

Sex on the brain

Bringing up to date an astonishing and enriching text

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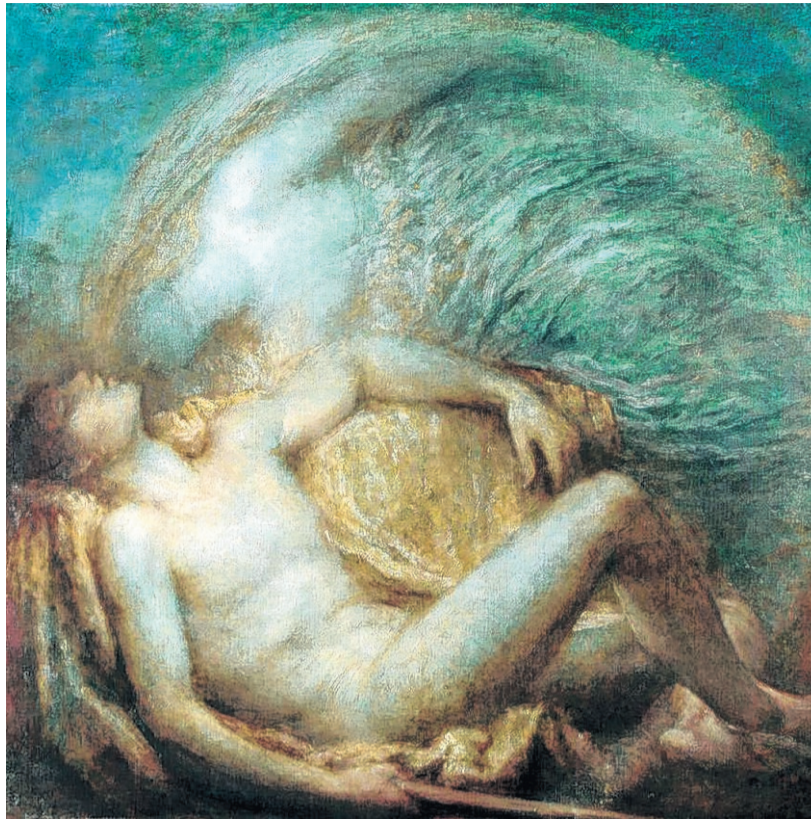
**THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS
ARTEMIDORUS**

Peter Thonemann and Martin Hammond, editors
416pp. Oxford University Press. £10.99

AN ANCIENT DREAM MANUAL

Artemidorus' *The Interpretation of Dreams*
PETER THONEMANN

256pp. Oxford University Press. £20.



ARTEMIDORUS' *INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS* is the only treatise on how to interpret dreams to have survived from antiquity. The *Oneirocritica*, in Greek, contains accounts of the

images seen by Greek-speaking dreamers during the second century CE that open hundreds of fascinating windows into their mental lives. Sometimes, in a strangely reassuring way, it suggests our psychologi-

cal similarity to our classical ancestors, who also dreamt of flying, birth, sex, death, houses, significant numerals and verbal puns. But at other times, the dreams and recorded outcomes jolt the reader into confronting the gulf which lies between us and the ancients: there is a depressing number of references to horrible punishments such as crucifixion and castration, as well as fantasies of having sex with Hera or Artemis and turning into Xanthus, the Trojan river-god. Classical scholars began to take serious interest in Artemidorus in response to the third volume of Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* (1984). Artemidorus' first book contains a riveting account of dreams about sex, experienced by (mostly male) clients, about oral sex, masturbation and intercourse with wives, prostitutes, siblings, sons, daughters, older men, younger men, deities, corpses and animals as well as both male and female slaves. He refers, for example, to a breathtaking variety of sexual positions, not all of them portending disaster, in which ancient men dreamt they had sex with their mothers. This helps to explain why Sigmund Freud read Artemidorus, along with nineteenth-century classical scholarship on ancient dream interpretation. Almost a century later, Foucault persuasively used the parts of Artemidorus' treatise discussing dreams about sexual activity and genitalia to support his proposition that, in the pagan ancient world, sexual acts acquired their significance from the extent to which the (male) dreaming subject maintained or deviated from his superior position as a social subject. To put it baldly, this came down to who did the penetrating. Sexual agency was symbolic of superior social status, regardless of the sex, age or status of the "penetratee".

By the mid-1990s, no discussion of ancient gender and sexuality was complete without reference to Artemidorus. This was partly thanks to Foucault, but also to the late Simon Price, an innovative Roman historian, who brought Artemidorus to a different academic audience in a still-indispensable article in *Past & Present* (1986), reflecting on dream interpretation from the ancient world to Freud. A few classicists then began to venture beyond Artemidorus' sex dreams to think about the others, which vastly outnumber them, and use them to illuminate, for example, athletes and gladiators (some of Artemidorus' most interesting customers) and slaves (who dreamt constantly about emancipation). Yet, until now, Artemidorus' fascinating book has been kept under virtual lockdown in the English-speaking world outside the academy. The three previously available translations are eye-wateringly expensive and/or unreliable. This readable and precise new version by Martin Hammond changes all that.

This book pulls off a double feat. The lively introduction and explanatory notes by Peter Thonemann, the judiciously selected suggestions for reading, and above all the sub-divisions of longer sections and the marvellously useful index, make Artemidorus accessible to lay readers and even casual browsers. If you have a dream about seeing your face in the moon, you can now find out in seconds how Artemidorus would have interpreted it (answer: you will have a child of the same sex as you who resembles you strongly). But no Artemidorus scholar will want to be without this book, either; for Hammond has on several occasions revised the standard Greek text edited by Roger Pack (1963), partly by drawing on a ninth-century Arabic translation, published in 1964, to which Pack did not have access. In four deft pages of notes on the Greek text, Hammond explains his choices, showing classicists that we do not need a major new textual edition of an ancient author every time an editor chooses a few variant readings. A few pages in an economy paperback will suffice.

Hammond is an experienced and respected translator of ancient Greek authors, but Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* represents a different challenge from Homer, Thucydides or Marcus Aurelius. He is writing a practical handbook for use by other dream-interpretors, including his son, to whom he addresses

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part of the work. It is in workmanlike prose, shorter sentences than literary authors, and it uses a great deal of repetition of key phrases such as “a man dreamt that” or that some phenomenon (partridge, leek, tooth) in a dream “is auspicious” or “inauspicious” “for a rich man and a slave alike”. Hammond has achieved a fine balance between faithful representation of this mundane, repetitive and technical language and propelling it freshly forward. Here is a typical example: “To dream of boxing is harmful for everyone. It signifies financial damage as well as disgrace, as boxing disfigures the face and causes loss of blood, which has long been considered a symbol of money. The dream is only auspicious for those who depend on bloodletting for their living, by which I mean doctors, sacrificers, or butchers”.

This entry is in a section dealing with dreams about several types of athletic event; it follows wrestling and precedes competing in the brutal contact sport called the *pankration*. It exemplifies the major principles underlying all Artemidorus’ work. First, dreams are predictive rather than psychoanalytical, informative or retrospective (like most people in antiquity he saw dream analysis primarily as a form of foretelling the future). Secondly, although he emphasizes the importance of accumulated experience and especially of ascertaining whether the interpretations were proved accurate by ensuing events, this hands-on, empirically acquired expertise must be supplemented by a sophisticated decoding of similarities, rather like understanding metaphors: “A mouse signifies a household slave; it lives in our house, it shares our food, and is a constant presence”. Thirdly, it is crucial for the interpreter to know the “identity of the dreamer, his occupation, his birth, his financial situation, his state of health, and his age”. In practice, the same usually applies to gender. Artemidorus has a sensibly relativist model of human happiness, and is aware that the same symbol might mean different things in different minds, especially minds belonging to people of radically different status: “Dreaming of olive trees being harvested is auspicious for all others, but for slaves it predicts a beating, because the tree is beaten to drop its fruit”.

Our understanding of the way that Artemidorus worked, and how his mind organized his treatise, has been immeasurably enriched by Hammond’s collaborator, Peter Thonemann, in the book that accompanies the translation. Thonemann has been fascinated by this dream-book since he was introduced to it as an undergraduate by his tutor, Simon Price, author of that seminal article. A strength of this monograph is the respect for Artemidorus felt by Thonemann, combined with his obvious pleasure in the company of his politically insignificant but professionally conscientious subject. This is doubly refreshing because Artemidorus has produced extreme reactions in other scholars. William Harris dismissed him as “a man of monumental gullibility” and Glen Bowersock as a “snob”.

Thonemann, however, takes Artemidorus on his own terms, and while his pellucid analysis does reveal a couple of glaring inconsistencies in Artemidorus’ intellectual system, his admiration for Artemidorus’ over-riding insistence on each dream interpreter improving his skills with every customer encounter is infectious. So is his enthusiasm for his subject’s astonishing lack of apparent judgement of clients who were poor, or unfree, or prostitutes, or criminals. Artemidorus offers us an exceptional, diverse and colourful cast of characters, ripe, as Thonemann says, for appraisal by historians of ancient society and thought. But the dream-book is a confusing, maze-like read. Vast thought has obviously gone into Thonemann’s analysis and arrangement of the dispersed and unruly material into twelve largely thematic chapters, addressing, for example, the body, the natural world and the gods. These are enhanced by his elegant writing, thrilling use of contextualizing material, and well-chosen illustrations. One is the vivid shop-sign of a Cretan dream interpreter in the Egyptian town of Memphis, advertising his business near a sanctuary

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where people slept overnight in the hopes of receiving dream-messages from a god. His symbol was a bull and an altar, probably suggesting that the god in question was Apis.

Thonemann’s Epilogue “Artemidorus after Antiquity” traces the book’s extraordinary survival via Byzantine culture - eventually in just two manuscripts - which may suggest that even the learned monks who copied it out enjoyed looking up the possible meanings of their dreams. The account of the Arabic translation made in Baghdad by the Christian physician Hunayn b. Ishāq suggests that dream interpretation was popular in Abassid culture as well. Thonemann’s example shows the urgency of the need for more investigation of the reception and translation of these “useful” ancient Greek technical texts, or of compilations of aphorisms relating to intimate personal matters, such as parts of Hippocrates, the (often sex-related) Peripatetic *Problems*, and the much-reissued and adapted *Masterpiece* or *Secrets* attributed to Aristotle, which includes information from his *Reproduction of Animals*. They, like Artemidorus, were published in English translation and epitome (in Artemidorus’ case even Welsh) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, far earlier than most of Plato, say, or the Greek tragedians.

Thonemann writes brilliantly on Artemidorus’ acquaintance with earlier writers of dream books, with Homer, and with the types of entertainment, such as pantomime (masked and danced enactment of tragic plots), which dominated culture in the Greek East in the second century AD. I would have enjoyed more discussion of the debt Artemidorus owed to the earlier Ancient Near Eastern tradition

of dream interpretation and classification evidenced in both Babylonian and Assyrian texts. I also spotted one rare error concerning the popularity of different Euripidean plays in antiquity. When Artemidorus quotes a line from Iphigenia’s dream in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Thonemann asserts that it was “not one of Euripides’ better-known plays in antiquity”. While *Andromache*, he says, was well known. Exactly the opposite is true. *Iphigenia in Tauris* was especially familiar in Artemidorus’ part of the world (he was born in Ephesus and his mother came from Daldis) for reasons to do with the local cults of Artemis. Artemidorus may, moreover, have been making a larger point. Iphigenia’s own interpretation of her dream, as indicating that Orestes has died, is revealed by the play to have been wholly incorrect. But the dream itself, in that she will find herself in the situation of preparing Orestes for death, turns out to have made an accurate prediction. Iphigenia dreams true dreams but needs a more competent dream-interpreter. No wonder her dream seems to have won an honoured place in the ancestral discourse of this profession.

But these are tiny details which in no way compromise Thonemann’s vision and joint achievement with Hammond. These two vibrant books represent a landmark in the study of Artemidorus. They will be read with astonishment by psychoanalysts and excitement by social and cultural historians. They will substantially raise the profile of dream studies within Classical scholarship and, best of all, the public’s ability to access what Thonemann enticingly describes as “the magnificent, credulous, labyrinthine, pedantic and endlessly fascinating *Oenirocritica* of Artemidorus of Daldis”. ■