

Phan·tas·ma·go·ri·a

Noun 1. a sequence of real or imaginary images like those seen in a dream.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the evolving role of dreams in cultures throughout history, along with their mythological, scientific and psychological significance. In short, how our dreams have shaped our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. The paper is sectioned according to time period, from Prehistory to now, and covers approximately 70,000 years of human existence. As a disclaimer, almost every established culture in human history has had unique beliefs and practices in regards to dreams, and it would be near impossible to thoroughly report on each and every one of them. Therefore, for the sake of the length of this paper, each section contains research on, at most, two established cultures or theories, with a distinct dream practice uniting them.

“Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.”

-Carl Jung

*“Hwaet!
A dream came to me
At deep midnight
When humankind
Kept their beds
- the dream of dreams!
I shall declare it.
It seemed I saw the Tree itself
Borne on the air, light wound about it,
- a beacon of brightest wood, a beacon clad
In overlapping gold, glancing gems.”*

- *Dream of the Rood*, translated from the original Old English c. 8th century CE

INTRODUCTION

Humans have been dreaming since before recorded history, in the times when our dreams were just flickers of light on a cave wall. The allure of dreams hasn't dulled through the ages—their hazy, fleeting nature has served as inspiration for myths, folktales, and religion for cultures across the world. They've been a subject of both wonder and fear. Even the word itself, *dream*, reflects this dichotomy, stemming from the Proto-Germanic word *draugmaz*, meaning deception, ghost, song, and festivity (Bulkeley, 2016, p. 79). In ancient times, dreams were seen as godly omens of disaster, visions from demons, and bases for healing rituals. Today, most people speak of *having* dreams, while in languages and cultures of the past, dreams were *seen*. The Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic for the word “dream”, *raswet* (sometimes spelled *resut* or *rswt*), was represented by an open eye. (Bulkeley, 2016, p. 80) The Ancient Egyptians believed that dreams were prophetic visions from their gods, hence the specific glyph. In Ancient Greek mythology, the *oneiros* (literally, “dreams”) were personified dreams that flew into people at night through keyholes in their heads. (Kamil) It's only been in the last three hundred years or so that we have ascribed true scientific and psychological reasoning to them (mainly in thanks to the work of people like Sigmund Freud, whose research shaped modern dream theory), but in ancient times, people's dreams had the power to save lives or even topple nations.

PREHISTORY (approx. 70,000 years ago - 3200 BCE) EMERGENCE OF DREAM MYTH & PRACTICE

Since the dawn of human existence, dreams have been the focus of myths and legends. When humans ventured down into the caves to paint the animalistic figures we know so well, it's possible that the descent was likened to entering an altered state of consciousness. In Chapter 5 of *Big Dreams* by Kelly Bulkeley, the author poses a question: “What if the cognitive spark that lit the explosion of Paleolithic creativity was shamanic dreaming?” The images on cave walls from 50,000 years ago reflect well-known themes in dream content, and there's evidence in later periods of history of *Dream Incubation*, a process in which shamans entered caves to dream. However, Australian Aboriginal peoples, a culture dated at least fifteen thousand years before the earliest known paintings, already had developed dream myths and practices. Their creation myth was a result of dreaming: at the beginning of time, ancestral spirits dreamed the physical world into existence. (Powers) The plane of creation, colloquially known as Dreamtime or The Dreaming, is simultaneously occurring across all of time, and is able to be accessed through nightly dreams. While there, one could commune with ancestral spirits or witness the creation happening.

ANCIENT HISTORY (3200 BCE - 800 BCE) DREAM INTERPRETATION

As time progressed, dreams began to take on a greater role in society, aided by the invention of cuneiform and hieroglyphics. Thanks to this, two ancient civilizations, Mesopotamia and Egypt, created their own dream books to aid in dream interpretation, a practice in which priests would consult the books in search of symbols and their meanings when described a dream. (Mingren) In the Egyptian dream book, “good” dreams were written in black ink, while

“bad” dreams were written in red, as red was the color of bad omens. (Dhwty) The position of dream interpreter was sacred in both civilizations, as kings and pharaohs would consult them to clarify the divine visions they had at night. In Egypt, specifically, the pharaoh was elevated to a godlike position, so the result of his dreams and their interpretations could determine the fate of his entire civilization. A notable instance of dream interpretation in Ancient Egypt came from the Bible, in the book Genesis, in which Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream:

“**25** Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. **26** The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. **27** The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. **28** It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. **29** There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, **30** but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 41:25-30)



Fig. 1 British Museum, Dept. of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities, Gardiner, A. H. (ed.), 1935. *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum, Series III, Vol. I*. London: British Museum.

CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY (8th century BCE - 5th century CE) DREAM MYTHOLOGY & THEORIES

Dreams had a prominent role in the culture of ancient Greece and Rome, shaping social, philosophical, and religious functions. The Greek god of dreams, Morpheus, molded the dreams that people would have, and his children, Phobetor (the god of nightmares) and Phantasos (the god of phantastical dreams), flew into people and gifted them with the dreams. (Pelham) The Greco-Romans also believed that dreams came in two varieties: true dreams, wherein people would be visited by gods and ancestors or prophetic visions, and false dreams, which were the results of the day's trivial events. This duality is present in literature, most notably in Homer's *Odyssey*:

Then wise Penelope answered him again: “Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning, and in no wise do they find fulfillment in all things for men. For two are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and

one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfillment. But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn bring true issues to pass, when any mortal sees them .” (Hom. Od. 19.544.)

Additionally, dreams were viewed as gateways to physical and mental healing, and used as diagnoses for certain diseases by physicians. Supplicants would travel to Asclepions, temples devoted to the Greek god of healing, in the hopes of being sent a dream that pertained to their ailment. This process sounds much like the concept of dream incubation possibly practiced by shamans in prehistory. Furthermore, patients would abstain from sex and meat 48 hours before coming to the temples to ensure the purity of their bodies (Pelham), which is very similar to the vision quest rituals of certain Native American tribes, in which individuals would fast for days at a sacred site in order to enter a trance-like state and ascertain their purpose in life (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016). It should be noted that the curing of any ailments at the Asclepions was not due to the dreams themselves, but any medicine or regimen that physicians would prescribe to patients.

The transition from dream mythology to dream philosophy occurred around the fifth century BCE, in the Classical period of Greek society. Epicurus, one of the foremost philosophers of that period, succinctly stated that “dreams have no divine nature nor any prophetic force but originate from the impact of images.” (Cook) As society progressed towards more scientifically-minded pursuits, the idea that dreams were messages sent by the gods became less popular.

POST-CLASSICAL HISTORY & THE MIDDLE AGES (c. 500 CE - 17th century CE) **DREAMS & CHRISTIANITY**

When Christianity began to rise in popularity in Europe in the fifth century CE, dreams were again viewed as visions of divine revelation. People would see sacred objects in their dreams and ascribe meaning to them, saying that they were blessed by God. The most notable instance of this occurring was the dream that King Arthur and his knights had of the Holy Grail in Thomas Malory’s fictional *Le Morte d’Arthur*. The dream was interpreted as a call to action, a divine quest for only the worthiest of knights, and prompted the search for the Holy Grail. Additional evidence of holy dreams appears on the Ruthwell Cross, a stone cross with a poem in Old English titled *Dream of the Rood* (“rood” meaning “cross”), recounting the poet’s dream of the cross that Jesus was crucified upon. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2018) The prevalence of divine-centered dreams is likely due to Christianity’s popularity in Europe.

It wasn't until the instability of the Middle Ages that dreams truly began to be seen as malevolent forces. The turmoil in Europe after the devastation of the Black Plague made people search for stability, and the Catholic Church gladly filled the power vacuum. The church exploited the tendency of people to experience nightmares, as people turned to religion for spiritual protection. (Bulkeley, 2016, p. 213) The church classified dreams as the work of the devil, sent to people in the hopes that they would be led astray from Catholicism. This philosophy, likening dreaming to the work of witches and demons, aided in the persecution of women in the Salem witch trials of 1692 and 1693. (Bulkeley, 2016, p. 218) It involved *spectral evidence*, the testimony of the “bewitched” (a.k.a. accuser) that an accused person’s spectral

shape appeared to them at a time when their physical body was elsewhere, usually when the bewitched was dreaming. (Kreutter) Now, there was no way to verify an accuser's account of the dream, and this discrepancy led to the deaths of dozens of women. (Bulkely, 2016, p. 2018)

MODERN HISTORY (1700 CE - now)

DREAM PSYCHOLOGY & SCIENCE

The role of dreams in culture was forever changed with the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud's groundbreaking research in his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899. His theory that dreams were the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes was the foundation of almost all dream research up until the 1950s. (McNamara, 2007, p. 216) To Freud, every object in dreams was symbolic of a few, specific concepts: the human body, parents, children, birth, death, or nakedness. If one were to dream of royalty or a crown, it represented parents or guardian figures, as in childhood, one's parents were viewed as the absolute authority. (McAndrew) Additionally, Freud's analysis of the symbols in one of his childhood dreams led to his most famous concept: the Oedipus Complex, wherein a child desires their mother/father with resentment to the other spouse. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2018) His description of the dream follows:

"It was very vivid and showed me my beloved mother with a peculiarly calm, sleeping facial expression, being carried into the room by [people] with bird beaks. [...] I awoke in anxiety, which did not end until I woke my parents up...The anxiety can be traced back to an obscure and sexual craving. [...] I have found in my own case the phenomena of being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood...If this is so we can understand the gripping power of Oedipus Rex." (Freud, 1899, p. 586)

The bird-beaked figures in the dream were in response to the similar German words for bird and having sex, *vogel* and *vögeln*, respectively. Freud reasoned that the presence of the figures justified his feelings for his mother. (Engler, 2014, pp. 37-38)

While Freud's theories are certainly intriguing, we now know that not every dream is a product of the basest human desires. The theory of what dreams are and why we dream has evolved since Freud's research, mainly in part to the discovery of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep in the mid-twentieth century. The current, most widely accepted theory (which harkens back to Epicurus's theories in the 5th century CE) is that, occurring during REM sleep, dreams are projections of the pressures and images accumulated in one's waking hours. (McNamara & Bulkeley, 2007, pp. 216-223)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, dreams have been the focal point of countless myths and stories, as well as scientific and psychological theories. But what makes dreams so intriguing to the human psyche, and why did people ascribe so much meaning to them in the past? Dreams can be so fantastical that they have no discernible relation to the events of our daily lives, so why place stock in their various interpretations? Even now, people are still interpreting their dreams using the practices of

civilizations from thousands of years ago. Their fleeting images, shrouded in mystery, have intrigued humans since the dawn of time. But can one really find meaning in every dream? As Sigmund Freud once put it: "Sometimes, a cigar is just a cigar."

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