Dream incubation: ancient techniques of dream influence

(This document is a revised version of: T. Nielsen (1988). *Ancient methods of dream incubation: Bodily methods of inducing spiritual presence*. Bulletin of the Montreal Center for the Study of Dreams, 3(3-4):6-10; please cite as T. Nielsen (2012), *Dream incubation: ancient techniques of dream influence*, www.dreamscience.ca)

What is dream incubation?

Dream incubation refers collectively to the practices, rituals, techniques and efforts that an individual applies to intentionally evoke helpful dreams. Derived from the Latin verb *incubare* (in- 'upon' + cubare 'to lie'), the term connotes the support and nurturance provided by a laying mother bird for her developing egg. The parallels with dream influence are all too appropriate; in antiquity, the aspirant for a dream laid down to sleep in a sacred precinct with the intention of nurturing a dream of healing or prophecy. In more modern times, the aspirant frequently sleeps in a more profane location, but the nurturing intention toward the 'developing dream' remains the same.

The dream may be induced by engaging in several methods, techniques, rituals or other activities on the day prior to the intended dream and often just in the hours prior to falling asleep. The evoked dream is expected to address the question, situation or condition that motivated the incubation effort. To incubate a dream for a particular goal is thus to engage in an action that brings the dream content to address this goal—preferably in a direct manner. In the best case scenario, the dream will furnish a clear solution to a problem or will even depict an ailment as cured.

A common example of dream incubation today is the practice of focusing on a personal problem prior to sleep with the intention of inciting a dream that will help solve the problem. More esoteric examples involve the use of pre-sleep rituals such as meditating on symbols, painting or being massaged in order to shape the content of subsequent dreams. Incubated dreams reported in historical texts often involved some type of epiphany by which the dreamer's life was changed. These changes were usually brought about by the deity appearing in the dream in some recognizable form (spirit, sacred ancestor, in the guise of a human, etc) and effect a change by delivering a message, prescribing a healing treatment, directing the individual to construct a sacred object or perform a sacred dance, and so forth. Upon awakening, the incubant would typically remember the visitation and benefit from the dream in whatever form it took. In later times, some degree of dream interpretation by priests of the temples seems to have been introduced.

A Brief Survey of Dream Incubation in Antiquity

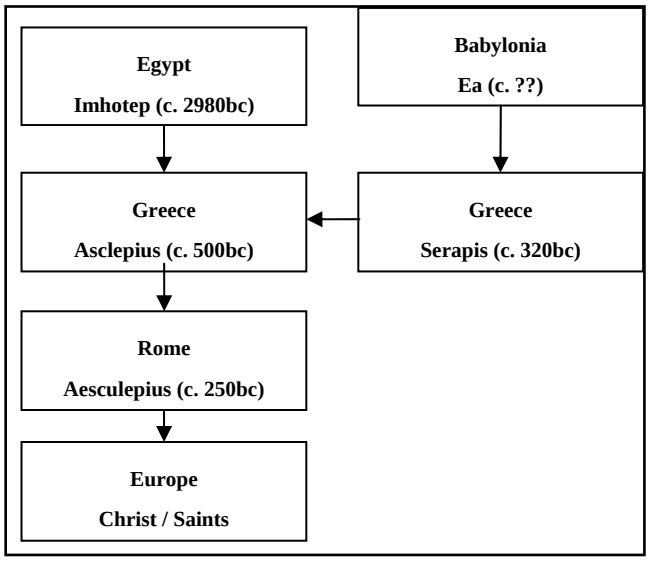

Figure 1. Approximate time line of dream incubation in antiquity.

Methods of dream incubation have been known to humankind for at least 5000 years, although the character of incubation techniques has changed markedly with time. Various ancient texts hint that the mythology and practices of dream incubation may date to ancient Egypt and Babylonia (see Figure 1) in association with a number of other deities such as Ea (aka Enki) and Imhotep. Less speculative evidence demonstrates that at least one zenith of dream incubation was in ancient Greece—and later Rome—where it endured as a religious institution for over 1000 years. The extensive evidence from Greek antiquity is found in the form of key texts and temple ruins very well-preserved from this time.

The earliest direct reference to a pre-sleep method for obtaining dreams by divine revelation is inscribed upon the Chester Beatty papyri—found near Thebes in Upper Egypt—and presently in the British museum. The papyrus was authored c.1350 BC and incorporates material as far back as 2000 BC. It describes a method of invoking the wisdom of Besa (or Bes in Egypt), a dwarf deity, helper of women in childbirth, protector against snakes and other terrors, and god of art, dance and music (Figure. 2). It translates as follows:

Figure 2. Sculpture of Egyptian deity Bes, Dendera Temple, Egypt

". . .Make a drawing of Besa on your left hand and enveloping your hand in a strip of black cloth that has been consecrated to Isis (and) lie down to sleep without speaking a word, even in answer to a question. Wind the remainder of the cloth around your neck. . .come in this very night." (Budge, 1901, British Museum Papyrus, No. 122, lines 64 ff and 359 ff, Catalogue of Greek Papyri, vol. I, p. 118)

This simple Egyptian magical rite demonstrates some similarities to the mythology and rituals later associated with temple incubation in later Greece, such as the binding of a body part in cloth, to bring an image of the deity in close proximity to the supplicant. The epithet of Besa as a protector against snakes is particularly noteworthy considering how central the symbol of the snake was in the later Greek healing cults, as the preferred manifestation of the incubated gods Asclepius, Trophonius, and Amphiaraos.

Figure 3. Statuette of Imhotep, the Louvre

Others claim that incubation had an even earlier origin in Babylonian mysticism, since the Greek god Serapis, who was also widely associated with incubation, can be traced to the much earlier Babylonian god Ea of Eridu (also referred to as Sar Apsi).

Still other historical accounts link the Greek incubation tradition to Egyptian deities. There is evidence that scientific and philosophical ideas were traded freely between Greek and Egyptian travellers around the 5th century BC at which time it is believed that Asclepius was imported from Egypt to Greece. The god Asclepius parallels in numerous aspects the earlier Egyptian god Imhotep (c.2980-2950bc; Figure 3), who was the principal architect of Pharaoh Djoser (aka Zoser) and built him the first pyramid at Saqqara (Figure 4). Imhotep was later deified and associated with a healing cult that is presumed to have practiced incubation in his temple at Memphis (MacKenzie, 1965). As of 2011, the tomb of Imhotep has still not been found, despite intensive archeological investigation in the Saqqara burial ground. The cult of Asclepius (Figure 5) first appeared in Greece in Thessaly; Kerenyi has traced the Greek mythology which preceded the cult in this area to approximately 1500 BC. In Thessaly, Trikka was the oldest centre of worship and remained prestigious for its healing cures through the historical centuries. Temples were transferred to Epidaurus (c.400)

Figure 4. View of Saqqara necropolis, including Djoser's step pyramid (centre) built by Imhotep. The pyramid, over 4700 years old, suffered severe damage in a 1992 earthquake and is in repair.

Figure 5. Statue of Greek deity Asclepius.

and Kos (c.350), and eventually to all parts of Greece and Rome. Meiers estimates that Asclepian temples numbered 420 in total.

Epidaurus was the most distinctive and favored of all the asklepeia and most of the available information about temple rituals and festivals were preserved in this temple on large stone steles in its porticoes. Two other oracular deities, Amphiaraos (at Oropos) and Trophonius (at Lebadeia) were closely related to the chthonian origin of Asclepius and were also the focus of intensive incubation rituals for several centuries.

The Egyptian cults of Isis and Serapis (Figure 6) also established temples that flourished in Greece and Rome. These temples grew to 'surpass in number and fame those of any other god because of the rapid spread of incubation during the 1st centuries of the Christian era' (Hamilton, 1906a, p. 103). Because of their far-reaching reputations for miraculous health cures and also because of their beautiful countryside environments, many of the asklepeia, and especially the exemplary temple at Epidaurus, evolved into thriving health resorts (Meier, 1989, p. 317).

The Dream Incubation

Dream incubation can be understood as a form of quest to encounter a sacred being, as an attempt to bring oneself physically closer to a spiritual presence in preparation for a revelatory dream. There was thus a certain logic—perhaps grounded in repeated experience—in incubants attempting to summon a vivid sense of the deity's presence prior to sleep through various incubation procedures, with the desired result being that the deity would manifest again in a later dream bearing its treasured response. On one level, the engagement in pre-sleep ritual can be seen as a facilitatory enactment of closeness to the deity that was desired to occur later in the dream.

Figure 6. Drawing of Serapis

Closeness to the deity

This aspect of the spiritual attitude—the production of a feeling of 'spiritual presence' through pre-sleep rituals and supplications renders many of the seemingly curious incubation rites described in the historical literature more comprehensible, i.e., as means of promoting a physically felt closeness of a deity. Such felt closeness may have been cultivated in a number of ways: sleeping in the sacred precincts of the deity, manipulating icons of the deity or the individual's affliction, or applying cutaneous and painful stimuli to one's person.

Sleep In Sacred Precincts

Perhaps the most obvious means of attaining a physical sense of closeness to the deity was for the incubant to reside within the sacred precinct where the deity was believed to dwell (Figure 7). Sleeping within the precincts was of course seen as the most direct method of attracting the deity's attention. This practice became so common and widespread throughout Greece and Rome that 'sleeping in a sacred precinct' has come to be synonymous with incubation itself.

Figure 7. Individuals often slept in a sacred site, such as a temple or ancestor's tomb, to procure dreams through incubation.

The motif of sleep in sacred precincts is seen in numerous incubation traditions:

- The Berbers of Northern Africa tried to obtain dreams wherein they could meet spirits and receive news of absent relatives and friends by sleeping in tombs that were constructed by a former race; the tombs were large, elliptical, surrounded by heaps of stones, and believed to bear concealed treasure (Basset, 1909, p. 513);
- The earliest Greeks to practice incubation (the Dodonian Selloi) slept upon earthen beds to procure prophetic dreams (Homer, Iliad, xvi, p. 233)(Messer, 1918)
- Other seekers to the Trophonian incubation oracle slept swaddled and banded in linen upon freshly-slaughtered ram's hides (Meier, 1989, p. 100).
- Many North American Indian peoples frequently chose mountain-top, hill-top, or tree-top beds during quests to obtain dream-visions;

Modern science sheds some light on how sleeping in sacred precincts may have enabled the induction of healing and problem-solving dreams. The well-known 'first-night effect' refers to how sleep and dreams are influenced when patients or experimental subjects sleep in the laboratory for the first time. They experience disrupted sleep, especially REM sleep, and altered dream content. Their sleep becomes more fragmented, with more awakenings; dreams often include references to the laboratory situation—including the all-important experimenter.

Manipulation of icons

The practice of bringing an image or icon of a deity into closer proximity to the body may have had as an objective the induction of a sense of physically felt closeness to the deity. An

example of this type of ritual is cited above for the incantation designed to invoke the wisdom of the fertility god Besa. In this case, the seeker would seem to cultivate an attitude of closeness to the deity by drawing the icon directly on the skin and then by binding it to the hand with cloth. Throughout the pre-dormitum period and during awakenings at night, sensations in the hand from this procedure could serve to remind the incubant of the deity's proximity. By suspending speech, the seeker may have further facilitated the salience of bodily sensations, which are known to be incorporated more readily into dream content (Nielsen, McGregor, Zadra, Ilnicki, & Ouellet, 1993). Images of the deity Besa were also frequently carved or engraved upon stone Egyptian pillows (Foucart, 1912), presumably to bring the deity into closer physical proximity with the dreaming soul. In a similar fashion Egyptians placed images of deities inside of their pillows. For example,

> *'. . .a stone head-rest or pillow, of the usual form, was found at Memphis having a small shrine hollowed in the side of it, evidently to contain an image of a god close beneath the sleeper's head (Petrie, 1910).*

Cutaneous Stimulation

The simple act of sleeping in a novel location and bed is likely to induce changes in how the dreamer's body is stimulated during the night. Bodies were likely exposed to unusual and unfamiliar cutaneous and kinesthetic sensations, such as the novel textures produced from the sleeping garments and covers, or strange sleep postures required by irregular sleeping surfaces. The example of seekers to the Trophonian oracle mentioned earlier who slept swaddled in linen on freshly-slaughtered hides illustrates this perfectly. Sleep in the sacred precincts likely also involved atypical night time routines, unusual sounds and noises during sleep, frequent night time awakenings, and so on.

However, even more specialized forms of cutaneous stimulation were also used in conjunction with dream incubation. Some of these may have had only mild effects on subsequent dreams, such as the practices of purificatory bathing required in some North American Indian groups, in Greek Asclepian temples, and in the later Christian churches (Hamilton, 1906b, pp. 179ff). Other methods were more likely to effect both bodies and dreams, such as the practices of pre-sleep bathing in cold water in the Trophonian oracles, of rubbing the face with mud, suet, or charcoal among some Indian groups (Radin, 1936, p. 243), of rubbing both the face and body with ashes or certain calcarous substances which induce the appearance of the 'pallid hue of a

Figure 8. Some primitive peoples rubbed ashes on the face and body to produce the pallid hue of a ghost

ghost' (Figure 8) among very primitive groups (Eliade, p. 64), and of rubbing the body with red liquid by initiates of the Dutch Guiana Caribs to make them 'handsome and worthy to enter the presence of the spirits' (Eliade, p. 128).

Finally, some harsher procedures likely had quite extreme effects. Two of these are described in some detail. The first, used by pre-Christian druids, was a complex ritual for procuring dreams that often culminated in a sleep posture consisting of crossing the arms and placing the palms against the cheeks.

> "The poet (or druid) chews a bit of the raw red flesh of a pig, a dog, or a cat, and then retires with it to his own bed behind the door. . .where he pronounces an oration over it and offers it to his ”idol gods”. He then ”invokes the idols”, and if he has not received the illumination before the next day, he pronounces incantations upon his two palms, and takes his idol gods unto him (into the bed) in order that he may not be interrupted in his sleep. He then places his two hands upon his two cheeks and falls asleep. He is then watched so that he be not stirred nor interrupted by any one until everything that he seeks be revealed to him at the end of a ”nomad (i.e., a day) or two or three, or as long as he continues at his offering" (in: Gerig, 1914, p. 128).

A second procedure, involving even more vigorous manipulations of the skin, was performed in healing rites by Quechua Indians of Peru. These Indians fell victim to soul loss or 'Susto' (Spanish for fright), after some traumatic encounter with lightning, a snake, or a malevolent earth spirit. Symptoms of the soul loss were weight loss, emotional imbalance, disturbed sleep, and nightmares. The healing rite was to result in the patient dreaming of a particular form of spiritual presence, specifically, the lost soul returning to the body in the shape of a tame animal. The pre-sleep incubation started with the patient being rubbed from head to toe with a living guinea pig in such a way that the guinea pig eventually expired. The creature was then skinned and a diagnosis read from its blood and entrails. In a second session, the patient was again rubbed with a mixture of various flowers, herbs and the flour of several grains. The medicine man wrapped the remaining mixture in a piece of the patient's clothing and used it to mark a trail to where the initial trauma had taken place, or else to some other dreaded place. The patient, meanwhile, remained in a darkened house with the door left open. The lost soul was expected to follow the trail back to the sleeping patient (Rosas, 1957, cited in Ellenberger, 1970, pp. 7-9). Rosas reports that he observed several cases of abrupt improvement or recovery after 1 or 2 applications of this treatment, even though medical physicians were unable to effect change in the patients.

Pain Induction

The most severe incubation procedures were those that inflicted bodily pain on the aspiring incubant. There are several possible explanations for the application of such procedures in the seeking of revelatory dreams. First, painful stimulation of the body may have signified a physical gesture of intended closeness to the deity. The chopping off of one's own finger joint or strip of flesh as an offering to the spirits during the vision quest of the Crow Indians (e.g., (Lincoln, 1970, p. 145ff; Eliade, 1964, p. 64; Tylor, 1903, vol 2, p. 400) can be seen as such a gesture. Such sacrifices may, in function and in form, have paralleled the less destructive rituals of offering small terra cotta icons of afflicted body parts that evolved independently in the dream incubation temples of Asklepius.

Second, pain manipulations may have been designed to attract the attention of deities by arousing in them sympathizing emotional responses. Rubbing with nettles or whipping (Eliade, 1960, pp. 203f) might have served such a purpose. Krickeberg (1993) describes the general case of the Delaware Indian puberty fast in which the boy or girl (around age 12) is taken to a prearranged place in the forest and left to his or her own devices.

> "Strictly forbidden to eat, the child remains alone with the silence of the day time and the voices of the night. The idea is that it will implore the spirits to take pity. The sight of the pale helpless creature, its head smeared with mud and its arms raised, begging to be granted a vision, is calculated to arouse the pity of sentient powers. Growing weakness - to be at its most effective the fast should last twelve days - and partial loss of consciousness finally so touches the hearts of the spirits that they put an end to the child's suffering by vouchsafing a vision. The whole family remains profoundly happy for a long period. (p. 168f)"

Finally, painful methods of dream incubation may have induced a state of exhaustion and lightness, presumably qualities that freed the seeker's soul to approach the spiritual presence. For example, one Indian elder stated that the benefit of fasting was to produce a sense of lightness of the body. The following dream of an Ojibwa youth after 5 successive days of puberty fasting suggests how such lightness might be incorporated directly into dreams.

> "(the spirit and I) looked into each others hearts, and guessed and gazed on our mutual thoughts and sensations. When he ordered me to follow him, I rose from my bed easily and of my own accord, like a spirit rising from the grave, and followed him through the air. The spirit floated through the air. I stepped as firmly as if I were on the ground, and

> it seemed to me as if we were ascending a lofty mountain, ever higher and higher, eastward." (Radin, 1936, p. 239)

Other Native Indian vision quest procedures seem allied with this theme of induced lightness, the choice of sleeping high in trees or on hill-tops, for example. Similarly, in some dramatic procedures, individuals manipulated the muscles beneath the skin by passing splints and ropes through the flesh and suspending themselves from a high place (Eliade, 1964).

Summary

Four features of incubation ritual have been described in an attempt to illustrate how pre-sleep and in-sleep influences on bodily experience may have played a central role in the dream incubation of ancient times. Although some of the specific rituals described may be considered extreme, bizarre or simply inappropriate by contemporary standards (e.g., pain infliction), the underlying principle of stimulating the body to influence dream content may still have some utility for bodily-oriented dreamwork approaches as applied to incubation.

Many more modern ‘dreamworking’ methods of promoting well-being, enhancing creativity, or solving personal problems (Krippner & Dillard, 1987) are 'bodily oriented' in that they focus on the bodily awareness that arises before, during or after dreams (Gendlin, 1986; Mindell, 1982; Mindell, 1985). Dream reflection presumably facilitates personal growth or problem-solving by revealing the kinesthetic, proprioceptive, or affective dimensions by which problems and concerns remain animated in private experience. A combination of such body-oriented dreamwork and dream incubation methods may thus yield dreams that are both rich in bodily themes and revelatory in nature. A recent laboratory experiment suggests that such dreams may well be induced. We found that when dreamers were given kinesthetic stimulation during REM sleep, their dreams gave prominence to motifs of bodily transformation (Nielsen, 1986). Moreover, participants reacted to their altered dreams with great excitement, as if further personal change was imminent. It seems worthwhile, then, to explore ancient methods of dream incubation with an eye to uncovering how to induce dreams of bodily change.

Modern methods of dream incubation.

Dreams incubated in contemporary times using a technique modelled on the ancient Asclepian incubation rituals (Reed, 1976) demonstrates the possibility of evoking distinctively spiritual presences during dreams. Sleep in a ‘sacred precinct’ (often a carefully prepared tent; Figure 9) was preceded by several techniques that included bodily-oriented procedures (attention to bathing, grooming, clothing, role-playing of dream characters, pre-sleep relaxation exercise) as

well as drawing, selection of symbols and intensive reflection. (Reed's publication of his dream incubation experiment can be found here: http://www.henryreed.com/incubation.pdf or here for a web-version: . A more recent, permanent, outdoor structure for dream incubation can be seen here: http://www.creativespirit.net/henryreed/flyinggoatranch/dreampagoda.htm).

Figure 9. View of a contemporary sacred precinct designed to incubate revelatory dreams

Participants undergoing this procedure often reported being visited by strange presences in their dreams and, after awakening, of remaining confused as to whether the visitation had really happened or not (p. 65). One of the most vivid dreams reported in this experiment demonstrates this reality of presence:

> 'She awoke, startled to find that a strong wind was blowing, and that the tent had blown away. A small, old woman appeared, calling out the incubant's name, and commanded her to awaken and pay attention to what was about to happen. The woman said that she was preparing the incubant's body for death and that the winds were spirits which would pass through her body to check the seven glands. The incubant was at first afraid, then took comfort in the old woman's aura of confidence and authority, and finally yielded her body to the experience, almost pleased with the prospect of death... (p. 66)'

The kinesthetic presence of this image of an old woman became manifest in the dreamer's bodily feelings of wind blowing and in her emotions of comfort, confidence, and authority. These were likely a major reason for the dream's realistic quality (Nielsen, 1991) and for the incubant's ability to finally yield bodily to the experience of death.

Other contemporary dreamworkers, also inspired primarily by Asclepian traditions, have attempted to induce revelatory dreams using a variety of methods. Deirdre Barrett (1993)

conducted an incubation experiment on 76 university students. For one week, they incubated dreams that addressed problems they had chosen. About half of the sample recalled a dream that they judged was related in some way to their chosen problem. Most of these thought that their dream in fact contained a solution to their problem. Personal problems were more likely to be viewed as solved than were academic or more general problems. The complete study can be found here: http://www.asdreams.org/journal/articles/barrett3-2.htm. Several other studies have examined the possibility on intentionally influencing dream content for problem-solving purposes (White & Taytroe, 2003; Saredi, Baylor, Meier, & Strauch, 1997; Marquardt, 1996); all have found evidence supporting the possibility.

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