CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Greco-Roman Traditions on Dreams and Virtue

Bronwen Neil and Kevin Wagner

In the Platonist tradition that flourished in Alexandria in the first century CE, dream-visions mattered. They offered a glimpse of the divine realities behind what the eye could see of the material world, and behind the perceptions produced by the imagination, the eye of the mind. Confirmation for this insight was sought and found in Jewish and Christian Scriptures. This volume deals with several influential Christian thinkers from the second to fifth centuries who grappled with the paradoxical nature of dreams. While these thinkers recognised that dreams could have divine origins, they also grew increasingly wary of their potential to lead believers away from the path of virtue.

It is argued here that there were two main avenues of approach to seeing God in Alexandrian thought: the philosophical and the psychological. The philosophical approach is first exemplified by Philo, a Hellenistic Jew who was influenced by his reading of Plato. The psychological approach was first expounded by the Greek monk and Neoplatonist Evagrius (d. 399). Evagrius, trained in Platonism by the Cappadocian Christians Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea, spent his final years in the Lower Egyptian desert, in the coenobitic communities of Nitria and in solitude at Kellia. Between these two poles, other Alexandrian philosophers – including Clement, Origen, Athanasius and Synesius – strove to find their own answers to the enduring problem of dreams and their role in the spiritual life.

The originality of this volume, and what sets it apart from previous studies, is its focus on Alexandrian literary sources, which are rich in evidence of a school of dream interpretation that was specific to Alexandria. The Alexandrian approach was primarily philosophical but later developed a psychological component. These sources must be interpreted within the constraints of their various genres. The authors take as their focus the ascetical and philosophical traditions of Alexandria which were formative in the ascetic movements of Egypt and Palestine. We have chosen a range of

Alexandrian sources that reflect several schools of thought, to demonstrate how that tradition was taken up and transformed in different spiritual contexts over the course of five centuries. Most of these sources originated in Greek but many were translated into Latin, Coptic and Syriac.

Two introductory chapters will set the scene for the more detailed studies of Alexandrian thinkers that follow. In Chapter 2 we suggest that opposing forces pulled at Alexandrian Christians in their development of a theory of dream-visions: the biblical tradition and the Platonist doctrines of the soul's ascent and the spiritual senses. This conflict is evident as early as Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BCE–c. 50 CE). Two centuries later, contemporaries Origen of Alexandria – speculative Christian thinker and proponent of asceticism – and Plotinus of Alexandria, known as the 'father of Neoplatonism', maintained very different approaches to the role of dream-visions in the soul's ascent to God.

The Platonist framework dominated, to varying degrees, the writings of all the Christian writers studied here: Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Evagrius, Synesius, Cassian and the fathers of the Egyptian desert. In each case, we find that what shaped individual late antique authors' approaches to dreams, divine knowledge and virtue was not how 'Neoplatonist' they were, but the contexts in which they were writing and operating, whether as philosophers, apologists for Christianity, bishops, spiritual directors or a combination of all four. Our contextual approach to literature on dreams, discernment and virtue allows a degree of sensitivity to the competing demands at work on those who addressed such contentious topics, which were of critical interest to their readers, especially in the ascetic domain.

Defining Dreams and Visions

Before proceeding, we should briefly deal with the question of how to define dreams and visions. The difference between the two in late antiquity is a vexed issue and one with which each author in this volume has grappled. It is clear that for late antique Christians there was a conceptual distinction between mundane dreams and spiritual visions, even though it is not reflected in their terminology, as has been established by Martine Dulaey, Guy Stroumsa and others.[1] In his study of definitions of dreams and visions in the Roman principate and late antiquity, Gregor Weber concluded that there were no underlying differences in early Christian usage from that of the Greco-Roman world, at least in terminology and setting, apart from

[1] Dulaey 1973: 49–52; Stroumsa 1999: 189–90.

the Christian tendency to posit biblical figures as precursors.[2] This is an important caveat, even though it may seem an obvious one. The difference between a Classical world governed by fate, in which tales of the gods were edifying legends at best, and a Judaeo-Christian world governed by God's providential economy, in which the divine appeared in vision and sound to mortals, is vast indeed. In a Judaeo-Christian world, divine providence could allow glimpses of divine wisdom through prayer, contemplation, dreams or even ecstatic experiences.

Dreams in this volume should be understood as any representation appearing to the mind during sleep. They overlap with images produced by the imagination, and with visions, the latter usually being distinguished in ancient texts as revelatory and inspired by divine or demonic forces.[3] Visions could occur while the subject was awake or asleep, and the vocabulary of seeing, hearing and dreaming was frequently used for both dreams and visions. Costache argues that Athanasius represents a more Neoplatonic approach, distinguishing between normal dreams, lucid dreams, revelatory dreams and visionary experiences that were unrelated to dreams.

Recent scholarly interest in dream interpretation in late antiquity and the Byzantine era has culminated in the publication of several comparative studies[4] and studies of particular thinkers, whether Classical Greco-Roman,[5] early Christian[6] or those somewhere in between, like Synesius of Cyrene.[7] Reception studies of earlier traditions in the medieval and early to middle Byzantine periods have also proved popular,[8] since the groundbreaking work on the Byzantine retroversion of Artemidorus by the Arab Christian Achmet.[9] New critical editions and translations of key texts, such

[2] Weber 2000: 31–4, 52–5. Athanasius attempted to draw a line between dreams and ecstatic visions in the fourth century, as is shown in Chapter 3.

[3] On the difficulties of distinguishing between dreams and visions in early Christian discourses, especially Augustine of Hippo, see Dulaey 1973: 49–52; Stroumsa 1999: 189–90.

[4] Shulman and Stroumsa 1999; Bulkeley 2008; Marlow 2008; Bulkeley et al. 2009; Mavroudi 2014; Neil 2016.

[5] E.g. Näf 2004; Harris 2009; the overview of imperial and late antique sources in Weber 2000; Harrisson 2013.

[6] E.g. Dulaey 1973 on Augustine; Amat 1985, Consolino 1989, Cox Miller 1994, Graf 2010, Neil and Anagnostou-Laoutides 2018 on the Byzantine tradition; Wei 2011a and Wei 2011b on the patristic tradition.

[7] E.g. Bregman 1982; Tanaseanu-Döbler 2008; Tanaseanu-Döbler 2014; Dickie 2002; the collection in Seng and Hoffman 2013; Neil 2014; Monticini 2018.

[8] Gregory 1985; Kruger 1992; Krönung 2012; Oberhelman 2013; Angelidi and Calofonos 2014; Neil 2015a; Keskiaho 2015. The last is the only full-length study of the reception of dream theory in the medieval West from 400 to 900 CE, focusing on Latin literary sources, especially Augustine of Hippo, and his reception in Gregory the Great.

[9] Oberhelman 1991; Mavroudi 2002.

as Artemidorus' *Oneirocriticon*, six Byzantine dreambooks and Synesius' *De insomniis*,[10] have aided studies in this field tremendously. Leslie Dossey has given us an excellent overview of the various Classical and patristic schools of thought on sleep and their links with different and often opposing medical and philosophical traditions, both Greek and Roman.[11] However, it can be difficult to locate Christian writers within any one school.

Christian Condemnation of Dream Divination

The reason for the divided early Christian stance against attempts to foresee the future in dreams was the nebulous state occupied by the dream. It stood in the netherworld between the imaginary and waking reality. This netherworld, which was populated by *daemones* (in later patristic literature, demons and angels) was a difficult epistemological zone to navigate for the philosopher, whether Christian or not, Platonist, Aristotelian or Stoic.

Divining the future from dreams was just one form of divination, a practice against which pagan and Christian philosophers were for the most part united in their protest. This was an ancient art that involved specialists who were trained to read dreams, stones and other arcane phenomena such as the flight and entrails of birds.[12] Clement of Alexandria scorned oneirocritics and other practitioners of divination.[13] The *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, a Roman text of the early third century, advises that those who practise dream divination should not be admitted to baptism.[14] In the mid-fourth century, Basil of Caesarea calls interpreters of dreams 'poisoners of souls … for not every dream is immediately a prophecy, as Zachariah said'.[15] Athanasius of Alexandria also rejected it outright, claiming that divination was unreliable because demons were able to hijack people's dreams.[16]

Not everyone rejected divination, however. The Stoic view of providence allowed for divination on the basis of cosmic sympathy.[17] In *Against*

[10] Harris-McCoy 2012; Oberhelman 2008; Russell and Nesselrath 2014.
[11] Dossey 2013.
[12] Dulaey 1973: 189–90. On the ambivalent attitude to dreams and divination in the ancient world, see Dodson 2009: 13–18; Gertz 2014: 111–24; Harris 2009: 174–84.
[13] Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 2.11.2–3, where he condemns useless pagan oracles, coupled with 'the expounders of prodigies, the augurs, and the interpreters of dreams', Mondésert and Plassart 1976: 68; tr. Wilson 1867: 174; and Origen, *Cont. Cels.* 4.95, a passage discussed below.
[14] *Trad. apost.* 16.22, Botte 1998: 745, Easton 1962: 42–3: 'An enchanter, an astrologer, a diviner, a soothsayer, a user of magic verses, a juggler, a mountebank, an amulet-maker must desist or be rejected.'
[15] Citing Zech 10:1–2, Basil Caes. *Ep.* 210.6, PG 32: 777B.
[16] This is discussed by Doru Costache in Chapter 3.
[17] Chadwick 1948: 85–6.

Celsus (*Contra Celsum*), Origen complained that the pagan philosopher Celsus omitted to mention that many people had learnt what would befall them – whether through the study of birds, sacrifices or horoscopes. This objection implies that Origen himself believed in the efficacy of divination, even though he condemned augury for Christians elsewhere in that work, based on proscriptions in the Hebrew Scriptures.[18] Plotinus too entertained the possibility that divination worked through a sympathy between the cosmos and the cosmic mind, as Matthew Dickie has shown.[19] The same cosmic sympathy could allow some purified souls to glimpse the future in prophetic visions, an idea that Synesius of Cyrene took up at the beginning of the fifth century.

Before we move on to the Alexandrian debate over the value of sleep and dreams in Chapters 2 to 4, however, that debate must be placed in its Greco-Roman context, which is twofold. First, I look at Greco-Roman dream literature: what Homer and the authors of dream key manuals had to say about dreams. Second, I consider the attitudes to dreaming in Hellenistic medical science, which was intimately linked with the philosophical traditions of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoic school, including Galen of Pergamon. Next, I ask what each of these traditions had to say about virtue and its impact on dreaming and divine knowledge. This will lay the ground for my next chapter, an overview of Alexandrian and Egyptian writing on dreams, from the Jewish, Christian and pagan traditions. Through this overview, we will observe how late antique Alexandrian Christians combined what they inherited from their study of Scripture with pagan Greco-Roman traditions on dreams and virtue to produce something unique, a dream theory that would last for another millennium.

Greco-Roman Dream Literature

Homeric Dreams

In the epic poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, written by Homer in the eighth century BCE, dreams already played a major part in imparting messages from the gods to humans. The main difference between Homeric and later

[18] *Cont. Cels.* 4.95, Borret 1986: 420. See Neil 2018a: 126–7.
[19] Dickie 2002 plausibly argues that two passages from Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.3.7 and 4.4.40–4 on divination and magic, influenced Synesius' discussion in *De insomniis*, either directly or by way of a lost commentary by Porphyry on the passages in question. See further Chapter 4.

Christian traditions was that the Greek gods' use of dreams was not always well-intentioned. In Homer, divinely sent dreams could be true or false, or even evil, as the translator Richard Lattimore puts it.[20] A dream message from the gods was 'divine' (*theios*) but it could also be destructive (*oulos*).

This is the case in the first detailed dream account in the *Iliad*, the one sent by Zeus to Agamemnon in the guise of his old counsellor Nestor to tell him (falsely) that his attack on Troy would be successful.[21] This dream (*oneiros*) is personified, so that 'evil Dream' becomes a proper noun in our translations, but also 'divine Dream'.[22] He is external, objective and not always associated with sleep. Zeus wished to push Agamemnon into a doomed venture, for personal reasons to do with his favourite, Achilles. Already in this early example, a link was made between dreams and virtue: when Agamemnon related the dream to his fellows, Nestor said that only the virtue of the one who had received it, the 'best of men', made them believe it: if anyone else had reported such a dream they would have called it a lie and might have turned from it.[23] Indeed, it is only men who receive dreams in the *Iliad*, never the less reliable sex,[24] although this gender discrimination was dropped in the *Odyssey*.

In *Iliad* 10, we find a dream simile used to describe the appearance to Rhesus of his killer Diomedes: like an evil dream, the son of Tydeus (whose father was Oeneus) appeared over the head of the Thracian king as he lay dying: '*Like to an evil dream* stood that night over the head of Rhesos the son of the son [sic] of Oeneus, by the design of the goddess Athena.'[25]

At *Iliad* 23 we find the first and only appearance of the dead in a dream in this work, with the dead Patroclus appearing to his beloved Achilles as a spectre (*eidôlon*) in his sleep.[26] The youth prophesied that Achilles too would die beneath the walls of Troy and begged that their ashes be joined together in a single funerary urn.[27]

Finally, at the end of the *Iliad*, there is a passing reference that seems to present a more modern, psychological conception of the dream, where the author

[20] Redfield 2014: 6 reads *oulos* as 'destructive' or 'ill-intentioned'. See note 22 below.
[21] *Il.* 2.1–71. See the discussion of Messer 1918: 1–9.
[22] *Il.* 2.6 'to send evil Dream to Atreus' son Agamemnon', and 2.8: 'Go forth, evil Dream.' *Il.* 2.22 'In Nestor's likeness the divine Dream spoke to him', tr. Lattimore 1951: 76.
[23] *Il.* 2.81–2, tr. Lattimore 1951: 78.
[24] Messer 1918: 8.
[25] *Il.* 10.495–7, tr. Powell 2014: 251–2. My emphasis. Cf. the less literal translation of Lattimore 1951: 231 'since a bad dream stood by his head in the night – no dream, but Oineus' son, by device of Athene'.
[26] *Il.* 23.62–71. See Messer 1918: 12–13; and Redfield 2014: 6.
[27] *Il.* 23.80–1, 83–91; Messer 1918: 15; Koschel 2016: 92.

comments that Achilles cannot catch Hector up as he pursues him under the walls of Troy and likens it to dreams of pursuit in which the one who flees cannot be caught.[28] Koschel and Harris call this an 'episodic dream'.[29]

To summarise the evidence of the *Iliad*, we find here, in the earliest known work of Greek literature, two kinds of external dream: a false dream sent by a god (Zeus); and a spectre portending death to the one to whom it appears. Books 10 and 22 offer similes which refer to the more ordinary anxiety dreams or nightmares, with which we are all familiar. These could be classified as 'internal' dreams, or in the terminology of modern neuroscience and cognitive science 'normal' dreams. The distinction between internal and external dreams is one that will become important in later chapters of this volume.

In Homer's second instalment, the *Odyssey*, we have the famous allegorical dream of Penelope, and her haunting image of the two dream gates.[30] This is usually classified as a prophetic dream.[31] Penelope, the wife of the wandering fighter Odysseus, had a dream in which she saw an eagle devouring twenty geese. Like Agamemnon, Penelope was a paragon of virtue.[32] Abandoned by her spouse for seventeen years, she embodied the virtues of patience and faithfulness. She refused to entertain the advances of the many suitors who sought to take advantage of her husband's extended absence. Instead she waited, endlessly spinning, weaving and undoing her tapestry, until his return. When she saw the dream, she was distraught, unable to tell whether this was a sign that she should give up waiting for her husband or keep hoping for his safe return. An interpretation of the allegorical dream is sought and given by a beggar (Odysseus in disguise): her husband would return and destroy the suitors.[33] Penelope comments that the fleeting dreams of mortals go through two gates: one of ivory, the other of horn. The gate of horn produced true dreams, the ivory deceptive ones. Penelope is still not sure whether the dream is true: she can only hope that it did not come out of the ivory gate.[34] Luckily for her, her

[28] *Il.* 22.199–200; cf. the similar account in *Aeneid* 12.908–14. Messer 1918: 20–1 and n. 64.
[29] Koschel 2016: 94–5; Harris 2009: 50.
[30] *Od.* 19.509–81.
[31] So Koschel 2016: 93; see also her discussion of Penelope's dream of sharing a bed with Odysseus in *Od.* 20 as a prophetic dream which sheds light on the past, present and future. Koschel 2016: 93–4.
[32] Messer 1918: 30–1.
[33] *Od.* 19.555–7. See discussion in Redfield 2014: 7–8; Pratt 1994 and esp. 148 n. 4 on Freudian interpretations of the lines (541–3) where Penelope weeps for the death of her geese. Pratt rejects the Freudian interpretation offered by some who see in Penelope's sadness over the destruction of the geese her repressed desire for her suitors.
[34] *Od.* 19.568–9. Messer 1918: 32.

ominous dream was prophetic, and forecast the final stage of the drama, Odysseus' triumphant return to his wife and home. This kind of allegorical dream was a new step for epic but became a staple in Greek tragedies.[35]

Following the epics of Homer, many playwrights of both comedies and tragedies made use of dreams to mediate messages from the gods to their human protagonists. The only problem was knowing what they meant when they were allegorical and whether the divine agents who sent them could be trusted.

Already in Homer we find reference to dream interpreters in general (*oneiropoloi*), and occasionally individual interpreters are named.[36] These professionals used dreambooks, or dream key manuals, to understand the significance of things seen in dreams. Dreambooks gave a less literary treatment of dream symbols, listing them alphabetically or by thematic group. While the dreams analysed in dreambooks were considered mantic, in that they told something about the dreamer's present or future, they were not considered revelatory in the sense of being sent by the gods. They did, however, provide a cognitive framework for later works on dream-visions and their interpretation. It will therefore be useful to consider the earliest extant dreambook, that of Artemidorus, a professional interpreter from Ephesus, who also identified himself as belonging to his mother's hometown, Daldis, also in western Asia Minor,[37] and wrote his enormously influential dreambook in the latter half of the second or the early third century.[38]

Dream Key Manuals: Artemidorus of Ephesus

Walde reminds us that in Artemidorus' day dreams fulfilled a much greater cultural role than they do today, although her assessment refers only to contemporary western culture, beyond which dreams still play a significant role in everyday life.[39] Dreambooks, also known as dream key manuals (*oneirocritica*), were used to diagnose illness, to predict the future

[35] Messer 1918: 33.
[36] *Il.* 5.149, tr. Lattimore 1951: 132: '[sons of] the aged dream interpreter, Eurydamas'.
[37] Pack 1963; Harris-McCoy 2012.
[38] On the imprecise dating see Harris–McCoy 2012: 1–2. Bowersock 2004: 54–6 realistically dates the work to the Severan age (193–211 CE) on the basis of some characters mentioned in it, including Aristides the lawyer and (Julius) Paulus the lawyer. This dating, according to Bowersock 2004: 59, 62–3, situates the work in the context of the Second Sophistic, although Artemidorus himself was not a part of it and was critical of it.
[39] Walde 1999: 121–2; also MacAlister 1992: 140–2; Marlow 2008: 1–24; Hahn 1992. It was Michel Foucault (1984) who brought the *Oneirocriticon* of Artemidorus to the attention of scholars of

(so-called 'mantic' dreams) and to determine one's place and destiny in a universe governed by capricious gods.

Dreambooks give us a sense of the 'social aspirations and anxieties' – to quote Suzanne MacAlister's phrase – of ordinary men,[40] and significantly less often, of women. Classical Greek and Latin dreambooks were written and used by professional interpreters, as witnessed by Artemidorus' dedication of his dream key manual to his son. This book enjoyed wide circulation in Byzantium throughout the first millennium, to judge from its manuscript tradition. The pagan tradition of dream interpretation which Artemidorus represented was arguably the final frontier of personal identity to be conquered by first-millennium Christianity. This is demonstrated by the continuing influence of pagan dreambooks, especially that of Artemidorus, on the theoretical assumptions of Byzantine *oneirocritica*.[41]

Artemidorus presented his views on the meaning-function of oneiric imagery in the theoretical parts of his dreambook.[42] In his introduction to the work, Artemidorus pointed out the importance of the interpreter's knowledge of common customs, which include respect for the gods. 'For no culture lacks gods, just as there is none without a ruler, and each worships different gods but all religions are directed towards the same divine referent.'[43] From this we may infer that even pagan dream interpretation took place within a broadly religious context. As Artemidorus observed, the sight of the Olympian gods cheerful and smiling is a positive omen for the dreamer.[44]

Artemidorus made a fundamental distinction between dreams about things present (*enhypnia*) and dreams about things which will happen in the future (*oneiroi)*. However, the latter are also a subset of things that are present: 'The *oneiros*, which is also an *enhypnion*, makes us observe a prophecy of future events and, after sleep, it is by nature inclined to rouse and stir the soul by inciting active investigations.'[45] He gives the example of someone who dreams he goes hunting and gets shot with an arrow in the shoulder. When he wakes, he goes hunting and is shot in the shoulder.[46]

power relations in the ancient world. On dreams in early and modern Islam and their similarities to the late antique tradition, see Neil forthcoming.

[40] MacAlister 1992: 140.

[41] The *Dreambook of Daniel*, named pseudonymously after the ancient Hebrew prophet, is the earliest Byzantine example of this genre and dates from around the seventh century. See Oberhelman 2008 and Neil 2015b.

[42] See the beginning of Book 1 and also of Book 4: Del Corno 1988: 150.

[43] Artem. *On.* 1.8.14, Harris-McCoy 2012: 60–1.

[44] Artem. *On.* 1.5, Harris-McCoy 2012: 58–9.

[45] Artem. *On.* 1.1, Harris-McCoy 2012: 48–9.

[46] Artem. *On.* 1.2, Harris-McCoy 2012: 48–9.

This example raises the question of how one would know that the dream was predictive if precautions were taken to avert the predicted event.

Predictive dreams were divided by Artemidorus into two categories: direct and symbolic (also called allegorical).[47] He defined the *oneiros* as 'a movement or composition of the soul, consisting of many forms, which is significant of future events, both good and bad'.[48] Direct dreams could be easily interpreted by the dreamer (for example, you dream you are shot in the shoulder and the next day it happens). The symbolic or allegorical required the services of a dream interpreter, or a manual like that of Artemidorus.

Artemidorus identified four categories of allegorical dream: common, alien, civic and cosmic. Six elements came into play: nature, law, custom, craft or profession, words (lexical choices) and time or season.[49] Each of these elements could be interpreted with a general approach or a specific approach. In the specific, there were four kinds of *oneiros*: some appeared good in the dream and bade well for the future; some were bad in appearance and also bad signs for the future. Some appeared good in the dream but were bad signs for the future; others appeared bad but were good signs for the future.[50] For example, being crucified in a dream looked bad but was good for a sailor, because crucifixes were made of wood, as were ships; for everyone else it was a bad sign. Stealing sacrifices intended for the gods was a bad dream and portended evil in the future, unless one was a priest, when it was a good sign for the future, since it was the priest's job to clear away sacrifices.

It is important to note that virtue played no part in the pre-Christian dreamer's capacity to receive dreams or the interpreter's capacity to interpret them. Artemidorus put more trust in the skill of the interpreter than in the dreams themselves.[51] To this end he dedicated the last two books (Books 4 and 5) of his tract to his adult son, also named Artemidorus, whom he hoped would continue in his own profession. To improve his son's capacity for dream interpretation, he devised a codification of dream symbols. These correspondences were not one-to-one, unfortunately, and sometimes the same symbol could encompass opposite meanings, as for example the dream of sex with a prostitute, which could either mean good luck for the dreamer, or the ruin of his family, depending on certain

[47] *On.*1.2 and 4.1; see Del Corno 1988: 150; Boter and Flinterman 2007: 591–2.
[48] Artem. *On.* 1.2, Harris-McCoy 2012: 48–9.
[49] Artem. *On.* 1.3, Harris-McCoy 2012: 54–5.
[50] Artem. *On.* 1.5, Harris-McCoy 2012: 58–9.
[51] Cox Miller 1994: 76.