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
Greco-Roman Traditions on Dreams and Virtue

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. 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

the Christian tendency to posit biblical figures as precursors. 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. 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 and studies of particular thinkers, whether Classical Greco-Roman, early Christian or those somewhere in between, like Synesius of Cyrene. Reception studies of earlier traditions in the medieval and early to middle Byzantine periods have also proved popular, since the groundbreaking work on the Byzantine retroversion of Artemidorus by the Arab Christian Achmet. New critical editions and translations of key texts, such

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1 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.

2 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.

3 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.


8 Gregory 1985; Kruger 1992; Krönung 2012; Oberhelman 2013; Angelidi and Calofonos 2014; Neil 2014a; Keskiäho 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.

Greco-Roman Traditions on Dreams and Virtue as Artemidorus’ *Oneirocriticon*, six Byzantine dreambooks and Synesius’ *De insomniis*, 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. 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. Clement of Alexandria scorned oneirocritics and other practitioners of divination. 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. 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’. Athanasius of Alexandria also rejected it outright, claiming that divination was unreliable because demons were able to hijack people’s dreams.

Not everyone rejected divination, however. The Stoic view of providence allowed for divination on the basis of cosmic sympathy. In *Against...*
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. Plotinus too entertained the possibility that divination worked through a sympathy between the cosmos and the cosmic mind, as Matthew Dickie has shown.

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**

**Homerian 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
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’ (\textit{theios}) but it could also be destructive (\textit{oulos}).

This is the case in the first detailed dream account in the \textit{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 (\textit{oneiros}) is personified, so that ‘evil Dream’ becomes a proper noun in our translations, but also ‘divine Dream’.\(^{21}\) 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 \textit{Iliad}, never the less reliable sex,\(^{24}\) although this gender discrimination was dropped in the \textit{Odyssey}.

In \textit{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: ‘\textit{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 \textit{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 (\textit{eidōlon}) 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 \textit{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 \textit{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: 231–2. 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’.


\(^{27}\) 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. Koschel and Harris call this an ‘episodic dream’. To summarise the evidence of the \textit{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 \textit{Odyssey}, we have the famous allegorical dream of Penelope, and her haunting image of the two dream gates. This is usually classified as a prophetic dream. 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. 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. 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. Luckily for her, her

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\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Il.} 22.199–200; cf. the similar account in \textit{Aeneid} 12.908–14. Messer 1918: 20–1 and n. 64.

\textsuperscript{29} Koschel 2016: 94–5; Harris 2009: 50.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Od.} 19.509–81.

\textsuperscript{31} So Koschel 2016: 93; see also her discussion of Penelope’s dream of sharing a bed with Odysseus in \textit{Od.} 20 as a prophetic dream which sheds light on the past, present and future. Koschel 2016: 93–4.

\textsuperscript{32} Messer 1918: 30–1.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{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.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{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.\footnote{Messer 1918: 33.}

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 (\textit{oneiropoloi}), and occasionally individual interpreters are named.\footnote{\textit{Il.} 5.149, tr. Lattimore 1951: 132: ‘[sons of] the aged dream interpreter, Eurydamas’.} 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,\footnote{Pack 1963; Harris-McCoy 2012.} and wrote his enormously influential dreambook in the latter half of the second or the early third century.\footnote{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.}

\textit{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.\footnote{Walde 1999: 121–2; also MacAlister 1992: 140–2; Marlow 2008: 1–24; Hahn 1992. It was Michel Foucault (1984) who brought the \textit{Oneirocriticon} of Artemidorus to the attention of scholars of} Dreambooks, also known as dream key manuals (\textit{oneirocritica}), were used to diagnose illness, to predict the future...
(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, 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.

Artemidorus presented his views on the meaning-function of oneric imagery in the theoretical parts of his dreambook. 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.’ 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.

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.’ 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.
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). 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’. 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. 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.

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. 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
elements of context: the age of the dreamer, the condition of his body, his financial status, even the nature of his birth.\textsuperscript{52}

Did Artemidorus think that it was valid to ask the gods for a dream that would answer a specific problem for the dreamer? The answer to this question is not a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Two passages of the \textit{Oneirocritica}, where Artemidorus discusses the practice of asking the gods for a dream containing a prediction or advice (\textit{On.} 1.6 and 4.2), have been recently brought to bear on the question.\textsuperscript{53} Boter and Flinterman have convincingly argued, against the opinion of other scholars,\textsuperscript{54} that Artemidorus did accept the validity of petitionary dreams. They show that Artemidorus accepted that such dreams could be valid predictions, conditional upon the observances of a certain protocol by the dreamer.\textsuperscript{55} First, it had to be a symbolic dream, not a literal one. If, having prayed for a dream, you had a dream whose imagery exactly reflected your problem (that is, it was direct and not symbolic), it was only an \textit{enhypnion}, and had no predictive value (\textit{On.} 1.6). Second, the petition should be framed politely; it was counterproductive to demand a symbolic dream from the gods (\textit{On.} 4.2), as it was counterproductive to demand anything of important people.\textsuperscript{56} Third, to avoid misinterpretation, one should not dictate to the gods – or to one’s own soul – how to encode the requested advice or prediction. It was pointless to attempt to make ‘legal contracts’ of the kind: ‘If I should do this, then show me that’ (\textit{On.} 4.2).\textsuperscript{57} One must not, for instance, insist upon preassigned meanings for any given dream symbol, such as: ‘If I dream of a vine, it will mean I should get married, but if I dream of bread, it will mean I should not.’

We are left wondering whether Artemidorus thought such dreams were internal or externally generated. Unfortunately for us, Artemidorus did not come down one way or the other on the origin of predictive dreams. Although he recommends praying to the gods about one’s concerns, he stipulated that ‘the manner in which it must be foretold, that is to be left to the god himself or to one’s own soul’.\textsuperscript{58} While he occasionally uses the phrase ‘God-sent’ (\textit{theopemptos}),\textsuperscript{59} he more often refers to such predictive dreams

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{On.} 1.9, Harris-McCoy 2012: 62–3.
\textsuperscript{53} Boter and Flinterman 2007.
\textsuperscript{54} E.g. Price 1986.
\textsuperscript{55} Boter and Flinterman 2007: 604, paraphrased in the three points below.
\textsuperscript{56} Harris-McCoy 2012: 308–9. This condition and the following are discussed by Boter and Flinterman 2007: 597–8.
\textsuperscript{57} Harris-McCoy 2012: 308–9.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{On.} 4.2, Harris-McCoy 2012: 310–11. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{59} ‘But those that come [to people] who are not worried about anything and reveal something to come, good or bad, are called god-sent.’ \textit{On.} 1.5, Harris-McCoy 2012: 58–9.
as being generated by the soul itself, since it is prophetic by nature: ‘For the god, or whatever else that is the cause of dreaming, furnishes the soul of the dreamer, which is by nature prophetic, with dreams that relate to a future outcome.’

Interestingly, he specifically refused to buy into the Aristotelian debate about the origins of dreams.

But I would not, as Aristotle does, raise the difficulty of whether the cause of dreaming is external to us, arising from a god, or if there is some internal cause, which disposes the soul within us and shapes it in accordance with natural processes. Rather, (they are) ‘god-sent’ (insofar) as we customarily call all unexpected things ‘god-sent’.

Finally, Artemidorus was keen to distance himself and his profession from other practitioners of the arts of divination: necromancers, palm-readers and those who read people’s futures from their physical characteristics, especially facial features. He attempted to lend scientific credibility to his profession by laying out in detail the many factors that could influence the interpretation of a dream. One should not attempt to interpret dreams that are only partially remembered. Artemidorus returned to this idea in Oneirocriticon 4, where he offers this advice to anyone who attempts to interpret someone else’s dreams, perhaps even a professional interpreter like himself:

And only interpret dreams that have been remembered in their entirety and on which the observer has a detailed grasp and can recall precisely, since if the things observed come to pass and you are found to have interpreted things that were not in fact seen, you will falter. And it is essential to avoid a reputation of ignorance.

Dream key manuals like that of Artemidorus are good indicators of what ordinary men and women were concerned about in the first few centuries of Christianity but tell us little of dream theory. In what follows, we will focus on the sources of Alexandrian dream theory, rather than the more practical approach of oneirocritica. The Alexandrian approach was

61 On. 1.6, Harris-McCoy 2012: 58–61. Similarly, On. 4.3, Harris-McCoy 2012: 310–11: ‘(Regard) dreams which appear suddenly as god-sent, just as we also call things that appear contrary to our expectations god-sent.’
63 On. 1.12, Harris-McCoy 2012: 64–5.
based on the Athenian philosophical tradition, and like it was initially intellectual rather than experiential.

The Athenian Philosophical Tradition on Dreams

Plato on Dreams

For Plato, as Tigner remarked, the dream ‘is itself not totally unreal, but bears a variety of derivative or secondary relations to “the real”’. We may liken these derivative relations to that between the sensible world and the realm of Forms. Although the dream figure or metaphor in Plato is richer and more complex than has previously been recognised,\(^{65}\) it is a derivative, lower order of consciousness than the sensible realm. The dreamer is deceived in thinking she sees things in the sensible realm when she dreams.

Those who followed Plato’s thinking believed that the rational mind stayed awake while the body went to sleep. This school of thought included most Hellenistic medical practitioners before Galen. They were suspicious of sleep and negative towards dreams, in which the irrational part of the soul might lead the mind astray. There were two irrational parts of the soul: the desiring and the incensive parts, and these were subject to the passions. Aristotle regarded sleep as a kind of affection (\textit{pathos}), likening it to epilepsy,\(^ {66}\) which suppressed the rational mind and allowed the irrational parts to play up. If allowed to get the upper hand, the appetitive part of the soul could induce dreams of evil acts like incest and bestiality.\(^ {67}\) Plato left the door open for true revelatory dreams, but urged light sleep and staying awake as much as possible.\(^ {68}\) He counselled meditation upon fine words before sleep, to try to head off irrational impulses, which could act on the senses during sleep through the \textit{pneuma}, the nexus between the body and the mind, or between the spiritual and material worlds. The \textit{pneuma} therefore had to be purified, through clean living and clean thoughts. Synesius of Cyrene was to give the most detailed account of the operation of the \textit{pneuma} in dreams, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Plato’s doctrine that the irrational parts of the soul needed to be kept under control of the mind, especially in deep sleep, was taken up and developed in the first century by Hellenistic Platonists such as the Jewish

\(^{65}\) Tigner 1970: 211.


\(^{67}\) Plato, \textit{Rep.} 9 571c–d. This seems to be predicated on the assumption that incest and bestiality is what people secretly desire.

\(^{68}\) Dossey 2013: 222.
philosopher Philo of Alexandria. If the soul was still awake in sleep, the mind (nous) or highest part of the soul could, Philo thought, access God during sleep. This insight was developed by the Neoplatonists and will be examined in Chapter 2.

**Aristotle on Dreams**

We mentioned above that Aristotle was concerned about the internal or external origins of dreams. According to Aristotle’s tract *On Dreams (De insomniis)*, the imagination (phantasia) played an important role in dreams, by mediating sense impressions: ‘It is plain that dreaming is the work of the perceptual part [of the soul] but belongs to this part in its imagining (fantastikon) capacity.’ Dreams were phantasms or appearances that arise from the movement of the sense impressions, while one is in the sleeping state.

Aristotle denied that divination was the purpose of dreams, or that they could be sent by God. On the distinction between sense impressions and the imagination, he writes: “That imagination is not sense is clear from the following considerations: sense is either a faculty or an activity, e.g. sight or seeing: imagination takes place in the absence of both, as e.g. in dreams.” Such movements were caused by nature: increased sensory impressions occurred when the blood sank downwards or cooled in sleep. Even so, Aristotle admitted that dreams ‘have a divine aspect, however, for Nature [their cause] is divinely planned, though not itself divine’. Thus he allowed that dreams could sometimes reveal ‘objective facts’ by coincidence, although he considered it unlikely that they should be mantic. Indeed, Aristotle went so far as to say that visions could not be God-sent because even some of the lower animals had dreams, and people ‘of inferior type’ had the power of foreseeing the future. He explains that people who suffer from a garrulous and excitable nature sometimes by pure coincidence foresaw things in vivid dreams that were fulfilled: ‘For, inasmuch as they experience many movements [of the soul] of every kind, they just

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74 Arist., *On Prophesying by Dreams* 2, Ross 463b.
76 Arist., *On Prophesying by Dreams* 2, Ross 463b.
chance to have visions resembling objective facts." Thus, he concluded that dreams were internally produced but that did not exclude them from sometimes hitting on the truth of things to come by pure coincidence.

**The Stoics on Dreams**

For the third largest group of philosophers, the Stoics, the challenge was the same as for the Platonists: to check the wakeful mind, which tended towards vice during sleep. This belief, so similar to the teaching of Plato, probably evolved in the third to first centuries BCE. The Stoic school viewed sleep positively as being productive for rest, but was sceptical about the value of dreams, during which the mind was free to roam unchecked. Following the Platonist and Stoic scepticism toward sleep, most Greek philosophers and later Christian ascetics therefore adopted strict practices of sleep deprivation, while Roman philosophers and ascetics adopted the more positive attitude toward sleep of Galen of Pergamon.

**Galen of Pergamon**

Galen (c. 130–200), personal physician of the emperors Lucius Verus, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus and Septimius Severus, adopted the Aristotelian conception that the mind or brain was ‘the seat of both perception and reason’, rather than the heart, as in earlier Hippocratic texts. When the senses rested, the body went to sleep, which was a shutting down of the perceptual part of the soul (ψυχή). According to Galen, it was the rational mind and the senses that fell asleep, not the body, allowing the faculties of desire and imagination (or envisioning) to run rampant, and to lead the philosopher (and later the Christian monk) astray. Dream images were evidence for Galen’s followers of the irrational nature of sleep.

An interesting anomaly in Galen’s thought and medical practice was his lifelong devotion to the cult of Asclepius. Galen’s hometown of Pergamon was the centre of a large Asclepion, where the god of healing was said

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78 Arist., *On Prophecying by Dreams* 2, Ross 463b.


80 In view of the complexities she outlines, Dossey 2013: 211 n. 8 is potentially misleading: ‘In fact, a skeptical Roman attitude toward dreams coexisted with a positive attitude toward sleep, whereas in the Greek world, it was, if anything, the opposite.’


to have appeared to Galen’s father in a dream, advising him to support his son’s education. As a result, Galen seems to have remained loyal to Asclepius throughout his career as a medical philosopher. The tradition of incubation at temples dedicated to Asclepius, where the sick would seek dreams from the god for their healing, indicates the positive value that many people placed on dreams as sites of divine intervention, in both medical and lay spheres. The practice of incubation at the Asclepion continued in late antiquity in both parts of the empire, with pagan temples being coopted for the Christian cults of healing saints, for example the shrine of saints Cyrus and John founded by Cyril of Alexandria on the site of a temple of Isis at Menouthis.

Galenism came to dominate medical theory and practice in the West, especially his theory that dreams could be used for diagnosing the excess or lack of humours in the human body. His theories of the four humours that had to be kept in balance for health influenced Augustine and other western patristic thinking on dreams, especially in Christian North Africa, as we will see in the next chapter.

To sum up, there were three separate Greco-Roman schools of thought on the moral, medicinal or spiritual value of dreams and sleep: the Stoics, the Platonists and the Aristotelians. From Hellenistic times to late antiquity, two secular schools of sleep theory came to dominate, each of which included both Christians and non-Christians: one that was positive towards sleep as giving rest to the body and mind, and another that was sceptical of the value of sleep, because it believed that the mind did not rest during sleep.

Dossey demonstrates that these different attitudes towards sleep roughly correlated with the schools of medical practice that dominated in each half of the empire, the West being positive and the East being generally sceptical about the value of sleep, with the exception of Athanasius. The eastern view of sleep as a dangerous indulgence, which was also characteristic of the West before Galen, was due to the dominance of Stoic and Platonist Hellenistic medical practitioners. From the third century, however, the followers of Galen, especially prominent in the West, introduced a more

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83 Oberhelman 1987; Graf 1990; Holowchak 2002: 166–7, Appendix C. Cf. Wiśniewski 2016: 568, who warns against the assumption that incubation was simply a continuation of pagan practice. His argument for a unique Christian practice is stronger in regard to book divination than it is for incubation: see Wiśniewski 2013.

84 Neil 2006 shows how the site’s purpose changed from the fifth to seventh centuries.

85 Holowchak 2002: 165, Appendix B.

86 Dossey 2013: 211.
positive appraisal of the value of sleep for good health. However, they were all sceptical about the value of dreaming, to one degree or another. It was left to the Platonists to devise a positive theory of dreaming as being associated with contemplation of the divine.

The relationship between contemplation of the divine and dreaming was one that was to vex Philo, Clement and Origen of Alexandria. Their solutions to the problem depended to a large degree on the role of virtue in dream interpretation and divine knowledge. We therefore turn now to Greco-Roman understandings of virtue, an important foundation for the later Christian virtue ethics of dreaming.

The Greco-Roman Traditions on Virtue

The analysis of virtue below is divided into similar headings to the previous section on Greco-Roman dream theory. We start with Homeric society, then look at the Classical Athenian virtue theory under three headings: the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle.

Virtue in Homeric Society

Given that the poems of the Homeric age provided the historical memory for Classical Greek society, they are a useful and appropriate source for any search for the meaning of virtue. In these classic literary works, virtue had three specific characteristics: ‘it denoted skill and excellence’; virtue was ‘relatively concrete, tangible and relative to the situation’; and it was equated with nobility, high birth and prosperity. In the first instance we find, for example, in Homer’s Iliad 20.411 that Polydorus, son of Priam, is praised as being the swiftest of all, while at 23.276 Achilles recalls that his horses surpass all others in excellence. In both senses the author uses ἀρετή – most commonly translated as virtue – to denote surpassing greatness.

With regard to the second characteristic we need only consider the role of society in determining moral standards. In Homeric society, ἀρετή

87 MacIntyre 1984: 121.
89 MacIntyre 1984: 122.
90 MacIntyre claims ‘morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society. There is only one set of social bonds. Morality as something distinct does not yet exist.’ By this we may understand that moral standards are entirely shaped by the rules regulating social bonds rather than by external factors such as the rules imposed by the state on the citizen such as one finds in Classical Greek societies. MacIntyre 1984: 123, 132–5, 141.
was determined by one’s place in the family and society and the excellence with which one fulfilled one’s role within these domains.\footnote{On the recognition of virtue in Homeric societies, see MacIntyre 1984: 122–3: ‘[K]udos, glory, belong(ing) to the individual who excel(led) in battle or in contest as a mark of recognition by his household and his community.’ Bryant 1996: 91 affirms that considerations of family, household (οικός) and honour often took precedence over societal demands. Robinson 2006: 13 also notes that loyalty to one’s family was more important than loyalty to the wider society in the early Homeric age.} Virtue was therefore dependent on the particular society to which one belonged, and the recognition of virtue was based on societal proscriptions or rules. By this I mean that in Homeric society a man was identified strictly with his place in that society and was thereby deemed virtuous or vicious in so far as he performed or failed to perform his duties within this society.\footnote{We follow the lead of Adkins 1960 and MacIntyre 1984 in focusing on the place of the adult male in Homeric society. Investigation into Homeric attitudes regarding the virtues and vices of women must be left for another occasion. The male bias perhaps led Adkins to neglect the more compassionate virtues, especially that of hospitality, which is especially important in the Odyssey. Even in the Iliad, Zeus takes vengeance on men who follow crooked ways (16.384–9) and is the protector of suppliants, as well as the guarantor of oaths. Thanks are due to our anonymous reviewer for alerting us to this caveat.} Thus, in such societies, social position not only acted as a rule against which to evaluate behaviour, but it was intrinsically linked to self-identity in a way that was far more pronounced than it is in the modern West.\footnote{‘Without such a place in the social order, a man would not only be incapable of receiving recognition and response from others; not only would others not know, but he would not himself know who he was … The self becomes what it is in heroic societies (such as the Homeric) only through its role; it is a social creation, not an individual one.’ MacIntyre 1984: 122–4, 129.}

The third feature of Homeric ἀρετή – its equation with nobility, high birth and prosperity – was seen in the nobility’s display of ‘hereditary virtue’ through public display in battle, the sporting contest, debating, singing and dancing.\footnote{Bryant 1996: 83.} Related to hereditary virtue was courage, the virtue which was of foremost importance in Homeric society.\footnote{MacIntyre 1984: 122.} Given the importance of war in this society both as a means for establishing individual and societal identities and for attaining and maintaining peace, it should come as no surprise that courage was highly valued. Also prized was the virtue of fidelity as expressed among brothers, friends and especially between husbands and wives.\footnote{For instance, MacIntyre 1984: 123 mentions the famous couples Andromache and Hector and Penelope and Odysseus as being friends who displayed the virtue of fidelity.} Fidelity acted as a strong guarantee of unity both in the family and in society as a whole.\footnote{MacIntyre 1984: 123.}
These features of virtue in Homeric society, although only briefly treated, highlight the link between virtue and society, a feature which may be found in the life of Synesius, more so in his actions than in his writings, a point to which we return below in Chapter 5.

Classical Athenian Views on Virtue

If the works of Homer inculcated a Greek sense of social virtue, it was left to the philosophers to work out what virtue meant for individuals, both among the elite and others of lower station. MacIntyre points out two problems inherent in the desire to establish the ‘Greek view of the virtues’. First, he notes that ‘we often say “Greek” where we should say “Athenian”’, and second, that there were many Athenian views, including those advocated by the Stoics, Plato, Aristotle, the sophists and the tragedians. We restrict our focus to the first three: the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle.

Stoic Virtues

The Stoics equated virtue with personal excellence. Simply speaking, we may take this to mean the totally rational life. More precisely, however, the Stoic view of ἀρετή is that it is the product of a life lived according to philosophy, where philosophy is considered to be an art (τέχνη). The product of such a philosophical life is both the ‘transformed disposition of the soul’ and the perfection of mental activities, the most important being desire, impulse and judgement. In the view of Sellars, the Stoic’s life is directed towards the transformation of character (ἦθος) and habits (ἔθος), and is thus concerned with ethics. However, while foundationally ethical, the Stoical life is not moral, at least not ‘in the modern sense of offering a series of regulations concerning how one should act or what one should do, and it is certainly not concerned with specifying how others should act’. Consequently, we see that for the Stoics virtue is the result of the philosophical or ethical life, rather than a discrete set of moral objectives by which one can measure the excellence attained by oneself or others. We can see immediately that this non-moral ethical framework

98 MacIntyre 1984: 135.
100 Sellars 2009: 168.
102 Sellars 2009: 169.
103 Sellars 2009: 169.
had limited application to the dream theory developed by Christians. The Platonic tradition on virtue offered them far more scope.

**Plato on Virtue**

Virtue in the Platonic corpus is a multifaceted concept, intimately linked with Plato’s belief in universal Forms, as well as his views on society and the soul. While individual virtues are treated occasionally in the early dialogues, it is not until *The Republic* that Plato fully unites his thoughts on the civic virtues with those on the virtues within the individual. Here Plato allocates virtues to the city and the soul on the basis of tripartite divisions, first for the city and then for the soul. The state, he posits, should be divided into Guardians who rule (οἱ φύλακες), Auxiliaries who serve in the military (οἱ ἐπίκουροι), and the rest who work in agriculture and manufacturing (οἱ πολλοί). Divided thus, the Guardians should possess the virtue of wisdom; the Auxiliaries, courage; and the governed, temperance. Justice is then to be found in ‘doing one’s own work’.

On the other hand, according to Plato, the individual contains a rational, a spirited and an appetitive or desiring soul. To each of these souls Plato attributes a virtue; to the rational, wisdom; to the spirited or volitional, courage; and to the appetitive, prudence (σωφροσύνη). More generally, however, the achievement of virtue in the individual demands an act of the will which aims to tread the middle path. To achieve this condition the individual must choose to avoid seeking pleasure for its own sake, knowing that pleasure does not annul pain. It is the development of habits (ἔθη) that makes such a state of being possible. Furthermore, it is especially in childhood that habits are most effective in shaping the character (ἦθος) needed to moderate the passions through the will.

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104 To take just a few examples, *Euthyphro* deals with piety, *Laches* with courage, *Charmides* with moderation and *Protagoras* with the unity of the virtues.

105 Copleston 1993: 229. The translators of Plato’s *Republic* recognise the difficulty of translating this term, declaring that σωφροσύνη may also mean moderation, ‘self-control, good sense, reasonableness … and (in some contexts) chastity’. Cooper 1997: 1062 n. 5.


109 In Book 7 of Plato’s *Laws*, the Athenian declares ‘the right way of life (τὸν ὀρθὸν βίον) is neither a single-minded pursuit of pleasure nor an absolute avoidance of pain, but a genial … contentment with the state between those extremes – precisely the state, in fact, which we always say is that of God himself’. Plato, *Laws 7*, 792c–d, 793a, Cooper 1997: 1461–2.


111 Plato, *Laws 7*, 792e, Cooper 1997: 1462.
For Plato the cultivation of virtue in individuals is an ever-present concern for the city-state. For Plato the cultivation of virtue in individuals is an ever-present concern for the city-state.112 The link between individuals and their society in Plato’s virtue ethics may be taken further. From the previous discussion it is apparent that there exists an analogous relationship between the individual and the city-state in the domain of Platonic virtue ethics. For instance, justice, analogous with the city-state, consists in each soul doing ‘its own work, whether [that is] ruling or being ruled’.113 Both the rational soul and the leaders of the city-state have knowledge of the Forms and are thereby best placed to order the rest of the body or city-state according to these Forms.114 Platonic virtue ethics is thus based on two pillars: the first being the belief that the rational component of the body (both macro and micro), through the knowledge of the Forms, comes to know what is good for the whole body and each of its parts; and the second, that justice is the fulfilment of the proper function of the part as an element of the whole.

The Platonic distinction between the rational and irrational parts of the soul offered fertile ground to those who, in later centuries, sought to categorise dreams as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Platonists accepted that the rational part of the soul, the awake mind (νοῦς), governed by wisdom, could access pure knowledge in sleep, as if freed from its fetters.115 For them, a purified mind did not lose consciousness or get swamped by sleep. The mind was able to rise above the pull of sleep, and do the spiritual work of contemplation, which they distinguished from dreaming. Dreams, for Plato, were a product of the irrational part that was governed by desire. Their epistemological value was further decreased by the fact that dreams bypassed volition altogether. Aristotle’s concept of virtue and its causes allowed even less room for dreams, as we will see.

Aristotle on Virtue
Aristotle’s treatment of the virtues has had an enormous influence on the field of virtue ethics. While he is perhaps most renowned for his doctrine of the mean in relation to conventional virtues, it is Aristotle’s teaching on 112 Lutz 1997: 567 notes that Plato’s ‘spokesmen’ regularly exhort their listeners to use political means to educate citizens to virtue, and lay out programmes for such education e.g. Apology 41e–42a; Gorgias 521; Rep. 403a, 500e; Laws 643d–e, 650b.
113 Plato, Rep. 443a–b, Cooper 1997:107. Members of the auxiliary class cannot attain true opinion of the forms as they lack training in mathematics and dialectics. Guardians, on the other hand, are able to come to stable true opinion of Forms precisely due to their formation in these disciplines. Cormack 2006: 120–2.
115 Dossey 2013: 211.
intellectual (natural) virtue which is the more profound.\textsuperscript{116} For Aristotle, intellectual virtue consists in the perfection of ‘the natural function of a human being … the exercise of the rational faculty’.\textsuperscript{117} The dichotomy between natural and conventional virtue in Aristotelian virtue ethics, while standard, should not, however, be pushed too far lest we underplay the role that the intellect has in habituation.

How then does Aristotle’s virtue ethics compare with that of Plato? In the first instance we may say with Sandrine Berges that the accounts of the virtues given by Plato and Aristotle share three common characteristics: that virtue is required to live the happy life; that the virtues are a unity; and that virtue is required for the individual to flourish.\textsuperscript{118} To this we may add MacIntyre’s insight that both Plato and Aristotle presupposed the existence of ‘a cosmic order which dictates the place of each virtue in a total harmonious scheme of human life’.\textsuperscript{119} Finally, we must recognise the importance both gave to the concept of habituation, or making virtue a habit in individuals.

Sorabji identifies three ways in which the intellect plays a part in forming the virtuous individual: through the exercise of prudence (\textit{φρόνησις}); in the rational choice (\textit{προαίρεσις}) of virtuous means and ends; and in the development of the habits.\textsuperscript{120} In the first instance it is clear that reason is required for the exercise of prudence. For Aristotle prudence assists the individual to choose good actions and to live the good life.\textsuperscript{121} Furthermore, in Aristotle’s view the good life includes both the attainment of excellence (\textit{τό ἄριστον}) and happiness or flourishing (\textit{εὐδαιμονία}).\textsuperscript{122} Irwin affirms that for Aristotle such flourishing is the proper object of reason and the ultimate end of the human life.\textsuperscript{123} This leads us to Sorabji’s second point, that the intellect plays a deliberative function in choosing means and ends for achieving happiness, that is, in exercising choice (\textit{προαίρεσις}).\textsuperscript{124} Sorabji’s third observation – that the rational faculty assists in the development of habits – must be tempered by the recognition that, for Aristotle,


\textsuperscript{118} Berges 2009: 11.

\textsuperscript{119} MacIntyre 1984: 142.

\textsuperscript{120} Sorabji 1980: 201–19.

\textsuperscript{121} Sorabji 1980: 205.

\textsuperscript{122} Sorabji 1980: 205–6.


\textsuperscript{124} Sorabji 1980: 201–5 outlines the contours of the debate concerning the apparent inconsistencies in Aristotle’s use of the word \textit{προαίρεσις}, especially noting the problem of whether it refers particularly to the choice of means for achieving just ends, or simply to the choice of particular just acts.
the development of virtue is dependent to some extent on nature, habit and teaching.\textsuperscript{125} Aristotle admits that the nature of the individual helps determine one’s receptivity to being taught and their ability to be moulded by experience.\textsuperscript{126} However, Sorabji rightly notes that teaching also plays a crucial role as it allows one to know the universal concepts which define the good life, which may then be applied to particular situations. In sum, Aristotle held virtue to be obtainable through the application of the intellect to the process of habituation for those who are naturally inclined, for the purpose of living the good life.

Dreams were not subject to any of Aristotle’s fundamental virtues: prudence, wise choice or good habits. This is why, as we saw above, Aristotle regarded sleep as a kind of affection (\textit{pathos}), like epilepsy, which suppressed the rational mind and allowed the irrational parts to play out their hidden desires.\textsuperscript{127} Dreams simply had nothing to do with virtue, as witnessed by the fact that they were experienced by people of all classes, even higher order animals such as dogs. Dreams might occasionally foretell events that came to pass, but this was no more than a coincidence, and could just as easily happen to an ignorant and base person as to an educated intellectual.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In this introductory chapter we have sought to answer the questions of why dreams mattered in late antiquity, and why they mattered more to those of the Platonist tradition than to Aristotelians, or to Stoics such as Galen. In the intellectual milieu of Christian Egypt and its capital city Alexandria, the invisible was more important than the visible, and the dangerous spiritual realm where demons and angels fought for control of people’s minds and souls while they slept was part of what it meant to be human. We have seen from the brief survey above that the legacy of Greco-Roman philosophy on the subject of dreams was quite scanty. This lacuna left Alexandrian Jews and Christians with room to move in their own development of doctrine on this vexed subject, as they sought to harmonise their views with their pagan forebears and with the biblical tradition. The same tradition had much more to say, however, on the subject of virtue. To appreciate how the Alexandrian understanding of virtue related to dreams and other modes of acquiring divine knowledge, we made a


\textsuperscript{126} Sorabji 1980: 217.

brief excursus into ancient Greco-Roman thought on virtue starting with Homer, and proceeding through the Athenian schools of the Stoics, Plato and Aristotle.

In the next chapter, I consider the Alexandrian philosophers Philo, Clement, Origen, Plotinus, Synesius and the ‘honorary Egyptian’ Evagrius, who all departed from the strict Platonist tradition in arguing that the things we see in dream-visions were superior and that dreams could give access to divine realities and knowledge of the future. Through an overview of these major thinkers from the first to fifth centuries, we can unpick some of the difficulties that dream-visions, prophecy, divine contemplation and ecstasy presented for Alexandrians and other Egyptians of late antiquity. From this overview, it emerges that the Alexandrian Christian approach was two-pronged: on the one hand, it was influenced by Platonism in that it recognised the limited potential of the mind to contemplate invisible, spiritual realities through dreams. On the other hand, it was experiential and viewed dreams as a barometer of spiritual progress, while fearing the possibility of demonic imposition. The first approach was more suitable to everyday life; the second more appropriate to the ascetic life. However, both modes of life were to be characterised by virtue.

These two sometimes conflicting approaches shaped the thinking of Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria and author of the hugely influential Life of Antony. In Chapter 3, Doru Costache shows how Athanasius, Antony the Great and various other Egyptian ascetics developed the idea that dreams were a potential source of deception that could just as easily lead the monk astray as impart to him any divine knowledge. This is the second prong of the Alexandrian approach. Synesius of Cyrene (d. c. 410), a pagan convert to Christianity, occupied an uneasy middle ground between the two approaches of intellectualised and psychological approaches to dreaming, as Kevin Wagner demonstrates in Chapter 4. As we shall see there, the Synesian practice of dream divination demanded virtue in the philosopher and led the practitioner to become virtuous. Wagner demonstrates how Synesius’ theory of dream divination was underpinned by Neoplatonist metaphysical, anthropological and psychological foundations, and how it contrasted with other contemporary Neoplatonist approaches to dreams and virtue, such as that of pagan philosopher Porphyry of Tyre, disciple of Plotinus.

Chapter 5, ‘Expanding beyond the Egyptian Ascetic Tradition’, surveys the expanded contours of Athanasius’ and Evagrius’ dream theory in the West through the works of John Cassian, and in the East through the anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers. These works were rooted firmly in
the Egyptian ascetic domain, and develop the ideas of Origen, Athanasius and Evagrius in novel and interesting directions. They took up and developed the insight that dreams could be sites of demonic intervention and were thus useful indicators of the state of the soul on its journey to the divine, with far-reaching consequences for medieval and Byzantine spirituality. The spread of the Evagrian tradition westwards and eastwards in the fifth and sixth centuries was the means by which the two-pronged Alexandrian approach came to dominate dream theory in the Middle Ages.