

2. In the Beginning

Since when has sleep inspired creation and given rise in painting but also in sculpture, drawing, stained-glass window making, printmaking and photography—to haunting images or volumes, phantasmal, often dramatized, of the human body? To images or volumes which highlight sleep's ambiguous aspects, showing it, if not as a death that has taken on the deceptive traits of everlasting repose, as a supernatural or lethargic state?

In *Archaic* cultural expressions sleep, it would seem, is rarely represented, if it is represented at all. Neither Sumerian sculptures (2700-2500 BCE) nor the art of the Cyclades, Babylon or Assyria seem to have included sleep as an idealized object in the arts, whether as a pause in the daily rhythm or an obligatory intercessor between humans and gods.

Egypt, in contrast, was greatly interested in sleep, in dreamers (with their protective deity, Bes) and in the content of dreams. Egyptian priests, scribes and nobility believed that sleep exposed one to the machinations of invisible, nefarious agents that could surreptitiously enter one's body through its natural openings and cause sickness and disease.



Figure 1.
Limestone headrest
of Qeniherkhepeshef,
carved with
protective figures of
Bes (Egypt, Dynasty
XIX, 1245-1190
BCE). Traces of
polychrome,
18.8 x 23 x 9.7 cm.
British Museum,
London - G.B.

To thwart this danger, headrests used as pillows at night bore protective images, painted or etched, of fabulous deities. The limestone headrest (fig. 1), originally in polychrome, from Qeniherkhepeshef (XIX dynasty, 1245-1190 BCE), represents, on one side, the deity Bes, depicted as a grimacing dwarf wearing a lionskin garment, holding a spear and shaking a snake above his head; on the other side, it shows a griffin and a lioness bearing knives in her paws. A central inscription explicitly mentions, besides the name of the fetishist owner, the purpose of the headrest: "To enjoy a night of restful sleep".



Figure 2.
Papyrus: "The key to dreams",
Dynasty XIX, 1245-1190 BCE.
Papyrus, ink black and red cursive
hieratic. British Museum,
London - G.B.

Incidentally, this headrest was paired with a papyrus tract (fig. 2), a kind of handbook on good and bad dreams. This guide, *The Key to Dreams*, is written in cursive hieratic and arranged in columns. It plays on the inversion of meaning: If the dreamer, while sleeping, sees a thing, an object, an unusual or unpleasant phenomenon (excrement, urine, menstrual blood, incest), he links that up with an everyday word or a situation, which gives rise to a positive or negative interpretation of the dream. To dream of white bread, for example, will make bright, joyful faces appear. The ancient Egyptians were thus given to making deductions of a mythological nature, which probably served to maintain their psychic equilibrium. In their art, however, no naturally sleeping subject is represented.



A remarkable idol from Cyprus (fig. 3), dating from the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1600 BCE), is—at least as far as the current state of knowledge can establish—one of the first instances of wakefulness and sleep represented together. Small in size, it consists in a figure representing a mother holding a baby asleep in its cradle. The mother is not looking at the baby. Modelled in terracotta with red slip, the figure is pierced with orifices; a high, rigid collar is engraved around the neck. More than a mere representation, this sculpture attests to the protective role of the idol, endowed, it was believed, with the power to stop death from striking. Indeed, the infant mortality rate, in these ancient times, must have been very high; there can be no doubt, therefore, that the infant's sleep was a constant cause for concern. Sleep, considered salutary, necessary and favorable to the wandering soul, nevertheless harboured dangers that primitive societies strove to mitigate through a variety of observances.

Figure 3. -Anonymous (Cyprus, 2000-1600 BCE). Woman holding a child in the cradle.
Terracotta, 15.5 cm. The Louvre, Paris – France

At the time of the foundries of Lorestan (Iran, 4th-3rd century BCE), the Scythian horsemen of what is now the southern Russian steppes had mastered the techniques of metalworking. A gold brooch (fig. 4) that probably belonged to a nomadic prince shows the goldsmiths' decorative virtuosity; the Scythian craftsmen were influenced, perhaps, by Persian metalworkers. It depicts three horsemen of the steppes, one of them asleep (Is he dreaming of wild rides and the spoils of war?) at the feet of the other two, one of whom is holding the reins of a horse. A quiver is hanging in a stylized tree in which the branches extend into leaves. Concretely observed, this remarkable royal ornament of openwork design shows a considerable degree of abstraction.



*Figure 4. - Scythie. The rest of the warrior, 4-3th c. BCE. Plate-staple garment. Gold.
State Hermitage Museum, Siberian collection, Saint Petersburg – Russia*

Ancient Greece, via Artemidorus of Ephesus (2nd century CE), whose five-volume work, the *Oneirocritica*, is considered to be the first book on dream interpretation, was familiar with the virtues of sleep. Not that the number of works devoted to it was great, but certain well-known pieces are worthy of the highest interest. In the decoration of an Attic bell-krater (fig. 5; 5th century BCE), the work of the celebrated Athenian potter Euphronios, we recognize the bearded twins Hypnos and Thanatos (Sleep and Death), sons of Nyx (Night), their masks raised, carrying away to his native land of Lycia the body of Zeus' son, Sarpedon.



Figure 5.
Euphronios
(Greece, circa 515 BCE).
Tanathos and Hypnos
(Sleep and Death, twin
brothers), carrying away to
his native land of Lycia the
body of Zeus' son,
Sarpedon.
Calyx krater, terracotta
45 x 69 cm.
Metropolitan Museum
of Art,
New York - USA

On a captivating bas relief from the archeological museum of Piraeus (fig. 6), Aesculapius (from the Greek god of medicine and healing, Asclepius), a stocky, muscular physician, endeavours to heal, by the laying on of hands, a sleeping patient. (We note, in passing, that the practice has continued into modern times.)

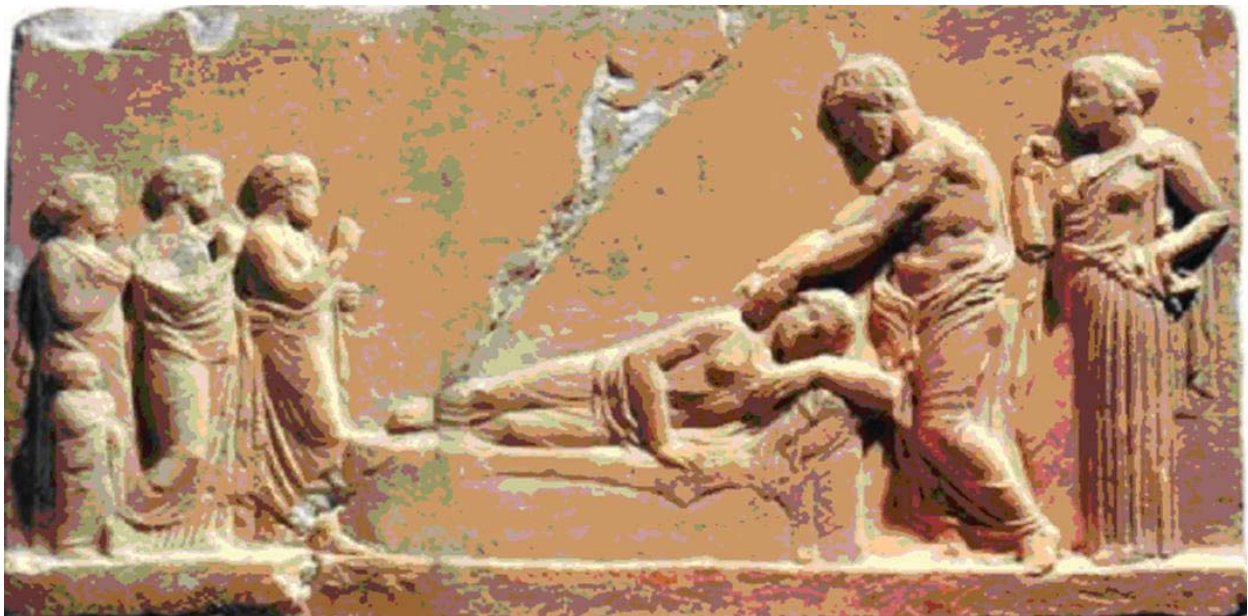
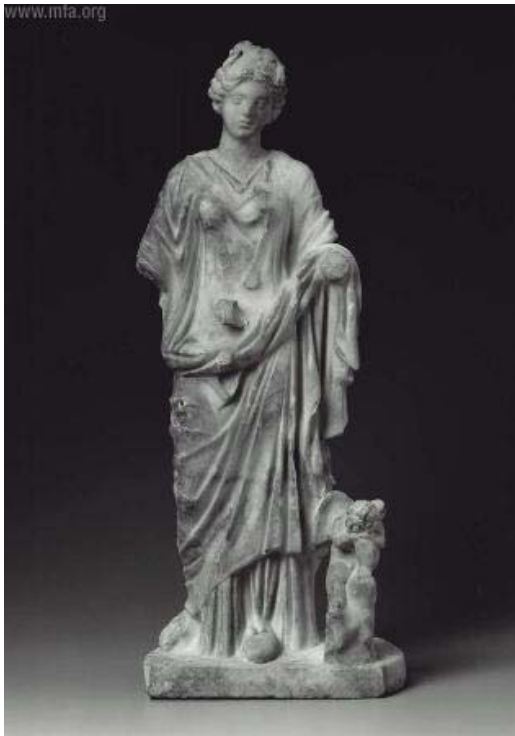


Figure 6. - Greece, 5th century BCE. Asclepius heals sleeping patients. Bas-relief.
Archaeological Museum of Piraeus, Athens - Greece



Another cult in Ancient Greece was that of the goddess of health, Hygieia. A marble statuette (fig. 7) from Roman provincial art (which originated in Docimium, present-day Afyon, in Asia Minor) shows her watching over Hypnos, depicted as a child-god. The slender goddess is dressed in a silk tunic and, draped over it, a pleated cloak which is gathered in a fold over her left hand. She is looking at the little god dozing at her feet, whence the implied maxim: “Peaceful sleep is yours to enjoy, provided you lead a healthy life”.

*Figure 7- Roman Provincial Art
(circa 140-190).*

Hygieia, goddess of Health and Hypnos, god of sleep. Statuette, 64.5 cm.

Marble from Dokimeion (modern Afyon) in west-central Asia Minor.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA

Similarly, in its cultural expression Cambodia, fertile womb of the Indochinese peninsula, quite early drew on its extraordinary poetic vein. Part of the sanctuary of Preah Pithu, the Khmer stoneware lintel from the late 12th century (fig. 8), teeming with gods, evokes the advent of the primordial cosmic day. From the navel of Vishnu, sleeping on the primordial Ocean, a lotus grew, and from this lotus Brahma was born. The lotus stalk arising from Vishnu's navel represents the pillar holding up the sky; from the flower, Brahma, creator of the world, was born.



*Figure 8. - Khmer art, Cambodia,
late 12th century.*

From the navel of Vishnu, sleeping on the primordial Ocean, a lotus grew, and from this lotus Brahma was born.

Lintel of a sanctuary of Preah Pithu, stoneware, 68x215 cm.

Guimet Museum, Paris - France

Sleep is a force to which Gautama Buddha (the awakened one) is not subject. Indeed, he is never represented as a real sleeper, but is always shown in his state of perpetual wakefulness. He is even free from any desire for sleep, as can be seen in a schist relief (fig. 9), a version which shows Siddhartha, soon to be metamorphosed into Buddha, in the midst of sleeping

women who are lost in dreams. Tired of their insatiable lust, he resolves to devote his existence to religious life. “Like when someone, who has eaten and drunk far too much”, writes Hermann Hesse in his novel of initiation, *Siddhartha* (Project Gutenberg eBook; translated by Olesch G. et al.) “vomits it back up again with agonizing pain and is nevertheless glad about the relief, thus this sleepless man wished to free himself of these pleasures, these habits and all of this pointless life and himself, in an immense burst of disgust.”



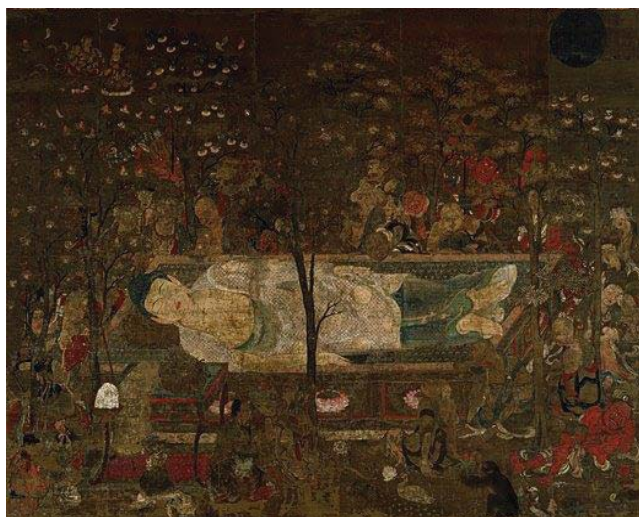
Figure 9. - Art of Gandhara, 2nd-3rd century. The sleep of women (and the decision of Siddhartha devote himself to religious life). Schist. Provenance Takht-i Bahi, Pakistan. British Museum, London - G.B.



Eight centuries before the Khmers, a hybrid art appeared from India and Greece: that of Gandhara, the pinnacle of Greco-Buddhist art. Gandhara art glorified, in stucco-and-mud reliefs, an episode in the life of Buddha: Siddhartha's stoical and redemptive act (mentioned earlier) in which, in this version (fig. 10), the Prince gives up the beautiful Yasodhara—asleep in a den, her breasts as firm as bowls—and serenely abandons worldly life. Thus sleeps protects the beloved from the wrenching separation from the divine.

Figure 10 - Gandhara, 3th-4th c. Renunciation of the world. Part of a relief. Stucco and mud. Collection Hirayama, Kamakura - Japan

In Buddhism, Nirvana, the extinguishment of karma (the totality of an individual's actions), is the profound peace of mind attained after liberation from the cycle of birth and death; it is the state Buddha, a hero still considered exemplary all over India today, finally achieved. This ancient, luxuriant India, then, which has never stopped building temples to its gods, had its origins in the sleep in which, at the dawn of human consciousness, Vishnu the Supreme prospered. His religion spread throughout Asia.



In China and Japan (Heian period, 12th century), Nirvana (sleep, the flowers and perfumes of the garden of earthly delights) is a panacea that only an eccentric mind could put forward (fig. 11).

Figure 11.
Japan, Heian Period, 12th c.
Nirvana, 155.1 x 202.8cm..
National Museum,
Tokyo - Japan.

There was nothing realistic about it when it appeared in the Middle Kingdom; rather, it was a metaphor, as in this white incised porcelain headrest (fig. 12) from the vibrant Song dynasty (960-1126). A headrest, for women, in the shape of a little boy sleeping under a curved lotus leaf, it is a sculptural theme that was extremely popular in China in the 10th-12th centuries. Why this vogue? This type of “luxury” pillow, the zenith of ceramic art, maintained women’s fashionable hairstyles and was probably considered comfortable. Moreover, it was said to promote the impregnation of women.



Figure 12.
China, Northern Song
Dynasty, 960 -1126.
Headrest shaped sleeping boy
and lotus leaf.
Porcelain with incisions.
Asian Art Museum,
San Francisco - USA

In Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun, the child was more likely to represent sleep when the character derived from classical literature. We see such a case in the extremely rare illumination (fig. 13, Kamakura period, 13th century) from the diary of Lady Murasaki Shikibu, author of the classic *Tales of Genji*: A high-angle view of a baby of noble lineage wrapped in silk swaddling clothes; the baby is watched over by its aristocratic mother, dressed in a brocade kimono, in her apartments at the Imperial court.

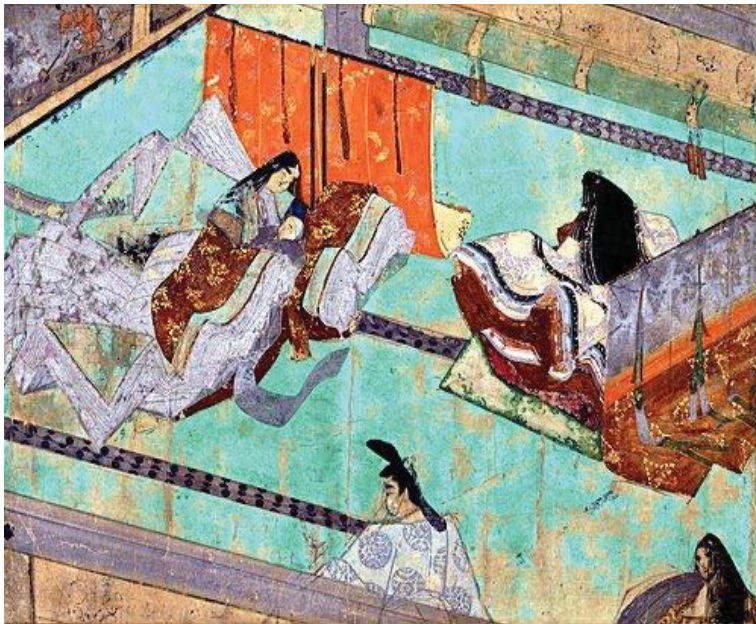


Figure 13.
Japan, Kamakura period,
13th century.
Views down with sleeping child.
Illumination. Segment detached
from Murasaki Shikibu Nikki
Emaki (illustrated diary of Lady
Murasaki),
20.9 x 79.2cm.
National Museum,
Tokyo – Japan

In Europe one must wait, it seems, for the rise of a monotheistic religion, Christianity, to witness the growth and spread in Western culture of the representation of figures associated with sleep. Indeed, little by little, this trend gained ground in Carolingian France, which slowly opened itself to the inspirations of the ineffable.



Figure 14.
Anonymous (Germany, before 1014).
The Dream of Joseph.
Illumination of Pericopes of Henry II.
Staatliche Bibliothek, Bamberg – Germany

Sleep, however, is as feared as it is beneficial; it belongs to the mysteries of the night, peopled with dream-figures. Life, in sleep so precarious and dispossessed of its natural defences, can be annihilated without our knowing why, and so we invoke divine will to explain it. During the endless and uncertain Middle Ages, which nevertheless favored an extraordinary flowering of the arts, people tended to sleep in a semi-seated position, supported by the cushions in their truncated bed (fig. 14). Why? Because they were wary of falling victim to sickness, or even death. Indeed, it was believed that death could act more effectively on a creature when that creature is in the “lethal”, recumbent position. Asleep, a person’s defences are neutralized, and his breathing is more difficult when lying in the position in which corpses lie, parallel to the ground.

Some time later, Michelangelo (1475-1564)—who, like most of his peers, mainly worked on commission—extracted Night (Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici) from a block of marble (fig. 15). It is a Pallas-figure, sculpted in the round, in idealized contours. The proportions are magnificent, leading one to believe that the sculptor, when working on it, felt not impatience or discouragement as Eugène Delacroix implied in his diary entry of 9 May 1853 (*The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, Phaidon 1999), but rather joyfulness. Relief and contours are supreme; the smooth *finito* is brilliant. The humanism of a man enamoured of neo-Platonic ideas is palpable. In the pursuit of shadows, light comes into being. Night, the counterpart of Day, from the same tomb, marks Michelangelo's fiftieth year. It departs from the cliché of blindfolded Night that the Creation cycles found in cathedrals had hitherto depicted. His Night has an incomparable stature of arrested movement. It grounds sleep in a majestic allegory, sculpted as it is in a pose presented as natural. Moreover, it is at once singularly supple and tense. One feels or sees subdued internal forces throbbing beneath the surface and rolling over it; indeed, the figure of the woman, built like an Olympic Venus, is gracefully curled up in the truth of some mechanism where hollow and solid trapezoids and triangles control a formidable perpetuum mobile. One finds oneself speaking softly before such a powerful presence, as if disturbing the quiet would dispel the magic.



Figure 15 .- Michelangelo (Italian, 1475-1564). Night, 1526-1533.

Detail of the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici. Marble.

Church of San Lorenzo, New Sacristy, Florence - Italy

In the arts which serve as reservoirs of emotion and in which stories, news media and knowledge are closely linked, there are always days lived and hours imagined to be read, interpreted and remembered. The illustration of sleep, for its part, is polymorphous, like a shadow cast by the past. To the active being's polygon of forces, it is a foil. Indeed, it is like a pier where, every night, all of us dock for several hours. It is enough to draw the curtains for scenes to appear which suggest that sleep is a lapse of time where variety is woven.