“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 visibility (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 ὀνείρος. 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 ὀνείρος in 1.34, Croesus’ dream is now called an ὅψις 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 (ἠρη) to him, indicating that Atys’ death was communicated verbally to him, not visually as an ὅψις 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’ (ἰδόντι γε ὅψιν τοιούτην), 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 ὅψις, he characterizes his father’s dream as an ὀνείρος, which is what Herodotus initially refers to Croesus’ dream as. Atys discusses the ὀνείρος as being verbally communicated, instead of visually, as he did previously. The ὀνείρος ‘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 (ὡςις) to a dream (ὁνείρος), as I argue, in order to rectify the disparity between a dream being communicated visually or verbally.

Despite the fact that ὀνείρος and ὅψις 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


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