Viscera and the Divine: Dreams at the Divinatory Bridge between the Corporeal and the Incorporeal

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Abstract
Dreams are perhaps the ancient world's most-traveled bridge between the heavens and the individual. As a form of divination, dreams play a pivotal role from Homer through the late Neoplatonist Synesius (ca. 370-413 C.E.). The dream serves as a conduit for a message from the world beyond. According to the traditional view, on which there are a hundred variations, the source is an authority figure or a god who either appears in person at the head of the sleeper or generates a phantom drama with a hidden message. In the medical corpus, dreams also produce ties between the individual and the larger cosmos. In incubation rites that were widely practiced in Greek and Roman times, the dream served as a vehicle for the god Asclepius to make his visitation to the patient. In the Hippocratic corpus also, as I discuss shortly, dreams remain a linking agent between the individual and the larger cosmos. When these traditions of divination, incubation, and medicine are placed alongside one another, a somewhat counterintuitive fact emerges. While it is perhaps no surprise that dreams reach outward toward the furthest reaches of the stars and the gods—as is customary with divinatory systems—it is somewhat of a surprise to see that ancient dreams also consistently reach inward, inside the human body, toward the extreme reaches of the internal organs. In fact, many testimonia on dreams from the ancient world display a certain fixation on internal organs. One cannot but recall the sad tales from the Roman period of Aelius Aristides (117-89), who writes page after page on absinthe-induced dreams and diseases, documenting divine intrusions into nearly all his bodily organs. In this movement, dreams do not stand outside the rather common Mediterranean tendency, exhibited in extispicies of all kinds, to see the divine in the viscera. But I will take a closer look at three of our earliest detailed attestations of this double movement from the self, outward toward the gods and inward toward the organs. After a brief look at the famous stela from the Asclepian temple at Epidaurus (second half of the fourth century B.C.E.), I will examine more closely the Hippocratic treatise On Regimen (likely early fourth century B.C.E.) and Plato's Timaeus (first half of the fourth century B.C.E.).

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7. Viscera and the Divine: Dreams as a Divinatory Bridge Between the Corporeal and the Incorporeal. Peter Struck. 8. Stars and the Egyptian Priesthood in the Graeco-Roman Period. Smith points to the expansion and relative prominence of the religions of "anywhere," over against and sometimes at the expense of the persistence of the religions of "here" and "there," as one of the most significant developments of late antiquity. Part II, "Prayer, Magic, and Ritual," contains four essays that reveal the rich diversity of approaches now being applied to the study of ancient magic.