indicates that the person seeking a cure, commissioned this relief to present to the God as an offering, was suffering from a varicose vein problem. It has hung in my office ever since. Cupping has many variations in Greece, and the practices presented below are two I consider the most interesting.

Cupping treatment for common cold and bronchitis (from Ioannina, North West Greece)

Ioannina, (pronounced Janenna), is a picturesque city situated on the coast. There I spoke with the very helpful Vicky Kalfakakou and Angelo Evangelou, Associate Professors at the University of Ioannina’s Laboratory of Experimental Physiology. Vicky’s mother had been a nurse all her working life and “had lots of cupping experience.” That evening when I met with her, she said, “the main purpose of cupping is to create warmth and hyperaemia, in order to draw coldness from the body, not only from the surface tissue but also from deeper levels.”

She also suggested I talk to the local fishermen about cupping. So the next morning I walked down to the pier, where I asked a man who owned a small boat if he could take me to a nearby small island. There I chanced to meet a seasoned fisherman named Janus Sadas who said, “I always get cupping if I feel unwell. But these days most people I know take the easy way and get injections or take pills. No good for the body. You know forty years ago everyone did it, but things have changed a lot. Before especially for fishermen, when they go to get the fish, it is often cold, rain and



Photo credit: Alisa Mappe

windy, sometimes snow, and they would get cold and pneumonia. They often had the *vendouses* done.”

I didn't have to go far to meet another very supportive person interested in cupping. My landlady, Soula Tzabana, at the small hotel I was staying, was very keen on the subject. Soula inherited her cupping skills from her ninety-nine year old grandmother. She was so enthusiastic, even before our interview had begun, she declared, 'I'm very interested...I love it!' Soula told me she became a cupping fan after her grandmother very

quickly cured her from an illness. She kindly gave me instructions on her family cupping practice, together with a practical demonstration, which she performed on another person working at the hotel.

Soula Tzabana's Cupping Treatment

Soula's practice, delineated by stages, highlights what a positive indicator cupping marks are in establishing the presence of pathogenic coldness. Stage One determines its lodgement within the body by a show of dark circular marks, after quick application of cups. Stage Two concentrates on drawing this cold from deeper levels within the body by leaving cups on certain focus sites for a longer period of time. This type of treatment is common throughout Greece as a folk treatment for common colds, influenza, bronchitis and muscular aches.

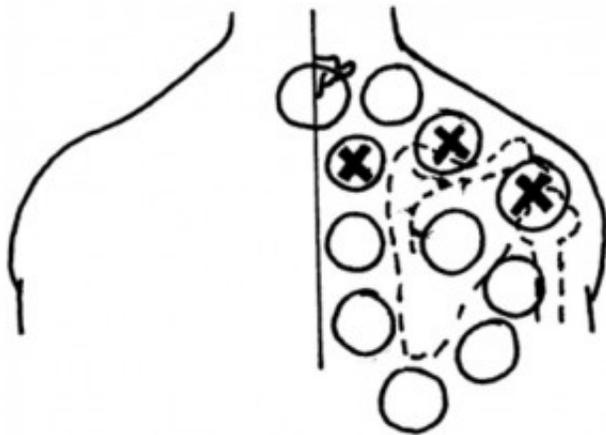
Treatment Procedure: In Stage One, the practitioner stands beside the table, taking off cups and reapplying them in a constant stream of activity. The tempo of applying the cups is brisk. There is a slapping sound as each cup lands on the skin. The intention is to have the cup strike and intensely focus its impact on the body, to release contracted cold and wind factors lodged within the outer layers of the body.

Stage One:

1. Apply 5 – 6 heated cups (warmed to at least body temperature) to one side of the upper and middle regions of the back.
2. Immediately take off the first cup in the placement sequence and reapply it to

the next position. Continue removing all cups in their order of application and place on the next position, moving in anti-clockwise direction.

3. Shift the placement of the cups to the next area of the back and do the same to the opposite side of the upper back by repeating Step 2.
4. Continue to cover the entire upper back in this manner.
5. Repeat the above steps 5 – 10 times.



Soula begins her treatment placing a cup on either of the circles where X “marks the spot”. Progressively apply 4, 5, or 6 cups (“depends how many are available”) in a sequence counter-clockwise around the perimeter of the scapula and one in the center above the infraspinatus muscle . Having circumnavigated around once the next

cup is applied lateral to C7 and another covering the intervertebral space between C7 and T1, which are both “important points to treat cold”, especially when ‘hot’ symptoms coexist. Soula said, “my grandmother used only 2 glasses; her skill was very good.” This means she was very swift and dextrous.

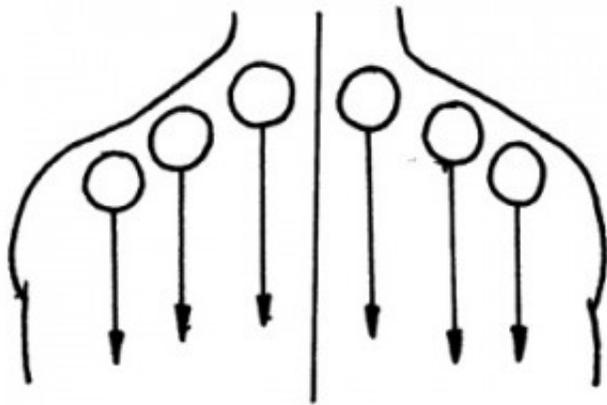
Stage Two:

1. Note those spots that have become dark and cup them again. Leave the cup(s) in place for 3 minutes. With the cups in place, cover the entire back with a towel or thick blanket.
2. Remove all the cups and massage the back to warm and invigorate the circulation. In Greece, alcohol is often rubbed into the skin after cupping in order to warm and close the skin pores.

Cupping is a wonderful field research subject, if for no other reason than you may be invited to someone’s house, be served tea and be talking eagerly about a mutual interest. On another occasion during my few days in Ioannina, I went into a shop looking for something to eat and asked the lady serving if she knew anyone I could talk

to about cupping. She said, “sure, my mother” and invited me for dinner to meet her that evening. Christine, the shop owner, translated what her mother Margaret Moukas, who was about 70 years old said, “This is our family method from my grandmother. Our family cupping method is a quick answer for cold and pain.”

Her method is to apply, without any lubrication to the skin, 6 quick parallel downward swiping movements in rows with the same cup. At the moment of contact, from the upper back, she drew each cup down for about 6 – 8 inches until it “naturally” leaves the skin. Margaret said not to include the spine in this treatment. I was told, “Not down the backbone, the cups need meat!” I was also informed that with each downward sweep of the cup “the body tells you how far each cup should travel, because the cold that it draws out acts as a gauge and releases the cup from the skin surface when it has done what it needs to do.”



Margaret Moukas' cupping method for ridding cold from the upper back. She said, “When you do this on a person, the body tells you how far each cup should stay on the body, because it draws out the cold. When this has been taken out to the level of the cold, the cup will naturally release its grip.”

Bibliography

Jones, W.H.S. (1959) Hippocrates Volume II. William Heinemann. Great Britain.

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