If time travel were possible, we could simply ask Ancient Egyptians about their dreams. Instead, we must make do with the scant records that have survived thousands of years. And just as our own perception of dreams has changed over time (just consider what a difference Freud made!) so too did that of the Egyptians. Bearing that in mind, it is still possible to catch a glimpse of Ancient Egyptian dreams and nightmares through their words written on stone and papyrus, as well as the personal objects they left behind. The focus here is on material from approximately 2600-664 BCE.

The most common word used for “dream” throughout Ancient Egyptian history was the noun “resut” which means literally “awakening.” Egyptian words are usually written as a combination of phonetic signs, plus a sign or classifier at the end, indicating the category of the word. Thus, words related to dogs have the sign of a dog behind them. Interestingly, the classifier usually used for resut was the open eye, Ꝓ, a sign that was also used for words related to visual perception (such as “to see,” “to be vigilant.”). There was no specific verb for dreaming—only a noun. In their terminology, one could see something “in a dream,” or see “a dream.” In other words, a dream was the object of a verb of visual perception—it was something you could passively see, rather than something you could do.

In contrast to modern understandings of the nature of a dream, the Egyptians did not think of it as arising from within the sleeper, nor as a psychological phenomenon, nor as an activity performed by an individual. Rather, it had an objective external existence outside the will of the passive dreamer. In a way, the dream was perceived as a threshold space whose boundaries lay somewhere between the world of the living and the world beyond—one that allowed contact between the dreamer and those who inhabited the afterlife: gods, the dead, daemons, and the damned.

Ancient Egyptian authors used the concept of a dream as a powerful literary device in poems, song, and fictional narratives. Just as today, dreams were used as metaphors to accentuate that which is ephemeral and uncontrollable. In The Teachings of Ptahhotep, the author warned the reader against abusing friendship by approaching the women of the friend’s household for fear that “a split second, the likeness of a dream, and death is reached on account of knowing her.” Here, the more negative aspects of a dream as insubstantial and untrustworthy inspired its use as an analogy for improper behavior.

The dream appeared in the fictional Tale of Sinuhe, a popular tale of the adventures of a man who fled Egypt upon hearing of the untimely death of the pharaoh, but always longed to return. He attempted to explain his unjustified flight by claiming “I don’t know what separated me from my place. It was like the unfolding of a dream—like a man from the North seeing himself in the South, a man of the marshlands in Nubia.” The dream was used to emphasize and excuse the irrationality of the hero’s behavior, and the dreamer portrayed as a passive viewer of a scenario which unfolds before him and over which he has no control.
Interestingly, the Egyptians were also the first to coin the now popular phrase “life is but a dream.” Over 3000 years ago the sentiment was recorded as part of a harper’s song inscribed on the walls of two tombs “… as for a lifetime done on earth, it is but the moment of a dream…”

The recording of actual dream content was extremely rare. Prior to 750 BCE, only a handful of examples have survived. The earliest are found in letters to the dead. On one, a woman writes to her deceased female relative, begging her to expel the pain of her body while she watches the deceased fight on her behalf in a dream. Another letter contains what may be the first recorded case of an anxiety dream caused by a guilty conscience. Here, a man writes to his dead father begging him to prevent another dead man from malevolently watching him in a dream. Visions of divinities were exceptional.

Prior to the Greek period, only two non-royal divine dreams are known, and both feature the beautiful and accessible goddess Hathor. In one case she appeared to a man who seems to have fallen asleep during her festival. The other was reported by one of her priests who proclaims that she spoke to him “with her own mouth” while he was dreaming in the deepest darkest part of the night. She showed him where to build his tomb, and there he recorded this epiphany as part of a hymn to be remembered forever.
Hathor columns in the Hathor Chapel in the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri. (Photo courtesy of the author).

Four pharaohs recorded dreams in which powerful gods communicated with them. The most well-known is the dream of Thutmose IV, who fell asleep at noon at the foot of the sphinx and discovered the sun god Ra-Harakhty speaking to him in a dream. The god complained that his monument (the sphinx) has been neglected and promised Thutmose IV that if he clears away the sand that had built up around it, he would be crowned king. Note that this dream was recorded on a stela (placed between the feet of the sphinx) years after the crowning of Thutmose IV. These dreams affirmed and stressed the exclusive relationship between the king and the gods.

Dream Stela of Thutmose IV. The upper part shows the pharaoh offering to the sphinx. (Giza, Egypt. Photo courtesy of author)
The twenty-fifth dynasty ushered in the Late Period, a span of time when Egypt struggled and failed to maintain its independence against a rising Assyrian empire. The last pharaoh of the twenty-fifth dynasty, Tanutamani, introduced a new element of dreams into the royal discourse: a symbolic dream requiring an interpreter. In his dream, the pharaoh saw two snakes, one on either side of him. The dream was interpreted for him as representing Upper and Lower Egypt, over which the pharaoh had total dominion.

Ancient Egyptians did practice dream interpretation, though not as much as is generally assumed. Only a few dream manuals exist, organized as lists of dreams and their meanings. These show that punning was a key feature linking each dream and its interpretation. The individuals responsible for interpreting dreams were likely priests, rather than specialist diviners.

But perhaps the largest number of references to dreams in Ancient Egypt mentioned bad dreams or nightmares. Attested largely in magico-medical texts, as well as indirectly via objects used in rituals, it is clear that nightmares were blamed on hosts of hostile dead and demons assaulting the vulnerable sleeper. The continuing need to protect the vulnerable sleeper from nightmares is reflected in the fashioning of bedposts, headboards, and headrests decorated with spells for good sleep or images of guardian genii. Some of these supernatural beings were literally armed to the teeth with spears, knives, and even snakes. The subject of Egyptian nightmares is fascinating, and worth a separate article.

Relief of a “Bes-image” guardian holding knives. (Louvre N5433. Photo courtesy of author).

Modern research focusing on the biological nature of sleep and dreams has questioned the boundaries between waking and dreaming, suggesting a fluid relationship that might have sounded familiar to an Ancient Egyptian. Throughout Ancient Egypt’s long history, a dream, literally an “awakening,” was perceived as a liminal phenomenon or zone, that allowed contact between beings in this world and the beyond.

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