An Introduction to Dreams, Memory and Imagination in Byzantium

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The value placed on dreams, memory and imagination in Byzantine communities of the 4th to 15th centuries may appear strange to the modern mind. Unlike the post-Enlightenment view of dreams as one of many products of the imagination, all of which hold a secondary place in relation to “the real”, in Byzantium dreams and other imaginary sense perceptions carried a social significance that made them more important than mundane reality. Even more strangely, dreams and memories were given equal weight as the imaginary in Byzantine histories, literature, art, and liturgical texts. While we are familiar with dreams and miracles in hagiography, modern readers might not expect to find the same in histories and chronicles. Byzantine readers were not phased by the inclusion in these narratives of events that we might consider products of the imagination; rather they accepted them as lending spiritual weight to a narrative of God’s intervention in human affairs, and Byzantine affairs in particular.

The authors of this volume seek to go beyond the modern disjunction between the rational and the irrational, to appreciate the layers of social and individual meanings that the imaginary had in the lives of Byzantine dreamers, writers, chronographers, hymnographers, traders and artists, and to consider how their writings and art were taken up and viewed, read and heard by both ordinary and elite Byzantine citizens. In doing so, they build upon the recent work of scholars who have studied various aspects of dream interpretation and dream narratives in classical Greco-Roman, patristic, medieval and Byzantine literature.1 However, our authors seek to extend previous analyses of such texts beyond dreaming to the linked cognitive fields of imagining and remembering. Our fields of reference also include studies of holy places and holy objects, in recognition of the fact that the material world was permeated by the imaginary in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine era, and had an important function in creating community memories.

Dreams and their corollaries, memory and imagination, may seem an amorphous subject of study, and of limited application to the current day. However,

the interpretation and study of dreams is a living tradition in the post-Byzantine world, whether Orthodox, Catholic or evangelical Christian, Jewish or Muslim. The cultural import of remembering dreams is evident in the survival of dream key manuals, which have been studied in detail elsewhere, and are still in use in some Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities. Comparative studies of early Byzantine Greek and Arabic dream manuals by Oberhelman, Mavroudi and others have revealed the concerns of ordinary dreamers, both Christian and Muslim.

The textual sources mined here contain less well known descriptions of dreams, memory and the imagination, some more popular (for example, chronicles, hymns, and saints’ lives) and others intended for an elite audience, for instance: Michael Psellos’ funeral orations, philosophical tracts on dream interpretation and the location of the memory, and the letters exchanged between an emperor and his beloved. We also include the study of depictions in icons, which can shed light on dreams, memory and imagination and how they reinforced each other in establishing community identities.

1 Methodological Considerations

Our main methodological consideration is the need to respect context, whether that of the original work, or its reception sometimes centuries later. In all the Byzantine texts considered here, whether private letters, poems, hymns or treatises, the audience is the key to their interpretation. It is therefore important to establish for whom they were intended at the time of composition, and who later interpreted them for readers of their own day. The readers of court poetry undoubtedly held different views on homoerotic desire from the monks whom Evagrius sought to instruct. A philosopher-bishop like Synesius placed a different value on dreams and their prophetic potential from those who saw dreams as an index of virtue and moral progress, or its opposite, a demonic hindrance to spiritual progress.

As well as the criterion of audience, two other criteria stand out as determinative for understanding Byzantine conceptions of dreams, memory and

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3 Oberhelman 1991; Mavroudi 2002; Bulkeley, Adams and Davis 2009.
4 On Evagrius of Pontus’ dream theory and particularly his approach to erotic dreams, see Chapter 1 below.
5 See Neil, Costache and Wagner forthcoming on the virtue ethics of Synesius in relation to dreaming, in his early fifth-century work De insomnius. On the reception of Synesius, see Francesco Monticini’s chapter below.