



Review

Sleep and Dreams: From Myth to Medicine in Ancient Greece☆☆☆

Helen Askitopoulou, MD, PhD, FRCA, DA Professor Emeritus of Anesthesiology*

Faculty of Medicine, University of Crete, Heraklion, Greece

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod in the 8th century BCE, the significance attributed to sleep and dreams by Greek antiquity is traced in myths referring to the god of sleep, *Hypnos*, and the dream gods, the *Oneiroi*. *Hypnos* was related to very ancient deities of darkness; his mother *Nyctia* (night), his twin brother *Thanatos* (death) and his sons the *Oneiroi* (dreams) who dwelled “past the gates of the dead.” Early in the 6th century BCE, induced sleep, *enkoimesis* or dream incubation, became an established healing practice in the sanctuaries of *Asklepios*.[†] Later, starting in the 4th century BCE, sleep and dreams were among a series of biological phenomena that became an integral part of the Greek physician’s practice. Several Hippocratic treatises explore the medical significance of sleep and dreams, as symptoms of disease. The treatise *On Regimen IV* uses dreams as prognostic and diagnostic signs of normal or abnormal internal conditions. This treatise distinguishes two types of dreams, those sent by the gods and those sent by the soul. The soul observes the body during sleep and informs on any impending problem manifested by dreams. By interpreting patients’ dreams, the Hippocratic physician made a prognosis about the condition of the patient’s body, the effects of diet and physical exercise, and adjusted the regimen to prevent deterioration of disease. It is the study of sleep and dreams in ancient Greece that provides us with knowledge on the evolution of these notions from mythology to medicine.

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Introduction

The earliest references to medicine in ancient Greece can be traced to the second half of the 8th century BCE and the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, assumed to be the oldest written work of Western literature. Before the 8th century BCE, there are no historical writings, only record tablets and labels exist.[†] At the end of the 8th century BCE, the epic poet Hesiod is also a major source of Greek mythology. It is in the various allegorical myths about *Hypnos*, the god of sleep, that the first recorded notions about sleep are found in the epic poems of Homer and Hesiod. These myths reflect, among other things, the ancient Greeks awareness of the relationship of sleep to oblivion and pain.

A few centuries later, the practice of dream healing during sleep became prominent in Greek theurgic (the work of a god) medicine in the sanctuaries of the god *Asklepios*, where the ritual of *enkoimesis* (dream incubation) was widely practiced. Sleep healing was an imi-

tation of decay, death, and rebirth. Sleep resembles a temporary death, because we remain motionless and unconscious during sleep, whereas waking up includes the element of rejuvenation, a new life.¹

Hippocrates (460 to ca 375 BCE), the central historical figure in ancient Greek medicine, and his disciples of the school of Cos were the first to provide systematic information about sleep and dreams from a medical point of view. In contrast to Homer and Hesiod, both of whom connected *Hypnos* with death and darkness, the Hippocratic physicians considered sleep necessary for the maintenance of human health. The interpretation of dreams was also used as a tool for diagnosis and cure of conditions derived from internal sensations.

The great significance attributed to medical dream interpretation by ancient physicians was later evidenced in Aristotle’s (384–322 BCE) essay *On Prophecy in Sleep*, which explored the physiology of dreams, as cause or result.²

The study of sleep and dreams in ancient Greek medicine provides us with knowledge of the evolution of these notions from mythology to medicine. Ancient Greeks often used information gained from their myths to bridge the gap between metaphysical phenomena and reality.

The God of Sleep, *Hypnos*, and his Sons, the *Dreams**Accomplishments and attributes of the god Hypnos*

In the *Iliad*, Homer closely associates sleep with the deities of darkness. Homer refers to *Hypnos* as the son of darkness (night)

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* 31 Stefanou Nikolaidi str, Heraklion, GR, 71305, Greece. Tel.: + 30 2810319166.
E-mail address: askitop@gmail.com.

* In this article, the Greek name *Asklepios* will be used instead of the Latin transliteration *Asclepius*.

† These tablets were written in the Linear A and Linear B. These linear forms of writing attributed to Aegean civilizations from the 2nd millennium BCE, either remain undecoded (Linear A), or those decoded (Linear B) refer exclusively to trade.

and, most importantly, as the twin brother of death (*Thanatos*). However, Homer placed the home of *Hypnos* in pleasant surroundings, on the island of Lemnos, near Troy.³ The god resided there without his brother *Thanatos*, although the two brothers sometimes worked in collaboration to carry young, dead, or wounded warriors to *Hades*, the underworld. The most well-known scene is described in the *Iliad*, in which they carried the fatally wounded hero *Sarpedon*, son of *Zeus*, away from the battlefield of Troy to his homeland Lycia in an unconscious state, but not yet dead.^{3,4}

In Hesiod's *Theogony* (The Origin of the Gods), *Hypnos* is also the son of night and twin brother of death;⁵ he has as brothers and sisters *Ponos* (pain), *Lethe* (oblivion), and *Algea* (sufferings).⁵ In contrast to Homer, both Hesiod and, much later, the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE to ca 17 CE), placed the home of *Hypnos* and his brother *Thanatos* in the underworld, an area associated with death,^{5,6} in front of which flows the stream of the river *Lethe*. The ancient traveler Pausanias (ca 2nd CE) in his book on Boeotia explains that souls on their way to the underworld had to drink from the waters of *Lethe* to forget their past lives.⁷ The connotation of death residing in such a place is obvious. What is not apparent is why the ancient Greeks also consigned sleep to the same place. It is plausible that ancient Greeks associated sleep with death because they were aware of the detrimental effects of sleep-inducing plants.⁴

The association of *Hypnos* with death reappears in the well-known myth of *Endymion*, cited by many ancient writers. According to the version by Apollodorus (ca 180 to 110 BCE), *Endymion* was a young man of surpassing beauty with whom the goddess *Selene* (moon) fell in love. *Zeus* allowed him to choose between *Hypnos* and *Selene*. *Endymion* chose to sleep forever and therefore to remain with the immortal goddess "untouched by either age or death."⁸ *Endymion's* eternal sleep connotes an idiosyncratic way of defeating death, human aging, and decay. Plato (427–347 BCE), in the Socratic dialog *Phaedo*, objected to this eternal sleep as a means of achieving immortality. Socrates argued that if the state of sleep prevailed, all things would have the same form, act in the same way, and nothing would be created.

"For example if the process of falling asleep existed, but not the opposite process of waking from sleep, in the end, you know, that would make the sleeping *Endymion* mere nonsense; he would be nowhere, for everything else would be in the same state as he, sound asleep... And in the like manner, if all things that have life should die, and, when they had died, the dead should remain in that condition, is it not inevitable that at last all things would be dead and nothing alive?"⁹

The idea that sleep could be interpreted as a means of cheating death, or as a way of reaching a separate kind of immortality, is highlighted by the personal qualities of *Hypnos* himself, as a kind of rescuer, a savior of those who have been injured by life's adversities, who are in need of a period of rest. These properties suggest that the true purpose of sleep is to promote physical and psychic healing, not allowing the individual to avoid life, but to embrace it. Homer, referring to *Hypnos*, mainly uses adjectives that associate the god with pleasant sweetness, especially that of honey. In fact, he calls him *nidyomos* (sweet),¹⁰ *meliedes* (sweet like honey),¹⁰ *melifron* (pleasant like honey),¹¹ and *ambrosial* (divine, heavenly).¹¹ In addition to these kind-hearted and gentle attributes, *Hypnos* is constantly recognized as *pandamator* (the one who conquers everything);³ an appraisal confirmed by the address used by the almighty goddess *Hera*: "sleep, lord of all gods and of all men."³

These connotations persist as well in the way Greek tragedy portrayed *Hypnos*. A most telling example is the one found in Sophocles' (ca 497 to 406 BCE) text *Philoctetes*. The hero, having chronic pain, was left on the island of Lemnos by his comrades on their way

to Troy. In this major tragedy, sailors appeal to *Hypnos* as a "healer" of suffering and pain.

"Sleep, ignorant of anguish [odynas], ignorant of pains [algeon], come to us with gentle breath... Come come, Healer!"¹²

Here, *Hypnos* is associated not only with the relief of somatic pain (*algos*), but also with the relief of strong psychic pains (*odynas*) and of mental suffering.¹³

Oνειροι, the dream gods

In the *Odyssey*, we learn that the *Oνειροι* (dreams) dwelled on the dark shores of the western *Oceanus*, past the gates of the sun and the kingdom of the dead.¹⁰ Dreams were sent out to men in their sleep passing through one of two gates. Deceitful dreams came through the gate of ivory "bringing words that find no fulfillment," whereas through the gate of horn passed true dreams, which "bring true things."¹⁰ On some occasions, these very *Oνειροι* create dream forms or appear personified under different shapes, as when *Zeus* sends to Agamemnon a "destructive dream" in the likeness of the wise old Nestor to encourage Agamemnon to attack Troy without delay to sabotage the Greek army.

"Up, go, destructive Dream (*Oνειρο*), to the swift ships of the Achaeans, and when you have come to the hut of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, tell him everything exactly as I charge you'. ... So, he spoke, and the Dream set out, ... Quickly he came to the swift ships of the Achaeans, and went to Agamemnon, ... So he stood above his head, in the likeness of the son of Neleus, Nestor, whom above all the elders Agamemnon held in honor;"¹¹

Much later, Ovid described *Hypnos* as the father of *Oνειροι* and above all of the three dream gods: *Morpheus*, who was named after the Greek word *morphe* (shape), because he used to take different human appearances in dreams to deliver messages from the gods;⁶ *Icelos* or *Phobetor*, the one who was supposed to bring nightmares; and *Phantasus*, the one who brought dreams of inanimate things.⁴ It is not by chance that morphine, the active ingredient of opium, was named after *Morpheus*.¹³ These three sons of sleep together with their father ruled in the sphere of dreams of ordinary people and kings alike, creating opposite sensations like euphoria or dysphoria.⁴

The connection of sleep with dreams is also confirmed by Pausanias in the description of an actual statue of *Hypnos* lying inside the sanctuary of *Asklepios* at Sikyon, near Corinth. In the inner room of the sanctuary, Pausanias saw "an image of the Dream-god and Sleep surnamed *Epidotes* (Bountiful) lulling to sleep a lion".⁷

Sleep Induction in Greek Antiquity

Sleep induction in mythology

The first reference to sleep induction by the administration of a soporific substance is found in the myth of the Golden Fleece.¹⁴ The sorceress *Medea*, daughter of the king of Colchis helped Jason to steal the Golden Fleece by lulling into a state of deep sleep the vigilant dragon that guarded it.¹⁵ For that purpose, she used a so far unknown potent substance, simultaneously asking the god *Hypnos* for help. Thus, one of the first references concerning induced sleep is associated not with a human being, but with a monster. The scene of *Medea* putting the ever-alert dragon to sleep is illustrated in art.¹⁴ It is also described by Apollonius Rhodius (3rd century BCE) in the epic poem *Argonautica*, which depicts the expedition of the Argonauts to Colchis.

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