ANCIENT SYSTEMS OF DREAM-CLASSIFICATION

BY

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I

One of man's least explainable experiences is his dream-life. This is certainly the case with people of a modest cultural background, for whom the rational explanation of things has only just started. This quest for a rational explanation did not start in the same age for all known phenomena. It was only in classical antiquity that serious efforts were first made to provide a rationale for most of them. This is certainly true of the problem of the dream.

It should be borne in mind that it is a great achievement when man begins to realize that between the dream-world and the waking-world exists a very fundamental difference. What this difference really is, and how it can be established, is of course another question, that is beyond the scope of this investigation. It may only be remarked in passing that even in antiquity one meets awareness of the problem that strictly speaking there is no real criterion to distinguish between these two worlds 1).

Of course from the above it cannot be concluded that 'originally' there was a situation in which primitive man did not mark any difference whatsoever between dream-life and waking-life. Still it is true that the same value was assigned to the things experienced in dreams and the things that happened in waking-life. In any case man regarded the dream as a real event, which was in fact as 'true' as ordinary events 2), even to such an extent that people


2) Cf. J. Hundt, Der Traumgläube bei Homer (Greifswald 1935), passim; H. J. Rose, Primitive Culture in Greece (London 1925), 152; L. Lévy-Bruhl, L'expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitifs (Paris 1938), 98 ff., who gives a general treatment of the primitive attitude to dreams; cf. also La mentalité primitive (Paris 1922), 94 ff. by the same author. L. Binswagner
were able to show some visible proofs for the reality of the dream-
experience. So at least Pindar in his 13th Olympian Ode (63-78) 
waants us to understand the tale of Bellerophon, who in a dream
was presented with a 'horse's charm'. After his dream he actually
found on awaking the bit lying near him as a visible proof of the
dream's reality).

Quite early in history man started trying to interpret his dreams.
He did not ask himself in the first place how a dream came about,
for this was and remained unexplainable and was therefore ascribed
to the influence of the gods. The question asked was='What can I
do with it?'. The interpretation in practice turned out to be an
effort to find a clue as to the possible relation of the dream with the
future fate of the person concerned. This appears to have happened
already in Babylonian times. People then did not bother much
about the how and why of dreams; they were satisfied with an
interpretation which had some practical value.

In Greece, too, for quite a long time dreams were looked upon as
a divine sign concerning man's future, notwithstanding several
efforts at rational explanation by e.g. Heraclitus, Democritus,
Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates. One has only to remember
how the incubation sanctuaries flourished.

In Greece, therefore, there existed two methods of approach
to the phenomenon of the dream). One was a philosophico-

Traum und Existenz (= Ausgew. Vorträge und Aufsätze, I, 74-97) speaks
about "die ursprüngliche enge Zusammengehörigkeit von Gefühl und Bild"
(p. 82) and refers to the dream of Penelope about the geese. On Aeschylus'
Persae 191-196 he remarks (p. 87): "Man sieht diesem Bild als solchem nicht
an, ob es einem Traum oder einem Geschehen in der äusseren Welt entstammt;
so verwischt sind bei den Griechen die Grenzen zwischen dem innern Er-
lebnisraum, dem äusseren Geschehensraum und dem kultischen Raum".

1) For other instances cf. Paus. 10, 38, 13 and the inscriptions from the
incubation sanctuaries, Verg. Aen. 8, 42 and 81 ff. (Aeneas finds a white
sow as a proof of the validity of the dream). Prof. Waszink reminded me of
the proem of Hesiod's Theogony (22 ff.), where Hesiod relates how he received
his σκῦῖαπτρον from the Muses. However, it must remain uncertain whether
he actually met the Muses in a dream. There is no trace of this in the Theogony
itself, but later writers, e.g. Callimachus, followed Hesiod's story and clearly
made it into a dream.

2) Accordingly D. del Corno, Ricerche sull' onirocritica greca, Rend.
Ist. Lombard. 96 (1962), 334-366, draws a distinction between 'onirologia'
and 'oniromantica'.