CHAPTER 16

Dream Interpretation and Christian Identity in Late Antique Rome and Byzantium

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To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub.
SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet* (1602)

1 Introduction

Steven Oberhelman justly observed that, "Dreams had a checkered history throughout the formation and growth of Christianity."[1] Dreams and dream interpretation in Greco-Roman culture and in the Christian culture of late antiquity have received much scholarly attention in recent decades.[2] In late

1 Steven M. Oberhelman, *Dreambooks in Byzantium: Six Oneirocritica in Translation, with Commentary and Introduction* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008), 45.

2 Recent general studies of dreams in classical antiquity include: Beat Näf, *Traum und Traumdeutung im Altertum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2004); William V. Harris, *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); in the Roman principate and beyond: J.S. Hanson, "Dreams and Visions in the Graeco-Roman World and Early Christianity," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, part 2, vol. 23/2, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 1395–427; Juliette Harrisson, *Dreams and Dreaming in the Roman Empire: Cultural Memory and Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); in Christian late antiquity: Jacqueline Amat, *Songes et visions: l'au-delà dans la litterature latine tardive*, CEASA, vol. 109 (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985); Franca Ela Consolino, "Sogni e visioni nell'agiographia tardoantica: modelli e variazioni sul tema," *Aug* 29 (1989): 237–56; Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Fritz Graf, "Dreams, Visions, and Revelations: Dreams in the Thought of the Latin Fathers," in *Sub Imagine Somni: Nighttime Phenomena in Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Emma Scioli and Christine Wade (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2010), 211–31; Leslie Dossey, "Watchful Greeks and Lazy Romans: Disciplining Sleep in Late Antiquity," *JECS* 21 (2013): 209–39; Guy G. Stroumsa, "Dreams and Visions in Early Christian Discourse," in *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, ed. David Dean Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 189–212; in the Middle Ages and Byzantine empire: the collected essays in *I Sogni nel Medioevo. Seminario internazionale Roma, 2–4 ottobre 1983*, ed.

 | DOI 10.1163/9789004301573_017

antiquity Christian attitudes towards visions, dreams, and dream symbolism were ambivalent, to say the least. While pagan dream manuals were outlawed, partly because of their focus on sexual material that was taboo for Christians, including bestiality, some anonymous Byzantine dream manuals were produced, telling lay Christians how to interpret the images they saw in their dreams. The question of divine inspiration was troubling to Christian commentators on dreams and visions. In this chapter I consider how two Christian authors, Gregory the Great and the anonymous author of a dream key manual ascribed to the prophet Daniel, dealt with the interpretation of dreams. The differences in the ways that dreams were understood by these western and eastern authors may be explained by the emergence of distinctive Christian identities in the eastern and western churches, as these Christians sought to define themselves against paganism in very different ways.

Byzantine dream key manuals give us a sense of the 'social aspirations and anxieties'—to coin the phrase of MacAlister[3]—of ordinary men, and significantly less often, of women. The western church allowed for the appearance of the divine in dreams, and the communication of divine revelations. The use of dreams and visions as illustrative material for the lives of saints in Gregory's *Dialogi* stands in contrast to the demise of eastern dreambooks from the sixth century, as the Byzantine church came down increasingly hard upon dreams and the interpretation of dreams, or divination, which was considered a species of magic. Dreams were perhaps the final frontier of personal identity to be conquered by Christianity, and the continuity between Greco-Roman dreambooks, such as the second-century Greek writer Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*,[4] and Byzantine dreambooks and dream key manuals is obvious from even a cursory glance at the contents. The evidence for this gentler western church attitude to the vagaries of laypeople's dream life is scanty, however,

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Tullio Gregory, Lessico intellectuale Europeo, vol. 35 (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985); Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, vol. 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Maria Mavroudi, *A Byzantine Book on Dream Interpretation: The Oneirocriticon of Achmet and its Arabic Sources*, The Medieval Mediterranean: Peoples, Economics and Cultures 400–1453, vol. 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Steven M. Oberhelman, ed., *Dreams, Healing, and Medicine in Greece: From Antiquity to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); and the unpublished 2012 Byzantine Studies Fall Workshop on "The (Mis)interpretion of Byzantine Dream Narratives," held at Dumbarton Oaks, November 8–10. Only Kruger, *Dreaming*, 45–48, 125 and 161 treats Gregory the Great's *Dial*. in any detail.

3 Suzanne MacAlister, "Gender as Sign and Symbolism in Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*: Social Aspirations and Anxieties," *Helion* 19 (1992): 140–60.

4 See the new edition and translation by Daniel E. Harris-McCoy, *Artemidorus' Oneirocritica: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).