

Alcman's Rocky Dreams, Reinterpreted

A vexing verse in Alcman's 'Louvre' Partheneion, τῶν ὑποπετριδίων ὀνείρων (v. 49), has defied various efforts at interpretation (e.g. Calame: 1977, Hutchinson: 2001, Nagy: 1973, Page: 1951, West: 1965). This paper seeks a new explanation by examining the largely unnoticed association of dreams – specifically *prophetic* or *significant* dreams – and rock. I submit that such an association is confirmed by proverbial expressions in Homer and Hesiod, as well as by descriptions found in epic and tragedy of Delphi as the 'rocky' source of prophecy. Finally, a votive relief from Kos provides striking illustration of a dreamer asleep in a rocky cave. Thus, the association of prophetic dreams and rock may be refined to denote dreams that occur *below* rock, perhaps in a small cave, or in a fissure of a mountain. This explanation sheds light on Alcman's 'dreams below rock', for such prophetic dreams suit the context of his poem: the chorus praises their leader, Hagesichora, and describes her beauty, but it is clear that she has not yet appeared to the audience (v. 50). Because the chorus repeatedly uses language denoting vision or perception, ὁρῶ (v. 40); φαίνην (v. 43); δοκεῖ (v. 45); ὁρῆις (v. 50), I propose that the crucial phrase 'dreams below rock', which is employed in a simile about Hagesichora, has a double meaning: Hagesichora, a beauty that is found in dreams alone, and Hagesichora, who is yet to be truly beheld, like a figure in a prophetic dream.

The earliest literary example of the rock and dream association is found in the proverbial expressions 'around oak and rock' and 'of oak and rock' in Hesiod and Homer (*Th.* 35; *Od.* 19.163; *Il.* 22.126). These challenging verses have themselves sparked much debate (e.g. Cook: 1901, Goettling: 1843, Verdenius: 1958, West: 1966), but in each of these passages the proverb is to be understood as originally referring to prophetic dreams that occur when the dreamer is near to or in contact with a sacred tree or rock. Such an interpretation builds upon the old

arguments of Goettling (1843), who saw a connection with prophecy at Delphi and the oak at Dodona, and the more recent analysis of O'Bryhim (1996), who finds relevant Near Eastern parallels, by adding the crucial element of dreaming. This new approach suits the *Odyssey* passage in particular because the speaker, Penelope, has evidently just had a prophetic dream.

Further support for the connection between rock and prophetic dreams is found in descriptions of Delphi. In the *Iliad*, Pytho/-on is twice mentioned with the epithet 'rocky' (2.519, 9.405). In Euripides, the god at Delphi is said to distribute his prophecies *from below* the *adyta* (*IT* 1254-58). Such a description matches the language of Aeschylus, who uses the term *mychos* (e.g. *Eum.* 39, 180). Crucially, dreams are specifically linked with Delphi by Euripides: Earth is said to create prophetic nighttime dreams that visit men who sleep on the ground – a possible reference to incubation – as competition for Apollo's prophecies (*IT* 1259-67). Although the import of this passage has been debated (Dodds: 1951, Kyriakou: 2006), the association of dreams with Delphi is confirmed in the *Prometheus Bound*, in which Io describes how Delphi and Dodona were consulted for the interpretation of her prophetic dreams (*PV* 657-60).

Finally, iconographic evidence also supports the linkage between dream and rock. A relief from a sanctuary of the Charites on Kos, though Hellenistic in date, depicts a small figure sleeping in a cave, attended by four Charites. Van Straten (1976) has demonstrated that the scene shows the epiphany of the goddesses to the dreaming figure. Moreover, the relief proves that such scenes were not limited to healing cults like that of Asclepius, but were also found in other kinds of prophetic contexts.

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