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Introduction

Despite being the oldest civilization in history, there is still an increasing fascination for everything Egyptian, something which was referred to as *Egyptomania* [1]. Regarding sleep medicine, the contribution of ancient Egypt dates back to 4000 BC and it tackles various aspects concerning the nature of sleep and dreaming, dream interpretation, use of sleep as therapy, description of sleep problems like insomnia, description of treatments for sleep disorders, and others.

How Were the Words “Sleep” and “Dream” Expressed in Hieroglyphics (Ancient Egyptian Language)?

The ancient Egyptians used the word *qed* (symbolized by a bed) to denote sleep, and the word *rswt* or *resut* (depicted as an open eye) to refer to dream. The literal translation of *rswt* means *to come awake*; thus, a dream is expressed in hieroglyphics by the symbol of *bed*, combined with the symbol of *open eye*. Such a combination makes the word dream to be read as *awaken within sleep*, which is an early description of the physiologic similarity of dreams to wakefulness, despite being asleep [2].

Dream = “*rswt*” (awaken) (open eye) + “*qed*” (sleep) (bed)

This symbol may be pointing also to the state of consciousness that we call today *lucid dreaming* [3].

What Is the Meaning (Concept) of Sleep in Ancient Egyptian Culture?

Ancient Egyptians believed each person has five bodies [4]:

1. *ka*=creative or divine power or the living physical body
2. *ba*=soul, able to travel beyond the physical body
3. *akh* or *Shat*=body of the deceased in the afterlife (the corpse body) which means the union of the *ka* and *ba*
4. *the name*=living part of the person
5. *the shadow*=another living part of the person

This description of multidimensional levels of the self has something to do with sleep, as the ancient Egyptians believed in the ability of the *ba* (soul) to travel beyond the physical body during sleep. The *ba* was represented in hieroglyphics as a human-headed bird floating above the sleeping body. In that sense, sleep was viewed to be similar, in some aspect, to death, in which the person is in a different state or a different world. Being strong believers in the afterlife, sleep was considered as a way or outlet to that mysterious world and a means through which a person can communicate with the dead as well as his *gods*. For this reason, it is not surprising to find some rituals related to sleep to resemble what is adopted in preparation for death [5].

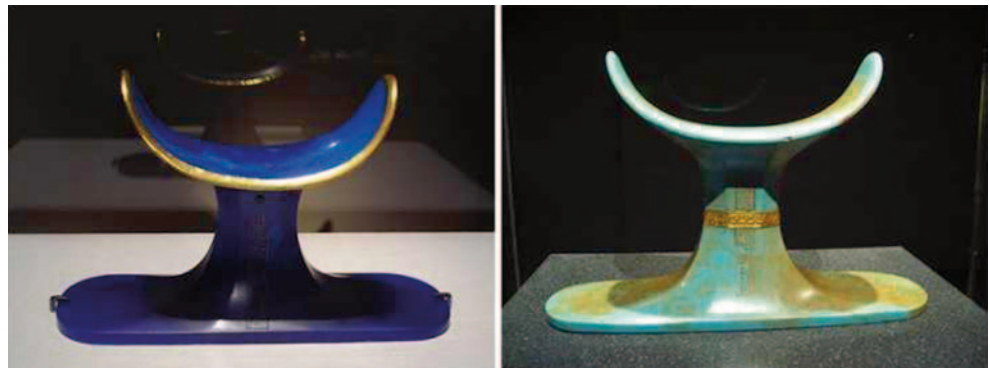
The headrests used for the act of sleeping during life were most probably of a symbolic nature and were essential requirement for funeral—to be kept with the dead in his burial chamber, acting as a pillow for eternal sleep, ensuring the head remained physically intact with the body in the afterlife (Fig. 2.1). Thus, if the tomb represented the home for the deceased, the burial chamber represented the bedroom [6].

The idea that the dead were sleeping or that they occupied another dimension not totally disconnected from the living is indicated in letters to the dead written on *papyrus* or *ostraca*, including Coffin Texts. These Coffin Texts functioned as ritually protective spells and instructions, intended to ensure safe passage to the afterlife. In Coffin Text (CT) 74, it was written “Oh sleeper, turn about in this place which you do not know, but I know it. Come that we may raise his head. Come that we may reassemble his bones” [6].

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Fig. 2.1 Two headrests from the tomb of Tutankhamun [6]



How Were Dreams Dealt with by Ancient Egyptians?

The Importance of Dreams

Like many ancient cultures, the Egyptians put quite a bit of emphasis on dreams. They believed the gods could show themselves in dreams, delivering messages that could guide them in their lives, i.e., the received messages might cure an illness or help them make important decisions, to the point of deciding where to build a new temple or when to wage a war.

The Egyptians also believed that their dreams could serve as a window to see the activities of the dead. However, they often feared these types of dreams, being afraid that this could bring about unwanted evil spirits [7].

Types of Dreams

The records list three main types of dreams [8]:

1. Those in which the gods would demand some pious act
2. Those that contained warnings (perhaps about illness) or revelations
3. Those that came about through ritual

Dream Incubation

Like other Near Eastern people, the Egyptians believed that the dreams could serve as oracles, bringing messages from the gods. The best way to get the desired answer, especially in sickness, was to induce or “incubate” dreams (Incubate comes from the Latin *incubare*, meaning *to lie down upon*). To incubate dreams, Egyptians would travel to a sanctuary or shrine, where they slept overnight on a special *dream bed* in the hope of receiving divine advice, comfort, or healing from their dreams. There were dream or sleep temples built specifically for this reason. The temples were open to everyone who believed in the god the temple was dedicated to, as long as they were considered pure. To achieve this, the person often went through a ritual of cleansing that included

fasting and abstinence for several days prior to entering the temple to assure their purity. The name of the god the person hoped to contact at the temple was written on a piece of linen and that linen cloth was burned in a lamp while at the temple. To help call the god, the dreamer would often recite a special prayer to him or her. Once they visited the ancient Egyptian dream temple, the person would often go to a priest or dream interpreter for dream analysis [7].

Dream Analysis in Ancient Egypt (The Dream Book)

Because they put so much stock into dreams, it was important for Egyptians to be able to understand the significance and meaning of their dreams. Like many others, some Egyptians kept a dream book—a book that chronicled their dreams and the interpretation of them. One such dream book, written on papyrus, dates all the way back to approximately 1275 BC, during the reign of Ramesses II [9, 10] (Fig. 2.2).

It is believed that the ancient Egyptian dream book kept in the British Museum in London had many owners as it was passed down for more than a century. All in all, the dream book included 108 different dreams, which included such activities as weaving, stirring, seeing, eating, and drinking.

The dreams were categorized into good (*auspicious*) dreams and bad (*inauspicious*) dreams, with the bad dreams being written in red, a color of bad omens. In this book, there are hieratic signs that state such interpretations, as that it is good when a man dreams he sees himself looking out of a window. Even a man seeing himself dead was seen as a good sign, meaning that he would live a long life. However, if a man dreamed he saw his own face in a mirror it was a bad omen. Also, dreaming of putting your own face to the ground was seen as a bad omen. It was believed that that particular dream meant that the dead wanted something.

Qenherkhepshef’s dream book was a family affair; penned by his grandson, the scribe Amen-nakht, who was the son of Kha-em-nun, Qenherkhepshef’s oldest child. The texts allow insight, not only into the dreams of these ancient people but also into the everyday experiences of their lived lives.

Fig. 2.2 Qenherkhepshef's dream book, BM 10683,3 [10]



Listing of Dreams in the Dream Book [9]:

The dream book is divided into lists of auspicious and inauspicious dreams:

a. Auspicious dreams (good dreams)

- If a man sees himself eating crocodile meat, it is good, meaning that he becomes an official among his people.
- If a man sees himself burying an old man, it is good, meaning prosperity.
- If a man sees himself sawing wood, it is good, meaning his enemies are dead.
- If a man sees himself seeing the moon shining, it is good, meaning a pardon from God.
- If a man sees himself in a dream slaying a hippopotamus, it is good, meaning that a large meal from the palace will follow.
- If a man sees himself in a dream plunging into the river, it is good, meaning purification from all evil.

b. Inauspicious dreams (bad dreams)

- If a man sees himself in a dream seizing one of his lower legs, it is bad, meaning a report about him by those who are yonder (the dead).
- If a man sees himself measuring barley in a dream, it is bad, meaning the rising of worlds against him.
- If a man sees himself bitten by a dog in a dream, it is bad, meaning that he is touched by magic.
- If a man sees himself in a mirror in a dream, it is bad, meaning that he will find another wife.
- If a man sees himself in a dream making love to a woman, it is bad, because it means mourning.

- If a man sees himself in a dream looking at an ostrich, it is bad, meaning that harm will befall him.
- If a man sees himself in a dream feeding cattle, it is bad, because it means wandering the earth.
- If a man sees himself in a dream casting wood into water, it is bad, meaning bringing suffering to his house.
- If a man sees himself removing the nails of his fingers, it is bad, because this means removal of the work of his hands.
- If a man sees the gods making cessation of tears for him in a dream, it is bad, because it means fighting.

It is not known to what extent these interpretative guides were used in daily life. Few people would have had access to such texts; few people were literate and able to read them. There are indications that many villages may have had a priest, or a local scribe, or else who could interpret dreams in which deceased relatives or gods might appear. Some later New Kingdom Deir el Medina texts refer to “the wise woman” of the village who supplied advice. Such *seers* were consulted not only concerning dreams, but also on other issues affecting daily life including disputes with neighbors, or concerns over failing crops. Dreams could be powerful experiences and revelatory dreams in particular, were taken seriously [11].

Most Prevalent Dreams

Like today, the ancient Egyptians had some dreams that were more prevalent than others were. People often dreamed of breaking stones, which the Egyptians interpreted as having one's teeth fall out. Dreaming of your teeth falling out is still a common dream today [11].

Many often dreamed of drowning in the Nile or climbing to the top ship’s mast. However, some other common dreams seem to defy explanation. Dreaming that your face turned into a leopard was a common dream in ancient Egypt [11].

Reading Dreams in Different Ancient Cultures, Compared to Egypt

Dream interpretation differed in various ancient cultures. The symbolic meaning of items in a dream might even have contradictory explanations. Table 2.1 is an illustration of how four different common items are symbolically interpreted in the ancient Egyptian culture, compared to other ancient cultures, namely the Assyrian, the Greek, and the Hebrew [8].

How Did Ancient Egyptian Medicine Deal with Sleep Disorders?

The medicine of ancient Egypt is one of the oldest documented scientific disciplines. It is said that, “If one had to be ill in ancient times, the best place to do so would probably have been in Egypt.”

The Egyptian priest–physicians served a number of important functions, discovering and treating a lot of diseases, through some powerful magic (rituals, spells, incarnations, talismans, and amulets), deities, scripture, herbal medicine, and some other methods.

Unfortunately, only a few papyri have survived, from which one could learn about Egyptian Medicine [12]:

- 1. The *Edwin Smith Papyrus* describing surgical diagnosis and treatments (Fig. 2.3)

Table 2.1 Dream symbols in different ancient cultures [8]

Item	Pot	Tree	Snake	Bird
Egyptian	Filling a pot=bad omen Beer poured from a pot=robbery	Sitting in a tree=troubles could be overcome	Good omen, indicating that the dreamer would soon settle some dispute	Catching birds=loss of something precious
Assyrian	Empty pot=poverty Full goblet=children and fame	Cutting date palm trees=solution of problems	Seizing a snake=protection from angels	Meeting a bird=return of lost property
Greek	Wine poured from pots=serenity Drinking a cup dry was lucky	Trees for making ships=unlucky sign (except for carpenters and seamen)	Ill omen (illness, enemies)	Eagles=rulers Wild pigeons=immoral women
Hebrew	Cooking pots=peace and domestic calm	Palm trees=punishment for past sins	Snakes=secure livelihood Snake bite=doubled income	Good omen, except owls (bad luck)

Fig. 2.3 Edwin Smith Papyrus [12]



2. The *Ebers Papyrus* (dates from the sixteenth century B.C.) on ophthalmology, diseases of the digestive system, the head, the skin and specific maladies like aAa, which some think may have been a precursor of aids and others, perhaps more reasonably, consider to have been a disease of the urinary tract, a compilation of earlier works that contains a large number of prescriptions and recipes (Fig. 2.4)
3. The *Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus*
4. The Berlin Medical Papyrus
5. The London Medical Papyrus
6. The *Hearst medical papyrus* repeats many of the recipes found in the Ebers papyrus
7. The *Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* contains a number of spells for treating physical ailments

Insomnia

The Egyptian medical papyri mentioned for the first treatment in history that the ancient Egyptians described use of poppy seed (*opium*) as hypnotic to relieve insomnia, headache, and also as an anesthetic [12].

Lavender, which is considered *herbal sleep remedy*, was used by the Egyptians to preserve their mummies, which has something to do with their belief about death as an *eternal sleep* [13].

Chamomile was considered a sacred plant by the ancient Egyptians, being offered to the gods. It was used for different purposes as a cosmetic treatment, anesthetic, and antiseptic. It was known to induce a state of quiet and serenity foreword for sleep [14].

Snoring

Ebers Papyrus mentioned that *Thyme*—a herb used by the Egyptians for embalming—was thought to be beneficial in reducing snoring [15].

An interesting story about snoring was mentioned in one of the famous myths about “Isis” (the mother of goddess of

ancient Egypt). According to this story, *Isis* found *Ra* (the sun god), asleep one day, snoring loudly, and saliva dripping from his mouth. She collected the saliva and mixed it with earth to form *poisonous serpent*, which she later used to force *Ra* to disclose his secret name to her! [16]

Narcolepsy

The Edwin Smith Papyrus referred to epilepsy without clear description of narcolepsy, as described in the translated Babylonian texts [17].

Hypnosis

The ancient civilizations of Egypt, China, and Tibet used hypnosis in one way or another, with reference to deep sleep. Sleep temples are regarded by some as an early instance of hypnosis, over 4000 years ago, under the influence of *Imhotep*, who served as chancellor and high priest of the sun god *Ra*. Such sleep temples were like hospitals of sorts, healing a variety of ailments, perhaps many of them psychological in nature. The treatment involved chanting and placing the patient in a trancelike or hypnotic state, before analyzing his dreams, to determine the treatment [18].

Conclusion

As in any other field of science, the ancient Egyptians did have their own fingerprint in the area of sleep medicine. They linked sleep to death (and afterlife), and practiced dream interpretation in a rather systematized and constructive way. Their medical papyri included mentioning of some sleep disorders and their treatments. However, more research and studying are still needed to clarify some of the many undiscovered secrets of the miraculous Egyptian civilization regarding the mysterious world of sleep.



Fig. 2.4 Ebers Papyrus [12]

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Sleep Medicine

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