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ON ARTEMIDOROS' APPROACH TO DREAMS

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1.1

Artemidoros lived in the second century A.D., the century of the emperors Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, the orator Aelius Aristides, the writer Pausanias, and the scientists Ptolemy and Galen. Widely traveled himself, Artemidoros was a keen observer, a quality which stood him in good stead as the most brilliant exponent of a long oneirocritic tradition which influenced European thought and literature and with which Freud became familiar seventeen centuries later.

The *Oneirocritica*, composed of four books, displays a "rational, practical approach."[1] Dwelling on the organization and classification of the first two books helps to understand what kind of "scientific" approach White and others have perceived in the *Oneirocritica*, to compare these books with the description of categories found in Ancient Mesopotamia, and to assess the importance of Artemidoros' work for the Mediterranean tradition of dream interpretation and temple sleeping still very much alive today.

The first book concerns the self and the body in contrast with the second, which deals with the natural world. In Book I mention is made (p. 20) of internal as opposed to external relationships and of the relation between dream and dreamer which the interpreter needs to know (22). "Whole" dreams are discussed, and what is meant by 'whole' in this context is highly suggestive. From there the sequence of subjects roughly includes birth (one's own) (13), pregnancy (14) and children (15 - 16), the coming into being of the notion of self, and then a series of subjects focusing on the head. This focus is particularly significant because, as Onians[2] writes, in Greek popular belief, "the head is an organ of life, as seat of the psyche, an organ of generation, and a symbol of the continuity of life and family." We still speak of the head of state, the head of the household. Onians mentions the Greek idea according to which the doctor acts as a brain to the patient. The acceptance of such an idea implies the considerable extent to which suggestion and authority must have been used in healing. Finally, there is the analogy of the philosopher to the brain; the philosoper - king acts as a brain to his people.

The sequence of themes dealing with the head in the *Oneirocritica* includes hair, the forehead, the ears, the eyebrows, vision, the nose, cheeks, jaws, beards, teeth, tongue, vomiting, absess in head region, back-headedness, beheaded, animal-headed, head in hands, and horns on head. Two features of this sequence are worth noting. The fact that the various themes begin with the hair on the head (i.e., at the top) and then proceed downwards more or less straightforwardly until one comes to vomiting. From there on all themes deal with illness or abnormality.

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Significantly, one finds two categories of features—the first normal and healthy, the second abnormal and associated with illness.

What we are dealing with here seems astonishingly clear: culturally grounded perceptions and conceptions of the self, the body and body parts with their relation to political and social organization on one hand and to physiology and medicine on the other. Indeed, it is an inescapable conclusion.

The systematic fashion in which Artemidoros organizes his considerable volume of material, and the ways in which he also uses the older, popular tradition of auspicious and inauspicious meanings of certain dream symbols are among the most fascinating features of the *Oneirocritica*. Moreover, in the light of a distinction between scientific and status-oriented approaches to the interpretation of dreams, Artemidoros' system is of particular interest. No longer is there an emphasis on position and hierarchy, whether political or social. Rather, much depends upon context and the systematic consideration of the field of dream interpretation generally. Dream symbols are seen to constitute a language of their own, to be decoded through the method of dream interpretation. Here too, the scientific (i.e., systematic and classificatory) method of dream interpretation seems to have egalitarian overtones: dreams are phenomena to be explained rather than primarily symbols of social, political or religious status as they were in Ancient Mesopotamia.

For instance, consider the discussion of food (Book I). Dry and wet are principles according to which nourishment is divided into two basic categories (not raw and cooked). Artemidoros first discusses drinks. Drinking cold water is good luck for all, but drinking warm water brings bad luck except to those used to it (it is an unnatural practice); drinking moderate amounts of wine is auspicious (and Artemidoros quotes Xenophon and Theognis to this effect), but drinking mead, honeyed quince wine, hydromel, myrtle wine, and prepared wines means bad luck to all but the rich to whom it is natural to drink them (p. 50). Drinking vinegar presages a quarrel with a member of the household "because of the contraction of the mouth" (p. 50), while drinking olive oil means poisoning or illness. "It is always auspicious for a thirsty man to drink. . . for thirst is nothing but a longing for something, and drinking releases a person from that craving."

After a brief discussion of drinking cups, Artemidoros passes to dry nourishment. He begins with vegetables. Specifically with vegetables which "give off a smell after they are eaten (e.g., radishes, leeks, endives). "Beets, mallow, dock, curled dock and orach are only auspicious for debtors, since they stimulate the stomach and relax the bowels" (p. 51). Any reader here is a bit perplexed. Furthermore, as is often the case reading Artemidoros, the explanation which follows is more suggestive than helpful. "For the stomach and entrails especially are like a money - lender" (p. 51). Presumably this is because money "passes through" them.

Plants with a head (carrots, etc.) are good luck and signify success. This seems in keeping with the importance already alluded to attributed by the Greek and Roman world of Artemidoros to the head. But dreams about cabbage are "entirely inauspicious" since "the cabbage is the only vegetable around which the vine does not curl" (p. 51), yet another empirical observation incorporated into the "science" of dream interpretation. After an elaborate discussion of cereals and breads in which Artemidoros notes that it is good for a man to dream that he is eating the kind of bread to which he is accustomed (for to a poor man black bread is appropriate and to a rich man, white bread), he goes on to discuss meats and fish. Finally, he concludes the section on edibles with fruit, having followed the order of courses in his presentation. The transition to the following section is made with the phrase: "Since

household articles naturally (*sic*) come next after food, I think that it is fitting to deal with them also" (pp. 54 - 55).

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If I have dwelt on Artemidoros in some detail here, it is to demonstrate: a) the kind of careful observation of the real world which characterizes his *Oneirocritica*, and b) the ways in which the order of presentation often reflects not so much immutable natural sequences (as with the seasons) but rather customary social procedures. For instance, he began his discussion of food not with apples (because A is the first letter of the alphabet) or with milk (because that is what human beings [i.e., newborn infants] eat first), but with vegetables. The sequence is 1) vegetables, 2) meat and fish and 3) fruit: the sequence of dishes in an ordinary meal.

In other words, Artemidoros bases his classificatory principles on the organization of human behaviors he sees around him. There is no preoccupation with Platonic forms or ideal order. For his is a mundane system of dream interpretation rooted in the customs, habits, psychological motivations, and symbolic meanings which he has observed first-hand, collected and compiled in meaningful (i.e., orderly) systems. The systematics of Artemidoros' approach may seem to us oddly incompatible with the superstitious meanings of the symbols. But this should not blind us to the richness of his classificatory system, and to the many ways in which his book can be studied profitably by all those interested in cultural systems of dream interpretation.

Finally, Artemidoros' discussion of dream symbolism effectively calls attention to the multivalence of symbols or what Freud called "overdetermination"—one symbol having a variety of complimentary meanings. In Artemidoros the same symbols have different meanings for different people, such as white bread for the rich, black for the poor. In working out the interpretative principles of dream interpretation, Artemidoros articulates a symbolic language which retains many of the characteristics of linguistic systems. In fact, dream interpretation for Artemidoros is a discourse on the language of dreams which, far from distancing the dreamer and interpreter from the here-and-now, brings them closer. The principles of interpretation are to be discovered not in any domain of divine messages, but in the world of daily experience. Thus by calling attention to the depth and richness of our everyday existence, by applying the methods of observation to the behaviors of those around him, Artemidoros can be seen as having developed what Freud is now known for: a method of relating dreams to the various (hidden) meanings of social and individual life.

It is worth emphasizing that the multiplicity of meanings depending upon the dreamer and the dream situation is quite unlike the more idealized system of dream interpretation which Islam and other religions appear to encourage. Other worldly truths are less relative. The very relativity of the meanings of dream symbols lends itself to systematizing them as a language, to contextualizing them. The context, in turn, needs describing and understanding. Hence the importance of social context, social status, sex, age, and all other variables which enter into the interpretation of a dream for Artemidoros. In short, for Artemidoros, if dreams serve as a prism which concentrates and encodes the hidden meanings of daily experience, then interpretation decodes them and makes them intelligible.

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If, then, Artemidoros deals with many kinds of dreamers and consequently with a far richer and more realistic social spectrum than the message dreams of the ancient Near East and of ancient Greece, one can argue that his dream interpretation reflects a more complex and diverse society than do the dream books studied by Oppenheim.[3] Indeed, there is certainly much evidence to substantiate such a claim. Certainly the mundane search for a depth of meanings in daily experience may be opposed to the more ethereal thrust of religious philosophy, particularly Christian philosophy, and was characteristic of Mediterranean peoples in general. The influence of the dream book of Artemidoros was profound throughout the Mediterranean primarily because it articulated extant cultural notions of the dream and of dream interpretation. Within the Christian tradition it was soon relegated to a very secondary place when Christianity rose above the variety of religions vying for supremacy at the time Artemidoros was writing. But within Islam the situation is rather different. One might suggest that whereas Christ gained a reputation as doctor (he healed the sick), Mohammed gained a reputation as visionary and dreamer. Indeed, in Islamic texts it is stated that there can be no "truthful" dreams since Mohammed, because he had them all. Dreams were the vehicle of revelation for Mohammed, whereas, since Christ was already the son of God, there was already a hotline, so to speak, established between Father and Son.

The subject of the comparative reception of the dream book of Atemidoros within Islamic and Christian worlds is indeed a fascinating one, and one that richly deserves full treatment. In this context I can only very briefly indicate that the book was translated in Arabic very early, claimed by the translator as his own and thereafter assimilated to the growing corpus of oneirocritical literature in Egypt and Maghreb as well as Persia and other parts of the Middle East.

REFERENCES

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