

“A Vision of a Dream Said”: Verbal Dreams in Herodotus Book 1

In the first book of the *Histories*, Herodotus wrote about four dreams experienced by three barbarian kings: Croesus of Lydia, Astyages of Media, and Cyrus of Persia (1.34, 1.107-8, 1.209 respectively). For each of these three individuals, the dream foreshadows the downfall of their kingdom and/or rule. Dreams, like oracles and omens, are used by Herodotus as ways for the gods to indicate future events, a recommended course of action, or other lessons to learn (Harrison 2005). Much scholarship has been devoted to Herodotus’ usage of dreams throughout the *Histories* (e.g. de Jong 2005, Pelling 1996), but little attention has been given to how those dreams are delivered to their recipients. In this paper, I argue that Herodotean dreams can be delivered either visually or verbally, and that Herodotus differentiates his word choice for dreams based on that method of delivery. This, I submit, is highly significant because it suggests that Herodotus is utilizing some categorical system to organize his language of dreams.

In reading the dreams of these three kings, one notices verbal and narrative similarities between the dreams of Astyages and Cyrus. These three dreams (two belonging to Astyages and the third to Cyrus) are explicitly visual due the language used to describe them, such as being referred to as an ὄψις, ‘vision’. When telling the happenings of the dreams, visual terminology such as εἶδον are used, confirming that these ‘visions’ were ‘seen’. On the other hand, Croesus’ dream appears to lack any overt visual language and is, at first, referred to as an ὄνειρος, ‘dream’. The verb Herodotus uses to describe what happened in the dream is not an explicit visual verb; rather, σημαίνω (to show or signal) is used to relate Atys’ upcoming death to his father Croesus. Although σημαίνω does contain an implicit visuality (as one needs to see the signs), it also suggests some type of interpretation needed to be performed by the

viewer (Hollmann 2005). It is unclear how exactly the dream shows or signifies its message to Croesus, so one can reasonably assume there was some visual aspect to this ὄνειρος. However, when the king relates his dream later on in the *Croesus Logos* to his son, a linguistic disconnect arises due to Herodotus' word choice.

After being prohibited from taking part in a boar hunt by his father, Atys questions Croesus as to why he cannot go, prompting the king to recount his dream. Croesus says that a 'vision of a dream said to me...' (1.38). Despite Herodotus referring to Croesus' dream as an ὄνειρος in 1.34, Croesus' dream is now called an ὄψις of a dream, not unlike Astyages' and Cyrus' dreams. This switch in language could be purely coincidental, but then Croesus says that the vision spoke (ἔφη) to him, indicating that Atys' death was communicated verbally to him, not visually as an ὄψις would suggest. In his response, Atys attempts to rectify this visual/verbal disconnect coming from his father by saying that his father 'saw such a vision' (ιδόντι γε ὄψιν τοιαύτην), indicating that he understands that a vision is an explicit visual medium and can only be seen, not heard. However, Atys interacts further with his father's dream. Now, instead of an ὄψις, he characterizes his father's dream as an ὄνειρος, which is what Herodotus initially refers to Croesus' dream as. Atys discusses the ὄνειρος as being verbally communicated, instead of visually, as he did previously. The ὄνειρος 'said' (φάναι) how Atys will die. Furthermore, Atys continues to perpetuate the idea of a verbal dream, saying that "if the dream said (εἶπε) ...". Atys has repeatedly switched up the terms from a vision (ὄψις) to a dream (ὄνειρος), as I argue, in order to rectify the disparity between a dream being communicated visually or verbally.

Despite the fact that ὄνειρος and ὄψις have seemingly been used interchangeably within the first book of the *Histories*, I conclude that Herodotus, by way of Atys' attempt at

rationalizing the words of his father, actually distinguishes the two types of dreams according to their method of either visual (ὄψις) or verbal (ὄνειρος) communication. Herodotus' system of dream categorization, while implicit, serves as an important way of understanding how Greek authors understood dreams in the 5th c. BCE.

Bibliography

- Harrison, Thomas. *Divinity and History: the Religion of Herodotus*. Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Hollmann, Alexander. "The Manipulation of Signs in Herodotos' *Histories*." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), vol. 135, no. 2, 2005, pp. 279–327.
- de Jong, I.J.F. (2006) "Herodotus and the Dream of Cambyses (Histories 3.30, 61-5). Land of Dreams." *Greek and Latin Studies in Honour of A.H.M. Kessels*, 3-17.
- Pelling, C. (1996). The urine and the vine: Astyages' dreams at Herodotus 1.107–8. *The Classical Quarterly*, 46(1), 68-77.