

Dreams and Sleep-threshold Experiences in Homeric Epic

Dream scenes were important to Homeric storytelling, although few examples from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* resemble what most modern readers would consider an ordinary dream. Only two passages depict the dreamer imagining him or herself outside bed while interacting with others in a simulated environment (Penelope's dream in *Od.* 20.535-553, and the simile in *Il.* 22.199-201). In most other examples, the dreamers are aware that they are still in bed, while a figure seems to stand beside their heads and stare down at them. Usually, but not always (*Od.* 20.93-5), this dream figure is speaking, and it sometimes enters the dreamer's bed (*Od.* 20.89-92). As a narrative device, such epiphanies were a convenient way for a god or ghost to deliver a message to a mortal character, and the first step of "Zeus' plan" (*Iliad* 1.5, 2.1-83) depends on them.

These passages are also of psychological interest, since, among other reasons, they have details that resemble sleep-threshold experiences more than normal sleep-phase dreaming. In particular, these details suggest hypnopompic hallucinations such as those associated with sleep paralysis and with the closely related phenomena of lucid dreaming (see, e.g., Sacks 2012: 199-217, Konkoly et al. 2021, Sharpless and Doghramji 2015). Following the lead of J. Russo (Russo 1982, Russo et al. 1992: 114), my paper surveys dream (and dreamlike) scenes from the Homeric corpus, including the two major epics and the hymns, with attention to the sleep-threshold imagery that these passages evoke. I also compare relevant verses from Archaic Greek lyric poetry (e.g., Sappho fr. 4 and Alcman fr. 23), passages from Aelius Aristides' *Sacred Tales*, as well as epigraphic evidence from the Asclepieion at Epidaurus and cave sanctuaries of Pan and the Nymphs in Attica and Boeotia (e.g., Wagman and Nichols 2017, Travlos 1971: 295, figs.

386-7). In conclusion, I argue that such experiences appear in the epic tradition not only because of their storytelling utility but also because of their persistent role in Archaic and Classical Greek religious experience and cult practice, in which they often had therapeutic purposes. In this regard, my paper revisits and expands on W.H. Roscher's classic study on the origins of the cult and iconography of Pan in sleep paralysis nightmares (Roscher 1900). That terrifying *Alpdämonen* are only one manifestation of sleep paralysis visions, and that emotionally positive experiences happen as well during these altered states, demonstrates how culturally and personally conditioned these experiences are. This distinction helps to understand Homeric passages in which sleep-threshold epiphanies represent a beatific encounter, such as Nausicaa's visitation from Athena in *Od.* 6.20 ff. These observations also help to speculate about the procedures used in Asclepieia to induce such experiences, which can be reached through certain waking-sleeping habits without the need for pharmacological aids.

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