

Dream books, ancient Egypt

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In ancient Egypt, as in many other ancient civilizations, a dream book – also known as an *oneirocriticon* – was a handbook containing lists of possible dream topics (from inanimate objects to living creatures, from trivial daily-life happenings to divine visions), each of which was followed by its mantic interpretation. In contrast with modern dream interpretation (see *DREAM INTERPRETATION*) as originally popularized by Sigmund Freud's work, ancient dream interpretation (also known as *oneiromancy*) interpreted dreams (see *DREAMS, PHARAONIC EGYPT AND ANCIENT NEAR EAST*) not in order to unveil facts and events about the dreamers' past, but about their future, treating dreams as omens. Dreams were believed to contain messages to be deciphered, messages that concerned the future of the dreamer or even of a third party, and thus their interpretation pertained to the field of divination (see *DIVINATION, ANCIENT NEAR EAST*), alongside other divinatory sciences such as astrology (see *ASTROLOGY, ANCIENT NEAR EAST*). It is important to realize that ancient Egyptian oneiromancy (and, more generally, divination as a whole) was seen by its practitioners as a proper science. Thus, dream books constituted actual scientific texts, in which dreams and predictions based on their interpretation were causally connected, and the very language and style in which dream books were written closely resembled the style of other scientific texts, such as medical or even legal manuals.

Our knowledge of ancient Egyptian dream books has hugely advanced in recent years. Until the early 2000s, only one manuscript of Pharaonic date – from the reign of RAMESES II, hence dubbed the “Ramesside dream book” (thirteenth century BCE) – was known, Papyrus Chester Beatty 3 (Gardiner 1935; Szpakowska 2011), written in hieratic. Substantial fragments from two dream books in DEMOTIC dating to

Roman times (second century CE), Papyri Carlsberg 13 and 14 verso, had also been published (Volten 1942). Besides this material, some additional small fragments from other papyrus manuscripts in Demotic of Ptolemaic and Roman dates were also known (e.g., Zauzich 1980), but the corpus at the disposal of scholars was, overall, relatively limited. Moreover, the chronological gap of over a millennium separating the Ramesside dream book from its Demotic counterparts often led scholars to wonder whether there was any continuity between the two traditions, or if the Demotic dream books were to be considered as something separate from their Pharaonic ancestor, and their revival as a peculiarity of the Graeco-Roman Period.

In the last fifteen years, however, the situation has radically changed, mainly thanks to an increased interest in the study of papyrological material from the later phases of Egypt's history. We now have papyrus fragments of two more hieratic dream books from Pharaonic times, namely, from the Late Period (Quack 2010). They represent a precious link between the Ramesside dream book and the Graeco-Roman material in Demotic, and unambiguously testify to the continuity of oneiromancy from Pharaonic to Ptolemaic and Roman times. As for the Demotic dream books, plenty of additional papyrus fragments from multiple oneirocritica have now been identified and edited, or are currently being prepared for publication (Prada 2015; Quack and Ryholt 2019). We thus now have a remarkably large corpus adding to our knowledge, with, in total, remains of three hieratic and more than ten Demotic manuscripts on papyrus (no single dream book survives intact).

The Ramesside dream book is not only the earliest known Egyptian dream book; it also shows the most peculiar internal organization of them all. The beginning and the end of the papyrus scroll are lost, but from the surviving columns of text we see that the dreams were not ordered by subject matter, as one would perhaps expect to be the most practical and reader-friendly taxonomy for a work of this

kind. Instead, the book is structured based on the nature of the dreamer: first come the dreams of men who were probably identified as the “followers of Horus” (the passage in question is lost with the beginning of the papyrus), and then those of men dubbed the “followers of Seth,” whose characteristics (both physical and behavioral) the text describes in full detail. Within each of these two sections, dreams were subdivided into two further groupings, this time on the basis of their mantic value: first came the dreams interpreted as auspicious, and then the ominous ones. To give an idea of the size of this composition, only for the “followers of Horus” more than a hundred auspicious dreams were listed (not all are preserved, due to the papyrus’ damaged condition), which were then followed by ninety-one considered to be harbingers of misfortune; as one example: “If a man sees himself in a dream seeing a dwarf: bad, (it means) the robbing of half of his life” (column 8, line 13). Moreover, at the close of the section dedicated to the ominous dreams of the “followers of Horus,” the Ramesside dream book also contains a magical spell to ward off any dream’s malignant influence.

The two later Pharaonic dream books in hieratic and, particularly, all the dream books in Demotic, show a different internal structuring. Their dreams are ordered based on their subject matter, and are thus divided into proper thematic chapters, typically introduced by headings: dreams about beer, about stones, about plants, about gods and goddesses, about reading, about writing, about cities, about Pharaoh, about swimming, about murder, about sex, about birds – the huge number of attested topics ideally covers all areas of human experience (Prada 2012). Within these thematic chapters, auspicious or ominous dreams are not separated into two groups, as in the Ramesside dream book, but are mixed all together. However, at least a basic taxonomy of dreamers was retained also in the Demotic dream books, since these manuals can show sections catering separately for male and for female dreamers. An example of the latter is, for instance, in P. Carlsberg 13: “when (she

dreams that) a crocodile has sex with her: she will die swiftly” (column b2, line 26). This continuous attention to the characteristics of the dreamer in both Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman dream books is important, for it shows the persistence of an underlying concept that the same dream can have different meanings and outcomes for different dreamers.

The dreams listed in ancient Egyptian oneirocritica offer an encyclopedic panoramic of the topics of which the ancient Egyptians thought one could ever possibly dream, and thus reflect their own taxonomy of the world. Indeed, we should not consider them to be a collection of dreams actually dreamt of and later collected in written form. The material they contain is of great importance for modern historians not only in terms of our study of divination and dreams, but also for what the interpretations (i.e., predictions) assigned to each dream reveal with regard to the hopes and fears of entire social groups. Preoccupations featuring in the predictions include, for example, wealth and financial matters, matrimonial problems or happiness, social status, health, and divine (dis)favor. They thus enlighten us on the worries of the “average” Egyptians, since it is clear that dream books (especially in the case of the Demotic ones) were not meant to cater only for the elites.

Who were the practitioners who owned and used dream books in ancient Egypt? The Ramesside dream book seems to be exceptional in this respect too, in that it belonged to the private library of a learned scribe, Qenherkhepshef, living in Deir el-Medina. The later dream books are instead likely (and, in most cases, certain) to have been preserved in temple libraries. Members of the priesthood would specialize in all sorts of divination, including dream interpretation, and ownership and use of dream books would be their prerogative. Members of the public were probably able to use their service and have their own dreams interpreted in exchange for a fee or an offering, although the sources are not explicit about these more practical implications of oneiromancy.

SEE ALSO: Religion, Pharaonic Egypt.

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