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A Contribution to Better Understand the Therapeutic Incubatory Rituals Within the Greek Antiquity

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Abstract

In this paper the whole historical, structural, and psychological aspects of the incubatory rituals practiced within the *Asklepieia*[1] will be deep-in examinated. The paper will start with an introductory remark on Hellenic incubation practice (1) to then move on to sequence and analyze the rituals associated with the cult considered (2) to highlight the state of mind they sought to induce in sufferers. Section (3) will be mostly focused on the connection between the ancient medicine and dreams, whilst the following section (4) analyzes a possible direct connection between theater and the dreaming world. Then, through comparison with a present-day incubatory cult (5) and the contribution derived from some modern psychological theories (6), we will try to formulate a plausible hypothesis (7) about the functional properties of such liturgies with reference to their ability to mobilize the deep energies of pilgrims, aimed at achieving healing from the physical and psycho-physical ills that afflicted them or at solving other pressing problems[2].

Keywords: Dreams and ancient medicine - Dreams and ancient theatre - Incubation in modern psychology - Functional hypothesis.

1. Introduction: some general remarks on Greek incubation.

The incubation practice, already attested by the Sumerians, it was present in Mesopotamia from the third millennium B.C. It is difficult, however, to determine precisely whether and when this tradition, perhaps transiting through the Near East, actually spread throughout Greece[3].The first evidence of an incubatory practice in Greece is recorded by Herodotus[4], who witnessed the existence of the dream cult of Amphiaraus, a local hero, at the sanctuary of Oropos in Boeotia. However, it was through the worship of Asclepius that this practice flourished at Epidaurus[5]. The beginning of the latter cult is attested by an epigraph dating from the late 6th century B.C., whilst the first secure evidence of an incubatory ritual at this site comes through *iamata*[6] from the second half of the 4th century B.C.[7]. As time went on, such veneration experienced strong development, assuming remarkable proportions. This can been easily inferred from the subsequent enlargement and monumentalization of the sanctuary at Epidaurus, as well as that of other *Asklepieia* (*e.g.*, Pergamum)[8]. Moreover, the incubatory cult by expanding became *democratized*, so much so that, at its peak, it would attract many different users. This expansion was also linked to the revaluation of the illness notion itself, which passed, through such a cult, from a dimension of suffering *tout court* to the status of a possible privileged condition for numinous contact[9].

2. The sacred route

Cultic procedures that was followed at the beginning had many local variations, so that no two shrines proceeded from each other, and even it looks like different incubatory rituals may could coexist in the same location. We know that many ceremonies were performed collectively by all pilgrims to the shrine, while some were *refined* for incubants and still others were exclusively reserved for them. For expository utility we will divide the entire cultic journey into five steps:

a. The convocation: the patient usually went spontaneously to the shrine, sometimes after a dream in which the deity of the holy place invited him/her to join it. It could also happen that this appeal occurred through someone else's dream.
b. The preliminary prohibitions: those who had sexual intercourse few days prior to entering the sacred area were not allowed to enter the incubatory rooms, nor could they have access to the cult during the entire duration of the their stay in the *Asklepieion*. Excluded were also menstruating women and all those who had been recently came closed to with either births or deaths[10].
c. The preparatory rituals: preliminary donations by incubants consisted of money and/or sacrificial animals (usually either roosters or piglets). The offering of some kinds of sweets or breads was also expected. Incubants were also presumed to abide by certain dietary prescriptions, such as abstinence

from a variety of food, *e.g.,* meat and goat cheese. These aliments were likely considered indigestible and thus throught to disturb sleep and prevent truthful dreams. Limited periods of fasting could also be required. White robes used to distinguish incubants from other worshippers. White was associated with purity and was considered a necessary medium to achieve healing. Indeed, as Hedvig von Eherenheim[11] noted, incubants were required to have a greater degree of virtue than simple pilgrims. The final step, *i.e*., the opportunity for incubation, was not immediate and it could take some time, even months or years, before the subject was deemed fit to enter the final rite. It even happened that priests, also in presence of substantial offerings from the postulant, refused to perform the ceremony in its final steps if they considered the subject not to be fully purificated[12]. Luigi Lafasciano points out that the state of mind of those who were about to enter the *abaton*[13] was generally described by the term *hesuchia* (and the corresponding verb *hesuchazo)* meaning "tranquility" but also concentration, in reference to "total stillness, a fundamental requirement for the dreamlike encounter with divinity"[14]. Finally, if all ritual path had been properly observed, the pilgrims were sent to sleep in the *abaton*, with the intimation that they should observe absolute silence. The way pilgrims would spend the night was also very specific. First, men and women would lie down separately: men in the East, based on a very ancient classification that held the eastern side more conducive to their dream production, and women in the West[15]. In many cases incubants slept, instead of on normal *klinai,* in a bed of leaves or on top of a crude bedding (*stibas*) or on the skin of a sacrificed animal (usually a ram). All of which, together with the immobility and the required silence, concurred to make incubants enter even more into a sort of unknow dimension.

d. The incubatory night: at this point, while asleep, it could finally happen that in dreaming the god himself, appeared, or one of his theriomorphic *avatars,* such as a snake or a dog in the case of Asclepius, who either intervened directly on the sleepers by healing them, or indicated them the remedies to be taken to heal the ills that tormented them (usually herbs and diets, but sometimes also ablutions or physical activities). The sleepers would awaken sometimes already cured, or they would narrate the dream to the priests so that the latter could interpret it properly[16]. It was also important for the interpreters to understand the time at which the dream had appeared, because those occurring around dawn were considered more reliable[17] .

e. The concluding ceremonies: at the end of the healing process, pilgrims were to dedicate one of the two laurel wreaths with which they had been provided to Asclepius and then make the concluding offerings and/or sacrifices. In summary, as stated by Ido Israelowich:

This socially-organized cult taught an individual worshipper, like Aristides, how to relate to his illness; what he should expect from Asclepius; how the invoke the god; which vocabulary to use in the process; and how to recognise the hand of god when it finally touched his worshipper[18].

3. Dreams and medicine

Human anatomy was not a tool of ancient medicine, and dreams were one of the few ways through which one could grasp what was going on inside a human body, therefore they generally took significant diagnostic relevance.

Even Galen, in his treatise *De dignotione ex insomniis*[19] admitted that reading dreams could be helpful for clinical medicine, to more effectively achieve the healing of the sick person. Probably the incubatory practices could somehow direct the individual's deep attention to himself/herself and his/her body. In fact, generally, consciousness is too engrossed and hypnotized by daily *routines* to be able to make the decisive introspective break necessary for the individual to fully know, and understand his or her, psychophysical state. Even today's medicine is realizing that such practices certainly possessed a nontrivial kernel of truth, at least at the diagnostic level, as demonstrated by the pioneering work of Vasily Kasatkin[20].

Moreover priestly medicine could go hand in hand for a time with the "naturalistic" medicine that was beginning to establish itself[21]. In the V century B.C., these two therapeutic fields were by no means alternative but, on the contrary, usually operated in good accord. Interestingly, Lorenzo Perilli[22], has observed a wealth of structural and lexical similarities (such as medical technicalities, surgeries, etc.) between the *iamata* and the descriptions found in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*. In fact, the common antagonist of priests and physicians was magical medicine, represented by magicians, *goetai,* charlatans, etc., who, for example, saw diseases such as epilepsy as a manifestation of the gods' power over humans, and proposed cures that presupposed the belief that they could condition the gods themselves (Cf. *De Morbo sacro*, 2).

4. Dream and theater

The *Asklepieia* were endowed with libraries and clinical archives, and artistic events functional to the cures (*e.g*., musical) took place in them. At some point, as Lafasciano hypothesizes, theatres were also built where some incubatory dreams that had already occurred were performed to pilgrims who had yet to enter the *abaton*[23]. Such dramatization had a threefold effect: on the one hand it further magnified the power of Asclepius by convincing incubants even more of his thaumaturgic virtues. On the other, it placed the audience itself at the center of the stage, and thus of attention, by involving them more in the dream dimension on which their healing would depend. Lastly, the cathartic function typical of all theatrical performances could anticipate and prepare the purification that would occur during the dream thus making the repre-

sentation of the miracle more usable by an audience of pilgrims who must have been mostly illiterate[24].

5. Another incubatory ritual

For our purposes, we will now consider a ritual (*dharna*)[25] taking place in Tarakeswar near Calcutta, West Bengal, which brings together around a thousand pilgrims each year. It is an incubatory cult whose origins are lost in legend, and which bears many similarities to the Greek ones along with some notable differences. Since *Hindu* polytheism has never waned, the comparison between the two different ceremonials has seemed to us to be able to provide some useful elements to better understand the functional characteristics of dreams in the cult of Asclepius. We describe it very briefly: once the pilgrim arrives at the sacred place (again, sometimes after a "dream summons") he is asked to wear very simple clothing (with only two changes of clothes) and then to undergo a purifying bath and a common ritual meal together with the others[26] . He must also bring with him a blanket on which he will then lie down sleeping in the temple. Exactly as was the case in the *Asklepieia,* the ceremonial is forbidden to people who have had recent contact with births and deaths and women during their periods. On one point, however, the *Hindu* rite differs sharply from the Greek one, as it requires the pilgrim not to eat or drink a full four days and nights before. The pilgrim will be allowed to incubate only if he or she has passed this very severe test. It goes without saying that the entire stay at the shrine is much shorter than that stipulated by the Hellenic ritual; in fact, it lasts only four to five days after arrival, as the priests believe that the deity has no intention of manifesting itself if it has not done so within this lapse of time, so insisting would be futile.

In one crucial point, however, the two rituals coincide; in fact, both tend to bring about a *détournement* that enables the subject to emerge, albeit for a limited but indispensable period, from the dramatic and dead-end situation in which he has been immersed too long in his or her daily life, therefore to process it through a complex of mental (conscious and unconscious) activities and finally to objectify it through a dream. Interestingly, the two forms of diversion follow the cultural coordinates of the philosophical-religious environment that generated them. Indeed the Greek ritual tended toward achieving a state of mind quite close to an ideal of Apollinian serenity already present in Hellenic religion, whereas the much more drastic Bengali ceremonial, in requiring the decisive test of steadfastness, is somehow aligned with the *hindu* attitude that stigmatizes character weakness as one of the main, if not the main, flaws of the soul.

7. Incubation in modern psychology

So far the description of the Greek and the Hindu rituals. We will now try to elaborate on the way how the one and the other can be effective in solving the serious physical, psycho-physical and existential problems of pilgrims[27]. To do so we will be using the

concept of *incubation* as understood by some modern psychological schools, where this term is used in a broader sense than we did so far, namely, including not only nocturnal but also diurnal processing. Indeed, it has been noted that the incubation time is usually proportional to the the problem needed to be solved. On the matter, Sébastien Hélie and Ron Sun have stated that "incubation can last from a few minutes to many years, during which the attention of the problem solver is not devoted to the problem[28]".

Various psychological theories have attempted to explain how of incubatory works (*Conscious work*, *Unconscious work theory*, etc.)[29]. The *Conscious work* hypothesis argues that the effects of incubation are due to factors such as reduced mental fatigue and the presence of additional problem-solving activities during the incubation period itself[30]. Both possibilities involve changes in the conscious problem-solving mechanism in which the role of the pause would be to make the mind more inclined to receiving and assimilating stimuli from the out side. The words that Mircea Eliade wrote on the alienating experience of mystery cults well apply to the situation, stating that pursuing those cults produced: "detachment from the immediate, from the viscosity of the concrete, [achieving] the calm and serenity that are necessary to any effort of intellectual concentration[31]". Indeed, we know that in such cults one is driven to separate oneself through a series of ascetic practices, from the *hypnotizing force of the existent*[32]. It is plausible that such "magnetism" is more relevant when a person is afflicted with a serious physical or existential problem, hence the *break* needed to free one's attention from such worries must necessarily be of a *different quality or of greater intensity* than the *break* needed to distance oneself from daily routine. Remarkably, both definitions fit perfectly - in our opinion - with the two incubatory rituals described: on the one hand, in the Greek (softer) ritual mental fatigue is reduced while on the other hand, the strict Hindu fasting, shifts the focus on the most pressing urge, so distracting the subject from his/her personal problems.

Another interesting hypothesis is the *Unconscious work theory,* according to which a subject willing to solve an important problem continues to think about it intermittently while not being conscious of that it. Only after the solution has been taken, he becomes aware of it. And it is from this kind of work that incubation itself derives its name by analogy with animal hatching[33]. Henri Poincaré[34], in a lecture given in 1908 at the "Institute of general psychology" in Paris on the psychic modalities of mathematical discovery, also came to similar conclusions by indicating three stages of scientific discovery:

> *In the first, he would work at a theoretically important aspect of his problem for some days, but typically he would fail to find the solution which he had sensed to be there...in second stage, increasingly frustrated, he would give up on his work and abandon it for an entirely different pursuit - perhaps a holiday. Then suddenly after a few hours - or it might be days, weeks, or sometimes even months - the solution would come to him*[35].

Poincaré compared this process to the situation in which, under certain conditions, the molecules of a gas can disengage from each other. The in-between phase represents the unconscious attempt to recombine the free molecules until the productive connection of order, coherence and completeness arises.
Both theories therefore imply that significant changes take place throughout the problem-solving process, and that the pause helps either, consciously or inconsciously, to make the mind more ready and able to mobilise its cognitive potential at its fullest. Importantly, in the Greek incubation rituals the pause also acts to bring the individual close to the numinous dimension.

Conclusion

If we assume these theories to explain the rituals of the *Asklepieia* (and of the *dharna*) we necessarily arrive at an interesting and surprising result: *the Greek incubation*[36] *did not begin with the night in the abaton, but well before, exactly from the moment when the sufferer left his or her home to undertake the sacred pilgrimage*[37]. Precisely because this first step already represented a break from the *typical workspace* in which the individual had lived until then. Each of us, in fact, has experience of how far an ordinary journey can take us from everyday life. If we think that in ancient Greece, people undertook a long and arduous journey in order to get to the sanctuary, perhaps leaving their village for the first time, and that, once they arrived there, they had to submit to a complex ritual we understand that these were precisely the conditions under which the decisive *detachment* and the *internal reorientation* of attention could take place.
In conclusion, in the Greek incubatory rituals two different stages can be distinguished: a slow-moving diurnal stage and a much faster and more intense nocturnal. In fact, these rituals served, in our opinion, to distract the *attention*[38] of the sufferers from the ills that afflicted them, so as to allow deep meditative processes to emerge, starting since the instant of departure from home and going on until the incubatory night; therefore hence the latter start since instant of departure from home and continue until the incubatory night. In the profond religious atmosphere these processes could only be enhanced, thus letting energies crucial to clinical healing be mobilised. In fact, Patricia Cox Miller, observed that at that level: “the dream was not mimetic of disease, but creative of cure [...] because the source of health was located in the visual images of dreams”[39]. The remarkable efficacy of incubatory rituals is proven, finally, by the fact that incubation remains one of the most tenacious rites of Paganism, later transformed into the similar Christian practices of cults related to thaumaturge saints, such as those of St. Thecla and Sts. Cosmas and Damian[40]. In fact, while the other forms of mantics, were repressed beginning with the provisions contained in canon XXIV of the Council of Ancyra in 314 A.D, neither in these acts nor in subsequent ones is there any mention of the incubatory practices. However these practices somehow survived until the Middle Ages and beyond to arrive, albeit in a different form, to the present day.

Bibliography and notes

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1. The *Asklepieia* were temples dedicated to the worship of Asclepius, god of medicine. Were practiced cures related of physical as well psychical affections. It is estimated that 420 to 643 temples were built in honor of Asclepius/Esculapius alone in the Greco-Roman world, see Gasseau M, Dall'incubazione dei sogni nei templi di Asclepio all'incubazione del sogno nello psicodramma junghiano. In: Gasseau M and Bernardini R (ed.), Dalla psicologia analitica allo psicodramma junghiano. Milano: F. Angeli; 2009. p. 236.
2. Usually the consultation was for health reasons, but in the *Chronicles of Epidaurus* there are cases reported where it was required for other reasons, *e.g*., the search for a lost precious object or the body of a deceased person, see Dodds ER, Supernormal phenomena in classical antiquity. Glasgow: Glasgow Univ. Press; 1971. In: Lo Cascio E (transl. by.), Parapsicologia nel mondo antico. Roma-Bari: Laterza; 1991. p. 25 and also Lloyd GER, In the grip of disease. Studies in the Greek imagination. Oxford, New York: Oxford University press; 2003. p. 54.
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4. Herodotus, Histories, 8, 134.
5. von Eherenheim H, Greek incubation rituals in classical and hellenistic times. Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège; 2015. pp.168-169.
6. The votives were either sculptures depicting the affected organs without any explanatory inscription or wooden tablets (*pinakes*) where the cure performed (*iamata*).
7. LiDonnici LR, The Epidaurian miracle inscriptions. Text, translation and commentar. Atlanta: Scholars Press; 1995.
8. Pausanias gives an extensive description of the sanctuary of Epidaurus, in *Perieg*. 2, 26-29.
9. We also know that, along with Asclepius, other minor deities associated with him were worshipped: one of the most present was *Mnemosyne*, goddess of memory, probably in homage to the fact that this faculty is indispensabile to remember dreams and thus narrate them. Another deity associated with iatromantic medicine is *Pronoia*, as vision of the future. As Marco Cilione states: "L'esperienza incubatoria, dunque, richiede il presidio di *Μνημοσύνη* per il questuante e di *Πρόνοια,*per il medico del tempio, in una sorta di complementarietà che con Asclepio dà vita a un triangolo religioso della terapia", see Cilione M, Phytagorica medica. Scienza e sapienza nella tradizione preippocratica. Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider; c2023. p. 90.
10. These prohibitions were usually common to all who came to the shrine.
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12. Taffin A, Comment on rêvait dans le temple d'Esculape. Bullettin de l'Association Guillaume Budè 1960;3:329.
13. The *Abaton* of Epidaurus (literally the *inaccessible*) was a sacred building whose entrance was allowed only to priests, except for one room in which worshippers could enter.
14. Lafasciano L, Archeologia del sogno rituale. Dall'arcaismo alla tarda antichità nel mondo greco- romano. Roma, Bristol: L'Erma di Bretschneider; 2021. p. 62.

15. Sassi MM, La scienza dell'uomo nella Grecia antica. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri; 1988. pp. 87-89; see also Cilione M, Phytagorica medica. Ref. 9. p. 30.
16. According to Françoise Dunand, "most of the time the consulter found that he was healed from the moment of awakening; it could happen, however, that the healing was postponed," see Dunand F, Sincretismi e forme di vita religiosa. In: Settis S (ed.), Storia Einaudi dei Greci e dei Romani; VII, I Greci alla conquista del mondo. Utopia, guerra, espansione. Torino: Einaudi; Il Sole 24 ore, Milano, c2008, p. 360.
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18. Israelowich I, Society, medicine and religion in The Sacred tales of Aelius Aristides. Leiden, Boston: Brill; 2012. p. 172; see also, Aristides Aelius, Hieroi logoi. In: Nicosia S (edited by), Discorsi sacri / Elio Aristide. Milano: Adelphi; 2003. p.172.
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22. *Ivi,* p. 30.
23. Perilli L, Scrivere la medicina. La registrazione dei miracoli di Asclepio e il Corpus Hippocraticum. In: Brockmann C, Brunschön W, Overwien O (eds), Antike Medizin im Schnittpunkt von Geistes- und Naturwissenschaften. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter; 2009. pp. 75-120.
24. "E' un dato di fatto che oltre ai più stringati resoconti dei miracoli, venissero talora consacrate vere e proprie opere teatrali con funzione votiva, come rende esplicito l'aneddoto riguardante il tragediografo Aristarco di Tegea (V sec. a. C), tramandato in un frammento di Eliano*: Aristarco…si ammalò di una qualche malattia: Asclepio quindi lo guarì e ordinò di rendere grazie per la recuperata salute. Il poeta dedicò (al dio) uno spettacolo che portava il suo nome",* see Lafasciano L, Visioni, terapia e performance. Il ruolo del teatro nei culti terapeutici tra V e IV sec. a.C. Ostraka. Rivista di antichità 2021;XXX:125-140, p. 127.
25. Interestingly, the Indian word *dharna* means among other things: "to grasp something to hold on to," but also "to fix the mind over an object". It is derived from the sanskrit verb *dharati*, meaning "to maintain, to continue, to resolve".
26. Morinis EA, Levels of culture in Hinduism: a case study of dream incubation at a Bengali pilgrimage centre: Contributions to Indian Sociology 1982;NS, XVI:255-270.
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32. Through priestly initiation and mystery cults the adept entered definitively into a spiritual dimension *other* than that of the normal worshippers. In the case of incubants the impression is that they too temporarily accessed this higher dimension only to fall back into the everyday while still retaining the memory of the numinous vision.
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37. Dodds RA, Smith SM, Incubation. Ref 3. p. 39.
38. In a sense, attention had to be shifted without the subject noticing, otherwise there was a risk that the instrument would not work precisely because the mechanism had become obvious.
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