

Electronic Encyclopedia of the Ancient World

Dreams

For a **summary** of this article, click here [\[\[LINK 1\]\]](#).

What did the Greeks and Romans dream about? Scholars sometimes take almost everything on trust, but there are several factors that should make us sceptical about **the reliability of ancient dream-narratives** [\[\[LINK 2\]\]](#). They often lack specifically dream-like qualities, and dream reports were constantly subject to manipulation, since many people thought that a dream might come from a god, or at any rate might have, in Aristotle's phrase, "something significant about it". The motives for this manipulation were commonly religious, political or literary. And in most periods there were plenty of more or less specialized **dream-interpreters** [\[\[LINK 3\]\]](#) eager to sell their services.

No doubt **the Epicureans** [\[\[LINK 4\]\]](#) were correct when they categorized many dreams as anxiety-dreams, and others as wish-fulfillments (including **erotic dreams** [\[\[LINK 17\]\]](#); see Stewart 2002). Many ancient writers attest to dreams that recalled recent waking experiences. These categories correspond both to common modern observation and to **recent psychological research** [\[\[LINK 5\]\]](#). The most insistent kind of ancient dream that lacks a modern counterpart was the divine or otherwise authoritative epiphany-dream, a descriptive convention (possibly a real dream-type too) that lasted throughout antiquity.

We are on the other hand quite well informed about what the more articulate Greeks and Romans thought about dreams. By Homer's time there had already been noteworthy Greek reflection on the subject (and there is an important **Ancient Near Eastern context** [\[\[LINK 6\]\]](#)). The Homeric heroes are represented as thinking that dreams have a divine origin and as sometimes resorting to a specialized dream-interpreter (*oneiropolos*), but **Homer** [\[\[LINK 15\]\]](#) himself knew well that dreams can be misleading or meaningless (see *Iliad* ii.38, for instance, and for the Gates of Ivory from which false dreams emerge see *Odyssey* xix.562-567).

The **Greek and Latin terminology** [\[\[LINK 7\]\]](#) of dreams and dreaming has a more complex history than has generally been recognized; there were few clear-cut categories. What this terminology can teach us about ancient concepts of dreaming is, however, debatable. It is striking that though the Greeks and Romans possessed specific concepts of the **nightmare** [\[\[LINK 8\]\]](#) (*ephiartes*, *incubo*), they made relatively little use of them.

Many Greeks and Romans believed that dreams revealed otherwise unavailable information, and not only about the future. Closely linked was the belief that gods or their representatives or other authoritative figures might appear (the dead Patroclus to Achilles, for instance, in *Iliad* xxiii.65-107), giving instructions (hence many inscriptions survive recording dedications made because of such **divine instructions** [\[\[LINK 9\]\]](#)). For much of antiquity the commonest kind of instruction was medical and came from Asclepius or Amphiaraus, commonly by **incubation**

[[LINK A1]] at a shrine. The attitude of the best-regarded **physicians** [[LINK 10]] varied: Herophilus of Alexandria developed a naturalistic theory to explain how dreams could be truth-telling, the Empiricists thought that dreams were of no medical use, the great Galen on the other hand took medical advice from his dreams and believed the Asclepius appeared in dreams.

How much people believed in the supernatural nature of dreams depended on many things, including individual temperament, the emotional tension of a given moment, and probably one's level of education (though many well-educated people believed, especially it seems from the second century AD onwards). We should also distinguish between nervous fear and the willingness to act according to a dream. Each ancient author presents complications (see the **bibliography** for many individual studies [[LINK 11]]), and a full history of belief in dreams has yet to be written. Herodotus, for example, can illustrate some of the complications: the dreams in his history come true, yet it is only barbarians and occasionally tyrants who allow their practical decisions to be determined by dreams. Detailed rationalistic theories survive from Aristotle onwards, yet it is in the fourth century BC that incubation inscriptions begin to multiply; for Theophrastus meanwhile it is the superstitious man who constantly resorts to a dream-interpreter (*Characters* 16.11). **Philosophy** [[LINK 4]] sometimes actually favoured belief: the Stoics sought to provide a theoretical basis for supposing that dreams could predict the future (see most fully Cic. *De div.* i.39-65).

In the **Roman republican tradition** [[LINK 12]] dream-divination played only a minor religious role, but it is plain that dreams were widely believed to be significant -- otherwise Scipio Africanus, for example, could not have stirred up his troops, as he did at New Carthage in 209 BC, by recounting a divine dream-epiphany. But by Cicero's time a sceptical view had gained much ground among the educated, and his *De divinatione* debunks dream-prediction (ii.119-148). Educated people continued to be divided on this subject throughout the rest of antiquity (for Cicero's contemporaries see *De div.* ii.125; for Pliny the elder see *Natural History* x.211; for Augustine see *De gen. ad litt.* xii.18.39, *CD* xviii.18).

The second century A.D. was the period of the two most extensive dream-records to survive from classical antiquity, the one included in **Aelius Aristides' Sacred Tales** [[LINK A2]] and the dream-book of **Artemidorus of Daldis** [[LINK A3]]. It is also the great period of dedications made "because of a dream" or by command of a god who appeared in a dream. The cultivated and hypochondriac Aristides narrates approximately 130 dreams, most of which he interprets as advice about his health. Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica (Dream Interpretations)* is the sole surviving example of a genre that in its written form was not especially popular, to judge from the papyri (most dream-interpretation was done orally). The greatest historical interest of Artemidorus, who was incidentally too astute to claim that all dreams were meaningful, is perhaps his insistence that his interpretations have an empirical basis.

The **visual evidence** [[LINK 13]] about ancient dreams is not vast in extent: much of it consists of reliefs commemorating incubation dreams (see Van Straten 1976). We also possess a dream-interpreter's shingle from Hellenistic Memphis (often illustrated, e.g. Nāf 2004, fig.16).

The main **political use of dreams** [[LINK 14]] was to legitimize claims to political power, the emperor **Septimius Severus** [[LINK A4]] being perhaps the most conspicuous case. Under

the absolute monarchy of the Roman emperors it could be fatal if one was believed to have dreamed ill-omened dreams about the ruler. Not surprisingly **ancient biographers** [\[\[LINK 18\]\]](#), unlike serious historians, tend to be highly attentive to dreams.

Dreams are made much of by certain authors in certain genres of **imaginative literature** [\[\[LINK 15\]\]](#), especially epic poetry, tragedy and romance. A good deal of ink has been spilled on analysing these texts as if they were reports of actual dreams, and a few authors (Aristophanes, Heliodorus) do succeed in conveying the "unreal" atmosphere of real dreams. More astute critics have looked at ways in which authors play on the conventions of literary dream-narratives.

Revealing and predictive dreams play a certain role in early **Christian literature** [\[\[LINK 16\]\]](#) (the *Apocalypse*, the *Shepherd* of Hermas, the *Martyrdom of Saint Perpetua* [\[\[LINK A5\]\]](#)), and this may hint at popular beliefs, at least in certain parts of the Roman Empire. But the interest of the Christian **Synesius** (d.413) [\[\[LINK A6\]\]](#), whose book *On Dreams* survives, like that of **Macrobius** [\[\[LINK A7\]\]](#), who wrote a commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, was more learned and esoteric. In spite of their role in the Old Testament, some church fathers tended to regard dreams with distrust (being suspicious of unmediated contact with the divinity), and it was no doubt for this reason that, starting with Constantius II, some Christian emperors legislated against dream-interpreters (*C.Th.* ix.16.6, etc).

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- A4. Septimius Severus
- A5. *Perpetua, Acts of*
- A6. Synesius
- A7. Macrobius

Possible further link: Some Key Texts

Select Bibliography

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