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Dreams in ancient Greek Medicine

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Dreams preoccupied the Greek and Roman world in antiquity, therefore they had a prominent role in social, philosophical, religious, historical and political life of those times. They were considered as omens and prophetic signs of future events in private and public life, and that was particularly accentuated when elements of actions which took place in the plot of dreams were associated directly or indirectly with real events. This is why it was important to use them in divination, and helped the growth of superstition and folklore believes. Medicine as a science and an anthropocentric art, could not ignore the importance of dreams, having in mind their popularity in antiquity. In ancient Greek medicine dreams can be divided into two basic categories. In the first one –which is related to religious medicine– dreams experienced by religionists are classified, when resorted to great religious sanctuaries such as those of Asclepius (Asclepieia) and Amphiaraos (Amfiaraeia). These dreams were the essential element for healing in this form of religious medicine, because after pilgrims underwent purifications they went to sleep in a special dwelling of the sanctuaries called "enkoimeterion" (Greek: the place to sleep) so that the healing god would come to their dreams either to cure them or to suggest treatment. In ancient Greek literature there are many reports of these experiences, but if there may be phenomena of self-suggestion, or they could be characterized as propaganda messages from the priesthood of each sanctuary for advertising purposes. The other category concerns the references about dreams found in ancient Greek medical literature, where one can find the attempts of ancient Greek physicians to interpret these dreams in a rational way as signs either of a corporal disease or of psychological distress. This second category will be the object of our study. Despite the different ways followed by each ancient Greek physician in order to explain dreams, their common intention was to give a rational answer for the creation and content of dreams setting aside any supernatural beliefs. In addition they tried to explain in a scientific way the correlation that could have emerged between the story that took place in dreams and the events that happened in everyday life. Nevertheless, ancient Greek physicians focused especially on nightmares, which were associated with physical problems. For those physicians these nightmares included information about the corporal disease of the patient, which had a reflection in the dream, and they could help them to diagnose the problem in order to restore balance of the body.

Key words: Dreams, antiquity, Greek Medicine.

Introduction

Dreams preoccupied the Greek and Roman world in antiquity; therefore they had a prominent role in social, philosophical, religious, historical and political life of those times.¹⁻⁷ Ancient Greek physicians tried to give a rational answer for the creation and content of dreams setting aside any supernatural beliefs.

Regarding the dreams of patients suffering from mental illnesses, ancient Greek physicians believed that their weird dreams and nightmares were a result of the impaired function of their logic, therefore they considered them as a symptom of their disease and were not interested to their thorough examination.

In *Corpus Hippocraticum*, mania's and dementia's terrible dreams and nightmares are considered as symptom of these diseases and an outcome of brain dyscrasia –bad mixture of brain humors– (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De morbo sacro 14.1–20,⁸ Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De morbo sacro 15.1–22, Hippocrates Med. et Corp. Epistulae 19.1–29,⁹ Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De affectionibus interioribus 48.14–29¹⁰). In this *Corpus* it is also stated that patients suffering from phrenitis have very figurative dreams (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. Prorrheticon 1.43.1–2),¹¹ although there is not a direct connection between these dreams and the fever which is a dominant symptom of the disease. Nevertheless, this connection can be found in *Corpus Aristotelicum* (Aristoteles Phil. et Co. De insomniis 461a.21–3).¹² On the other hand, the mental illness in which patients experience the most turbulent dreams was considered to be melancholy, as it was stated in the most famous ancient book on melancholy written by Rufus of Ephesus (this book is lost but many parts of it were saved by medieval Arab physicians).¹³ This conception is also found in *Corpus Aristotelicum*, where it is emphasized that the most vivid dreams are experienced by patients with high fever, melancholics and drunks. It is also stressed that melancholics have dreams which are distinct (greek: εὐθυνοειρία) and cause them to wake up violently (Aristoteles Phil. et Co. De divinatione per somnum 464a.24–464b.7.¹⁴ Aristoteles Phil. et Co. De divinatione per somnum 464a.28–464b.3. Aristoteles Phil. et Co. Ethica Eudemia 1248a.29–1248b.7¹⁵).

Dreams in *Corpus Hippocraticum*

The earliest medical study on dreams is found in *Corpus Hippocraticum* and in the book *De diaeta* (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i-iv 86.1–93.30).¹⁶ The author of this work attempts to present in a scientific way the creation and function of dreams separating them from the art of prediction (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i-iv 87.1–12). In the introduction it is stated that dreams are creations of the soul's vigilance during sleep, because in contrast to relaxed body, soul is on alert making images of body's activities (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i-iv 86.1–14).

The central idea is that dreams reveal the state of human body and are influenced in their development by it. The core of the research lies on the diet.¹⁷ It is believed that diet, in terms of quantity and composition, plays a significant role in the content of dreams, since it is essential for the presence of wetness, dryness and heat in the body which in turn will nominate or disturb the balance of its humors. Dreams therefore reflect the equilibrium (health) or disturbance (disease) of the body. Therefore, if diet reinforces the equilibrium of humors, man will have calm and sweet dreams, but if it provokes disturbance of humors man will have turbulent sleep and nightmares (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i-iv 93.1–30).

The author distinguishes three main thematic categories of dreams. Firstly, the examples of celestial objects are used. Thus, when someone sees the sun, the moon, the sky and the stars clearly this is an indication of good health which should be maintained, sustaining the nutritional choices of the respective days of these dreams. On the event of the opposite the dream reveals some kind of illness either stronger than the strong ones or milder than the mild ones. If a man thinks that the stars are off or harmed or lost or they do not orbit, then if this happens due to air or nebula, these are signs of a mild disease, but if it is due to water or hail there it is sign of serious disease. According to the author all that happen because excreted humor of phlegma has accumulated (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i-iv 89.1–16).

Subsequently, examples about the earth and the natural environment are mentioned. When someone

dreams that he can clearly see or hear the earth, that the earth is smooth and well treated, that the trees are bloomed and fruitful and that the water is clean and calmly runs into the rivers, the sea and the fountains, the man is healthy. When he dreams the opposite there is some kind of disorder. Because if he thinks that he cannot hear or see well, then this is an indication of an illness of the head (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i–iv 90.9–11).

The third section of this work deals with the dead. If someone dreams of the dead being clean, in white clothes and takes something from them which is clean and good, this is an indication of good health. On the other hand, if someone dreams of them being naked, bruised, dirty or them taking or bringing something home, this is a sign of a disease (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i–iv 92.1–10).

Two other passages of this work are of particular interest. The first one refers to a dream, wherein the human traverses rivers and confronts warriors, enemies and bizarre monsters. The author considers it as an indication of a certain disease or mania, thus making the first mention of the possibility of a specific mental disease manifested in a dream (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i–iv 93.23–25). The second passage is related to the previous one, because again there is a reference to a mental disturbance which affects the content of the dream, but in this case this is probably not a mental illness. More specifically, dreams that have as subject the pointless wandering in various places, declare some agitation of the soul due to an everyday life problem. In fact the solution proposed is to cheer up and try to entertain himself, otherwise there is a risk that these dreams will come true, in two to three days, and become a disease (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. De diaeta i–iv 89.52–57).

Although it would be easy to observe that the author is in the mood of creating a dream-book, similar to those that already appeared in ancient times, in our belief this analogy is only superficial, resulting from the structure of this work, because there is a fundamental difference between this work and other dream-books of antiquity. The author's intention was to create a dreams' list matching each one with the pathological or natural condition that provoked them, in order this study to become a rationalistic medical teaching manual for use by the physicians.

Oberhelman⁷ and Jouanna¹⁸ perceived this book as a philosophical rather than a medical one, emphasizing that it reflects the philosophical theories of the macrocosm into the microcosm of the human body and soul. According to our point of view the author's intention was to create a practical medical book concerning the dreams and their rational interpretation, in order to facilitate the exercise of the medical profession in everyday life during the antiquity, having in mind the detailed list of the dreams and their connection to mental or corporal diseases. Therefore, these philosophical ideas were embodied into the text under the theory of humors which derived from the works of Pre-Socratic philosophers,¹⁹ but was converted into a useful and practical medical tool.

Herophilus on Dreams

Herophilus' (ca.320 – 250 BC) views on dreams are saved in short reports by other writers,²⁰ but they are of particular value. Herophilus has concentrated his interest almost exclusively on intellectual-mental processes about soul functions and its comprehension of the world, but mainly he focused on men's desires, considering them crucial to the creation of dreams. His views are quite different from those of other physicians of antiquity.

Herophilus thought that dreams are divided into three main categories. In the first one he places dreams derived from god, which he considered necessary and inevitable, as Von Staden observed.²⁰ The only comment we could make for this short report is that this approach is at odds with the rational character of ancient Greek medicine, while the other two categories of dreams according to Herophilus are characterized by their rational context. Into the second category he places natural dreams in which the soul creates images of what is in its best interests. In the third category he lists mixed dreams –as he names them– which occur suddenly, and their context is the idols of man's desires, presenting the example of the lovers who dream of those who love (Pseudo-Galenus Med. De historia philosophica 106.4–8.²¹ Pseudo-Plutarchus Placita philosophorum 904.F.6–11²²).

Setting aside the first category, we will underline that the other two categories define dreams as creations of human desires, which is clearly seen in the

third category and indirectly observed in the second one, because what is in the interest of the soul apparently is associated with desires and expectations. It should be noted that the reference to the term 'idols' should not be limited only to images and scenes of everyday life, but it also incorporates an imprint of emotions and abstract concepts.

Von Staden emphasized that the tripartite distinction of dreams by Herophilus considerably affected the Stoics, and especially Poseidonius, in order to create a similar dream classification scheme. In addition, Von Staden pointed that Herophilus distanced himself from the recognition of disorders or predictions in the dreams.²⁰ According to our point of view, Herophilus' doctrines on dreams are of particular interest, because they demonstrate an unprecedented, for the antiquity, quest of mental function, distinguishing its autotelic function and approaching several modern theories of the subconscious. Herophilus pointed that man creates the world of his dreams because their context is inspired by man's desires and by his experiences of everyday life which had influenced him.

This thought of him predominates the ancient Greek medicine, regarding the perceptions of the soul. It is obvious that Herophilus limited his concepts solely to the mental sphere, without involving specific views about dreams theory, such as that of the humoral theory, or determining the function of the soul in relation to that of the body, introducing now especially for the dreams the idea of the imaginary, which is decisively determined by the interaction of man with his natural and social environment.

This notion is not exactly in line with the basic principles of ancient Greek medicine, as it considers the soul having a special link to imaginary situations, allowing us to parallel this approach to that of Aretaeus of Cappadocia (2nd or 3rd to 4th c. AD) regarding melancholy, who expressed the idea that sometimes this disease occurs without a disorder of the humors of the body, but due to a disturbance of the soul itself (Aretaeus Med. De causis et signis acutorum morborum 1.5.2.1–1.5.2.4).²³ Both physicians suspected that the mental illnesses and dreams could be solely responsible for the function of the soul. This thesis was difficult to be accepted in ancient times, when the basic principles for the

diseases and the function of the soul, physiological or pathological, had a different starting point, mainly the humoral theory. Instead, the emphasis on the soul and the imagery was more suited to philosophical queries, so perhaps this was the reason why Herophilus' theory about dreams was accepted by and further influenced his subsequent philosophical circles that were mentioned above.

According to our point of view, Herophilus highlighted his medical status, and his research on dreams showed that he overcame the stage of "medical dreams", as seen in other ancient physicians. In contrast, we will consider possible that by performing an in-depth study of the imaginary, which he analyzed rationally and by medical standards, he faced the inability to adequately and fully explain according to the rules of ancient Greek medicine –which combined body and soul– the imaginary situations of dreams. That is why he rather opted exclusively for the function of the soul, focusing on human desires, which made him a pioneer of his time.

Rufus of Ephesus on Dreams

Rufus of Ephesus (1st–2nd c. AD) relies on the theory of humors and states his strong belief that corporal humors cause dreams, both good and bad.²⁴ In fact he states that he has no knowledge of another theory for their interpretation. His views will converge, at least with regard to their general principles, to those encountered in *Corpus Hippocraticum* (Rufus Med. Quaestiones medicinales 33.1–3).²⁴

Rufus of Ephesus deals exclusively with the medical dimension of dreams, perhaps more than any other ancient Greek physician, as he advises that dreams, as well as the general state of sleep, are an important tool for the proper and successful diagnosis. This is why he also underlines that physicians need to ask if the patient slept or not, and if he falls asleep easily or has insomnia, and if there are fantasies or dreams, since all of the above would aid the physician to come to a diagnosis (Rufus Med. Quaestiones medicinales 28.1–29.3).

Rufus of Ephesus states that Myron, a wrestler from Ephesus, while he seemed healthy, he had the following dream. He dreamed that the whole night was in a lake with black, drinking water. When he woke

up, he reported it to his trainer. He did not consider the dream important and permitted him to wrestle. After a while he died. The physician points out that the wrestler would not have died if the trainer had been wise and had made a phlebotomy to Myron before the wrestle (Rufus Med. Quaestiones medicinales 29.4–30.2).

Rufus of Ephesus also mentioned that another person suffering from high fever dreamed many times that he was fighting with an Ethiopian man, who hanged him. The patient reported the dream to a physician, but he did not remember it, before a heavy bleeding from the nose occurred and revealed the disease (Rufus Med. Quaestiones medicinales 31.1–4).

The last incident that is reported by Rufus of Ephesus is the case of a patient who dreamed that he swam in the river Kaystros and died of dropsy (Rufus Med. Quaestiones medicinales 32.1–2).

Comparing the "medical dreams" examined by Rufus of Ephesus to those of Corpus Hippocraticum we realize that their main difference is that they are specific, they describe facts and they are related to the progression of the health of the man who dreamed of them. Nevertheless, their essential similarity is that they signify a physical disorder which caused the situation experienced in the dream. Although they do not constitute a general guide but only a limited group of cases, their aim is to draw the attention of the ancient physician to their crucial diagnostic role.

Galen on Dreams

Galen (129 – ca. 210 AD) has embraced the importance of dreams for medicine, devoting a special work on them, where he analyzed the diagnosis through dreams. Complying with the lessons of the earlier physicians and honoring the findings of the ancient Greek medicine, he also considers dreams as reflections of the physical condition of the patient.

Galen recognizes the disequilibrium of humors as the main cause of dreams, so that the form of the dream is associated with the characteristics and qualities of the humor, and in this way he goes along with the thoughts developed in the corresponding work of Corpus Hippocraticum. This agreement of opinions

will be even more obvious when nutrition and weather will be taken into account as shapers of dreams.

Galen also adds the psychological factor, which is determined by the events of everyday life and by the human wishes which disrupt mood, pointing a diversity from Corpus Hippocraticum, because there the revival of everyday incidents is a health component while in this work they are highlighted for their negative impact.

Galen starts this work with the assumption that the dream testifies the mood of the body, so that he matches the types of humors with the dreaming representations, citing general examples. That is, dreaming of fire may be caused by yellow bile and dreaming of smoke or fog or of deep darkness could be due to black bile, as well as dreaming of rain and chill may testify a wetness excess. Additionally, dreaming of snow, ice and hail imply the existence of cold phlegm. He believes that it is important to monitor the weather and the received food. According to him whoever dreams of snowing is considered to suffer from paroxysmic shivering, therefore the attention must be drawn to the body (Galenus Med. De dignotione ex insomniis 6.832.1–6.833.7).²⁵

Subsequently, the author analyzed the impact of daily events. It is mainly pathologic conditions in the body that occur during sleep, resulting in the patient experiencing the dream and being able to realize it when he wakes up. Therefore, divination plays only a secondary role (Galenus Med. De dignotione ex insomniis 6.833.7–18).

He argues in favor of this analysis using the following cases. One man dreamed that his leg turned into stone and people judged that this was about the suffering of the slaves, but his leg paralyzed and no one could have foreseen it. A wrestler dreamed that he was in a tank of blood and when he was waked up he was found full of blood and had to be cleaned. He also referred that some people sweat and deciding to take a bath they imagine that they swim in tanks of warm water. Also, the fantasy of drinking without relieving ones thirst is quite often, as well as that of eating or having sexual activity, for those who lack these activities. It seems that during sleep the soul dives in the depths of the body, separates from the sensible and feels the mood and the desires of the body, transforming them into reality through the

dreams. We notice that these views are compatible especially with those of Herophilus about the connection of dreams with desires (Galenus Med. De dignotione ex insomniis 6.833.18–6.834.16). Galen concludes that the desires or the plots of the dreams testify a lot about the absence, redundancy and quality of humors in the human body, accepting the Hippocratic views on the issue (Galenus Med. De dignotione ex insomniis 6.834.16–6.835.14).

Conclusion

After examining the views on dreams of many of the most important ancient Greek physicians the main conclusion to be drawn is that these physicians denied the divine nature of dreams, and the majority of them considered the plot of the dreams as signs of the medical condition of the body which was determined by

the status of the corporal humors. According to them the dyscrasia of humors leads to nightmares, while the eycrasia of humors leads to calm and cheerful dreams. Their belief that the dreams were signs of physical disorders resulted in their effort to determine the ‘medical dreams’, as we can name them, that is their effort to correlate specific dreams to specific conditions of the body. Their empirical observations allowed them to correlate human desires and the function of the soul in the formation of dreams. But due to the fact that ancient Greek medicine was unable to understand the independent role of mental function and of psychology, as we understand it today, the importance of desires was considered secondary. The only real exception was Herophilus, but despite his effort to highlight the role of desires in dreams, this could not be distant from humor’s theory.

Τα όνειρα στην αρχαία Ελληνική Ιατρική

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Τα όνειρα (ενύπνια) απασχόλησαν ιδιαίτερα τον κόσμο στην ελληνική και ρωμαϊκή αρχαιότητα, γι’ αυτό και κατείχαν εξέχουσα θέση στην κοινωνική, φιλοσοφική, θρησκευτική, λατρευτική, ιστορική και πολιτική ζωή εκείνων των χρόνων. Ως κύριος ρόλος τους αναγνωρίστηκε το γεγονός: θεωρούνταν οιωνοί και προφητικά σημεία για τα μελλοντικά γεγονότα της ιδιωτικής και της δημόσιας ζωής, πράγμα που τονίζονταν ιδιαίτερα όταν στοιχεία των διαδραματιζομένων κατά τη διάρκεια των ονείρων συσχετιζονταν άμεσα ή έμμεσα με τα εξελισσόμενα μελλοντικά γεγονότα. Γι’ αυτό άλλωστε θεωρούνταν σπουδαία η χρήση τους στη μαντική τέχνη, ενώ έδιναν τροφή για την ανάπτυξη των προλήψεων, της δεισιδαιμονίας και των λαϊκών δοξασιών. Η ιατρική ως επιστήμη και τέχνη που έχει ως επίκεντρο τον άνθρωπο, ήταν αδύνατο να αδιαφορήσει ή να μείνει ανεπηρέαστη από τα όνειρα, ειδικά μάλιστα κατά τους αρχαίους χρόνους, οπότε και είχε ιδιαίτερη διάδοση η ενασχόληση με αυτά. Στην αρχαία ιατρική τα όνειρα μπορούν να διακριθούν σε δύο βασικές κατηγορίες. Η πρώτη αφορά τη θρησκευτική ιατρική όπου κατατάσσονται τα όνειρα που βίωναν οι πιστοί όταν κατέφευγαν στα μεγάλα θρησκευτικά-ιαματικά κέντρα, δηλαδή στα ιερά του Ασκληπιού (Ασκληπιεία) και του Αμφιάραου (Αμφιαράεια). Οι πιστοί έφταναν σε αυτά τα ιερά, υποβάλλονταν σε καθαρμούς και υφίσταντο την «εγκοίμηση», δηλαδή κοιμούνταν σε ειδικό χώρο, το εγκοιμητήριο, με σκοπό να έρθουν στον ύπνο τους σε επικοινωνία με τη

θεότητα, τον Ασκληπιό ή τον Αμφιάραο, η οποία και θα τους πρόσφερε την ίαση ή θα τους υποδείκνυε τη θεραπεία. Υπάρχουν πολλές αναφορές για τις εμπειρίες που βίωναν οι πιστοί κατά την εγκοίμηση, οι οποίες όμως αν δεν πρόκειται για φαινόμενα αυθυποβολής, χαρακτηρίζονται ως προπαγανδιστικά στοιχεία από το ιερατείο κάθε ιερού, με στόχο τη διαφήμισή του. Στη δεύτερη κατηγορία κατατάσσονται οι ειδικές αναφορές των αρχαίων Ελλήνων ιατρών στα συγγράμματά τους σχετικά με τα όνειρα, όπου γίνεται προσπάθεια ερμηνευτικής προσέγγισής τους, η οποία όμως βασίζεται στους κανόνες της επιστήμης, όπως αυτή είχε διαμορφωθεί στους αρχαίους χρόνους. Μερικοί από τους σπουδαιότερους ιατρούς της αρχαιότητας αφιέρωσαν διάφορα κεφάλαια στο θέμα. Παρά τον διαφορετικό τρόπο που προσεγγίζει ο καθένας από αυτούς το συγκεκριμένο φαινόμενο, θα μπορούσαμε να εξαγάγουμε ως διαπίστωση κοινή για όλους, ότι πρόθεση και μέλημά τους ήταν να δώσουν μια ορθολογική απάντηση για τη δημιουργία και το περιεχόμενο των ονείρων, παραμερίζοντας οποιοσδήποτε δοξασίες μπορούσαν να προκύψουν. Ακόμη προσπάθησαν να ερμηνεύσουν με τον τρέχοντα επιστημονικό τρόπο τον συσχετισμό που θα μπορούσε να αναδειχτεί μεταξύ της ιστορίας που διαδραματιζόταν στα όνειρα και στα γεγονότα που συνέβαιναν στην καθημερινή ζωή. Επειδή ο ορθολογισμός ήταν το απόλυτο κριτήριο των ερμηνειών τους, για τον λόγο αυτό παρατηρούμε ότι οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες ιατροί επικεντρώνονταν σε όνειρα και κυρίως στους εφιάλτες, τα οποία συσχετιζόταν κυρίως με σωματικά προβλήματα των ανθρώπων. Δηλαδή, γι' αυτούς είναι στοιχεία νόσου και μαρτυρούν ότι υπάρχει κάτι παθολογικό στον ανθρώπινο οργανισμό, το οποίο έχει την αντανάκλασή του μέσα στο όνειρο. Θεωρούνται δηλαδή συμπτώματα μιας εκτροπής του οργανισμού που πρέπει εκείνοι να τη διαγνώσουν, ώστε να αποκαταστήσουν την ισορροπία στον ανθρώπινο οργανισμό.

Λέξεις ευρητηρίου: Όνειρα, αρχαιότητα, Ελληνική Ιατρική.

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