

Dream Incubation

Dream incubation is the modern term applied to dreaming for purposes of problem solving, healing and divination, a common practice in ancient times.

Ancient Dream Incubation

The term 'dream incubation' is drawn from the Greek *enkoimesis*, meaning a dream-like state of induced sleep, and Latin *incubatio*, 'to lie on a kind of bedstead or camp-bed' (in Greek, on a *kline*, from which the term 'clinic' arose). Historical documents record a series of dreaming incubation practices in ancient times, mainly for the purpose of healing. The idea of incubation has survived, although in a reduced form, for problem-solving or achieving an enlightening and transformative effect.

The historical and cultural contexts in which sleep incubation occurred varied, but they shared the common feature of promoting wellbeing. Sacred sites for the purpose took variety of forms: caves, hilltops (North American Indians), tombs (Berbers of North Africa), and chamber or hall in a temple (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome). Later, this function was taken over by churches or shrines. The aim was to seek a cure, advice or an oracle in the form of dreams believed to derive from a divine source, usually from the god for whom the temple was built. The topic is of interest to scholars in disciplines as widely varied as classics and religious studies, medicine, philosophy, history, archaeology, psychology, psychotherapy and the arts.

Incubation as practised in most old cultures derived from Egypt and Mesopotamia and spread to countries in and outside Europe, continuing for thousands of years. The rituals surrounding it vary according to time and place. Greek and Roman authors described incubation in factual or poetic terms, and in prose, variously with enthusiastic or critical attitudes (the list includes Claudius Aelianus, Aelius Aristides, Aristophanes, Cicero, Euripides, Eusebius, Herodian, Herodotus, Pausanias, Flavius Philostratus, Pindar, Plutarch, Sophocles, Strabo, Tertullian and Virgil). Numerous original case inscriptions (*iamata*) were arranged in an exaggerated style to impress new arrivals and promote the temple.

It seems likely that the importance of dreams was first recognized during the palaeolithic and neolithic periods, when dream interpretation was a task of the tribal elders, matriarchs and patriarchs, priests and shamans.¹ In primal societies dreams were messages from gods and other powerful beings.

The earliest evidence of dream interpretation is found in civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, then Greece and Rome. While the Greek 'temple culture' lasted from the ninth century BC onwards, extending into the Hellenistic period and Roman conquest,² the oldest testimonies of dream incubation come from even earlier civilizations. These were recorded in around 4000 BC in cuneiform on clay

tablets, such as the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, the somewhat later Akkadian Epic *Atra Hasis*, and the 'Assyrian Dream Book', a compendium of texts known as the *Iškar Zaḳīqu*, the 'core text of the god Zaḳīqu'.

From Egypt, the document Papyrus Chester-Beatty 3, known as the 'Dream Book', was written in ink during the twelfth dynasty between 1991 and 1786 BC. It distinguishes good and bad dreams, explores the background of a dream, and makes dreamers aware of typical dream skills, such as how dreams can play with words. It offers the first pre-sleep method for gaining a dream from the deity Besa, protector against terrors:³

Make a drawing of Besa on your left hand and enveloping your hand in a strip of black cloth that has been consecrated to Isis (and) lie down to sleep without speaking a word, even in answer to a question. Wind the remainder of the cloth around your neck... [and say] come in this very night.

Dream incubation fulfilled various purposes, but the one most valued concerned cures relating to illness in all parts of the body. That dream incubation is one of the oldest methods of healing is testified by written documents. When ordinary physicians could not succeed, patients turned directly to the gods for help by sleeping in their temples. Crowds streamed to sacred sites and sanctuaries near and far.

In ancient times such a journey was motivated by an urge to communicate with a divine power. Dream responses relating to a health issue or any urgent problem, such as unsolved crime, would be understood as coming externally from the divine, specifically from the gods in charge of the sacred site. The question of whether dreams could indeed provide cures, oracles or advice has been posed ever since, but even during antiquity the claim was contested, notably by Cicero.⁴

Incubation Sites

For incubation the worshipper went to a sacred site - a cave, temple, tomb or any place that contained relics.⁵ A famous pagan sanctuary was the Serapeion in Alexandria, which was built in the third century BC for the chthonic (earth and underworld related) Graeco-Egyptian god Serapis, known both for appearing in dreams and for his power of healing.⁶ Another outstanding Serapeion was located in Memphis, and more such sites have been discovered in Turkey and Italy. The Egyptian god of healing Imhotep also played a central role in dream incubation.

The most popular Greek sanctuaries were those built for Asclepius, son of Apollo and Koronis, husband of Epion and father of seven children, amongst them Hygieia, the personification of health; and Panaceaia, the personification of healing with plants. Asclepius was regarded as a chthonic deity found in caves inhabited by snakes, although in Homer's *Iliad* the legendary healer was presented as a mortal, a skilled physician from Thessaly. The association with snakes matches his representations in arts as a man holding a stick with a snake winding around it – the symbol of medicine.

Two Asclepieia sanctuaries became famous, both claiming to be built at his birthplace. According to Strabo, the oldest and most well-known is the Asclepius temple in Trikka, Thessaly.⁷ The other sanctuary is Epidaurus on the northeast Peloponnese, generally accredited as his birthplace,⁸ which became the focus point for a cult in the seventh century BC. Not only local inhabitants came to Epidaurus: sick individuals made pilgrimages from cities such as Pellene, Athens, Herakleia and Lampsacus in preference to their local Asclepieion. In total there were more than 300 Asclepieia, many of them connected to spas.

The presence of water initially played an important role in dream incubation, so much so that a spring was dug out of the rock of the Asclepieion of Pergamum.⁹

During the Hellenistic and Roman period, Serapis and Asclepius were equally worshipped,¹⁰ although other temples in Greece honoured various gods including Imhotep. In the fourth century Epidaurus started actively to promote the Asclepius cult throughout the empire as far as northern Greece, Macedonia, Thrace, Sicily and Italy. Dream incubation flourished until the end of the Roman period in about 400 AD.

A Celtic well and sacrificial site for the god Grannus has been discovered at Grand, France. We know that the Romans also used the holy water for healing purposes and in the first and second centuries they built thermal baths next to the well, also a temple for their god of healing, Apollo, renamed Apollo Grannus. The inscription on the temple *somno iussus* reveals that it was a place where one could get an 'order during sleep'.

In Britain a Romano-Celtic temple dating from the fourth century was discovered at Dwarf's Hill in Lydney Park estate, Gloucestershire, with the help of author JRR Tolkien.¹¹ The temple was dedicated to the healing deity called Nodens, who is equivalent to the Roman god Mars.

Of great importance in a Greek sanctuary was its entrance gate, the *propylon*. The gate functioned not just as an ordinary opening, but also as the threshold between profane and sacred spaces.¹² Inside the sanctuaries, statues of the worshipped gods were erected to impress visitors and increase their expectations of success in dream incubation. Some sanctuaries displayed a statue of Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, to help them recall their dreams.¹³

The most important spaces inside a temple were a sacred *stoa*, an open-air chamber or hall, and the *abaton*, where clients incubated their dreams. Another sacred space was the *abyton* ('a place it is forbidden to enter'), for the exclusive use of the priests. The creation of a secure sleeping place and sacred atmosphere remain an important part of modern dream incubation techniques.

Incubation Rituals

Incubation rituals were popular in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome and pre-Christian Gaul and later found their way into Christianity, Judaism and Islam. They are still popular in some Mediterranean areas, especially in rural districts, where they are seen as a resource for healing, especially where orthodox medical practices have failed. They also attract spirituality-seekers and people undergoing

challenging life situations, who hope to experience direct contact with divine power.

While the application of the older incubation rituals were usually limited to certain periods during the year, the Asclepieia were accessible daily for the purpose of incubation. There was only one restriction: pregnant women and the terminally ill were excluded in order to keep the sanctuary 'clean' from birth and death¹⁴ (a restriction also found with incubation in Japanese Shintoisms).

Dream incubation was not simply a matter of one overnight stay: it required the prior performance of rites that had been developed over six thousand years. The typical conditions for incubation in an Asclepieion were:

- ablution, purification with water like washing the hands or bathing in the cold sea;
- sacrifice and/or the promise of a votive gift (possibly in the shape of the concerned body part)
- praying to the god
- feeding the sacred snakes of Asclepius with honey cake
- white linen cloths (in Trophonios nakedness)
- abstinence from certain activities (such as warm baths, sexual intercourse) and wine, for one or more days prior to incubation
- diet or fasting, for one or more days prior to incubation

Fulfilling these conditions required days, months, or in some cases years.¹⁵ In support of this there were ceremonies, prayers, and even theatrical and musical performances. A receptive attitude was crucial: at the Epidaurus temple pilgrims who passed through the entrance gates, the *propylaia*, were greeted with these words:

Pure must be who enters the fragrant temple;

Purity means to think nothing but holy thoughts.

Similarly, an inscription at the entrance of the Asclepieion at Lambaesis in Africa reads:

Entering as a good man, leaving as a better one.

*(Bonus intra, melior exi)*¹⁶

Dreaming in the Sacred Space

What exactly happened in the *abaton* remains uncertain. Surviving inscriptions, together with descriptions by Greek and Roman authors, reveal experiences in dreams or visions of the divine. It might be that the rituals preceding the incubation – such as fasting, pilgrimages or ingesting psychoactive plants – induced the encounters with the divine.¹⁷ It could also be the case that imagery arose in sleep-related hypnagogic or hypnopompic states, by means of hypnotic suggestion, or in other altered and transpersonal states of consciousness. It has even been speculated that medically skilled priests tricked incubants by wearing a

mask and appearing as the god. There is some evidence that real surgery took place: occasionally pools of blood were found next to the incubant the following morning. Ointments were often rubbed onto body parts showing symptoms, and in some cases these were also licked by the sacred snakes of Asclepius.¹⁸ Since not every incubant could recall dreams, a priest might act as a stand-in and dream on their behalf.

If even a small percentage of these accounts are considered credible, it must be concluded that dream incubation can activate a latent psi-potential.

Records of Cures, Oracles and Information

Numerous successful dreams were recorded on temple walls, on upright stone slabs (*stelai*), or on a dome-shaped building (*tholos*) as in Epidaurus, describing the problems, medical issues and means of cure. Famous examples are in the Asclepieion at Epidaurus, where four limestone *stelai* exhibit some seventy descriptions of cures attributed to the healing powers of Apollo and Asclepius.

Records of healing (*iamata*) from the fourth century BC are partly based on older inscriptions. Extraordinary accounts of gods' healing powers promoted a sanctuary. The reports describe the success of dream incubation, concerning the healing of ailments and injuries and the effectiveness of advice.

Healing miracles in the Graeco-Roman world concern a wide range of illnesses and injuries.¹⁹ Some accounts provide only superficial information: a shrine to Asclepius and his son Machaon in Gerenia claims merely that people can find cures there.²⁰ Others give details, as in the second century AD case of Marcus Julius Apellas from Asia Minor:

In the end the god was right! It was worth going to all this trouble... For a long time I was a tormented man... I had health problems all the times... I had lost my health and peace of mind. Frequently the God would appear to me in my sleep and give me courage. One night I dreamt of the god – he advised me to visit his sanctuary in Epidaurus in order to get well... I boarded a ship... The trip was unbearable, the ship's movement made me dizzy and I couldn't wait to put foot on solid ground. Finally I arrived safe and sound in the Asklepieion of Epidaurus: There I followed the god's instructions to the letter: I applied healing mud on my body, I walked barefoot, other times I would walk for hours on end and afterwards continue to exercise. I ate cheese and bread and celery with lettuce according to the god's instructions. And though he had advised me to drink milk and honey, once that I drank plain milk, he came to me in my sleep and told me not to forget the honey! Days passed and I began to lose hope... So I begged the god to heal me as fast as he could. And he did exactly that. After a portentous dream my health was restored! Praised be Asclepius, I am so happy to have my health back!

A famous account of a dream incubation pilgrimage comes from Aelius Aristides, author of 'Sacred Tales' (ST). Although the work's factual basis has been questioned, it describes how Aristides, who seems to have been permanently ill, sought healing during a period of several years from Asclepius, Serapis and Isis.²¹

Aristides describes experiencing visions of Isis,[22](#) Athena,[23](#) Hygieia[24](#) and Apollo,[25](#) and on one occasion Isis, Serapis and Asclepius all appeared in the same dream.[26](#)

There was also a light from Isis and other unspeakable things which pertained to any salvation. Serapis also appeared on the same night, both he himself and Asclepius. They were marvellous in beauty and magnitude, and in some way alike each other.[27](#)

Aristides illustrates a typically suppliant attitude amid severe suffering (he once undertook a pilgrimage on the rough sea to Egypt in order to receive healing). People who took such risks 'may have been really desperate';[28](#) some think the effort of making the journey may itself have facilitated the healing process.[29](#)

Other examples are as follows:

Pamphaes of Epidauros, suffering from a cancerous sore inside his mouth, is said to have had a dream in which the god opened his mouth with his hand, took out the sore, and cleansed his mouth, making him well.[30](#)

Galen of Pergamon, perhaps the best known physician of the period, was influenced to take up the profession by a vision of Asclepius, in which he received healing instructions for an injury to his hand:[31](#)

I shall now tell you how I got the inspiration to have recourse to arteriotomy. Urged on by certain dreams I had, two of which were particularly vivid, I went for the artery in the space between the index finger and thumb of the right hand, and allowed the blood to flow until it stopped of its own accord, as the dream commanded. Not quite a pound escaped.

A successful cure for baldness was reported by Heraieus of Mytilene.[32](#)

Do you know what it means to have a thick and full beard and no hair on your head? That was exactly problem and the reason that people laughed at me. So I decided to travel from my homeland in Mytilene to the Asklepieion of Epidauros to be healed. During the incubation, the God applied a miraculous medicine on my head and soon I grew hair.

Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, received instructions for his medical art at the Asclepius sanctuary on the island of Cos where he was born.

The archaeologist Hermann Hilprecht reported a dream in which an Assyrian priest came to him and revealed the accurate translation of the stone of Nebuchadnezzar.[33](#)

A rare type of dream found among the inscriptions concerned shared dreams, 'double dreams'[34](#) the same dream (coincidences or Jungian synchronicities) experienced by the incubant and temple priest. This was an important aspect of the healing effect (a parallel can be seen in contemporary psychotherapy where the role of the therapist corresponds to that of the priest's.)[35](#) An example is known from Epidauros:[36](#)

Arata, a Spartan woman, a case of dropsy. She remained in Sparta and her mother slept here for her and had a dream. She dreamt the god cut off her daughter's head and hung her body with the neck down; then after a copious effusion he took down the body and put the head back on the neck. After having this dream she went back to Sparta and found that her daughter had the same dream and was now well.

The interpretation of dreams was usually done with the help of a priest, subject to the final approval of the dreamer - the 'Aha!' effect familiar to Jungian therapists doing dream work today.

Modern Incubation Practices and Research

Compared with the vast corpus of literature about ancient dream incubation, there has been relatively little research on contemporary dream incubation. It has been conducted in sleep laboratories since the 1960s,³⁷ but in contrast with classical times the contemporary focus is on problem solving and creativity.³⁸

William Dement, an American sleep researcher, described a technique of inducing dreams by thinking about a problem for fifteen minutes prior to sleep.³⁹ This has been tested experimentally by Deirdre Barrett using students as subjects.⁴⁰ The participants were asked to choose a problem 'of personal relevance with recognizable solution(s)'. After recording their dreams for a week they evaluated the degree to which these addressed 'any aspect of the problem or attempted any solution of it' and which contained 'a satisfactory solution.' Ratings were also carried out by two outside judges. The participants rated 49% of the dreams as relevant, 34% as containing a solution which was similar to both judges (51% and 25%). The finding that thinking about a problem before sleep has an effect on the dream content has been replicated in at least one other laboratory.⁴¹

The modern technique of learning dream incubation⁴² is based on:

- focusing on a certain problem before going to bed for a week
- repeating that they will dream... similar to a lucid dream
- attention given to a specific area; thinking of a problem and as soon as an image comes holding it in mind before falling into sleep
- placing supportive aids by the bedside, such as a photo of the person one has a problem with or of a deceased person, or a blank canvas for an artist
- staying in bed until the dream is recalled

The state of consciousness in which problem-solving occurs – whether during REM-dreams, waking thoughts or during thoughts in non-REM sleep – is still unknown.⁴³ One possibility is that the process occurs while a person is reflecting on a dream rather than during the dream itself.⁴⁴ More likely is that success results from a combination of pre-sleep thinking, REM-dreaming, non-REM-dreaming, possibly even false awakening, and dream reflections after awakening.

In a problem-solving experiment by White and Taytroe,⁴⁵ 96 frequent dreamers recorded their most vivid dreams for ten days, rated waking and dream moods, and reviewed cognitively one particular focal problem each day. As a means of solving

the problem, they were allowed to choose between a dream incubation technique⁴⁶ before or after sleep, or alternatively a relaxation technique, before or after sleep. The nightly use of dream incubation techniques was found to bring solutions to personal problems and improvements in mood, with a linear decrease in states of anxiety and depression. A second experiment confirmed that these findings could not be attributed to expectancy.⁴⁷

An attempt to reconstruct a ritual in contemporary form was developed by Reed from his interest in the 'creative possibilities in remembering dreams'. It was initially conducted in a dream laboratory, then expanded to be consistent with healing rituals in general and carried out in a tent on a field of a summer camp. Reed gives four case examples, pointing out that some dreams had the quality of visions and appeared to be telepathic.⁴⁸

Many incubations lead to an intense emotional catharsis, as for example in a 29 year-old man whose work suffered from extreme self-criticism:

In his incubated dream, he had cathartic exchanges with several important people from his past, including especially his father, from whom he received in the dream the kind of positive emotional support which he claimed had been painfully absent in their relationship. The incubant awoke from the dream crying, but relieved and renewed, feeling a fresh capacity for work.

Reed's therapeutic approach centres on selection of a sacred place and on encouraging the individual to feel a sense of being revered. For Reed, these factors are still operative today 'in some of our feelings and expectations concerning our personal spaces or vacation retreats, if not churches and shrines, and concerning our doctors, psychotherapists, clergy, or gurus'. The essence of his reconstruction is the 'bootstrap operation of enlisting these current symbols of sanctity and power to constellate in the contemporary dreamer approximately the same psychodynamic configuration which must have existed in the psyche of the indigenous incubant upon falling asleep in the sanctuary'.⁴⁹ Reed's 'tent incubation' practice followed an elaborate procedure:

- careful selection of the dreamer for incubation
- preparation of the incubant (contemplating the purpose, choosing personal symbols of the sacred place and the revered benefactor)
- incubation ceremony (four to six hours, including guided imagery)
- incubant's testimony

As an alternative to 'idealization of causal research paradigm', Reed recognizes in the practice of symbolic ritual an opportunity of providing and exploring 'an acausal but meaningful paradigm' in order to 'attune ourselves to the self-realization of the realities'.⁵⁰

An interdisciplinary project to re-visit the ancient practice of temple sleep, the Dragon Project, was conducted jointly by Paul Devereux and Stanley Krippner in the UK and other countries over a period of more than ten years. Participants of different ages recorded their dreams outdoors at four ancient holy sites, for instance a holy hill in Wales and a Neolithic dolmen in Cornwall, also their dreams

in familiar home surroundings. The results showed that in contrast to the home dreams, the dreams at the sacred sites were more often 'bizarre', 'magical' and 'paranormal' [51](#) Despite the project's limited resources, the researchers considered that it collected a 'unique and important body of dream data'. [52](#).

Pilgrims in ancient times used dreaming in sacred sites as a way of getting in touch with the divine, an element that is missing from the current revival of interest in pilgrimage. However, opportunities are arising for sacred places suitable for dream incubation to be offered, as for instance in the 2020 launching of the six Northern Saints Trails in the northeast of Britain by the [British Pilgrimage Trust](#).

Success in dream incubation largely depends on the strength of a person's motivation to resolve an issue. One possibility that dream incubation can be combined with 'lucid dreaming' to facilitate communication with one's inner healing power and with the 'archeus' that Paracelsus taught binds us to the spiritual realm. The inner power, recognized in antiquity, is in focus today, while the outer 'divine' power is neglected.

Annekatriin Puhle

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Endnotes

Footnotes

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- [4](#). De divinatione 2, 123.
- [5](#). Csepregi, 2018, 111.
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