The Influence of Dreaming in the Neolithic

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The Beginning of the End? Neolithic “Revolutions” and the Shaping of the Modern World

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Abstract

The Neolithic period has classically been defined as the beginning of many common practices associated with modern humans: animal and plant domestication, monumentality, communal life, death rituals. However, the period has also been defined by many questions, all centered around one main theme: How did early humans attempt to reshape the landscape they were living in? This paper approaches this question through a review of the anthropology of dreaming--how different societies throughout history have engaged with their dreams and how this has affected different people's relationships with public spaces. In other words, this paper explores how dreams might have contributed to the emergence of place-making practices during the Neolithic. This paper by no means intends to cover every dream ever recorded and the impact it had on society; instead, it aims to start a discussion about the potential for dreaming to have influenced place-making in the Neolithic and in the world as we know it today.

Introduction to Dreaming

Kelly Bulkeley, a psychologist of religion, defines a dream as "an imagined world of sights, sounds, thoughts, feelings, and activities that you (either as a character in the dream or a disembodied observer of it) experience during sleep" (Bulkeley 2). This definition does not include visions, trance, possession, hallucination or other extraordinary states of being that occur while awake (Bulkeley 9). It highlights the fact that dreams emerge with no influence from outside factors, unlike some of these other states of being. In Bulkeley's definition of dreaming, all humans dream and that "the basic patterns of your sleeping and dreaming are shared by all humans" (3). Humans' dreams are rooted in the particular conditions of their waking worlds. They tend to be in places they know with people they recognize. However, it is impossible to deny the relatedness of sleep dreams with hallucinatory phenomena that can be induced by various means.

Many people have claimed to have very similar experiences to dreams while at very high altitudes, while going too long without sleep, or while under the influence of drugs. Some scholars have attempted to draw harsh lines between dreams and their hallucinatory sisters. Robert Gnuse writes in *The Dream Theophany of Samuel* that this is particularly true of the dream accounts of the ancient Near East, saying that there are no "sharp distinction among dreams, hallucinations, and ordinary different modes of revelation" (12). Regardless, there are stylized formulas that denote a dream as being such. For example, in one formula that indicates a dream was experienced during sleep, the dreamer's soul leaves their body and visits a different place (Gnuse 13). However, for the purposes of this paper, and when considering the possible influence of dreaming on societies in prehistory in general, I propose that it may be more

beneficial not to try to draw a distinction between the dreaming of sleep and related phenomena that are linked to hallucinations. These phenomena have common experiential attributes, and it is impossible to know whether prehistoric communities distinguished between them whatsoever.

Sociologists and anthropologists tend to describe emotion as deeply embedded in and reflective of social structure and culture (Norgaard 379). Recently, anthropologists have begun to study how culture also colors and structures human dreams, in addition to coloring and structuring emotional problems, (Mageo and Sheriff 4). Dreams have a known capacity for conscious and unconscious problem solving (Tedlock 1987; Barrett 2007). Antti Revonsuo, a neuroscientist, theorized in a 2000 article that dreaming emerged because it provided a helpful behavioral adaptation, writing: “dream consciousness is essentially a mechanism for simulating threat perception and rehearsing threat-avoidance responses and behaviors” (882). Dreams prepare us for threats in our waking environments. Dreams influenced by culture can, through their innate ability to solve problems, comment on and provide solutions for cultural problems. In this way, dreams have influenced societies in many ways throughout the history of the world, and continue to do so today.

The Influence of Dreams on Human Societies

Many ancient cultures engaged in the practice of incubation, ie., sleeping in a designated sanctuary to procure a specific dream from a god. The different peoples of the ancient Near East were among the first people known to have been doing so (Renberg 36). In two biblical passages, King Solomon is described journeying to a hilltop sanctuary at Gibeon where he makes a sacrifice to God and then goes to sleep in the hopes of conversing with God in dreams: “Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statues of his father David; only, he sacrificed and

offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you'" (*The Bible,* 1 Kings 3:3-5). Renberg makes it clear that it would be unreasonable to assume that all dreams believed to be sent by a god were "deliberately solicited," but it's clear that this was not uncommon (71). As far back as the Classical and Hellenistic periods, the Nasamones, a Libyan tribe known to the Greeks, would engage in incubation in tombs in order to obtain dreams from specific people: "They divine by approaching the tombs of their ancestors and, having made prayers, they sleep upon [*or,* next to] them. Whatever they see in their dream they treat as an oracle" (Renberg 106).

Some of the other earliest recordings of dreams can be found in Ancient Egypt, and many of these dreams appear in royal contexts. In Ancient Egypt, it was believed that dreams could provide guidance and/or legitimation for rulers. Thutmose IV (ca. 1400 BCE), an Egyptian Pharaoh, was inspired by a dream to undertake restoring the Great Sphinx at Giza. Thutmose was taking a nap in the middle of the day in the direct shadow of the statue of the Sphinx when he dreamt that the Sphinx himself appeared before him and gave Thutmose his support and good fortune in exchange for completing a task for him, saying, "I have waited to have you do what is in my heart, for I know that you are my son and my champion" (Bulkeley 126). Thutmose relayed that he truly believed he had been visited by the Sphinx and understood that the Sphinx wanted Thutmose to restore the statue. This restoration project came to define Thutmose's rule and helped to restore the "grand civic spirit" of earlier Egyptian dynasties (Bulkeley 125). However, it is important to note that it is impossible to know whether this dream was actually

dreamt. This dream account may have been fabricated as a rhetorical device to use to legitimize a king's actions. In this case, the actions of the society may not have been directly motivated by a dream, but by the use of dreams as a social tool.

Among the Iroquoian-speaking peoples of North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was seen as extremely important to fulfill dreams (Graeber and Wengrow 23). This frequently involved requesting possessions that had been dreamt about from others, which could be anything from a small crystal to a mask to a dog. Some individuals travelled for days to bring back specific objects, and this led to such objects traveling from town to town. Graeber and Wengrow describe this exchange of objects as one part of some of the "long-distance interaction spheres" of the past (23).

In *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, Graeber describes this exchange of objects in more detail. Among the Iroquois, sometimes dream-guessing festivals were held, usually in midwinter, in which individuals would present their dreams to one another in the form of riddles and then friends and family members would offer objects to the dreamer to determine if these were their "soul's desire" (Graeber 137). During an Onondaga dream-guessing festival in February of 1656, men, women, and children were seen running wildly from place to place in order to obtain objects to fulfill the dreams of themselves and others (Graeber 138). Graeber also points out that among the Iroquois, there were no regimes of private property or personal accumulation (until some converted to Christianity): "Within the Huron community, there were no commercial transactions, properly speaking. Goods acquired were spontaneously shared within lineages (or segments of clans). This generalized

practice of giving insured equality and accounted for the disdain with which the accumulation of goods was viewed . . . as a result, there were no sellers nor buyers among the Hurons, neither commanders nor commanders, neither rich nor poor . . .” (146).

Dreams influenced Iroquois societies in other ways as well. Robert Moss writes in his book *Dreamways of the Iroquois* that dream sharing was considered very important among the Iroquois, and villages gathered each morning to discuss their dreams because any dream could be relevant to other members of the community. The Iroquois would take action to celebrate more favorable dreams in order to manifest them, as celebration would please the soul and “oblige it to keep its word” (Moss 39). Celebration could include feasting, performance, and/or gift giving. Other, more unusual dreams were acted out as well. One Iroquois man dreamt he was feasting on human flesh, so his tribe offered him a young girl to sacrifice and turn into stew (Moss 40). An Elder woman of the Oneida dreamt of an ambush from a neighboring village, but also dreamt of the war chief of this enemy village, whom she was able to name, so the Oneida promptly sent out a war party to defend themselves against this village (Moss 35). Again, it is impossible to know whether all dreams narrated in Iroquois societies were actually dreamt; however, these stories show that dream accounts still played an important role in society as a social tool whether they were the result of a real dream or a fabrication.

In the village of the Umeda, one of four villages known as the Waina-Sowanda villages located in New Guinea today, successful hunting is dependent on obtaining specific dreams. In Alfred Gell’s article “Magic, Perfume, Dream . . .,” Gell explains that humans don’t give meaning to smells by distinguishing them from other smells, but by associating them with contexts in which

they have value. For example, humans give meaning to the smell of a pie baking in the oven because they know they will get to eat the pie later. Humans give meaning to the smell of perfume by associating it with creating an environment that is conducive with sexual happiness. Rather than seducing, perfumes set up a "context of seduction" (Gell 406). Our association of smells with contexts in which they have value makes the pleasures of the sense of smell only anticipatory (or retrospective). Similarly, the Umeda believe that special scents can be employed to create a positive environment for a specific dream to occur in, and thus direct the course of the dreamer's dreams during sleep. For example, an Umeda man will sleep with a sachet of the perfume *oketsap*, which will allow him to "dream a dream which betokens good hunting" (Gell 406).

In "Dreams of Treasure: Temporality, Historicization and the Unconscious," Charles Stewart unravels how dreams affect culture in modern-day Greece. According to Stewart, dreams may be produced by the desire for history. This is especially true of countries with very rich histories and intense historical consciousness, such as Iraq, Egypt, and Greece. Citizens want to keep the former grandeur of their countries alive; however, this creates a burden of living up to and protecting chosen pasts (Stewart 486). The social importance of living up to history has contributed to a high frequency of dreams related to treasure in modern Greece (Stewart 487). In the early nineteenth century, in the village of Koronos on the Cycladic island of Naxos, three individuals began to see visions instructing them to dig for an icon of the Panagia ('All Holy' Mother of Christ), buried in a mountainside. After much digging, a small icon was eventually unearthed, but promptly stolen. A century later, a schoolgirl from Koronos experienced a sequence of dream visions instructing her of where to find the lost icon, which was located and

returned to Koronos. These dreams and their narration have contributed to a message "that Koronidiates live in a blessed place and that their mining skills should be maintained as part of a sacred plan" (Stewart 496). Through narrating dreams Koronidiates have made a history.

The Influence of Dreaming in the Neolithic

As the above examples show, it is an inherent human behavior to want to share and interpret dreams and to use the resulting interpretations to reshape surrounding landscapes. In the second half of this paper, I would like to make the argument that humans were dreaming and making decisions based on dreams in prehistoric times as well. The prehistoric Neolithic period (10,000-3,000 BCE) is characterized by a wide range of developments that occurred over thousands of years throughout many geographical locations. The effects of these developments are still visible today, as well as a great number of unexplained artifacts. In the second half of this paper, I am proposing that many of these unexplained artifacts may have been influenced by dreams (or the prospect of them). This includes unusual burial practices at the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük and strange henges at the site of Göbekli Tepe. It is also important to note that these artifacts and these sites represent only a fraction of the peoples that attempted to reshape the landscapes they were living in during the Neolithic period.

The Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in Turkey, an early city, is characterized by many houses clustered very close together, joined together by their roofs and accessible only by holes in the roofs. The rooms of the houses are small and split up into different sections by raised platforms. Different daily activities were conducted on different platforms, and different categories of people were buried under different platforms. For example, in one building, more young people

were buried under a platform and more older people buried under another (Hodder and Cessford 22-23). I am proposing that these raised platforms with people buried underneath could have been used for an early form of dream incubation. In most cases, dream incubation was engaged in in order to procure a specific dream from a god; however, among the Libyan Nasamones, it was common to attempt to procure dreams from ancestors by sleeping near or directly on their tombs. The people of Çatalhöyük may have just expedited this process by burying their ancestors directly underneath the places designated for sleeping.

It would not have been convenient to bury people beneath the floors of homes in Çatalhöyük. Personal belongings inside homes would have to have been moved in order to dig up the floors, and older skeletons would have to have been slid out of the way to make room for new burials. With the only access point to homes being located on roofs, dead bodies would have to have been lowered into homes in order to be buried. Additionally, not every individual at Çatalhöyük was buried in this under-the-floors context--some were buried in midden deposits (deposits of trash-like objects, including pottery shards, food, bones, or broken tools) (Hager 139) and very occasionally people were buried in outdoor spaces as well (Russel and Düring 74). And it will be impossible to know when (if ever) archaeologists uncover all of the human burials at Çatalhöyük. The people of Çatalhöyük had the capacity to bury their loved ones in other contexts; however, they consistently chose to bury people under the floors of houses, indicating that these burials were more than just convenient places to bury bodies.

It is true that it does not seem that people of Çatalhöyük were buried next to their kin; as evidenced by Hodder and Cessford, it was not uncommon for groups of people of certain ages to

be buried together (22-23). This would suggest that even if the people of Çatalhöyük wanted to engage with their ancestors through dreams, the skeletons they were sleeping on top of may not have even been those of their direct ancestors. However, rather than being remembered individually, it is possible that when people at Çatalhöyük died, they became part of a collective memory of the dead. This is evidenced by the frequent exhumation and replastering of skulls. It was not uncommon for skulls to be removed from primary burials, decorated with plaster and red pigments, and interred in large, commingled caches (Haddow and Knüsel 56), thus effectively doing away with the individuality of each skull and the living human it belonged to. Thus, through burying their dead under the floors of their homes, the people of Çatalhöyük may have been trying to engage with their ancestors not individually, but collectively.

The Neolithic site of Göbekli Tepe is a tell site located in Turkey that is known widely for one of its earlier layers that features multiple henges; one of the henges consists of T-shaped pillars arranged around two even taller pillars in a circular shape, and the other henges are similar. The henge also contains walls and benches decorated with animals, including scorpions, gazelle, and birds, as well as some more ambiguous figures. Some of the pillars even feature anthropomorphic inclusions, such as hands and clothes (Dietrich et al 675). Because of their sheer size and the size of the pillars within, the henges would have taken a great deal of time and energy to construct, and probably would have been the work of many people. Since there is no direct evidence that the people of Göbekli Tepe practiced religion or followed any sort of social hierarchy, I propose that interpreting the construction of the monumental layer of Göbekli Tepe as the result of a dream requires fewer assumptions about societal behavior than interpreting it as a religious site. In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh Thutmose IV was supposedly inspired by a dream

to undertake restoring the Great Sphinx at Giza and promptly organized a great number of people to carry out his wishes. My point is that the monumental layer at Göbekli Tepe could have been constructed as the result of such a dream (or the fabrication of one).

As no signs of animal or crop husbandry have been found at this site, that would place the origins of monumentality here beyond the origins of agriculture, showing that the construction of this sedentary site was not constructed as a result of the need to watch over the growth of planted fields. Some other archaeological evidence present at the site of Göbekli Tepe and neighboring sites provides further evidence of the presence of dreams in their broadest sense. Large barrel- and trough-like vessels have been uncovered at the site of Göbekli Tepe. Chemical analysis conducted on a group of these vessels from Göbekli Tepe provides evidence of beer brewing at the site. Probable evidence of oxalate, a residue that develops during the fermentation of cereals, was found on the bottom of one such vessel (Dietrich et al 687). Similar vessels have been found at other sites, such as Jerf el Ahmar in Syria, where three large basins were found in a common area interpreted by archaeologists to be a large kitchen, where beer may have been brewed as well (Dietrich et al 688). At the site of Nevalı Çori, located just 230 kilometers away from Göbekli Tepe, an unusual stone bowl has been found depicting a turtle-like figure dancing with two human-like figures. Some scholars have suggested that this image may hint at the altered state of dancers who took part in the feasts held at Göbekli Tepe ((Dietrich et al 691). Certainly the presence of alcoholic beverages in the community of Göbekli Tepe would have led to the possibility for people to engage in a new kind of dream-state.

The presence of evidence of beer brewing at Göbekli Tepe, along with the presence of benches and decoration, has led some archaeologists to believe that the monumental layer of Göbekli Tepe may have been constructed with the intention of using it as a place to gather for feasting (Dietrich et al 687). While there may be truth to this idea, I would also like to propose that the monumental layer at Göbekli Tepe may not have been built with the intent of being used for feasting, but certainly would have become important in this context to the people who used it as a place to celebrate pleasing dreams and/or to procure new ones. Favorable dreams are very important to the Umeda in order to have success in hunting; favorable dreams were also very important to the Iroquois, and these dreams were celebrated in order to ensure that they would come true. As the people of Göbekli Tepe engaged in the use of substances that could lead to dreams in their broadest sense, the people would have instilled new meaning in these altered states of being, and these states would have occupied a greater influence on how the people of Göbekli Tepe viewed and restructured the world they were living in.

Conclusions

It has been my personal experience that the legitimacy of dreams is treated with much skepticism throughout Europe and North America today; however, the stories I have relayed in the first half of this paper show that this has not always been the case. Many societies throughout history have made large decisions based on the stuff of dreams, and this practice even continues in some societies today, such as that of the Umeda. The analysis carried out in this paper allows for comparisons between actions taken as the result of dreams in prehistory and recorded history and opens the door for discussion about the potential for dreaming to have influenced place-making in the Neolithic and in the world as we know it today.

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