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The role of dreams in ancient medicine

Abstract: The history of medicine provides us with a great variety of topics which give an opportunity to recognize this history in terms of both rational and irrational categories. Rational medicine is based on everything that is logical and scientific. Irrational medicine is in turn focused on beliefs and magical theories. Some researchers assume that the medical empiricism is not a disordered way of inquiring into human nature¹. It is thought to play the preeminent role, because making observation is *sine qua non* in a medical setup². Dreams, regarded as a messages from gods and signs for the future, were also considered harbingers of coming health problems. The aim of this article is to elaborate chosen passages of ancient authors' works, which show the important role of dreams in ancient medicine. Furthermore, the great emphasis is put on the interpretation and analyze on account of ancient tradition and culture.

Key words: dreams, Hippocrates, Galen, Artemidorus, ancient medicine

The significance of dreams has drawn researchers' attention for centuries. Today this issue is still of great importance among scientists interested in different fields, such as medicine, psychology, philosophy and literature. Investigations were also carried out in the area of psychopathology and psychoanalysis, in which Sigmund Freud stands out as a major modern pioneer³.

¹ *Medical Empiricism and Philosophy of Human Nature in the 17th and 18th century*. Ed. C. Crig-non, C. Zelle, N. Alloca. Boston 2014, p. 351.

² A. Indrayan: *Medical Biostatistics*. Boca Raton 2008, p. 159. More about medical empiricism in: R.J. Hankinson: *The growth of medical empiricism*. In: *Knowledge and scholarly medical traditions*. Ed. D. Bates, Cambridge 1995, pp. 60–83.

³ F.B. Krauss: *An interpretation of the omens, portents, and prodigies recorded by Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius*. Philadelphia 1930, p. 139.

Thanks to the classical texts that have survived it is possible to reveal the secrets of the ancient world and also the crucial role of dreams for the people at that time. They were indispensable factors in every aspect of the society. It should be stressed that dream visions and symbols were primarily regarded as messages from gods, which were a sign for the future⁴. Such dreams – apart from omens, meteorological and behavioral anomalies – were signs of the gods' favour or disapproval of particular actions undertaken by people. In modern times such a conviction has been presented e.g. by Isador Corriat. In the *Meaning of dreams*, published in 1915, he wrote:

A dream may often solve situations, important crises, and mental conflicts which may baffle one in the waking life. The situation and the conflict are cleared up in a dream by a kind of unconscious incubation of wishes, and only in this sense a dream may be said to be prophetic⁵.

Aristotle in his *On dreams* describes dreams as movements within the body (presumably the bloodstream), created during sensory stimulation in wakefulness. The residual movements act on human soul/ heart and simultaneously activate perception in its imagining capacity (*phantastikon*). The residual perceptions in turn create appearances in the form of dreams⁶. Reading the corpus of Aristotle we can find references to three functions of dreams, which can tell others about our moral condition, foretell events and indicate our bodily health. He claims that sometimes the state of one's body manifests itself in dreams. In *On dreams*, he says that dreams make small movements appear large. Thus from a tiny drop of phlegm one might dream of honey and sweet juices; from a slight sound it is possible that one dreams of thunder⁷.

There is rich evidence that demonstrates the important role of dreams in ancient medicine. For the study of health in the ancient world it is crucial to rethink the topic in terms of Greek and Roman thought and mentality as well as moral values, social rules and cultural history. Among the mandatory elements that should be taken into consideration in such a discussion are e.g. physical and mental health, lifestyle, quality of life, well-being and flourishing. The surviving texts show that health was a key preoccupation for Greek medical writers and philosophers⁸. Medicine itself provides numerous topics, that give us an opportunity to recognize it in terms of both rational and irrational categories. Rational medicine is based on

⁴ Ch.A. Sarnoff: *Symbols in structure and function*. T. 3: *Symbols in culture, art, and myth*. Bloomington 2003, p. 173.

⁵ I.H. Corriat: *Meaning of dreams*. Boston 1915, p. 147.

⁶ *Sleep medicine: A comprehensive guide to its development, clinical milestones, and advances in treatment*. Ed. S. Chokroverty, M. Billiard. New York 2015, p. 51.

⁷ M.A. Holowchak: *Ancient science and dreams. Oneirology in Greco-Roman antiquity*. Oxford 2002, p. 49.

⁸ *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*. Ed. M. Jackson. Oxford 2011, pp. 25–26.

everything that was logical and scientific, while the irrational one was focused on beliefs, non-medical practices or magical theories. There are two key factors that need to be remarked in the definition of ancient medicine: science (*techne*) and the figure of the doctor. The latter was manifested as empirical observations of patients that led to the cure of diseases and met the patients' needs in that way⁹. The religious approach to healing was directly connected with the practice of incubation – the cult of Asclepius¹⁰ that was the most famous in ancient times¹¹. It became wide-spread in the fifth century when medical knowledge was becoming more systematic. Apart from the old shrines in Trikka and Epidauros, new centres were established in Athens and Cos¹². The shrines served as sorts of hospitals, where the sick came, prayed, consulted priests, and spent the night performing the rite of incubation. Often they saw the god in a dream and received advice or were cured so they went away in the morning¹³. Statues of Asclepius show the god holding a staff with a snake wrapped around it. This snake – the 'asclepian' serpent – symbolized regeneration and the hope of Asclepius' worshippers. The cult at Cos featured priests and physicians known as the Asclepiads (they considered themselves descendants of Asclepius). The most famous Asclepiad of Cos was Hippocrates, the renowned fifth century physician and writer¹⁴.

Dreams were believed to provide information about bodily condition and all processes hidden from direct observation. The Hippocraticus variously regarded dreams as negative events in themselves or as symptoms of illnesses to come. Every dream could have a physical background. In the 14th chapter of Hippocrates' *On the sacred disease* the author clearly outlined that the brain is the origin of human joys and pains. It is also responsible for perception and making an opinion¹⁵. If it

⁹ *Popular Medicine in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Explorations*. Ed. W.V. Harris. New York 2016, p. 199.

¹⁰ He was mentioned for the first time by Homer. In the *Iliad* Asclepius is portrayed as a mortal physician whose sons Podaleirios and Macaon practiced the healing arts. Early literary evidence suggests that originally Asclepius was regarded as a mortal hero. When the Homeric era came to an end a cult developed for celebrating Asclepius' divinity and miraculous curative power. J. Stephens: *Ancient Mediterranean Religions: Myth, Ritual and Religious Experience*. Cambridge 2016, p. 119.

¹¹ The cult of Asclepius grew during the Hellenistic age and later was adopted by the Romans, who built temples of Aesculapius in the Tiber River. The sick people went there for both medical and spiritual aid. The cult of Asclepius thrived during the Principate into the Later Roman Empire. R.M. Lawson: *Science in the Ancient World: An Encyclopedia*. Oxford 2004, p. 28.

¹² By the middle of the fourth century B.C. the cult of the god and his family members (Hygieia, Panacea and Epione) had spread all over the Greek-speaking world and was practiced from Cyrene to the island of Thasos in the northern Aegean and from Asia Minor to Sicily. I. Israelowich: *Society, medicine and religion in the sacred tales of Aelius Aristides*. Boston 2012, p. 54.

¹³ D.G. Rice, J.E. Stambaugh: *Sources for the study of Greek Religion: Corrected Edition*. Missoula 1979, p. 52.

¹⁴ R.M. Lawson: *Science in the Ancient World: An Encyclopedia*. Oxford 2004, p. 28.

¹⁵ M.A.A. Hulskamp: *Sleep and dreams in ancient medical diagnosis and prognosis*. Newcastle 2008, pp. 181–182.

becomes unwell and sick e.g. it is too hot, cold, moist or dry, this could result in madness, delirium, disorientation and other unusual conditions, which could manifest themselves during both the day and night:

And men ought to know that from nothing else but (*from the brain*) come joys, delights, laughter and sports, and sorrows, griefs, despondency, and lamentations. And by this, in an especial manner, we acquire wisdom and knowledge, and see and hear, and know what are foul and what are fair, what are bad and what are good, what are sweet, and what unsavory; some we discriminate by habit, and some we perceive by their utility. By this we distinguish objects of relish and disrelish, according to the seasons; and the same things do not always please us. And by the same organ we become mad and delirious, and fears and terrors assail us, some by night, and some by day, and dreams and untimely wanderings, and cares that are not suitable, and ignorance of present circumstances, desuetude, and unskilfulness. All these things we endure from the brain, when it is not healthy, but is more hot, more cold, more moist, or more dry than natural, or when it suffers any other preternatural and unusual affection. And we become mad from humidity (*of the brain*). For when it is more moist than natural, it is necessarily put into motion, and the affection being moved, neither the sight nor hearing can be at rest, and the tongue speaks in accordance with the sight and hearing¹⁶ [transl. F. Adams].

Hippocrates assumed that the dreams of physiological origin indicated the health condition of the sleeping person and thanks to that they could be used in diagnosis and therapy. He claimed that man, like nature (created from four elements: earth, water, fire and air), consisted of four contradictory factors: heat and cold, dryness and moisture¹⁷. They create four fluids in a human body, which are

¹⁶ Hipp. *Morb. Sac.* 14: εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ὅτι ἐξ οὐδενὸς ἡμῖν αἰ ἡδοναὶ γίνονται καὶ αἰ εὐφροσύνη καὶ γέλωτες καὶ παιδιὰ ἢ ἐντεῦθεν, καὶ λύπαι καὶ ἀνία καὶ δυσφροσύνη καὶ κλαυθμοί. καὶ τούτῳ φρονεῦμεν μάλιστα καὶ νοεῦμεν καὶ βλέπομεν καὶ ἀκούομεν καὶ γινώσκομεν τὰ τε αἰσχρὰ καὶ τὰ καλὰ καὶ τὰ κακὰ καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ ἡδέα καὶ ἀηδέα, τὰ μὲν νόμῳ διακρίνοντες, τὰ δὲ τῷ ξυμφέροντι αἰσθανόμενοι, τῷ δὲ καὶ τὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἀηδίας τοῖσι καιροῖσι διαγινώσκοντες, καὶ οὐ ταῦτ' ἀρέσκει ἡμῖν. τῷ δὲ αὐτῷ τούτῳ καὶ μαινόμεθα καὶ παραφρονέομεν, καὶ δείματα καὶ φόβοι παρίστανται ἡμῖν τὰ μὲν νύκτωρ, τὰ δὲ μεθ' ἡμέρη, καὶ ἐνύπνια καὶ πλάνοι ἄκαιροι, καὶ φροντίδες οὐχ ἰκνεύμεναι, καὶ ἀγνωσίη τῶν καθεστewότων καὶ ἀηθία καὶ ἀπειρίη. καὶ ταῦτα πάσχομεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐγκεφάλου πάντα, ὅταν οὗτος μὴ ὑγιαίνει, ἀλλ' ἢ θερμότερος τῆς φύσιος γένηται ἢ ψυχρότερος ἢ ὑγρότερος ἢ ξηρότερος, ἢ τι ἄλλο πεπόνθη πάθος παρὰ τὴν φύσιν ὃ μὴ ἐώθει. καὶ μαινόμεθα μὲν ὑπὸ ὑγρότητος: ὁκόταν γὰρ ὑγρότερος τῆς φύσιος ἔη, ἀνάγκη κινέεσθαι, κινουμένου δὲ μήτε τὴν ὄψιν ἀτρεμίζειν μήτε τὴν ἀκοήν, ἀλλ' ἄλλοτε ἄλλο ὄραϊν καὶ ἀκούειν, τὴν τε γλῶσσαν τοιαῦτα διαλέγεσθαι οἷα ἂν βλέπη τε καὶ ἀκούη ἐκάστοτε.

¹⁷ A.N. Feld: *Melancholy and the Otherness of God: a study of the Hermeneutics of Depression*. Lanham 2011, pp. 1–2.

called ‘humors’¹⁸: hot and moist blood, cold and moist mucus (phlegm), hot and dry yellow bile (choler), as well as cold and dry black bile (melancholy). People in good health were thought to have all of them in proper balance, if they were not – if the body produced too much or not enough of any fluid – it could cause illness¹⁹. Hippocratic therapies emphasize a close relation between the body and landscapes, which – seen during sleep – become a metaphor of the body and can be analyzed to design cures for its afflicted parts²⁰. The harbinger of good health is if someone is able to

see clearly and hear distinctly things on the earth: to walk safely and run safely and swiftly without fear; to see the earth smooth and well-tilled and trees flourishing, laden with fruit and well-kept; to see the rivers flowing normally with water clear and neither in flood nor with their flow lessened, and for springs and wells the same. All these things indicate the subject’s health, and that the body, its flows, the food ingested and the excreta, are normal²¹.

There were also numerous indicators that foretold more or less serious illnesses, such as the flood – a prediction of excess moisture in the body; water streams – of infirmity of the bowels; monsters – of overeating or alimentary canal troubles²².

¹⁸ Another physician who thought that dreams are symptomatic of malfunctioning humors was Rufus of Ephesus (*Quaestiones medicinales* 5). He assumed that the disease melancholy is caused by black bile, which occurs naturally or as a product of yellow bile being burnt. For him it was a type of madness which appears in different manifestations (from general despondency and fear up to hallucinations, ravings and aggressive streaks). H.C. Kee: *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times*. Cambridge 1986, p. 59; *Mental disorders in the Classical World*. Ed. W.V. Harris. Boston 2013, p. 224.

¹⁹ A. Blis, M. Abrams, L. Abrams: *Personality theories: critical perspectives*. London 2009, p. 26.

²⁰ S.G. Cole: *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The ancient Greek experience*. p. 161.

²¹ Hipp. *Vict.* 4, 90 [transl. J. Chadwick, W.N. Mann].

²² A precise reflection of this theory can be found in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, one of the Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer. One spring morning, Chaunticleer awakens from a terrible dream of a beast roaming in the yard trying to seize him. His wife, Lady Pertelote, is convinced that it is caused by disruption of humor harmony:

Such dreams from overeating come to pass,
Or else from humors (if not simply gas)
When they get too abundant as they might. 2925
For sure this dream that you have had tonight
Resulted from there being great excess
In your red bile--the very thing, God bless,
That makes folks when they’re dreaming have such dread
Of arrows or of fire that’s flaming red, 2930
Of red beasts that pursue to bite and maul,
Of strife and of fierce dogs both great and small;
Like melancholy’s humor comes about

Another well-known physician was Galen. He came from Pergamum, where he received his philosophical and medical training²³. In the Galenic Corpus there is only a short fragment, entitled *On diagnosis from dreams remaining*²⁴, where it is possible to read about a fivefold system of dream sources popular in late antiquity: (1) Some dreams are daytime thoughts reappearing in images, while (2) some repeat a man's habitual actions in the waking state. (3) Dreams occur when they foretells future events, (4) other arise from the state of the dreamer's humors. There are also (5) miracle-dreams of the god Asclepius, in which Galen steadfastly believed. Galen claimed that during sleep the soul can sink into the body and remove outside sensory perceptions. In this case the body conditions influence the images in a specific way: the excess of blood can create the vision of standing in a cistern of blood; a fever on the verge of crisis – the picture of swimming or having a bath in hot water; a large quantity of faeces and foul humors results in the image of sitting among filth and dung; the plethora of humors creates the picture of one carrying a heavy burden or being scarcely able to move²⁵. Galen himself, on the basis of a dream from god, wrote his treatise on the use of the parts of the body²⁶. He found dreams enlightening also in one more way:

Some people scorn dreams, omens and portents. But I know that I have often made a diagnosis from dreams and, guided by two very clear dreams, I once made an incision into the artery between the thumb and the index finger of the right hand, and allowed the blood to flow until it ceased flowing on its own, as the dream had instructed. I have saved many people by applying a cure prescribed in a dream [Gal. *Comm. in Hippocr. de humor. 2. 2*]²⁷.

The most famous method of the interpretation of dreams, which was aimed at a proper diagnosis of sick people, was analogy – known also from Hippocratic practice. It was based on the similarity between the dream visions and mixtures of humors and other elements. The analysis results in such a diagnoses: a vision of

To make so many sleeping men cry out
For fear of big black bears, and bulls to boot, 2935
Or else black devils that are in pursuit.

Source: Nun's Priest Tale, v. 2923–2936, on-line access 6.01.2017: <http://english.fsu.edu/cantebury/nun.html>.

²³ C.A. Meier: *Healing dream and ritual: Ancient Incubation and modern psychotherapy*. Einsiedeln 2009, p. 8.

²⁴ *Claudii Galeni opera omnia*, cur. K.G. Kühn. Lipsiae 1821.

²⁵ S.M. Oberhelman: *The Oneirocriticon of Achmet: a medieval Greek and Arabic treatise on the interpretation of dreams*. Texas 1992, p. 35.

²⁶ Gal. *De usu partium* 10, 14.

²⁷ P.C. Miller: *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a culture*. Princeton 1994, p. 46.

snow and ice means an excess of phlegm (because this humor was cold and wet); dreams of deep darkness signify a disease from black bile (the humor was dry and cold); a fire foretells yellow bile (the humor was hot and dry). Cisterns of blood are analogous to the circulatory system; pools of hot water to impending crises of fever; dung heaps to putrid humors or blockage of the bowels; while running quickly indicates the absence of any excess of the humors²⁸.

Artemidorus' theory is also significant for the history of dream reading in ancient medicine. Despite the fact that among the texts, which are typical for research carried on the ancient medicine, *Oneirocritica* can be perceived as a little bit curious, it conveys fundamental information about the usefulness of particular visions. The text is based on the author's practical experience (*peira*²⁹), his contemporary oral tradition, and written sources which date back to the 5th century B.C.³⁰. Artemidorus' primary interest in dreams concerns their ability to predict the future. He clearly shows a distinction between dreams with predictive force (*oneiroi*) and those which indicate only the present state of affairs (*enypnia*). Predictive dreams are divided into two more subcategories: those, which predict the future directly (*theorematikoi*), and those which predict it allegorically (*allegorikoi*)³¹. According to his work *Oneirocritica*, a compendium of knowledge about dreams in ancient times, dreams related to health or disease show several grades of analogy³²:

- Open/ simple analogy: disease is indicated by easily decipherable body-images, with a small difference between the manifest dream and the content of the interpretation. E.g. a dream of vomiting food, blood or bile functions as an image of death.
- Complex imaginery: the web of associations is looser and removed from the manifest dream image. For instance a dream of having intercourse with the goddess Selene brings death to almost everyone (except for some professionals, astronomers or travellers)³³.
- Deviant imagery, which needs special explanation and cannot be understood at first glance:

To eat onions and garlic is bad, but to possess them is good. Onions have a different meaning only for the sick. [...] if a sick man dreams that he is eating

²⁸ S.M. Oberhelman: *The Oneirocriticon of Achmet: a medieval Greek and Arabic treatise on the interpretation of dreams*. Texas 1992, pp. 35–36.

²⁹ W.V. Harris: *Dreams and experience in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge 2009, p. 273.

³⁰ *The Classical Tradition*. Ed. A. Grafton, G.W. Most, S. Settis. Cambridge 2010, p. 285.

³¹ I. Israelowich: *Society, medicine and religion in the sacred tales of Aelius Aristides*. Boston 2012, p. 83.

³² Ch. Walde: *Illness and its metaphors in Artemidorus' Oneirocritica: a negative list*. In: *Dreams, healing and medicine in Greece. From antiquity to the presence*. Ed. S.M. Oberhelman. Ashgate 2013, pp. 152–153.

³³ Artem. 1, 80.

many onions, he will recover (but will shed tears of mourning for some other person). If he eats a few onions, he himself will die³⁴ [transl. R.J. White].

There are various examples of illness indicators which appear during the sleep in Artemidorus' work³⁵, although he generally ignores the physical and diagnoses dreams. In this he differs from Hippocrates and Galen, who concentrate on the medical perspective in the meaning and value of dreams. Yet Artemidorus assumes that dreams can be influenced by bodily needs and psychologically significant events. He even advises interpreters to acquire as much medical knowledge as possible for understanding dreams involving illness³⁶. He mentions such dream connections with particular organic disorders:

- “Someone dreamt that he had golden eyes. He went blind because gold is not proper to eyes”³⁷ [transl. R.J. White].
- “To have ears in one's eyes signifies that one will go deaf and that the information usually received by the ears will have to come to one through the eyes”³⁸ [transl. R.J. White].
- “Fish that are red, the *synodon* (sea-bream), the hermaphrodite fish, the piper, and the surmullet, for example, portend tortures for slaves and criminals, violent fever and inflammations for the sick [...]”³⁹ [transl. R.J. White].
- “A man dreamt that Asclepius wounded him in the belly with a sword and he died. This man developed an abscess in his belly and he was cured after undergoing surgery”⁴⁰ [transl. R.J. White].
- “Someone dreamt that he had no money and was disturbed by the fact. In real life, the man was stricken by apoplexy and died [...]”⁴¹ [transl. R.J. White].

³⁴ Artem. 1, 67: κρόμμυα δὲ καὶ σκόροδα ἐσθίειν μὲν πονηρόν, ἔχειν δὲ ἀγαθόν. μόνοις δὲ τοῖς νοσοῦσι διαφόρως τὰ κρόμμυα ἀποβαίνει. [...] εἴ τις πολλὰ κρόμμυα δόξειεν ἐσθίειν, τύχοι δὲ νοσῶν, ἀναστήσεται, <ἄλλον δὲ τινα πενήσει> εἰ δὲ ὀλίγα, τεθνήσκειται.

³⁵ *The interpretation of dreams. Oneirocritica by Artemidorus*. Transl. R.J. White. New Jersey 1975.

³⁶ J. Gollnick: *The Religious Dreamworld of Apuleius' Metamorphoses: Recovering a forgotten hermeneutic*. Ontario 1999, p. 39.

³⁷ Artem. 1, 4: οἶον ἔδοξέ τις χρύσεια ὄμματα ἔχειν. ἐτυφλώθη διὰ τὸ μὴ ἴδιον ὀμμάτων εἶναι τὸ χρυσίον.

³⁸ Artem. 1, 24: ὄτα ἐν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἔξειν κωρὸν σημαίνει γενέσθαι καὶ τὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς διὰ τῆς ὀράσεως παραδέξασθαι.

³⁹ Artem. 2, 14: ὅσοι δὲ τῶν ἰχθύων εἰσὶ πυρροί, δούλοις μὲν καὶ κακούργοις βασάνους σημαίνουσι, νοσοῦσι δὲ πυρετὸν λάβρον καὶ φλεγμονάς (...) οἶον συνόδους ἐρυθίνους κόκκυξ τρίγλη.

⁴⁰ Artem. 5, 61: Ἐδοξέ τις ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἀσκληπιοῦ ξίφει πληγείς εἰς τὴν γαστέρα ἀποθανεῖν. τούτῳ ἀπόστημα ἐγένετο κατὰ τῆς γαστρὸς καὶ ἰάσατο αὐτὸν Ἰό Ἀσκληπιῶς τομῆ χρησάμενος.

⁴¹ Artem. 5, 88: Ἐδοξέ τις ἀργύριον οὐκ ἔχειν καὶ ἐπὶ τούτῳ λυπεῖσθαι. τοῦτον συνέβη ἀποπληξία περιπεσόντα ἀποθανεῖν εἰκότως.

In Artemidorus' work the direct connection between medicine and dream interpretation should be emphasized. They both rely on different symptoms, clues, and barely noticeable signs and inferences⁴².

The significance of the role of dreams in medicine, as well as in every other aspect of ancient peoples' lives, is undisputed. Thanks to a precise interpretation of dreams it was possible to uncover the secrets of one's health condition, know one's life values and morals and predict the future. All beliefs and convictions about these images' correctness, quality and significance were deeply embedded in ancient culture and tradition.

⁴² *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of dreaming*. Ed. D. Shulman, G.G. Stroumsa. Oxford 1999, p. 128.