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Nature of Paper	Research Outline
Journal Edition	<i>The School of Historical Studies Postgraduate Forum e-Journal, Edition Two, 2003</i>

To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

Introduction

In modern society, the dream has a very different status from the one it had in antiquity. Today, we have come to think of the dream as a creation of our imagination, or as the processing of experiences we had during the day – for which we are of course much indebted to Sigmund Freud – that is, if we think about our dreams at all. In antiquity, however, the dream was mainly seen as a means of communication for the gods, and many believed that dreams could be a foretaste of future events. Yet numerous other theories about dreams and their origin were formed, opposed and defended, by philosophers, physicians and those who had made people’s dreams their source of income: professional dream interpreters. In my research, I am focusing on one specific role that the dream started to fulfil around the fifth century B.C.: its role as medical dream. What is a medical dream? The definition I have used in my research is: *a dream designed to lead to or instigate the improvement of the dreamer’s health.*

As this is supposed to be only a short talk, I will take you through the basics of the main theories on dreams and their interpretation, and I will introduce you to the ritual of incubation.

1. Believers

Let us start with the group of people who had adopted a (predominantly) positive attitude towards the much debated significance of dreams.

Hippocratics

As most, if not all of you may be aware of, the Hippocratic Corpus was written by a number of different authors. Now, one author is of specific interest to my current research, and that is the author of the treatise *De Victu IV*, which is also referred to as the book *On Dreams*. It is this author who ‘invented’, as he puts it himself, the way to use dreams in ones attempts to live a healthy life. He divides dreams roughly into two categories:

- I **Divine dreams**, which “foretell to cities or to private persons things evil or things good” (Reg.lxxxvii.1-4)
- II **Somatic dreams**, through which the soul foretells “all physical symptoms” (Reg.lxxxvii.5-9)

The first category the author leaves to the professionals to interpret, but the second category, the author more or less claims for himself and his fellow physicians, as, in his view, someone without medical knowledge would be unable to interpret the somatic signs correctly, much less give good medical advice based on the interpretation. After creating this division of

labour, the author proceeds to give interpretations of specific dream images, providing dietetic recommendations along the way.

Plato

Roughly contemporary with the Hippocratic authors was the philosopher Plato. He did not write a specific treatise on dreams, and it is difficult to derive a general standpoint from the often contradictory comments scattered throughout his works, voiced through his old teacher, Socrates. Passages in the *Timaeus* (70D7-72C), the *Apology* (33C5-9), the *Phaedo* (60D8-61B2), the *Charmides* (173A5-10), the *Crito* (43D-44B) and the *Theaetetus* (157E2-4; 173D6; 208B11-12) lead us to believe that Plato must have had some faith in the prognostic value of dreams, just as many of his contemporaries did. To sustain this suspicion, let us look at a passage in the *Politeia* (IX.571C-572B2). It gives a relatively clear indication of Plato's view on dreams. Perhaps uncharacteristic for his time, Plato has little or no faith in dreams of a supernatural character, and he bases his explanation of dreams on the tripartition of the soul – the *rational* part (rede), the *passionate* part (geest) and the *appetitive* part (begeerte) – although only the dreams coming from the rational part are of interest to Plato, for that part of the soul, when aroused in the right manner before sleep, can “*in isolated purity ... examine and reach out towards and apprehend some of the things unknown to it, past, present or future*”. Plato may not speak of medical dreams, which were probably still in the process of being ‘discovered’ and working to become accepted, but his approach to the phenomenon does support the Hippocratic theory which says that medical dreams are communicated to the dreamer by the soul.

Galen

Another great name that can be tied to the long tradition of dream interpretation is that of the physician Galen. Dreams played an important role throughout this man's life, and they played a significant role in his medical science and practice as well, closely following the use of medical dreams the Hippocratic writer of *On Dreams* had invented so many centuries before. In his treatise *On Diagnosis from Dreams (De Dignotione ex Insomniis Libellus)*, he gives a fourfold categorisation of dreams :

- I Dreams that mirror the **conditions of the body**
- II Dreams that **reflect our daily habits and actions**
- III Dreams that **originate in our thoughts**
- IV Dreams through which **the soul discloses prophetic matters**

Of course, only the first category is of importance to him as a physician.

2. Disbelievers

Although most people in antiquity believed in the divine origin of dreams, since long there had been the awareness that not all dreams were necessarily some communication from the gods. One needs only look at the gates of Horn and Ivory which Penelope refers to when she interprets her own dream in the *Odyssey* (*Od.xix.560ff.*): dreams that come through the gate of horn are true, the ones that come through the gate of ivory are false. However, few people took as negative a stance as both Aristotle and later Cicero, discarding every significance attributed to dreams. Every significance but the medical.

Aristotle

The first to give a systematic treatment of the phenomenon of the dream from a philosophical point of view was Aristotle. He wrote two treatises in relation to dreams and dreaming: *On Dreams* and *On Divination in Sleep*. In *On Dreams*, Aristotle's intention is to define what dreams are and how they work. He concludes that "*it is the mental picture which arises from the movement of sense impressions when one is asleep, in so far this condition exists, that is a dream*". (462A30-32).

Having determined what a dream is, Aristotle proceeds to explore the question whether or not dreams can be significant in *On Divination in Sleep*. Discarding the option of a divine origin, and with that the option of dreams conveying facts about the future that do not concern the dreamer, he sees only three possibilities (462B29-463A2): dreams can be

- I **causes** of events (self-fulfilling prophecy)
- II **signs** of events (cf. Freud's *Tagesreste*)
- III **coincidences**

As for dreams that concern the body, Aristotle remarks that "even accomplished physicians say that close attention should be paid to dreams, and it is natural for those to suppose so, who are not skilled, but who are inquirers and lovers of truth" (463A5-8). The *why* to that statement directly follows his explanation of how small or weak stimuli are more perceptible during sleep than in waking: since the beginnings of all things are small, the beginnings of illness must also be more evident in sleep than in waking (463A18-22).

Cicero

Another man with a particularly sceptic attitude towards dreams was Cicero. The centuries-long discussion about dreams and their significance is more or less represented in his *De Divinatione*, a fictive discussion between Cicero and his brother Quintus, with the latter cast in the role of defender of the widespread belief in dreams. Book one is dedicated to Quintus' arguments in favour of the dream, book two to Cicero's counterattack. To cut a long story short, Cicero opposes any belief in dreams, because "... if God is not the creator of dreams, if there is no connection between them and the laws of nature, and finally, if, by means of observation no art of divining can be found in them, it follows that absolutely no reliance can be placed in dreams." (*DeDiv.II.lxxi.147*)

Then what of medical dreams? If we cannot rely on any of our dreams, then this includes medical dreams as well. But Cicero does seem to excuse this category from his strong disapproval – at least he leaves the possibility open: "*Of course, physicians, from certain symptoms, know the incipency and progress of a disease; and it is claimed that from some kinds of dreams they even can gather certain indications as to a patient's health, as whether the internal humours of the body are excessive or deficient.*" (*DeDiv.II.lxix.142*)

Practice

By now we have seen what physicians and philosophers think of dreams. But what of the rest of Greek and Roman society? How did the ordinary man regard his dreams?

Asklepios: Testimonia

Let us for a moment return to the time when Hippocratic medicine was starting to rise, for at roughly the same time, another form of healing commenced its ascend to fame. Asklepios, son of Apollo, started out as a *healing hero*, but soon eclipsed his father, the god of healing, as a healing power and assumed the throne in his slowly but surely assumed new role of fully fledged healing god. Not only in ancient Greece, but also in Rome Asklepios was widely recognised and revered. We will now take a look at Asklepios from both a Greek and a (late) Roman point of view.

Until now, we have considered the medical dream in the role of a diagnostic tool. But there was yet another way in which medical dreams were used, and that was in the process of incubation: patients would come to the temple of the healing god and sleep there, hoping for the god to come to them in their dreams and heal them, or at least tell them how to become healthy again. We can deduce Asklepios' popularity as a healing god from the fact that his healing sanctuaries were scattered throughout the ancient world, of which the temple in Epidaurus, Asklepios' place of birth, was the most important. It is in this sanctuary that six *stelai*, slabs of stone, on which *iamata*, stories of healing at the hands of the healing god, had been inscribed. These *stelai* are thought to have been displayed on the walls of the sacred space where the incubants slept, to testify the reality of the dream healings for the suppliants, enhancing the sacred atmosphere and giving hope to those who needed it. For us, these stories of wondrous healing on people from places all over the known world, ranging from amazing births to cures for blindness, paralysis, strange growths and hideous wounds, tell a tale of the use of dreams in a ritual well-imbedded in the ancient culture.

That the Asklepios cult was indeed one with strong roots in ancient culture is proven by the fact that more than half a millennium later, it was still very popular. One of the most interesting testimonies, dating from the second century A.D., was the orator Aelius Aristides' 'Nightbook', in which he recorded the dreams he had whilst residing in Asklepios' sanctuary in Pergamon. Aristides was a true hypochondriac, for which we are grateful. He describes in detail how the god comes to him in sleep on numerous occasions, prescribing now this treatment now that for the scores of different ailments the rhetorician suffered.

Now, it is interesting to compare the manner of treatment used by the Asklepios featuring in the *iamata* and the Asklepios that plays the main role in Aristides' Nightbook. While the former seems to mainly use miraculous ways of healing, the latter has taken up a more advisory role in the patients' healing process, even though his advice is often unconventional at the least. To borrow a phrase from an earlier scholar, "*the god seems to have studied medicine*", and he has become more a physician than a miracle healer.

Artemidoros

There is one view on dreams that we have not yet considered, namely that of the professional dream interpreter. Artemidoros of Daldis, who lived in the second century A.D., wrote a guide to the art of dream interpretation, the *Oneirocritica*. In Artemidoros' time, such *dream books*, as they are referred to, were quite common, and Artemidoros mentions several colleagues in his own work, but unfortunately his dream book is the only one that has been preserved for us. It is an elaborate piece of work, consisting of five books, of which the last two were written especially for his son, disclosing things only to be transferred from father to son, thus attempting to give him a head start on others in the profession.

At the beginning of his work, Artemidoros gives a detailed categorisation of dreams. He first makes the distinction between *enhupnia* and *oneiroi*, the first indicating matters of the present, the second of the future; Artemidoros was only really interested in the latter. He proceeds to give an intricate subdivision of these two categories, as follows:

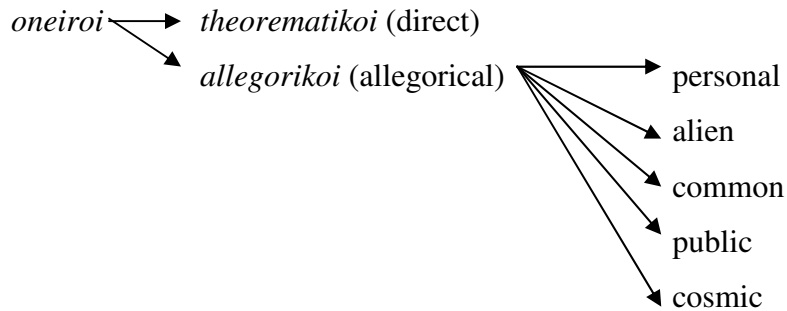
I *enhupnia*

↳ *fantasmata* (apparitions)

II *oneiroi*

↳ *horamai* (visions)

↳ *chrematismoi* (oracular response)



In this complicated system of dream categories, there are only two which are of possible significance to our current investigation: the *enhupnia* that are not apparitions, and the personal *oneiroi allegorikioi*. However, in the whole of his dream book, Artemidoros hardly or never even refers to the complicated system he has devised – which makes one wonder why he went through the trouble of doing it – yet while he does not make specific mention of a class of medical dreams, he does in his interpretations often refer to a condition of illness or even death.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that from what we have seen of various different approaches to dreams, it has become clear that the medical significance of dreams has stood its ground throughout antiquity.

Handout 'To Sleep, Perchance to Dream'

6 October 2003 – Maithe Hulskamp

MEDICAL DREAM: a dream 'designed' to lead to or instigate the improvement of the dreamer's health

HIPPOCRATICS

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(Reg.lxxxvii.1-4)
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PLATO

The **rational** part of the soul, when aroused in the right manner before sleep, can "**in isolated purity ... examine and reach out towards and apprehend some of the things unknown to it, past, present or future**"
(*Rep.*572A2-5)

GALEN

- I Dreams that mirror the **conditions of the body**
- II Dreams that reflect our **daily habits and actions**
- III Dreams that **originate in our thoughts**
- IV Dreams through which the soul discloses **prophetic matters** (*DeDig.Insomn.*16-20)

ARISTOTLE

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CICERO

"Of course, physicians, from certain symptoms, know the incipency and progress of a disease; and it is claimed that from some kinds of dreams they even can gather certain indications as to a patient's health, as whether the internal humours of the body are excessive of deficient." (*DeDiv.*II.lxix.142)

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