

Incubus

An **incubus** is a demon in male form who, according to mythological and legendary traditions, lies upon sleeping women^[1] in order to engage in sexual activity with them. Its female counterpart is a succubus. Salacious tales of incubi and succubi have been told for many centuries in traditional societies. Some traditions hold that repeated sexual activity with an incubus or succubus may result in the deterioration of health, mental state, or even death.^[2]



Incubus, 1879

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Etymological, ancient and religious descriptions

The word *incubus* is derived from Late Latin *incubo* "a nightmare induced by such a demon" from *incubare* "to lie upon."^[3] One of the earliest mentions of an incubus comes from Mesopotamia on the Sumerian King List, ca. 2400 BC, where the hero Gilgamesh's father is listed as Lilu.^[4] It is said that Lilu disturbs and seduces women in their sleep, while Lilitu, a female demon, appears to men in their erotic dreams.^[5] Two other corresponding demons appear as well: Ardat lili, who visits men by night and begets ghostly children from them, and Irdu lili, who is known as a male counterpart to Ardat lili and visits women by night and begets from them. These demons were originally storm demons, but they eventually became regarded as night demons because of mistaken etymology.^[6] Written later but described as happening before the Sumerian King List was completed is the mention of the Nephilim: Christian tradition attributes the completion of the Biblical book of Genesis to the 5th century BC.

Incubi were thought to be demons who had sexual relations with women, sometimes producing a child by the woman. Succubi, by contrast, were demons thought to have intercourse with men. Debate about these demons began early in the Christian tradition. St. Augustine touched on the topic in *De Civitate Dei* ("The City of God"); there were too many alleged attacks by incubi to deny them. He stated, "There is also a very general rumor. Many have verified it by their own experience and trustworthy persons have corroborated the experience others told, that sylvans and fauns, commonly called incubi, have often made wicked assaults upon women."^[7] Questions about the reproductive capabilities of the demons continued. Eight hundred years later, Thomas Aquinas lent himself to the ongoing discussion, stating, "Still, if some are occasionally begotten from demons, it is not from the seed of such demons, nor from their assumed bodies, but from the seed of men, taken for the purpose; as when the demon assumes first the form of a woman, and afterwards of a man; just so they take the seed of other things for other generating purposes."^[8] This view was also shared by King James and in his dissertation titled Dæmonologie he refutes the possibility for angelic entities to reproduce and instead offered a suggestion that a devil would carry out two methods of impregnating women: the first, to steal the sperm out of a dead man and deliver it into a woman. If a demon could extract the semen quickly, the transportation of the substance could not be instantly transported to a female host, causing it to go cold. This explains his view that Succubae and Incubi were the same demonic entity only to be described differently based on the sexes being conversed with. Being abused in such a way caused women at nunneries to be burned if they were found pregnant. The second method was the idea that a dead body could be possessed by a devil, causing it to rise and have sexual relations with others. This is similar to depictions of revenants or vampires and a spirit taking deceased corpse to cause some mischief.^[9] It became generally accepted that incubi and succubi were the same demon, able to switch between male and female forms.^[10] A succubus would be able to sleep with a man and collect his sperm, and then transform into an incubus and use that seed on women. Even though sperm and egg came from humans originally, the spirits' offspring were often thought of as supernatural.^[11]

Some sources indicate that it may be identified by its unnaturally large or cold penis.^[12] Though many tales claim that the incubus is bisexual,^[13] others indicate that it is strictly heterosexual and finds attacking a male victim either unpleasant or detrimental.^[14]

Incubi are sometimes said to be able to conceive children. The half-human offspring of such a union is sometimes referred to as a cambion. An incubus may pursue sexual relations with a woman in order to father a child, as in the legend of Merlin.^[15]

According to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, exorcism is one of the five ways to overcome the attacks of incubi, the others being Sacramental Confession, the Sign of the Cross (or recital of the Angelic Salutation), moving the afflicted to another location, and by excommunication of the attacking entity, "which is perhaps the same as exorcism."^[16] On the other hand, the Franciscan friar Ludovico Maria Sinistrari stated that incubi "do not obey exorcists, have no dread of exorcisms, show no reverence for holy things, at the approach of which they are not in the least overawed."^[17]

Regional variations

There are a number of variations on the incubus theme around the world. The alp of Teutonic or German folklore is one of the better known. In Zanzibar, Popo Bawa primarily attacks men and generally behind closed doors.^[18] "The Trauco", according to the traditional mythology of the Chiloé Province of Chile, is a hideous deformed dwarf who lulls nubile young women and seduces them. The Trauco is said to be responsible for unwanted pregnancies, especially in unmarried women. Perhaps another variation of this conception is the "Tintín" in Ecuador, a dwarf who is fond of abundant haired women and seduces them at night by playing the guitar outside their windows — a myth that researchers believe was created during the Colonial period of time to explain pregnancies in women who never left their houses without a chaperone, very likely covering incest or sexual abuse by one of the family's friends.^[19] In Hungary, a lidérc can be a Satanic lover that flies at night and appears as a fiery light (an *ignis fatuus* or will o' the wisp) or, in its more benign form as a featherless chicken.^[20]

In Brazil and the rainforests of the Amazon Basin, the Amazon River Dolphin (or *boto*) is believed to be a combination of siren and incubus that shape-shifts into a very charming and handsome man who seduces young women and takes them into the river.^[21] It is said to be responsible for disappearances and unwanted pregnancies.^[22] According to legend, a boto always wears a hat to disguise the breathing hole at the top of its head while in human form, metamorphosing back into a dolphin during the day.^[23]

The Southern African incubus demon is the Tokolosh. Chaste women place their beds upon bricks to deter the rather short fellows from attaining their sleeping forms. They also share the hole in the head detail and water dwelling habits of the Boto.

In Swedish folklore, there is the mara or mare, a spirit or goblin that rides on the chests of humans while they sleep, giving them bad dreams (or "nightmares").^[24] Belief in the mare goes back to the Norse Ynglinga saga from the 13th century,^[25] but the belief is probably even older. The mare was likely inspired by sleep paralysis.

In Assam, a north-eastern province of India it is mostly known as "pori" (Assamese: পৰী, meaning "angel"). According to the mythology, Pori comes to a man at night in his dreams and seduces him. Gradually the victim's health deteriorates and in some cases develops suicidal tendencies.

In Turkish culture, incubus is known as Karabasan. It is an evil being that descends upon some sleepers at night. These beings are thought to be spirits or jinns. It can be seen or heard in the nightmare and a heavy weight is felt on the chest. Yet, people cannot wake up from that state. Some of the causes are sleeping without adequately covering the body (especially women) and eating in bed.

Scientific explanations

Victims may have been experiencing waking dreams or sleep paralysis. The phenomenon of sleep paralysis is well-established. During the first phase of sleep (also known as REM sleep), motor centers in the brain are inhibited, producing paralysis. The reason for this is ultimately unknown but the most common explanation is that this prevents one from acting out one's dreams. Malfunctions of this process can either result in somnambulism (sleepwalking) or, conversely, sleep paralysis—where one remains partially or wholly paralysed for a short time after waking.

Additional to sleep paralysis is hypnagogia. In a near-dream state, it is common to experience auditory and visual hallucinations. Mostly these are forgotten upon fully waking or soon afterwards, in the same manner as dreams. However, most people remember the phenomenon of hearing music or seeing things in near-sleep states at some point in their lives. Typical examples include a feeling of being crushed or suffocated, electric "tingles" or "vibrations", imagined speech and other noises, the imagined presence of a visible or invisible entity, and sometimes intense emotions of fear or euphoria and orgasmic feelings. These often appear quite real and vivid; especially auditory hallucinations of music which can be quite loud, indistinguishable from music being played in the same room. Humanoid and animal figures, often shadowy or blurry, are often present in hypnagogic hallucinations, more so than other hallucinogenic states. This may be a relic of an ancient instinct to detect predatory animals.

The combination of sleep paralysis and hypnagogic hallucination could easily cause someone to believe that a "demon was holding them down". Nocturnal arousal etc. could be explained away by creatures causing otherwise guilt-producing behavior. Add to this the common phenomena of nocturnal arousal and nocturnal emission, and all the elements required to believe in an incubus are present.^[11]

On the other hand, some victims of incubi could well have been the victims of real sexual assault. Rapists may have attributed the rapes of sleeping women to demons in order to escape punishment. A friend or relative is at the top of the list in such cases and would be kept secret by the intervention of "spirits".^[17]

See also

- Dæmonologie of King James
- Alp
- Batibat
- Christian demonology
- Classification of demons
- Demon
- Demonology
- Fiery serpents
- Gancanagh
- Krampus
- Lilith
- List of fictional demons
- List of theological demons
- Night terror

- [Sexuality in Christian demonology](#)
- [Trauco](#)

Notes

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