Dreams, Pharaonic Egypt and ancient Near East

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In the ancient Near East and Egypt, dreams were considered to be produced by sleep. Therefore, the words designating this phenomenon are often related to “sleep”: Sumerian U, Hittite tešha, and Egyptian qd mean both “sleep” and “dream,” while Akkadian suttum “dream” comes from the same root as sittum “sleep.”

The ancient Near Eastern languages do not have any verb meaning “to dream.” The usual expression is “to see (in) a dream,” which shows that the dreamer is perceived as a spectator of his own dream. It also shows that dreams are considered as predominantly visual in nature.

The texts attest to two main categories of dreams: message-dreams and “bad dreams.” Message-dreams are divine messages sent to the dreamer. Their content may vary, but the most remarkable ones are the dreamt theophanies: gods appear in dreams expressing themselves. These dreams are most of the time seen by the king, and their report in historical records is a convenient rhetorical device for showing the affection of a god for the ruler.

“Bad dreams” can have various shapes. Some of them can be dangerous for the dreamer, who therefore needs to exorcize them through a ritual. The use of apotropaic amulets that are seen as warding off “bad dreams” is also attested in both Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Dreams can be solicited through incubation rituals. Performing an incubation means sleeping in a consecrated place while having been ritually prepared. There are two main categories of incubation rituals: divinatory ones (for receiving a message-dream) and therapeutic ones (for being cured through sleep or a healing dream). Pharaonic Egypt does not have clear evidence of incubation rituals, whereas this practice is attested both in Mesopotamia and in Hittite Anatolia (Zgoll 2002; Mouton 2003).

Interpretation of dreams did not have its own specialist. Priests in Pharaonic Egypt and diviners specialized in several divinatory techniques in ancient Mesopotamia and Anatolia were responsible for interpreting dreams when required. Although treatises on dream interpretation are attested since the Old Babylonian period in Mesopotamia and the Ramesside Period in Egypt (see DREAM BOOKS, PHARAONIC EGYPT), we do not know to what extent they were used for actual dream interpretation.

SEE ALSO: Dream interpretation; Dreams, Greece and Rome; Incubation.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Did ancient Egyptians care about ethnicity? Judging from the abundant texts and representations that have survived it seems that ethnicity mattered. Processions of foreigners carrying their tribute to the sovereign of Egypt stand out for their colourful characters dressed in distinctive non-Egyptian clothes and wearing unequivocal markers of their ethnic origins. Egypt was far from being the exclusive abode of high culture, social order and economic prosperity that pharaonic sources were so inclined to boast about, the model to be imitated. In fact, when regional rulers emerged in periods of political division, they frequently considered more favourable to invoke not a prestigious Egyptian royal ancestry but a foreign one. Part of a series on the Egypt portal. v. t. e. Ancient Egypt was a civilization of ancient North Africa, concentrated along the lower reaches of the Nile River, situated in the place that is now the country Egypt. Ancient Egyptian civilization followed prehistoric Egypt and coalesced around 3100 BC (according to conventional Egyptian chronology) with the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under Menes (often identified with Narmer). The history of ancient Egypt occurred as a series of Ancient Egyptian pharaohs were considered to be both divine deities as well as mortal rulers. Throughout the 30+ dynasties in ancient Egyptian history, it is speculated that some 170 or more rulers reigned over the great land of Egypt during a three thousand year time span. The throne of Egypt was primarily intended to be succeeded from father to son, however in many cases this line of kingship was interrupted by murder, mayhem and mysterious disappearances. The earliest pharaonic tombs are the mastaba tombs made of mud-brick. Scholars found these tombs in some of the oldest cemeteries near the ancient capitals (see capital list below). Mastabas, like all ancient Egyptian cemeteries, were on the Nileâ€™s west bank, which was the realm of the dead.