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|  | **THE GOLDEN WAND OF MEDICINE, A History of the Caduceus Symbol in Medicine** WALTER J. FRIEDLANDER FOREWORD BY ROBERT P. HUDSON Contributions in Medical Studies, Number 35 GREENWOOD PRESS New York · Westport, Connecticut · London -iii-  |  |

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | TO ALICE -v-  |  |

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**Contents**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Figures**  | [ix](http://www.questia.com/read/15324378)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Foreword**  | [xi](http://www.questia.com/read/15324380)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **1. Introduction**  | [1](http://www.questia.com/read/15324384)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **2. Definition of the Caduceus**  | [5](http://www.questia.com/read/15324388)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **3. Development of the Structure of the Caduceus**  | [13](http://www.questia.com/read/15324396)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **4. Hermes**  | [31](http://www.questia.com/read/15324414)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **5. Egyptian Hermes**  | [61](http://www.questia.com/read/15324444)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **6. Caduceus in Medicine: Sixteenth Through Nineteenth Centuries**  | [83](http://www.questia.com/read/15324466)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **7. Caduceus as a Printer's Mark**  | [109](http://www.questia.com/read/15324492)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **8. U. S. Army's Medical Department Adopts the Caduceus**  | [127](http://www.questia.com/read/15324510)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **9. Present**  | [145](http://www.questia.com/read/15324528)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **10. Summary**  | [155](http://www.questia.com/read/15324538)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Appendix I: Persistence of Confusion About Hermes**  | [159](http://www.questia.com/read/15324542)  |

 |

-vii-

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Appendix II: History of the American Medical Association's Official Symbol**  | [167](http://www.questia.com/read/15324550)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Selected Bibliography**  | [171](http://www.questia.com/read/15324554)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Index**  | [175](http://www.questia.com/read/15324558)  |

 |

-viii-

**Figures**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **1. Successive stages in the evolution from the "Babylonian caduceus" to the "Greek caduceus"**  | [23](http://www.questia.com/read/15324406)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **2. (A.) Rod of Ningizzida compared to (B.) the rod of Hermes and its evolution; (C.) a tree branch similar to the one carried by Hermes on the Krater of Dresden and its evolution into the 8-shaped wand; (D.) the impossibility of Homeric Hymns' staff evolving into an 8-shaped wand**  | [24](http://www.questia.com/read/15324407)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **3. Graph showing how the average caduceus has been depicted from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries**  | [25](http://www.questia.com/read/15324408)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **4. Diagram showing the relationship of the various Hermes**  | [65](http://www.questia.com/read/15324448)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **5. (A.) Caius' non-caduceus-like emblem; (B.) Butts' caduceus; (C.) Harvey's caduceus**  | [119](http://www.questia.com/read/15324502)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **6. Caduceus of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (left) compared with the caduceus of the Royal College of Physicians of London**  | [120](http://www.questia.com/read/15324503)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **7. An early (1516) example of Froben's mark with Hans Holbein's name in the upper corners**  | [121](http://www.questia.com/read/15324504)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **8. John Churchill's 1837 use of the staff of Aesculapius**  | [122](http://www.questia.com/read/15324505)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **9. Evolution of the caducean printer's marks**  | [123](http://www.questia.com/read/15324506)  |

 |
|  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **10. The banner of the first issue of Le Caducée**  | [139](http://www.questia.com/read/15324522)  |

 |

-ix-

**Foreword**

"Of making many books there is no end" saith the preacher of *Ecclesiastes*. And
we shall thank the Muses for it! What a diminished life we would lead if that
process ended.

Books, like living things, begin as seeds, and seeds have at least two
characteristics germane to this metaphor--at the outset and at first glance they
are small and perhaps rather uninteresting, and they usually convey no indication
of what they will become when fully-grown. *The Golden Wand of Medicine*
derives from such a seed--the "question of how a particular object, the caduceus,
came to symbolize a particular activity, medicine, especially when there is no
evident connection between the two." The first glance at this seed might appear
to interest only those specializing in such realms as antiquity and medical
symbolism. Indeed it could be asked, what difference does it make whether the
caduceus or the staff of Aesculapius is the historically correct and proper emblem
of the profession of medicine. But it does matter, because we use history. If we
are to use the past to try to understand the "origins of our predicament," and for
short-range social and political planning, the story of what went before needs to
be as accurate as the storyteller can make it.

But there is more than mundane utility in the study of history, just as
there is much to be gained by watching a seed generate through its cycle and
into the mystery of reseeding and dying that simultaneously closes the ring and
begins it again. Understanding the process by which an idea develops can be as
intrinsically fascinating and instructive as watching what is done with it in
application. Even without utility, which some deny history in any case, an
understanding of the past can confer a sense of place and purpose in personal
and vocational lives. One need not be a physician to be elevated by an
appreciation of the emblems of medicine any more than one need be an art
historian to gain from a detailed study of Rembrandt *Anatomy of Dr. Tulp*. There is as much to be reaped in following the generation and growth
of Dr. Friedlander's thesis as there is in his gleanings. His search for an answer
to how the caduceus and the Aesculapian staff both came to exist as medical
symbols on the current scene is the root and stalk of his efforts. His conclusions
are, at once, appropriately definitive and tentative. In short, his harvest is
successful. But there is more. Along the way the reader encounters a luxurious
growth of scholarly endeavor ranging from ancient mythology to the origins of
the seal of the American Medical Association.

Alone among the professions, practitioners of medicine founded the
history of their discipline. For years they nurtured and dominated the field.
During the past three decades, humanistic studies have been all but squeezed out
of the education of physicians. Simultaneously, standards of scholarship in
writing medical history have been raised by the infusion of non-physician
professional historians into the specialty. The result is that physicians lacking
formal historical training have all but disappeared from the scene. A few
exceptions to this trend continue to appear-- Guido Majno ( *The Healing Hand*)
and Sherwin Nuland ( *Doctors*) come to mind. Dr. Friedlander has brought us
a book that revives the physician as historian. *The Golden Wand of Medicine*
will probably remain the last word on the subject for years to come.

Robert P. Hudson, M.D.

**THE GOLDEN WAND
OF MEDICINE**

-xiii-

**1
Introduction**

A student parks his car on the street just in front of my office at the medical
college; on the back window is a round decal which has the name of the medical
school on the outer rim and in the center is a caduceus--a short rod entwined by
two snakes and topped by a pair of wings.

Anyone who wishes to buy their doctor a present can go to the Gift
Shop in the University Hospital where there are a variety of objects that have a
caduceus on them: coffee cups, tie clasps, plaques, etc.

Some of the patients who are admitted to the hospital receive from the
Director a nicely printed card welcoming them; on the card is a caduceus.

Two of the other hospitals that are in the vicinity of the College of
Medicine prominently display a caduceus at their entrances.

Not infrequently I receive in the mail advertisements for health insurance
from companies that include in their logo a caduceus. The notices which are
commonly mailed to physicians to announce a doctor opening a new office has
embossed on them a caduceus.

And I certainly cannot forget the caduceus I wore on my lapel when I
was a medical officer in the United States Army.

It seems obvious that a close association has been established between
the caduceus and the practice of medicine. In the United States the caduceus
appears to be the more popular of the two commonly used symbols of medicine;
the other is the staff of the Greek and Roman demigod of medicine, Aesculapius.
However, when I turn, as for example, to a dictionary of Greek and Roman
mythology I find that the caduceus was the magic rod of Hermes, the messenger
of the gods, "deity of wealth, god of trade and travelers, of commerce, manual
skill, oratory and eloquence, of thieves, and of the wind. . .and patron of
athletes." [1](http://www.questia.com/read/15324386) With these attributes, how did his wand become the symbol of
medicine?

-1-

This essay is a history and an analysis of how this occurred, of how the
caduceus became *The Golden Wand of Medicine*. This is not the first time the
subject has been discussed and references to a number of these other papers will
be made. However, these other works have been of two types: either, one, short
reviews which often have been largely copies of what others, perhaps more
authoritative authors, have written in short pieces, or, two, lengthy and often
original studies but ones which have been limited to only certain aspects or
periods of the history of the caduceus. This book is the first one to consider this
history in depth, using both primary and secondary sources, and also covering
the entire span of time, ancient to the present.

However, it is hoped that it will be more than just that. Symbols play
a vital function in the lives of men. Here is the story of how one popular
symbol developed. As such, this history is not only about something related to
the rather restricted interests of medicine, but also has wider implications in
trying to show how at least one symbol came to be adopted.

The first thing that needs to be accomplished is to define what,
specifically, this symbol is. As the history develops, it will be evident that one
of the important factors that led to this sign, which originally had very little
connection with medicine, to become a symbol of medicine was that it became
confused with a sign that was truly related to medicine, the staff of Aesculapius.
Therefore, the subject of this history must be clearly defined from the outset.

The third chapter will discuss the evolution of the symbol itself. The
beginnings of this particular figure have been used by some to try to prove that,
even if the owners of the caduceus, the Greek Hermes and the Latin Mercury,
had but little connection with medicine, the wand associated with them originally
had a close association with medicine. Also, the various parts of the
figure--wings, serpents and rod--as it is now depicted, is said to have particular
complementary meanings which give to its user--medicine--certain positive
attributes. Does the evolution of this figure really bear this out?

Chapter Four is an examination of who Hermes, the original owner of
the caduceus, really was. From this, two questions may be answered. First,
what, if anything, in ancient history justifies connecting Hermes, and therefore
his caduceus, with medicine? Second, what about the opposite side of the coin;
are there things about Hermes with which medicine would be reluctant to be
identified?

Chapter Five is essentially a continuation of the history of Hermes, but
now he has become identified with several, more-or-less totally different
individuals: one, the Egyptian god, Thoth, and, two, the neo-Platonic sage who
never actually existed, Hermes Trismegistus. Some connections between Thoth
and medicine were certainly present, but it is unlikely that these were at all
important in the much later misperception of an association between Hermes, his
sign and this particular profession. A better possible link between Hermes
Trismegistus and medicine was by way of alchemy.

-2-

The sixth chapter discusses the history of the caduceus as a symbol of
medicine from the beginning of the fifteenth century until the end of the
nineteenth. Evidence will be offered that for the first 250 to 300 years of this
period, the caduceus was employed in some medical situations, but probably not
as a symbol specific for this profession. Rather it was a means of conveying to
the person who was assigned this symbol certain positive characteristics
attributed to Hermes or Mercury, such as wisdom or eloquence. At the same
time, the caduceus continued to be associated with other specific activities
closely aligned with the ancient functions of these gods, such as commerce or
peaceful negotiations.

The use of the caduceus in the printer's marks by publishers of medical
books has been a topic of considerable interest. Chapter Seven gives evidence
that early printers used the caduceus not as a medical symbol, but rather to
convey the idea that, as publishers, they were followers of Hermes and dispensed
messages, particularly on a commercial basis. This is in contrast to nineteenth
century and later medical publishers who, probably through misinterpretation as
well as a desire to imitate a successful contemporary publisher of medical books,
John Churchill, assumed that the caduceus had some unique association with
medicine.

An event which was particularly important in accounting for the present
day acceptance of the caduceus as a symbol of medicine is discussed in Chapter
Eight, the adoption in 1902 of this sign as the official insignia of the United
States Army Medical Department. The ninth chapter is concerned with the
situation as it exists today. The last chapter summarizes the history that has been
presented and offers a conclusion.

**NOTE**

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| [1.](http://www.questia.com/read/15324384)  | Zimmerman J. E. *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. New York: Bantam, 1964, p. 124.  |
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**2
Definition of the Caduceus**

If a book is to be devoted to a particular subject, it is essential that, at the very
beginning, the subject be clearly identified. What, then, is a caduceus?

The word caduceus is Latin, derived from the Greek, *kerykeion* [1](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393) which,
in turn, may have been derived originally from *keryx* which means herald or to
announce. According to Dr. Harry L. Arnold, Jr."it was first used in the phrase
*kerykeion skeptron* meaning, loosely, a herald's wand. Very early, however, the
word *skeptron* was dropped from the phrase, and the word *kerykeion* alone used
to mean the same thing." [2](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393)

*Kerykeion* was probably used to designate a nonspecific herald's wand
before it became associated with the particular wand of Hermes, the messenger
of the gods. [3](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393) In most modern, nonmedical dictionaries [4](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393) the primary definition
of caduceus remains a herald's wand, and only secondarily is it noted to be the
particular wand of Hermes. This is well illustrated by the definition of caduceus
in three modern, authoritative English-language dictionaries: "1 The symbolic
staff of a herald; *specif*.: a conventionalized representation of a staff with two
snakes curled around it and two wings at the top"; [5](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393) "1. An ancient herald's
wand or staff"; [6](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393) and, "The wand carried by an ancient Greek or Roman herald,
*specif*. the fabled wand carried by Hermes or Mercury as the messenger of the
gods; usually represented with two serpents twined around it." [7](http://www.questia.com/read/15324393)

The definition of a caduceus that will be used in this essay is: *a figure
whose basic structure consists of two entwined serpents encircling a wand or
rod*. This, of course, is defining the caduceus in a limited fashion--Hermes'
caduceus--rather than the more general definition, a herald's rod or wand. It
would be awkward to have to use the term Hermes' caduceus or the caduceus
of Hermes, every time the topic is mentioned. There are occasions when a
herald's wand will be discussed distinct from Hermes' caduceus; on such
occasions it will be evident which of the two caducei are being considered.

-5-

<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM199305133281918>

**The Golden Wand of Medicine: A History of the Caduceus Symbol in Medicine**
(Contributions in Medical Studies. No. 35.) by Walter J. Friedlander. 181 pp., illustrated. New York, Greenwood Press, 1992. $45. ISBN: 0-313-28023-1

In the United States, by 1900, the staff of Aesculapius (in heraldry, a knotty rod, sometimes fruited and leaved, with a snake entwined) had been confused with the caduceus of Hermes (a winged staff, with two snakes intertwined). This book describes how the staff of medicine got mixed up with the caduceus, symbol of trade, commerce, communication, and thieves. The staff, in heraldry, means medicine, but the caduceus appears -- among other places -- in the crest of Lloyds' Register of Shipping and the arms of Kharkov (Ukraine), Tampere (Finland), and Puerto Rico. Heraldry is symbols; for example, the 16th-century Augsburg Guild of Bakers displayed a gold pretzel on a red shield.

Early printers, medical and nonmedical, often used a caduceus as colophon. In 1851, the U.S. Army prescribed a yellow caduceus embroidered on an emerald green half-chevron for hospital stewards. Why is not clear. Perhaps an overworked War Department clerk was told to design something for hospital stewards and copied the caduceus from the colophon of a contemporary medical publisher. Fielding Garrison argued that the caduceus, often used in the arms of 18th-century ambassadors, was a sign of peace, a badge that hospital stewards were noncombatants. Army surgeons wore epaulets with a laurel wreath surrounding the letters M.S. until 1872 and thereafter a variety of collar badges -- until 1902, when the caduceus became official for the medical department. Medical officers, however, were first clearly defined as noncombatants at Winchester, Virginia, on May 31, 1862, when the Union and Confederate armies agreed not to hold them as prisoners of war, and only in 1887 did Army regulations exempt hospital personnel from combat duties.

The unofficial 1818 arms of the Army Medical Department (the United States, deplorably, has no college of arms) included both a cock in the crest and the staff of Aesculapius impaled sinister, and from 1826 until 1832 Navy surgeons had the staff as a collar badge. During the Civil War, Navy surgeons wore shoulder straps similar to those of line officers, minus the foul anchor, but their cap emblem was a vertical silver oak leaf surrounded by a gold wreath of oak and olive branches. (Oak trees were sacred to European sky gods.) In 1871 or 1872, the Marine Hospital Service adopted a caduceus on its seal “because of its relationship with merchant seamen and the maritime industry.”

Dr. Friedlander clarifies this chaotic series of misunderstandings with great thoroughness, immense learning, and charmingly self-deprecatory wit. He catalogues Hermes' numerous

illegitimate children, graphs the evolution of the caduceus (wings on staff vs. number of coils in snakes) from the 15th through the 18th century ([Figure 1](http://www.nejm.org/action/showImage?doi=10.1056%2FNEJM199305133281918&iid=f01)Figure 1The Seal of the Surgeons of Dresden, 1663. From Rod and Serpent of Asklepios by J. Schouten (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1967).), discusses various Hermetic legends, and suggests that the caduceus acquired its medical association through Hermes Trismegistus' fame as an alchemist. He concludes that the caduceus did not indicate noncombatant status for hospital stewards, that the medical caduceus crept from Army to civilian use in the United States, and that “at the present time the caduceus is a commonly accepted symbol of medicine, although it is used more widely by commercial than professional medical organizations.” He documents his conclusion that the caduceus is no proper symbol of medicine and is widely regarded as such only in the United States.

Who cares? Traditionalists, those interested in heraldry, medical historians, and anyone else who relishes the really thorough demolition of an error. An officer in Evelyn Waugh's 1952 novel Men at Arms asked if a lecture comparing the jurisdictions of the Lyon and Garter Kings of Arms would interest the troops and got this answer: “Not all of them perhaps. Those that are interested will be very much interested indeed.”

Many readers will find this book pure bliss, and every medical library should have it.

William D. Sharpe, M.D.
Cabrini Medical Center, New York, NY 10003

-xi-

## The History and Origins of The Caduceus Medical Symbol

## <http://www.squidoo.com/caduceus>



**The Caduceus (Kerykeion in Greek) is a winged staff with two snakes wrapped around it. It was an ancient astrological symbol of commerce and is associated with the Greek god Hermes, the messenger for the gods, conductor of the dead and protector of merchants and thieves.**

The Asclepius Rod, is an ancient Greek symbol associated with astrology and with healing the sick through medicine. The Caduceus and The Rod of Asclepius are often used interchangeably. The Rod of Asclepius symbolizes the healing arts by combining the serpent, and the [figure-eight shape](http://www.squidoo.com/feng_shui_symbols) the number eight; which is important to the practitioners of judicial astrology.

In the seventh century, the caduceus came to be associated with a precursor of medicine, based on the Hermetic astrological principles of using the planets and stars to heal the sick.

## Read More About The Caduceus



#### [The Golden Wand of Medicine: A History of the Caduceus Symbol in Medicine (Contributions in Medical Studies)](http://www.amazon.com/Golden-Wand-Medicine-Caduceus-Contributions/dp/0313280231%3FSubscriptionId%3D19BAZMZQFZJ6G2QYGCG2%26tag%3Dsquid560428-20%26linkCode%3Dxm2%26camp%3D2025%26creative%3D165953%26creativeASIN%3D0313280231)

**by:** Walter J. Friedlander

**Amazon Price:** $103.94 (as of 12/13/2011)

"Many readers will find this book pure bliss, and every medical library should have it."

-New England Journal of Medicine

## The Rod of Asclepius

### Asclepius was the (Greek) God of Healing.

**As a symbol for medicine, the caduceus is often used interchangeably with the Rod of Asclepius (single snake, no wings), although learned opinion prefers the Rod of Asclepius, reserving the caduceus for representing commerce.**

Historically, the two astrological symbols had distinct meanings in alchemical and astrological principles. Some medical organizations join the serpents of the caduceus with rungs to suggest a DNA double-helix.

**Who was Asclepius?**
Asclepius was most probably a skilled physician who practiced in Greece around 1200BC (and described in Homer's Iliad). Eventually through myth and legend he came to be worshiped as Asclepius, the (Greek) God of Healing.

Healers and those in need of healing invoked Asclepius' name in prayer and healing ceremonies in temples and at home. A healing clan known as the Asclepiads claimed to be the descendants of Asclepius and to have inherited a knowledge and mystical power of healing from him.

**The Myth:** Asclepius is the God of Healing.
Asclepius is the son of Apollo and the nymph, Coronis. While pregnant with Asclepius, Coronis secretly took a second, mortal lover. When Apollo found out, he sent Artemis to kill her. While burning on the funeral pyre, Apollo felt pity and rescued the unborn child from the corpse.

Asclepius was taught about medicine and healing by the wise centaur, Cheiron, and became so skilled in it that he succeeded in bringing one of his patients back from the dead. Zeus felt that the immortality of the Gods was threatened and killed the healer with a thunderbolt. At Apollo's request, Asclepius was placed among the stars as Ophiuchus, the serpent-bearer.

**The probable medical origin of the single serpent around a rod:**
In ancient times infection by parasitic worms was common. The filarial worm Dracunculus medinensis aka "the fiery serpent", aka "the dragon of Medina" aka "the guinea worm" crawled around the victim's body, just under the skin.

Physicians treated this infection by cutting a slit in the patient's skin, just in front of the worm's path. As the worm crawled out the cut, the physician carefully wound the pest around a stick until the entire animal had been removed.

It is believed that because this type of infection was so common, physicians advertised their services by displaying a sign with the worm on a stick.

**The Staff as a Medical Symbol:**
From the early 16th century onwards, the staff of Asclepius and the caduceus of Hermes were widely used as printers' marks, and later in pharmacopoeias (pharmacy's) in the 17th and 18th centuries. Over time the rod and serpent emerged as an independent symbol of medicine.

Despite the unequivocal claim of the staff of Asclepius to represent medicine (and healing), the caduceus, a rod with two entwined serpents topped by a pair of wings appears to be the more popular symbol of medicine in the United States, probably due to simple confusion between the caduceus and the staff of Asclepius, the true symbol of medicine. Many people use the word caduceus to mean both of these emblems.

## The Caduceus of Hermes

### Mercury to the Romans

**The Greek God Hermes, found his counterpart in Egypt as the ancient Wisdom god Thoth, as Taaut of the Phoenicians and in Rome as the god Mercury (all linked with a magic rod with twin snakes).**

**The Myth:**
The mythical origin of his magic twin serpent caduceus is described in the story of Tiresias. Poulenc, the "Les Mamelles de Tiresias" (The Breasts of Tiresias) tells how Tiresias- the seer who was so unhelpful to Oedipus and Family- found two snakes copulating, and to separate them stuck his staff between them. Immediately he was turned into a woman, and remained so for seven years, until he was able to repeat his action, and change back to male.

The transformative power in this story, strong enough to completely reverse even physical polarities of male and female, comes from the union of the two serpents, passed on by the wand. Tiresias' staff, complete with serpents, was later passed on to Hermes...

**Occult Hermetic Connection:**
An occult description of the Caduceus of Hermes (Mercury) is that the serpents may represent positive and negative kundalini as it moves through the chakras and around the spine (the staff) to the head where it communicates with the MIND by intellection, the domain of Mercury [wings].

**Caduceus Power Wand:**
This wand is sold at occult, new age & witchcraft stores such as Abaxion with descriptions such as

*"It's central phallic rod represents the potentiality of the masculine, and is intimately surrounded by the writhing, woven shakti energies of two coupling serpents. The rod also represents the spine [sushumna] while the serpents conduct spiritual currents [pranas] along the ida and pingala channels in a double helix pattern from the chakra at the base of the spine up to the pineal gland".*

According to occultists, there are three principal "nadis" or channels, in the human body. The Sushumna (the spinal column through which the life-forces flow), by which energy enters and leaves the body, the Ida (refreshment and stimulation of spirit), which is associated with the higher mind or manas and the Pingala, (reddish-brown), associated with karma or the force of desire.

*(G. de Purucker "Man in Evolution" ch. 15 & 16; and "Fountain-Source of Occultism", pp. 458-63).*

**The Hermetic Arts:**
There are few names to which more diverse persons and disciplines lay claim than the term "Hermetic". Alchemists have applied the adjective "Hermetic" to their art, while magicians attach the name to their ceremonies of evocation and invocation.

The most abiding impact of Hermeticism on Western culture came about by way of the occult tradition. Renaissance occultism, with its alchemy, astrology, ceremonial magic, and occult medicine, became saturated with the teachings of the Hermetic books. This content has remained a permanent part of the occult transmissions of the West, and, along with Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, represents the foundation of all the major Western occults.

**The Caduceus as a Medical Symbol:**
The link between Hermes, his caduceus and medicine seems to have arisen by Hermes links with alchemy. Alchemists were referred to as the sons of Hermes, as Hermetics or Hermeticists and as "practitioners of the hermetic arts".

By the end of the sixteenth century, the study of alchemy included not only medicine and pharmaceuticals but chemistry, mining and metallurgy.

Despite learned opinion that it is the single snake staff of Asclepius that is the proper symbol of medicine, many medical groups have adopted the twin serpent caduceus of Hermes or Mercury as a medical symbol during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Like the staff of Asclepius, the caduceus became associated with medicine through its use as a printer's mark, as printers saw themselves as messengers of the printed word and diffusers of knowledge (hence the choice of the symbol of the messenger of the ancient gods).

A major reason for the current popularity of the caduceus as a medical symbol was its ill-informed official adoption as the insignia for the Medical Department of the United States Army in 1902.