
Roman Dream Concepts

The Romans were a deeply superstitious people long before they became conquerors. They took great stock in omens and dreams of all kinds, as is reflected by their enormous early pantheon. There were spirits (numina) of the air, water, trees, wind, crops, weeding, carting, brewing, and so on to include virtually all aspects of daily life. All of these myriad numina expressed their intentions through observable objects and actions, and each had to be routinely enjoined through rituals and ceremonies if good outcomes were to be forthcoming (Ogilvie, 2011; North, 2000).

The Romans assigned the female deity Fauna to oversee the dreams of women, with the most notable secular manifestation being the agency of oracular intermediaries who could be employed to divine the future in dedicated temples. A woman with a vexing dream could go to such a temple, and a priestess would sing or chant a divinely inspired interpretation as if possessed by the goddess. In the pantheon, Fauna's brother (or husband in some schemes), Faunus, could reveal the future in the dreams of men, but the process often required rituals involving sleeping in sacred spots and making sacrifices (Lipka, 2009). For example, a man might be called upon to sleep within the sacred Tibur grove or near the well of Albunea. There he might sacrifice a sheep, and sleep upon its freshly removed fleece, hoping that these pious acts would be rewarded with a mantic dream or perhaps a divine voice that would forecast the future. The voice heard was usually that of a hidden priest, just one of the many services provided.

The Romans borrowed deities freely from the Greeks, Egyptians, and other cultures with whom they had contact (e.g., Serapis and Isis), and as a result, their own gods changed in name and character. Fauna became Bona Dea (the Good Goddess) while Faunus took on the traits of Pan, but both continued playing a role in mantic dreams. Moreover, the influence of dream and sign divination grew, even to the extent that Augustus decreed that any citizen dreaming about matters relating to the empire would be required to publicly recite the dream in the market place or forum of his or her community (Southern, 1998; Cassius, 1987). The Romans also readily incorporated and expanded the Greek use of dreams in determining and treating medical problems, although they recognized interpretational difficulties. For example, Galen, a Hellenic Roman, recommended in *De Dignotione ex Insomniis* (Oberhelman, 1983; Percy, 2012):

The vision-in-sleep [enhyption], in my opinion, indicates a disposition of the body. Someone dreaming of a conflagration is troubled by yellow bile, but if he dreams of smoke, or mist, or deep darkness, by black bile. Rainstorm indicates that cold moisture

abounds; snow, ice, and hail, cold phlegm...But since in sleep the soul does not produce impressions based on dispositions of the body only, but also from the things habitually done by us day by day, and some from what we have thought and indeed some things are revealed by it in fashion of prophesy (for even this is witnessed by experience)—the diagnosis of the body from the visions-in-sleep that arise from the body becomes difficult. (*Ibid.*, VI.517).

As might be imagined, the Romans eagerly took to dream incubation, dream books, and an ever-shifting cast of dream diviners. Military actions, legislation, and all manner of everyday affairs were often influenced by dreams and dream interpretations, although some voices were raised against the trend—especially amongst the learned. For example, in Book IV of *De Rerum Natura* the philosopher Lucretius saw dreams as artifacts of everyday affairs rather than divinely inspired insights (Brown, 1987). He argues that dreams are devoid of prophetic meaning, and instead mirror what is occurring within our everyday lives. He presents a psychophysical perspective that extends to using wet dreams as proof that our dreams are an expression of our physical desires (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 4.1030–57). For Lucretius, the focus of current interest has the greatest potential to be the subject of a dream, with the divine not being a causal agency. As we shall see, these views closely mirror those of modern psychologists.

Luminaries such as Cicero also rejected the popular faith and importance accorded to dreams. Cicero particularly loathed the professional caste of dream interpreters, considering them uncouth charlatans and frauds. He proved his point in *de Divinatione* by noting the different interpretations for the same dream that diviners often provided, concluding:

And I say this with the greatest confidence, since those very persons who experience these dreams cannot by any means understand them, and those persons who pretend to interpret them, do so by conjecture, not demonstration...Let us reject, therefore this divination of dreams, as well as eleven other kinds. For, to speak truly, that superstition has extended itself through all nations, and has oppressed the intellectual energies of all men, and has betrayed them into endless imbecilities (*Ibid.*, LXXI-LXXII).

There is no divine power which creates dreams...none of the visions seen in dreams have their origin in the will of the gods. (*Ibid.*, CXXIV; 2.60.124)

Lucretius and Cicero were swimming upstream in light of most Romans' deeply superstitious natures. This is not to say that dream interpretation was a completely fraudulent art, left to the purview of swindlers and charlatans alone. Indeed, a major Greco-Roman contribution to understanding dreams was the recognition of the need to consider a dreamer's history and situation as well as the dream itself. This theme was inculcated into Artemidorus Daldianus' (circa 120-180 CE) *Oneirocritica* during the second century (see White's translation, 1980/1990). This five-volume text, written in Greek, includes two books that dealt with practical and theoretical issues concerning dreams, with the remaining three volumes presenting 95 dreams and their interpretations. Dreams are divided into two basic types, both of which have subtypes. These are enhypnia, dreams concerning psychological needs related to everyday events, and Oneiroi, dreams foretelling the future. Dreams are further categorized as being thematic or allegorical. Each of these have subtypes, but we need not address these details, except to note that categorizing dreams appropriately required finding ample data.

Indeed, Artemidorus demands us to be extremely rigorous in determining the dreamer's history before making a dream interpretation, even to the extent of knowing his/her social status, local customs, financial state, birthday, family dynamics, pre-dream food intake, and other variables. The investigation process calls for the dream interpreter to become a psychologist of sorts, and the approach taken had a pronounced influence on Freud and Jung, the former citing Artemidorus eight times (Freud, 1983, p. 60). Like his predecessors, Artemidorus recognized that dream interpretation is based on analyzing what dream symbols mean, but he clearly recognized that understanding the dreamer's contextual milieu was critical to understanding a given dream symbol's appropriate associations. For example, a dream about losing one's teeth might mean something different to an elderly politician than it does to a young boxer, with the goal being to find the most suitable "juxtaposition of similarities" (Miller, 1994, p. 86). With Artemidorus, we see a considerable evolution in dream interpretation that goes well beyond the simple need to go to a temple or read a simplistic "If X, then Y" dream book. Consider the following example as it will relate to some of the ideas Freud promulgated, for better or worse:

The case of one's mother is both complex and manifold and admits of many different interpretations...If anyone possesses his mother through face-to-face intercourse...if she is still alive and his father is in good health, it *means* that he and his father will become enemies because of the jealousy...but if his father is sick, he will die, since the dreamer will take care of his mother both as a son and a husband. (*Oneirocritica*, I.79)