

Don't Sleep on Dreams: Medical Dream Interpretation in Galen and Aristides

From Hippocrates and the cult of Asclepius onwards, dreams and dream interpretation were a significant component of ancient Greek medical practices (Haselswerdt 2019, Cillier & Pieter Retief 2013). It is surprising, then, that dreams feature so little in the extant corpus of Galen. Aside from the potentially spurious *On Diagnosis from Dreams* (Oberhelman 1983), dreams are only mentioned a handful of times in the extant corpus.

At first glance, the pervasiveness of dream interpretation in Galen's contemporary Aelius Aristides' *Sacred Tales* (Pearcy 1988) and the paucity of dream interpretation in Galen's broad corpus appears to set these authors apart in their theories of dream interpretation. However, in this paper I argue that upon closer investigation Galen and Aristides employ similar practices of dream interpretation. This in turn suggests that their theories of dreams and their interpretation are similar. This similarity can be seen most clearly in both authors' implicit preference for their own dreams and distancing from the interpretation of other's dreams.

I begin by positing a Galenic theory of the role of dreams in medical practice. For Galen, who argues that the knowledgeable doctor has precision in their prognoses in, for example, *De Constitutione Artis Medicae* and *Prognosis*, dream interpretation would have to achieve the same precision to be a worthwhile medical practice. Since the soul plays an important role in dreams and the nature of the soul itself is problematic in Galenic treatises (Vinkesteyn 2019, Chiaradonna 2014, Holmes 2013), dreams will necessarily be subject to less precision than the medical art of prognosis. This view is corroborated by the inconsistency of dream interpretation in *On Diagnosis from Dreams*, but Galen's adherence to dreams in both avoiding travel to Germany and developing his system of arteriotomy introduces a caveat. Namely, for the properly trained, one's own dreams can provide the necessary precision to be put into practice.

Having established this theory of dreams in Galen's corpus, I turn to the plethora of dream narratives in Aelius Aristides' *Sacred Tales*. Aristides' emphasis on self-dreams demonstrates the

same principle found in Galen; namely dream interpretation is most precise when a trained individual interprets their own dreams. In the case of Aristides, it is not his rhetorical training but his unique experience with Asclepius and Asclepian healing that grants him special privilege in dream interpretation. Although Aristides and Galen derive their authority from separate sources (Asclepius and Hippocrates, respectively), both authors similarly keep dreams within their own expertise and do not provide instruction for the reader to perform this interpretation themselves.

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