

Reviews

Presses are encouraged to submit books dealing with Late Antiquity for consideration for review to any of JLA's three Book Review Editors: Sabine Huebner (sabine.huebner@unibas.ch); Jason Moralee (moralee.jason@gmail.com); and Maria Doerfler (maria.doerfler@yale.edu).

Dreams, Virtue and Divine Knowledge in Early Christian Egypt

BRONWEN NEIL, DORU COSTACHE, AND KEVIN WAGNER

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 222. ISBN: 978-110-848118-2

Reviewed by Alessia Bellusci
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From the middle of the twentieth century and, particularly, in the last few decades, scholars of ancient cultures have focused on dream accounts, dream theories, and dream behaviors developed by the ancients, acknowledging that, to some extent, oneiric fragments shaped the social consciousness of the pre-modern world. The multi-authored book under review expands this growing research with a study focused on the reconstruction of a distinctive Alexandrian dream tradition. The book carefully traces its intellectual developments—with less interest, instead, in the actual sleep/dream practice—addressing Alexandrian conceptions on dreams vis-à-vis the notion of virtue. Based on a remarkable array of primary sources, the volume originates from the joint effort of Doru Costache,

Kevin Wagner and Bronwen Neil, thus bringing together their expertise in patristics, early church history and Neoplatonic philosophy with Neil's long-lasting commitment to the study of dreams in the ancient world.

In the first chapter, Neil and Wagner offer an overview of Greco-Roman traditions on sleep, dreams, and virtue according to Homer's epic poems, Artemidorus's *Oneirocritica*, as well as Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy. It emerges that while the Greco-Roman legacy on virtue was robust and bound to influence the early Christian tradition, the legacy on dreams was mostly inconsistent, thus leaving room for a substantial redefinition of the subject in the following centuries.

The second chapter shows how this conceptual lacuna was extensively filled by the Alexandrian school, who in the first to fifth centuries CE interfused the principles of Platonism and Judeo-Christian teachings in an articulated and highly specific dream theory. Neil reconstructs its main conceptual developments chronologically, outlining the standpoints of Philo, Origen, Clement, Athanasius, Evagrius and Synesius on oneiric phenomena and comparing them with the ideas advanced by pagan and non-Alexandrian Christian philosophers. Alexandrian Christian thinkers understood the oneiric experience as a mode of perceiving spiritual realities. Correlating the perception and interpretation of dreams with virtue through the rich oneiric tradition of their Scriptures, they believed

that dreams both plain and symbolic may be prophetic and grant access to divine knowledge proportionally to the dreamer's degree of virtue. The Alexandrian dream theory, the premises of which can be recognized in the writings of the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, articulates in two main variants, one more philosophical—inaugurated by Philo and carried on by Origen and Clement—and one more psychological which added demonology to the equation and which transformed the sleep/dream experience in a barometer of spiritual progress—implied in Athanasius's thought and fully expounded by Evagrius of Pontus.

In the third chapter, perhaps the most robust and engaging, Costache reconstructs Athanasius's theory of the nocturnal space with remarkable philological accuracy and reference to cognitive studies. The thorough analysis of the entire Athanasian corpus (which is often examined vis-à-vis coeval Christian and gnostic sources) enables Costache to reconcile the apparent contradictions that emerge in single writings by the Alexandrian theologian and to draw our attention instead to his complex but coherent theory. The many nuances and incongruities in Athanasius's holistic approach served his different theological, pastoral, missionary and polemic purposes as he addressed his various readerships and their specific spiritual goals. Familiar with contemporary medical teachings on sleep/dreams, Athanasius interpreted sleep as a positive and necessary physiological activity which confers rest to the body and peace to the soul from the agitation of world concerns. Yet, when shifting from human anthropology to the anthropology of the saints (that is, illuminated individuals who succeed in progressively redefining

their human nature through ascetic and monastic life), Athanasius supported sleep management to various degrees, from consistent sleep reduction to watchfulness during sleep and self-conditioning through prayer and hymnody. Less interested in dreams as shortcuts to divine knowledge, Athanasius maintained a multifaceted attitude also towards dreams, acknowledging value to those either recorded in Scripture or experienced by virtuous individuals.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the thought of the philosopher and bishop Synesius of Cyrene, who brought to its peak the Alexandrian positivism toward dreams. While moving away, in part, from the views of the Alexandrian school, Synesius's dream theory is the one that most intensifies the fusion between Platonic and Judeo-Christian traditions, reinterpreting them in Synesius's peculiar Christianized Neoplatonism. Synesius' science of dream interpretation personalizes the act and the results of this divinatory practice, empowering dreamers—even ordinary dreamers—who are considered fit to interpret their own dreams. Wagner correctly points to a strong correlation between Synesius's theory of dream interpretation and his anthropological thought. In appreciating Synesius's continuity with many of Plotinus's and Porphyry's conceptions, Wagner shows how the bishop's thought was deeply indebted to that of Iamblichus, especially for what concerned the belief that theurgy (and, therefore, also dream divination) could be used by philosophers and ordinary men (sleepers) to gain access to and eventually union with the noetic-divine reality. The fifth and last chapter evaluates the legacy of the Alexandrian tradition on dreams—and, especially, of the Athanasius's *Life of Antony*

and of Evagrius's theology of dreams—in the works of John Cassian and the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and, more broadly, its impact on medieval ascetism in the West.

Focused on sources originated in a circumscribed geo-cultural milieu, this volume offers a meticulous reconstruction of the distinctive Alexandrian attitude toward sleep and dreams, showing its continuity with earlier traditions and also its many innovations, and drawing attention to its mainly positive interpretation of the sleeping/dreaming experience. The complex philosophical views gathered and compellingly disentangled in the volume make readers eager to discover also their more practical counterpart, namely the array of sleep/dream behaviors developed within late antique Alexandrian Christianity, of which Neil, Costache, and Wagner occasionally offer a taste. Throughout the book, the authors draw several comparisons with classical and non-Christian Neoplatonic sources. Readers, though, may want to deepen their knowledge of the subject also with studies on conceptions on sleep/dreams developed in contemporary and later Jewish and Islamic milieus. For instance, the comparison with rabbinic dream literature may provide insight into some of Origen's ideas on dreams, but also into Athanasius's and Evagrius's demonology, while Athanasius's belief in the possibility of self-conditioning the nocturnal space through prayer and the intonation of psalms may be read vis-à-vis Jewish, Islamic, and later Christian sources on dream practice—and, especially, in light of the dream request, a technique used for soliciting/controlling dreams.

Neil, Costache, and Wagner take sleep and dreams as the starting points to navigate the systems of thought of

some of the most prominent intellectuals of early eastern Christianity, devoting substantial sections of the volume to outlining their anthropology, epistemology, and conceptions of virtue. The volume, then, is a valuable publication not only for scholars interested in ancient sleep/dream theory, but also for all those who wish to approach, refresh, or deepen classic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

***Social Control in Late Antiquity:
The Violence of Small Worlds***

KATE COOPER AND JAMIE WOOD, EDs.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2020. Pp. xiii + 380. ISBN: 978-1-108-
47939-4

Reviewed by Ari Z. Bryen
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For historians, the problem of “social control” is, rightly or not, more a problem of evidence than of definition. It is easy to track the moments at which large institutions make attempts to intervene in the world; it is hard to see the micro-processes by which social structures are reproduced. How does one account for gossipy conversations in which codes of behavior are navigated, expectations articulated, and anti-social behaviors named and critiqued? For a smirk, a grimace of disapproval, or the raised eyebrow of a respected superior? For the consistency by which codes of behavior are followed without any institutional elaboration—the prevalence or absence of jaywalking, habits of queuing, or protocols for interacting with a waiter? To the extent that institutions periodically intervene in these areas such that they leave an evidentiary record, they intervene in social acts and scripts that are already thick with rules