DREAMS AS GODS AND GODS IN DREAMS.
DREAM-REALITIES IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA
FROM THE 3RD TO THE 1ST MILLENNIUM B.C.

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Thank you, Åke:
working side by side with you and your “crew”
at the University Museum in Philadelphia
was a wonderful dream come true . . .

I. WHERE AND WHEN: ANCIENT SOURCES AND MODERN APPROACHES

1.1. THE SOURCES

The earliest sources for dream practice and dream theory stem from
Ancient Mesopotamia, i.e. the area which is now modern Iraq. They
include the earliest dream accounts to have been written down in world
history, starting during the third mill. B.C. A reflection of how important
dreams were to ancient Mesopotamians is found in an omen from the
early second millenium B.C.: šumma awīlum šuttam ša immaru lá ukāl
ilšu ittišu zeni – “If a man cannot remember the dream he sees, (then it
means:) his personal god is angry with him.”

1.2. OUTLINE

This paper will try to account for the importance of dreams to the inhab-
habitants of Ancient Mesopotamia by enquiring into the “who”, “how”, and
“why” of dreams. In other words, we will study the protagonists that
appear in dreams (section II), the phenomenology of dreams and the
anthropological basis of dreaming (section III), and finally the essence of
dreams (section IV). In so doing we will obtain insights into Mesopota-
mian dream theory and its anthropological and theological bases, propose

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1 This paper has much profited from discussion with Martin Worthington, to whom I
am also obliged for correcting my English.
2 OB omen collection VAT 7525, I:31f; cf. F. Köcher, A.L. Oppenheim, AFO 18 (1957/8)
a terminology for the classification of dreams, and show how parts of the dream theory of Sigmund Freud can be adapted to this material, which (at first sight) is very different from that of the inhabitants of Vienna in 1900 or Philadelphia and Uppsala in 2010.

II. WHO: DREAMS’ PROTAGONISTS

2.1. GODS IN DREAMS

Let us start with an example from the 21st century B.C., inscribed on the two cylinders of Gudea. These famous Sumerian inscriptions tell of a huge building project of cosmic significance: the most important temple in the city-state has to be rebuilt, and the initiators of this project are the gods themselves. As their earthly representative, the ruler Gudea is selected and initiated into their plan by means of three dreams.

The significance of the affair can hardly be overestimated. A Babylonian letter written to the king of Mari 300 years later warns against the rebuilding of a temple. The author of the letter reports that a god has already twice warned against this rebuilding, both times in a dream experienced by a young boy (ṣuhārum). Clearly, nobody felt compelled to pass this message along to the king, and now the dreamer himself has become sick! The writer implies that this may be a sign of divine anger. And in this way the message reached the ruler of the state, found its way into the state archives, and eventually to us . . .

For Gudea, too, the rebuilding of the temple was anything but a minor affair. It is not just that Gudea is reported to have dedicated himself to the project day and night, and that no sleep came over his eyes: before the work could even begin, a careful examination of the dreams which induced it had to be carried out. In particular, they were subjected to repeated verification through additional, incubated dreams, as well as through different types of divination, such as extispicy. The first incubated dream is depicted in particularly fulsome detail, and reveals the ways in which gods communicated messages in dreams. After extensive ritual preparations, Gudea lies down on a particular spot within the precinct of the old temple in order to make the divine encounter during the incubation possible. Then, during his dream, the city god steps towards him. He gives

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4 We know of a similar instance from Ancient Rome, recorded by Livy 2, 36, 5f.
5 Gudea Cylinder A 6:10f.; 19:23 and context.