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UDC: 255.2

2-137

TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STATUS OF HYPNOS IN ANCIENT CULTURE

Abstract. – The text analyzes the personification of concepts and abstract ideas in ancient culture; it examines the status of Hypnos and his relation to Asclepius within the framework of incubation practices; it explores the place of sleep as well as the general lack of interest shown toward Hypnos and related personifications in both Presocratic and systematic philosophy; finally, it offers a synthesis of the relationship between Hypnos and Asclepius through an epidemiological approach to cultural transmission.

The liminality and practical dimension of Hypnos – who responds to immediate human needs and is linked to fundamental existential questions of life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, health and illness, protection and danger – should have made him an ideally positioned religious concept, either to be integrated into the more elaborate cults of other divine or sacred entities, or to give rise to the development of a cult of his own, capable of fulfilling important religious and cultural functions, since he stands at the intersection between the intimate domain of individual dream experience and the divine sphere of sacred dreaming. Yet a theoretical analysis of the personification of abstraction, of the cultural conception of sleep, and of the particular nature of Hypnos, as well as of his relation to death and, especially, to healing, fails to explain why he did not develop a firmly established or widely disseminated cult.

Key words. – Hypnos, Sleep, dreams, Asclepius, cult, personification, culture

Personification of the abstract

Sleep and dreams have always been fascinating: they connect us to a reality that seems both within and beyond us; they serve as our mirrors; they unearth what has been buried in silent denial or stubborn fear, unburden us from layered anxieties, or further deepen our worries. Sleep grants us a temporary piece of eternity, a time carved exclusively for the drea-

mer, almost as a personal, fleeting haven for the holy. Hypnos is, therefore, an extraordinary entity: liminal, supernatural, comfortingly familiar and frustratingly elusive, belonging to the realm of home and hearth, yet in truth to the divine, the supraspatial, the timeless. This text offers a superficial glance at some of the theoretical framework around Hypnos as a personified religious abstraction, and around his association with healing through the connection to Asclepius.

From a ritual perspective, it was common for non-central (or marginal) deities and local sacred beings to develop cults through association with major gods – that is, by becoming integrated into the religious practices of a more widespread cult. Local daimones and other beings were linked with, or even identified as, well-known deities, allowing their worship to proliferate among new adherents and ritual settings. Practical and situational needs – such as healing sleep, nocturnal protection, or safety in liminal states and transitions between consciousness and death – led to the sharing of sacred spaces and, consequently, to ritual overlap. Thus, local daimones, spirits, or non-central divine or holy figures (such as Hypnos) could perform roles complementary to the ritual function of a central deity. It may be expected that existentially and practically significant sacred sites – healing sanctuaries, oracles, and the like – would attract worshippers seeking concrete magical and religious rites (healing, divination, incubation). Within such settings, relevant beings associated with healing or with sleep would naturally be integrated. In this kind of syncretism, the therapeutic roles of local sacred (divine or daimonic) entities coincide with certain functions of the “main” deities and emerge as products of local belief.

Yet not every similarity between functionally compatible sacred beings implies the existence of a cult, as in the case of Eros, Hypnos, and Thanatos. At times, one can identify only an apparent overlap of primary attributes and functions, without evidence of a formal, independent, or developed cult. The incorporation of such beings into an already established cult, however, often leads to their diffusion and adaptation, which may result in the loss of certain aspects of their originally local character. In Greek religion, for instance, it was common for multiple deities to be worshipped together at a single cult site – sometimes as equals, sometimes with one deity (or pair of deities) occupying a dominant position. According to Renberg, this phenomenon is clearly observable in the cult of Asclepius. Although Asclepius was primarily associated with Hygieia (his daughter and/or frequent companion), he was also worshipped alongside other deities, most notably the personified gods Hypnos and Oneiros, whose spheres of influence were crucial for incubation – though these fi-

gures may not, in fact, have played an active role in cultic practice within the *Asclepieia*.¹

Personified abstract beings – such as Sleep, Death, Fate, Fear, and Victory – acquire position, meaning, and ritual definition within a cultic framework precisely in those situations where their presumed power addresses emotional, physical, or socio-political needs that cannot be directly met by the major deities. The abstract relates to the concrete as the universal does to the particular or the singular. Hence, the concretization of the abstract through a personalized figure endowed with specific functions is a characteristic feature of the religious phenomenon. It is not that the gods are truly transcendent – but they may be relatively inaccessible or insufficiently involved in human affairs. Therefore, personified entities serve as suitable ritual mediators in circumstances where the gods are too distant or too little invested. The cultic success of such beings or forces illustrates the adaptability of ancient polytheism: religiously significant entities emerge from emotionally or socially significant situations and ideas.

Abstractions become powers within cultic frameworks when a psychological or social function requires ritual mediation, or when a particular function of a major deity is differentiated to meet the specific pragmatic needs of worshippers. Hypnos and Thanatos personify the liminal states between life and death, and thus are integrated into funerary rituals and incubation practices. On the human, personal level, they address existential needs too remote from the sphere of the principal gods. In this sense, personified abstractions enable mediation between the divine and the human, between the sphere of human emotion and ritual activity. Wherever human experience reveals vulnerability, personifications acquire cultic power. It would therefore be expected that the concept of Hypnos would display a more pronounced presence and wider dissemination, as well as further development within the cultic sphere.

The names of the gods denoted their principal spheres of power: whatever possessed power, did so through the gods, so that a powerful thing – whether a phenomenon, sensory reality, or abstraction – was named after the deity. The allegorization of the gods served to explain mythological concepts through a non-religious lens. Over time, an increasingly rational intellectual climate became fertile ground for Euhemeristic interpretations of the gods, according to which former rulers or meritorious heroes were divinized. Some personifications first appeared as divine epithets of major deities before later emerging as independent cultic figures. At times, a specific divine function became separated (though convergence of functions was more common). The linguistic became ritual: a

¹ Renberg 2017, 677.

description of a quality or attribute turned into a name, which was then hypostatized, allowing worshippers to address the (abstract) quality directly – a quality that, in turn, acquired layers of personal characteristics.

The naming of abstraction within ritual confers ontological significance upon it: it becomes inseparable from the religious experience embodied in cult practice. In religious ritual, an emotional or physical state must often be mentioned, named, or invoked – facilitating the appeal to personified abstractions. Religion entails functionality: it accommodates beings that can be appropriately and usefully incorporated into ritual. An abstraction becomes deified when the religious experience requires affirmation and definition through divine authority. It remains effective within the cult alongside the deity, because it satisfies specific existential – both spiritual and bodily – human needs.

In monotheistic culture, personification serves a rhetorical or didactic function. In polytheistic culture, the possibilities for personification are numerous and varied. Concepts that become personified cease to be merely allegorical and acquire agency and intentionality. As Stafford reminds us, the people of ancient Greece worshipped personifications: we know that personifications had altars, temples, and cult statues, that they received sacrifices and dedications, and that they were invoked in hymns and prayers. Such evidence from material and ritual culture demonstrates a genuine belief in the divine power of personified abstractions.²

Burkert traces the antiquity of the worship of deities expressed through abstract concepts to the Indo-Iranian parallel of Mithra (“Contract”). Since divine names themselves bear significance, the boundary between name and concept is fluid, Burkert argues; only the process of Homerization established a clear demarcation.³ The archaic Greek personifications acquired their distinctive character in that they mediated between individual gods and the spheres of reality. They received mythical and personal attributes from the gods and, in return, granted the gods participation in the conceptual order of things. Personification first emerged

² Stafford 2000, 2. Naturally, there exists a spectrum of belief. At one end stands the fully individualized deity; at the other, a rhetorical figure devoid of personality. Between them lie various intermediate stages, representing stronger or weaker forms of personification (*ibid.*). There were also cults devoted to abstract ideas such as ethical qualities, political ideals, social goods, or conditions, which Stafford groups under the broad category of Virtues (hence the title of her work). This, however, is a distinctly modern classification. It remains useful nonetheless, as it illustrates that the personification of abstract concepts requires an additional intellectual leap – the imaginative act of rendering the invisible and intangible in physical form (Shapiro 1993, 27). Stafford notes that her own conception of the abstract is broader. For references concerning the typology of such concepts – Pottier’s ten categories, Papadaki-Angelidou’s twelve, and Gardner’s three – see Stafford 2000, 36, n.6.

³ Burkert 1985, 85.

in poetry, then in the visual arts, and finally within the sphere of cult. Thus, while no proof can establish the existence or actuality of the Homeric gods, no reasonable observer would dispute the importance of the phenomena and conditions denoted by abstract terms.⁴

Humphreys argues that personification within cult represents a broader process of rationalization and secularization beginning around 550 BCE. More abstract conceptions of the gods emerged, reducing the space for religious doubt – if the gods were incorporeal, their existence could no longer be expected to receive empirical confirmation.⁵ At the same time, the more rational aspects of existing deities were emphasized, and personifications of philosophically defensible concepts were introduced. The focus of cult practice thus shifted away from the archaic aspects of the gods that had become obscure, toward the personification of the blessings upon which people placed their hopes.⁶ From Plato to Roman Neoplatonism, the interaction between religious and philosophical thought produced an increasing convergence between the psychological transformations experienced by thinkers, and the promise of revelation of a new meaning of existence offered by the mystery religions.⁷

For instance, the multitude of personifications belonging to the class of daimones occupies a lower position in the hierarchy than the Olympian gods – but the distinction lies less in ontological status than in the relatively narrow scope of their influence. Yet precisely the fact that daimones (or other subordinate divinities) possess limited domains and specific functions makes them significant to the practical life of religious individuals. They are not especially prominent in myth, but this does not reflect their position in cult, where their role in the daily affairs and concerns of human beings is greater than that of the major gods, and thus far more practical in religious life. In this sense, it is striking that Hypnos – a personification so closely connected with one of the most common and intimate aspects of human existence – was not more present or more fully developed in cultic practice.

The status of dreams

The ephemerality and liminality of sleep have always been peculiar. In this sense, it is unsurprising that dreaming plays a major role in animistic theory and in the notion of the doppelgänger (or the duality of the soul) in archaic religions. The dreamer is simultaneously present and absent, existing in two realms of being. Dreams may convey messages from

⁴ Idem, 186.

⁵ Humphreys 1986, 96.

⁶ Humphreys 1986, 102.

⁷ Idem, 98.

the divine sphere or from the domain of the dead – the departed souls. From a strictly medical standpoint, deep sleep can contribute to the healing of certain disorders. From a psychological and religious perspective, the existential messages and influences of dreams continue to play a significant role in spiritual life to this day.

The expressions used to describe dreams reveal a conception in which the dreamer is a passive recipient of an objective vision of something. As Dodds points out, Greek had no equivalent of the English phrase “having a dream”; instead, the formulation refers to seeing a dream.⁸ This applies not only when the dreamer remains passive within the dream, but also when he is its central actor. The dream does not “visit” the dreamer – it “stands over him.” Dodds identifies this usage in Herodotus, who may have been drawing on Homer; yet its occurrence in the Epidaurian and Lindian temple records, as well as in numerous later authors from Isocrates to the Acts of the Apostles, cannot be explained by Homeric influence alone. Hence, Dodds concludes that the notion of the objective, visionary dream had taken deep root not only in literary tradition but, more broadly, in the imagination of humankind.⁹

This conception is not incompatible with ancient Egyptian beliefs, where sleep was regarded as an external phenomenon. It is difficult to reconstruct the ritual practices of private life, owing to the scarcity of evidence and the consequently limited insight into the specifics of private religiosity across particular places and periods. Sleep is a profoundly personal experience, communicated through descriptions and analogies, and therefore difficult to document. Moreover, the narration or depiction of dreams occurs only rarely in the sources from Pharaonic Egypt. Nevertheless, from what is available, it may be inferred that sleep – whether good or bad – was considered external, a phenomenon coming from outside, a liminal realm connecting the earthly and the underworldly, the human and the divine. In texts such as „The Teachings of Ptahhotep“, the metaphor of dreams is employed to emphasize what is ephemeral, unreliable, and potentially dangerous – consistent with the conception of sleep as external (for the external is approached with cautious distrust) and as liminal (for the blending of ontological spheres may be dangerous).

In the ancient Egyptian context, dreaming was not understood as an active process, but rather as seeing a dream – that is, seeing something within the dream.¹⁰ This passivity implies that the dream lay beyond the

⁸ Dodds 1951, 105. Without entering into Frommian distinction between having and being, the emphasis here falls on the passivity of the dreamer. The liminality of Hypnos corresponds to this notion: the dreamer is passive within the dream but, beforehand, actively seeks the aid of Sleep – expressing a need or desire and hoping it will be fulfilled.

⁹ Dodds, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Szpakowska 2011, 64.

dreamer's control. Sleep and dreams were regarded as intermediaries between the inhabitants of this world and those of the other world – the Duat, the realm of gods and the dead. The dream belonged to the liminal domain, where boundaries were softened, allowing communication between the two worlds. In this sense, the dead were believed capable of moving freely between them, while the living, given the external nature of the dream and their lack of control over it, remained passive observers – recipients of the dream and of what it conveyed, whether as message, warning, or omen. The Letters to the Dead provide the earliest preserved examples of attempts to communicate with the inhabitants of the beyond.¹¹ A few centuries later, such petitions and prayers came to be directed not to deceased relatives, but to the gods of the Duat. In the early third millennium, direct access to the gods was reserved to the pharaoh alone, which is why the writers of these letters addressed them to the dead instead.¹²

If the dream is a liminal phenomenon, while the dreamer is not a liminal being (at least not at that moment), then the dreamer cannot be expected to enter the Duat – nor should it be assumed that dreamers believed they truly entered it – but rather remains outside, a passive observer of the events unfolding within the dream. Yet the liminality of dreaming allows the dreamer, without entering the Duat, to approach and linger at its periphery, in a state from which one may awaken having seen the inhabitants of that other world. Dreams could also be unpleasant – both because of the disturbing images that might appear and because of the dangers they could entail (if the dreamer fell victim to the evil eye or was attacked by malevolent dead within a nightmare). This is attested in the Letter to the Dead,¹³ as well as by the inclusion of bad dreams in a Middle Kingdom list¹⁴ of hostile individuals, groups, and untouchable harm-

¹¹ This type of significant dream is not included in the classification transmitted by Artemidorus, Macrobius, and other later authors. Macrobius identifies three types of dreams: the symbolic dream, which conveys a meaning that cannot be understood without proper interpretation; the vision, or the foretelling of a future event; and the prophetic dream, in which the dreamer's parent or another revered or impressive figure – a priest, or even a god – appears to reveal, without symbolism, what will or will not happen, or what ought or ought not to be done (*Somn. Scip.*, 1.3.1; for further references, see Dodds 1951, 124).

¹² See Gardiner and Sethe (1928). Dreams functioned as a means of communication with the world beyond – for example, when a man implores his deceased wife to assist him and to fight on his behalf within the dream (Guilmot 1973, 94–103), or when a scribe appeals to his dead father to prevent unwanted nocturnal visits from a deceased acquaintance (*Naga-ed-Deir* 3737, Simpson 1966, 39–50). See also Gardiner 1930, 19–24; for a more extensive discussion, Szpakowska 2003, 111–124.

¹³ *Naga ed-Deir* 3737, Simpson 1966, 39–52.

¹⁴ Szpakowska 2011, 67.

ful forces. These examples vividly illustrate both the liminality of dreaming and the distinctive nature of death.

A dream experienced in a temple dedicated to Asclepius was regarded as sent by the deity himself. The methods for attaining a divinely sent dream involved prayer, fasting, isolation, and – most importantly – physical contact with a sacred object or place, most clearly exemplified in the practice of incubation.¹⁵ Incubation had been known and practiced for centuries earlier in ancient Egypt. When Asclepius attained religious and medical prominence, his cult spread widely, and healing incubation became firmly established, enduring for centuries – while certain ancient techniques continue to be employed even today.

One of the six personifications examined by Stafford in *Worshipping Virtues* is Hygieia. The most problematic aspect, she notes, is the absence of early mythological references that might have provided a foundation for the development of her cult. Stafford emphasizes Hygieia's consistent association with, and dependence upon, Asclepius, suggesting that she may in some way have originated from him.¹⁶ Given the lack of evidence, it is difficult to imagine Hygieia as part of a divine family, and matters are further complicated by the uncertain status of Asclepius himself. Nonetheless, Hygieia's principal connection can clearly be situated with Asclepius and his household.¹⁷ In any case, she appears on nearly half of the surviving reliefs depicting Asclepius and seems to share in the sacrificial offerings made to him – indicating that her role in the cult of Asclepius was considerable.¹⁸ For a non-mythological figure, Hygieia achieved remarkable success, Stafford observes, which can only be attributed to the significance of the concept she embodies. The importance of maintaining good health is further underscored by the fact that, while Asclepius was invoked by the sick when needed, he was also regularly worshipped by the healthy.¹⁹

¹⁵ Deubner 1900, 27 *sqq.* More radical methods included acts of self-defilement, such as bloodletting or the cutting off of a finger. Fasting was required for entry into certain oracular sites, such as the cave of Charon; in addition, there were incantations intended to summon dreams and similar practices. Deubner emphasizes the significance of dreams for foretelling the future, particularly within the Christian worldview. Thanks to Deubner – who introduced the idea that incubation was a common pagan method employed in sanctuaries dedicated to chthonic deities or heroes/beings associated with the underworld (with Asclepius as the most characteristic example) – later scholars came to regard incubation as the principal method of healing in the sanctuaries of Asclepius (see the extensive documentation in Edelstein & Edelstein 1945).

¹⁶ Stafford 2000, 156.

¹⁷ Eadem, 157. For the familial relations – whether she was his daughter, and regarding her possible sisters – see pp. 157–159.

¹⁸ Eadem, 166.

¹⁹ Eadem, 167.

It has been noted that, according to Renberg, there is no basis for claiming that Hypnos played any practical role in the sanctuaries of Asclepius. Renberg acknowledges that much of the evidence thought to suggest a connection between incubation and Hypnos or Oneiros (or both) comes from sites dedicated to Asclepius.²⁰ However, while any source indicating that Hypnos and/or Oneiros were represented in a given sanctuary might at first glance seem to point to the importance of sleep and dreaming there, most of this evidence is, at best, ambiguous. Pausanias mentions a broken statue of Hypnos in a room near the entrance to the sanctuary, as well as another statue showing Hypnos putting a lion to sleep. This has led some scholars to conclude that the presence of Hypnos implies that incubation took place,²¹ though Pausanias himself does not make such observations even in sanctuaries where incubation is otherwise confirmed. Moreover, Pausanias also mentions the presence of statues of other deities alongside those of Hypnos (and Oneiros), which suggests that they might have been venerated beside Asclepius without being involved in incubation, or that their inclusion may have been purely aesthetic. In Renberg's view, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that Hypnos and Oneiros were honored with statues because incubation occurred – in other words, the presence of a statue does not necessarily indicate the participation of the deity in the process.²²

It would therefore be mistaken to assume that merely because sleep was essential to incubation, any votive offering in the form of a statue of Hypnos dedicated to Asclepius implicitly indicates that the donor had successfully slept and dreamed in the sanctuary. Nor can it be claimed that incubation was necessarily practiced there at all. After all, Hypnos is a mythological figure, and representations of mythological figures were acceptable offerings to the gods even when unconnected to healing functions.²³ Renberg's point is that conclusions must be drawn with caution: no source directly associated with incubation ever mentions Hypnos.²⁴ Overall, while it is entirely plausible that individuals who experienced successful incubation might occasionally have chosen a relatively unusual

²⁰ Renberg 2017, 679.

²¹ *Idem*, 686.

²² *Idem*, 687.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ In the *lex sacra* from Pergamon, for instance, Renberg notes that certain deities are identified as recipients of preliminary offerings. Mnemosyne is among them, and she was associated with Asclepius elsewhere as well. Thus, invoking the aid of Sleep before incubation appears to have been an equally significant act – particularly given that the dreamer would require the assistance of the goddess of memory to recall the dream. Quite simply, if Hypnos had played an important role in incubation, there would be evidence of his worship in sanctuaries associated with the practice (*op. cit.*, p. 688).

gift – a statue of Hypnos (or Oneiros) – the connection between incubation and these divine figures remains speculative and indirect.²⁵

The non-divinity of dreams

Interest in sleep within pre-Socratic and systematic philosophy is limited and concerns primarily physiological conditions or the conceptual relation between sleep and death. The discourse on the status of Hypnos is not directly relevant in this period, yet it remains worth addressing, as it reveals much about the ancient understanding of sleep and dreaming. The philosophers were fully aware of the connection between sleep and death, as well as between sleep and health, but there are no significant references to the cultic or mythological association of Hypnos with healing, for instance, nor anything beyond the already established literary motifs of Hypnos, Thanatos, or Asclepius as mythological constructs.

Beginning with Anaxagoras, for example, sleep occurs as a result of bodily fatigue;²⁶ it is experienced by the body, not by the soul. Anaxagoras' general physiological orientation consistently situates sleep as a physical, corporeal process. Moreover, sleep is conceived as an experience akin to death – sleep and the time before birth²⁷ serve as a kind of rehearsal for death.

Heraclitus states that in sleep each of us withdraws into a private world.²⁸ Dodds suggests that, for this reason, Heraclitus may be regarded as the first to have explicitly assigned sleep its proper place. With this view of withdrawal into one's own world, not only is the objectivity of the dream rejected, but – by implication – the validity of dream experience in general appears to be denied, since one of Heraclitus' central principles is that one must follow what is common to all.²⁹

Heraclitus contrasts the state of sleeping with that of wakefulness in order to underscore the constant condition of human ignorance.³⁰ The failure to understand one's actions while awake is analogous to the failure to remember what happens in dreams. Though these states are opposed, the cognitive position of the human being remains the same in both³¹ – a

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *DK 59 A103* – and death is the separation of the body from the soul.

²⁷ The underlying idea is that in both states consciousness of one's experience is not the same as when one is fully aware. It is noteworthy that Anaxagoras introduces the period before birth – if he is referring to the phase of incubation, the notion remains consistent: not yet having been born is not the same as being dead, yet in both conditions a person is absent from the world – either *not yet* or *no longer* present.

²⁸ *DK B89*.

²⁹ Dodds 1951, 117–118.

³⁰ *DK B1* and the dialectical transformation of the swift and the dead, the waking and the sleeping, the young and the old within us, *DK B88*.

³¹ Taran 1986, 10.

position of cognitive alienation. The underlying idea is that one cannot remember what one has never known. By using dreams as an image of forgetfulness, Heraclitus refers to the unique epistemic situation in which one recalls having dreamed but cannot recall the content of the dream.³² The association between dreaming and forgetfulness is part of his discussion of the *logos*. The *logos* is omnipresent but requires an interactive engagement: people can receive it only in wakefulness, since in sleep they forget, and forgetting leads away from understanding. Sleep thus becomes an obstacle to contact with the *logos*, affecting both human memory and intellectual capacity.³³ Because dreaming entails the loss of memory, it is unsurprising that Heraclitus gives no descriptions of dreams themselves, even though some form of action still occurs within them.

It was noted above that, according to Heraclitus, the waking share a common world, while the sleeper withdraws into his own. When awake, human beings inhabit the same objective cosmos as everyone else – a world experienced collectively, which allows contact with the *logos*. In sleep, a person is separated from this shared world, and all experience becomes confined to the self; in this sense, the dreamer is cut off both from sensory perception and from the *logos*. Holton summarizes that the two states – sleeping and wakefulness – stand in opposition within the framework of human experience and participation.³⁴

Heraclitus links sleep and death in DK B26: “The man in the night touches a light, being dead to himself yet alive. Asleep, he touches what is dead, having extinguished his sight. Awake, he touches what is asleep.” [Proportion.] Clement of Alexandria, in turn, connects this with the departure of the soul at death, drawing a parallel between sleep and death.³⁵ During life, a person can touch the dead – but only through sleep. This reflects the broader cultural association of the twin figures Hypnos and Thanatos, who are similar, yet not identical. The state of sleep, as an intermediary condition, allows the living to come into direct contact with the dead. These opposing states thus interact, though for Heraclitus – unlike in literary and cultural tradition – the agency lies with the dreamer, while the dead are not an active force. In this way, Holton argues, Heraclitus reshapes the traditional cultural schema of the dream as a meeting with the dead to express his own view of the human experience of sleep.³⁶

A common type of dream sent by the gods in ancient culture is one in which some form of dedication or analogous religious act is commanded. There is concrete evidence for this in numerous inscriptions stating

³² Holton 2022, 60.

³³ Idem, 62.

³⁴ Idem, 65.

³⁵ *Strom.*, IV, 141, 2.

³⁶ Holton 2022, 68.

that their authors made a dedication “in accordance with a dream” or “having seen a dream.” Dodds notes that details are seldom provided – one inscription records Serapis appearing in a priest’s dream to tell him to build a house for him alone, as he was weary of living in other places; another inscription gives rules for conduct within a sacred space for prayer, revealed by Zeus in a dream.³⁷ The evidence is largely Hellenistic–Roman, but it is worth noting that in the *Laws* Plato refers to dedications made on the basis of dreams or visions, particularly by women of all kinds, as well as by men who were ill, in difficulty, or who had experienced exceptionally good fortune.³⁸ Moreover, in the *Laws* it is stated that numerous cults of the gods were founded – and would continue to be founded – because of encounters with supernatural beings in dreams, including omens, prophecies, and deathbed visions.³⁹

Most of these dedications were made to healing deities such as Asclepius, Hygieia, and Sarapis. Plato himself did not believe either in the supernatural character of dreams or in their prophetic power, which lends even greater weight to his references. On this basis, Dodds argues that the divine dream (*chrematismos*) cannot be regarded merely as a literary form, but must be understood as what he calls a “culture-pattern dream” – that is, a dream belonging to the lived religious experience of individuals, transmitted and adapted within folklore and literature as a recurring motif.⁴⁰ Dodds devotes an entire chapter⁴¹ to situating the experience of dreams received during incubation in the temple of Asclepius within the broader framework of cultural norms, including conceptions of the sacred and of sacred healing. Dreams involving seemingly realistic events – such as medical procedures – he interprets as highly improbable products of imagination, which is entirely reasonable.⁴²

In the *Timaeus*, Plato explains that prophetic dreams originate in the insight of the rational soul but are perceived by the irrational soul as images reflected on the smooth surface of the liver – an image that accounts for their cryptic nature and thus for the need for interpretation.⁴³ Sleep and the experience of dreaming bear only an indirect relation to what is real, and Plato does not consider them to be of particular importance.

³⁷ Dodds 1951, 108.

³⁸ *Epin.*, 909E–910A.

³⁹ 985C.

⁴⁰ Dodds 1951, 108.

⁴¹ *Dream-Pattern and Culture-Pattern*, 104–134.

⁴² Liwerska-Garstecka rightly observes that Dodds engages in excessive simplifications, juxtaposing sources of differing specificity and, in particular, from distinct historical periods (2024, 3).

⁴³ *Tim.*, 71A–E.

For Aristotle, dreams are not sent by the gods. Dreams, hallucinations occurring in fever as a symptom of illness, and illusions experienced by people (such as mistaking a stranger for someone they wish to see) all share the same origin.⁴⁴ From the standpoint of natural philosophy, sleep is a fundamental function in the life of animals and even serves to preserve life. This is not medically inaccurate: the idea is that sensory perception cannot operate continuously, so the power of perception must necessarily be suspended during sleep. Dreams and dream-based divination have no such power; they are merely incidental phenomena accompanying sleep.⁴⁵ Dreaming is a manifestation of perception – a phantasm arising from the residual motion of sensory impressions – of which we become aware when, and precisely because, we sleep (dreaming thus differs from the instances of awareness of the external world that sometimes occur during sleep, for example in light sleep just before awakening).⁴⁶ We are not aware of dreams through the faculties of sense perception; nor, however, are we aware of them through opinion.⁴⁷

Because the dreamer believes that some form of sensory perception occurs within the dream, dreaming is not the absence of sensory experience or sensory power. Yet during sleep the senses are inactive, which creates difficulties in explaining how this perception functions. Imagination is the faculty of the sensory capacity to operate on the basis of prior sensory impressions.⁴⁸ These remnants persist for a time and are reactivated during sleep – either in a form closely resembling their original state, or blended and distorted in various ways – thus producing dreams.⁴⁹ Since in dreams we believe we perceive things that are not actually present, this is a kind of illusory awareness. Aristotle holds that dreams are not sent by the gods, for if the gods wished to communicate with human beings, they would do so by day and would choose their recipients with (more) care.⁵⁰ Dreams are not divine, but they may be regarded as daemonic, for nature itself possesses such a character.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *Insomn.*, 458b 25 ff., 460b 3 ff.

⁴⁵ Aristotle's approach is, as expected, non-religious. He holds that some dreams possess a kind of predictive power: those that communicate knowledge of the dreamer's bodily condition (when symptoms unnoticed in wakefulness reach consciousness), and those that fulfill themselves by informing the dreamer of what course of action to take, *Div. Somn.*, 463a 4 ff. In healing there is no role for Hypnos or Asclepius, but rather for the rational process of identifying symptoms – the first step toward the improvement of health.

⁴⁶ *Insomn.*, c. 3, 462a27–31.

⁴⁷ 458b10.

⁴⁸ c. 1, 459a14–22.

⁴⁹ c. 2, 459a24–b23, 460a32–b3; c. 3, 460b28–461b1.

⁵⁰ *Div. Somn.*, 463b 15 ff., 464a20.

⁵¹ 463b 14.

Aristotle's non-religious, natural-scientific approach was far from universal. A religious interpretation of dreams within a philosophical framework emerges among the Stoics and the Peripatetics.⁵² Cicero, by contrast, recognizes and criticizes the harmful influence of dreams on human existence, arguing that they merely intensify the burden of fear and anxiety. He blames the philosophers for upholding the supposed significance of dreams, accusing them of perpetuating superstition – and, in this sense, of aggravating rather than alleviating existential distress.⁵³

The cultural transmission of the concepts

Hypnos and Asclepius are compatible when viewed through the epidemiological approach to cultural transmission. The central question in this framework concerns the success of certain concepts or representations – why some manage to persist within culture more effectively than others. The idea is that they endure because they remain active in practical life and in collective memory. One of the principal features of the sacred is its contagiousness: the sacred proliferates by being easily transferable (its very transmissibility also entails vulnerability, though that issue lies beyond the scope of this text). The concept of cultural transmission follows the same logic: just as organisms are susceptible to infectious diseases, the human mind is susceptible to cultural representations.⁵⁴ Within this epidemiological perspective, supernatural concepts are particularly attractive and highly contagious. Such models focus on oral transmission, memory, and the effectiveness of intergenerational communication. Representations that have successfully spread throughout a community, Maiden concludes, result in the formation of culture.⁵⁵ If we add the material modes of representation – such as iconography and literature – which function as forms of external memory or symbolic storage, the situation becomes more complex. Religious thought abounds in concepts that are easily remembered and transmitted, sustaining themselves within a conceptual zone of moderation. In this way, what is known as cognitive optimum is achieved. A supernatural concept that minimally violates our (ontological) expectations about objects in the world is thus minimally counterintuitive (or counterontological).

Concepts belonging to the sphere of religious thought are easily formed, readily remembered, and effectively transmitted – thereby achie-

⁵² For example, although the philosophical views of Cratippus are largely unknown, it appears that he wrote a work on divination in which, according to Cicero, he expressed belief in dreams and in supernatural inspiration, but not in other forms of prophetic foreknowledge (Cicero, *De div.*, i. 3, 32, 50, 70, 71; ii. 48, 52).

⁵³ *De div.*, ii. 150.

⁵⁴ Sperber 1996, 57.

⁵⁵ Maiden 2018, 92.

ving what is termed the “cognitive optimum,” a conceptual zone free from excess. Optimal supernatural concepts are “minimally counterintuitive,” in the sense that they violate our ontological expectations about objects in the world only to a limited degree, as Boyer explains.⁵⁶ Exaggerated, complex, and chaotic liminal beings cannot be easily transmitted; they represent not a cognitive optimum, but cognitive and conceptual overload.

For a religious concept to be successful, it must strike a balance between how it captures attention and how it is remembered. If it attracts attention easily but is too complex to be retained or transmitted – for instance, an excessively hybrid creature with numerous contradictory features – it will not persist within a culture nor hold practical value for the religious individual. Conversely, if it captures attention because it is rooted in direct experience of everyday life, and its characteristics remain moderate, it will persist culturally. Such concepts are open to association with other concepts or representations that display a clearer supernatural quality or greater counterintuitiveness. The connection between Hypnos and Asclepius belongs to this type.

As a liminal being endowed with a supernatural yet easily conceivable power, the concept of Hypnos is sufficiently stable to be transmitted across time. Chaotic or excessively complex liminal beings are not easily transmitted within culture, for even if they appear in folkloric or literary descriptions, the multitude of their attributes cannot be retained in memory or effectively conveyed. The personified figure of Sleep is something familiar and intimate to all human beings. As noted earlier, concepts from religious thought are easily formed, remembered, and transmitted, provided they are not excessive – that is, so long as they do not contain a surplus of elements that cannot be clearly communicated or mentally retained – and thus readily maintain what may be called a cognitive optimum.⁵⁷ Hypnos clearly belongs to this group. As an abstract concept of practical significance and as a liminal being of metaphysical importance, Hypnos is nevertheless not counterintuitive – that is, he does not violate ontological expectations regarding the nature of beings in the world. On the contrary, he is neither aggressively nor terrifyingly hybrid; he is associated with healing, and thus with comfort, and he embodies mediation between ontological realms – life and death, the world beyond and the underworld – subjects inseparable from the experience of every individual and from the community’s desire for security.

⁵⁶ The term “counterintuitive” is used in a technical sense to describe information that contradicts the information derived from ontological categories (Boyer 2001, 65).

⁵⁷ See the explanation of the optimum offered in Boyer 2001, 65 ff.

It may be argued that the intuitive aspect of religious representations allows them to be easily learned and transmitted, while it is precisely their element of the supernatural – their counterintuitive character – that makes them religious.⁵⁸ From this perspective, Hypnos would not constitute a perfect religious concept – necessary, practical, and useful, yet not one around which a complex cult could develop. On the other hand, what is fundamentally important in ancient culture – health, safety, and the questions of life and death – originates from and belongs to the sphere of the sacred, which means it cannot be separated from the religious. This explains why Hypnos so readily associates with other personifications of religious significance, such as Thanatos and, above all, Asclepius. The question, therefore, should not be why the concept and its associated belief emerged, but rather why they did not develop further – especially given the significance of Hypnos' connection with healing through Asclepius (the triumph over suffering and death) and with death itself through Thanatos.

The transformation of Asclepius from a mortal physician to a divine healer can be traced through ancient narratives. If Boyer's theory of counterintuitive concepts in religious ideas is applied to the myths about Asclepius, it becomes evident that what violated intuitive expectations about the world was not the representation of Asclepius himself, but his actions. If one assumes that the violation of cultural expectations produces effects on attention and memory similar to those produced by counterintuitive concepts,⁵⁹ it may be argued that Asclepius attracted attention and could be retained in collective memory.⁶⁰ By bringing the dead back to life, Asclepius transgressed cultural expectations regarding the limits of medical power. This, in turn, disrupted intuitive expectations concerning the human capacity to overcome the inevitability of death. According to Panagiotidou, the deification of Asclepius in mythic accounts is not, following Boyer, the decisive counterintuitive element that made him particularly interesting or memorable. Rather, Asclepius' deification appears more closely aligned with cultural expectations according to which agents possessing supernatural powers were elevated to divine status.⁶¹

According to the stories in which Asclepius creates eyes out of nothing – thus enabling the blind to see – the petitioner's expectations of healing are entirely counterintuitive from the standpoint of the (then) contemporary understanding of ancient medicine, as well as physically inconceivable.⁶² On the one hand, the divine yet anthropomorphized cha-

⁵⁸ Paraphrased after Pyysiäinen 2001, 21.

⁵⁹ See the concepts concerning the (un)memorability of counterintuitive concepts in Porubanova-Norquist et al., 2013; 2014.

⁶⁰ Panagiotidou 2016, 21.

⁶¹ Eadem, 15.

⁶² Eadem, 18–19.

racteristics of Asclepius fit within people's intuitive ontological expectations. On the other hand, he possesses attributes that violate either intuitive or cultural expectations, and it is precisely this that makes him sufficiently interesting to be remembered. Yet he is not too interesting – that is, not so complex as to be difficult to remember – for he only minimally disrupts the cognitive perceptions and cultural conceptions of the familiar world. Finally, the stories and experiences associated with Asclepius belong to an intensely personal and emotionally charged sphere, which facilitates both the remembrance and the lasting significance of his figure.

In their pairing, Asclepius imparts to Hypnos a measure of counter-intuitiveness and supernatural quality – yet not so chaotic as to render it untransmittable. The liminality of Hypnos allows Asclepius to seamlessly connect divine superiority with human vulnerability. Both possess practical and existential relevance to the profoundly human concerns of life's quality and the maintenance of health. Their association achieves a balance: sufficient supernaturalness to qualify as religious concepts, yet sufficient memorability to be successfully retained as representations within religious culture. Hence, it remains striking that Hypnos, as a religious concept or representation, was not more widely developed and integrated into diverse aspects of cultic practice.

The (deliberately) superficial approach of this text to the status of Hypnos, his incorporation within the cult of Asclepius, and the broader practical interest in dreams within ancient culture cannot do full justice to the complexity of sleep and dreaming, nor can it fully illuminate why, despite his many cult-forming features, Hypnos did not develop a more sustained, pervasive, and enduring cult. Much remains to be investigated, and a multidisciplinary approach might yield a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics and the archaeological-anthropological factors underlying the (under)development of the cult of Sleep in its various manifestations across ancient culture.

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