

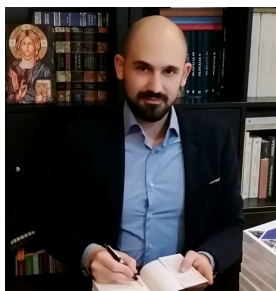


Cezar-Ivan Coliță

The Healing Dream in the Church History: a Pagan Heritage or a Solely Christian Practice?¹

Abstract

This present study starts from the premise that the dream reflects a subconscious experience in our unconscious mind and a mystic framework. Regarding this fact, the Christian Tradition has always been very skeptical about dreams because some intense oneiric episodes give us a false impression of a genuinely spiritual experience. Usually, dream revelations are spontaneous and represent an effect of ascetic and mystical diligence. Those kinds of revelations act as a framework for healing dreams, also known in history as the 'incubation practice.' Using both a historical and a neuroscientific



Cezar-Ivan Coliță is PhD Candidate at the Doctoral School "Dumitru Stăniloae" of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, University of Bucharest, Romania.

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approach, this article aims to prove the contrast between the pagan and Christian incubations. Even though they have a similar form of manifestation, they are very antithetical in essence. In conclusion, the reader will notice that the pagan incubations reflect only a phantasmagoric and a sensational experience caused either by endogenous neurobiological effects or by practicing a soft kind of sorcery. In contrast, the Christian incubations reflect a true and miraculous recovery of one's health with the promise of an inner conversion during his/her entire life.

Keywords

faith, incubation practice, miraculous healing, holy unmercenary doctors, divine therapists, placebo effect, collective dream

1 Introduction: dream and the physiology of sleep

In order to understand the phenomenon of the healing dream present both in the ancient divinations within religious syncretism and in the medieval cult of the Church (5th-10th centuries), a complementary vision of the physiological conditions during sleep is required. Neuropsychologically speaking, the „dream” represents the diversity of a reduced, dissociated, limited, and often an erroneous human thinking that occurs during sleep² from various causes, such as physical pain or pleasure (e.g. reflex dream of uncoordinated sensations), positive or negative emotions (e.g. admiration, joy, love, disgust, hatred, fear)³, being totally or partially in disagreement with all

² Ștefan ODOBLEJA, *Psihologia consonantistă*, trad. P. Iacob, Bucharest, Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1982, p. 288.

³ Carl Gustav JUNG, *Psihologia religiei vestice și estice*, trad. Viorica Nișcov, București, Edit. Trei, 2010, p. 29.

conscious psychic phenomena. The dream is a transition between wakefulness and deep sleep and can be categorized as pleasant/ unpleasant, intense/ blurred, new/ repeated, or well/ poorly imprinted. Some of these categories combined with one another can play a cathartic role in which the psyche benefits from a spontaneous self-therapy based on an affective and hedonic compensatory experience⁴.

Most dreams occur 90-95% during the REM (*rapid-eye-movement*) stage and last about 10-15 minutes per sleep cycle (ca. 60-90 minutes/night). This phase is preceded by the three non-REM stages in which deep sleep is formed, when brain activity and physiological functions slow down during 70-90 minutes per sleep cycle (ca. 6-7 hours/ night)⁵. The REM sleep records both the acceleration of the cardio-respiratory rhythm and the cerebral activity, moment in which the activities during the day are processed by the brain, contributing to the normal functioning of the memory⁶. Otherwise, the activity of storing memories is the main cause of dreaming. At the same time, it is known that sensations, perceptions and some recent experiences print certain representations in the depths of the mind, like a ring imprints its shape in a soft wax upon contact with it⁷.

Therefore, in sleep we meet our unconscious, which has recorded, from a more recent or more distant past, longings or anxieties recycled by the brain⁸. So the dream is a semi-sleep in relation to the illusion and daydreaming⁹.

⁴ Ș. ODOBLEJA, *op. cit.*, p. 288-290.

⁵ David HARTMAN, Diane ZIMBEROFF, „REM and Non-REM Dreams: Dreaming without a Dreamer”, in *Journal of Heart-Centered Therapies*, XV (2012), 2, p. 27-28.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 27-28.

⁷ Cf. MARCUS AURELIUS, *Gânduri către sine însuși*, trad. Cristian Bejan, Bucharest, Edit. Humanitas, 2020, p. 27, 29; EVAGRIE PONTICUL, *Capete despre deosebirea gândurilor*, în *Filocalia*, vol. I, Sibiu, Institutul de Arte Grafice „Dacia Traiana”, 1947, p. 49-50.

⁸ John Anthony MCGUCKIN, *Dicționar de teologie patristică*, trad. Dragoș Dâscă, Iași, Edit. Doxologia, 2014, p. 538.

⁹ Ș. ODOBLEJA, *op. cit.*, p. 288-290.

The approach of this article is a comparative one. Throughout this work the difference between the nature of Christian dream healings (ca. 450-950 AD) and the nature of the ancient pagan iatromancy (ca. 600 BC-400 AD) will be analysed and highlighted. The study will also aim to show that the Christian healing dream has nothing to do with the iatromancies found in the Greco-Roman temples.

2 Dream: between fantasies and revelation

As outlined, we can see that the imagination has a strong impact on our dreams, but the imagination is not an ally - on the contrary it is truly an opponent - of revelation, which is why the Church has its reservations about the alleged dream visions. The mystical experience of the Church observes in most "revelations" during sleep a possible sensory-affective reflex of the human psyche, or an attractive suggestion from the demon disguised as an "angel of light" who - skilfully mixing the lie with the truth in his predictions inoculated to the credulous dreamer - could draw the dreamer to perdition¹⁰. Psychiatrically speaking, the alleged dream revelations give us the illusion of their origin from „heaven" or "from another world", but they could be a simple reflex of the psyche to induce a hypnagogic state similar to altered states of consciousness, such as dreams, meditation, trance, episodes of intense creativity, on the one hand, or episodes typical of schizophrenia, hysteria and use of hallucinatory substances, on the other hand¹¹.

¹⁰ Cf. C. G. JUNG, *op. cit.*, p. 29-30, J.A. MCGUCKIN, *op. cit.*, p. 539.

¹¹ The difference between dream and hypnagogic states is that the latter are certain auditory or visual snapshots perceived by the psyche as a pure spectator. On the other hand, dreams are episodes marked by a certain theme and coherence in which the dreamer lives as a participant. Hypnagogic snapshots are also defined as a state of consciousness between sleep and wakefulness, falsely giving the impression of a small revelation, Oliver SACKS, *Halucinații*, trad. Florin Oprina, București, Edit. Humanitas, 2016, p. 194.

Patristic experience does not classify dreams as totally bad. On the contrary, they are a proof that the human soul is not fully connected to its own body. But until an authentic spiritual vision, the soul requires both an ascetic and a mystical training in order to get through the dreamlike "filters" produced by its own physical and mental body, but also by the deceptive work of demons¹². If pride, lust and anger enter the soul while it is in the waking state, the work of these three passions is also reflected in the dream world as a set of fantasies. A true revelation occurs in exceptional cases, especially when a Christian believer has gone through the stages of shunning of his passions, enlightenment, and the sanctification of his life, and when his humble contemplation always relates to the Divine as a result of the Holy Spirit's work over the mind¹³. So the Divine meets the human in the oneiric realm only when pure prayer takes control of the man's senses, mind and spirit¹⁴.

3 *Incubatio* in Greco-Roman polytheism

The conventional name of *incubatio* (lat. *incubo, incubare* = "Lying down", "lying on a bed/ pile of straw")¹⁵ involves the ritual in which someone would fall asleep in the temple of a god or a hero with theurgical and healing powers found in his statue. The purpose was to experience a premonitory dream or to cure incurable diseases (such as plague, ophthalmic diseases, fever, migraines, tuberculosis, infertility, motor disabilities, bodily

¹² In the early Christian times, the revelatory dream did not arise during sleep, but it usually began when the believer was awake, cf. J.A. MCGUCKIN, *op. cit.*, p. 540.

¹³ SF. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Cele 225 capete teologice și practice*, in *Filocalia*, vol. VI, trad, introd., note Dumitru Stăniloae, București, Edit. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 1977, p. 81-82.

¹⁴ Cf. ***, *Pelerinul Rus: Mărturisirile sincere către duhovnicul său ale unui pelerin rus cu privire la rugăciunea lui Iisus*, trad. Paulin Lecca, București, Edit. Sophia, 2002, p. 42-43.

¹⁵ Gheorghe GUȚU, *Dicționar latin-român*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2012, p. 310.

injuries etc.)¹⁶. This ritual appears in the belief system of Ancient Greece where the worship of the god Asclepius has played a central role since the 6th century BC. The first temples (gr. *asclepieia*) dedicated to this god appeared in Arcadia and Messene in the early period of Ancient Greece (8th – 6th centuries BC) and during the 6th – 5th centuries BC a famous sanctuary at Epidaurus (Peloponnese) is erected here. In a short time, this iatric cult would spread to Athens (420 BC), Corinth, then to Pergamum, Oropos, Kos, Lebena (during the 4th century BC) and Rome (in 293 BC), so that every major city of the Roman Empire possessed a temple dedicated to the god Asclepius¹⁷. Of course, in Late Antiquity there was a similar interest for gods like Isis, Serapis, Apollo, the Dioscuri of Rome (twins Castor and Pollux), but also for heroic therapists like Pelichos, Iatros and Neryllinos.¹⁸

The healing ritual was institutionalized and intended for all people, not requiring a special initiation as in the Greco-Roman mysteries. A fee was charged at the entrance to the sanctuary¹⁹, being imposed a period of abstinence from impure activities such as intimate relationships, birth, physical contact with the dead, etc. An evening before the divinatory practice, a ritual bathing took place in a distinct building found in the courtyard of the sanctuary. On the day of the incubation, an animal sacrifice (pig or sheep) was dedicated to the temple's divine therapist. The sacrificed skin was used as bedding for iatromancy by the

¹⁶ Hedvig VON EHRENHEIM, „Identifying Incubation Areas in Pagan and Early Christian Times,” in *Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens*, VI (2009), p. 236.

¹⁷ See: Olympia PANAGIOTIDOU, „Religious Healing and the Asclepius Cult: A Case Study of Placebo Effects”, in *Cognitive Science of Religion*, II (2016), p. 83-84; Nicolae ACHIMESCU, *Istoria și filosofia religiilor. Religii ale lumii antice*, București, Edit. Basilica, 2015, p. 405-406.

¹⁸ Fritz GRAPF, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East: From the Early Empire to the Middle Byzantine Era*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 246, 256; J. A. MCGUCKIN, *op. cit.*, p. 540; O. PANAGIOTIDOU, *op. cit.*, p. 539-541, N. ACHIMESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

¹⁹ F. GRAPF, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

sick; the meat of the animal was to be cooked and eaten during a common lunch that took place in an adjoining building in the temple premises²⁰.

Towards evening, the ill person was sent to sleep in a special room (*abaton/ adyton/ enkoimeterion*) with other sufferers, often distributed depending on their gender²¹. Immersed in a dream, the ill person met the revered god who offered him healing or a specific treatment for the disease he was suffering from. The next day the patient came out of the *adyton* by a ritual act. After that, he was describing the dream to the doctor on duty and to the interpreter of dreams who both agreed on whether the divination was a real one or not²². In the case of total healing, the staff of the sanctuary would render this event by a votive inscription or lithographed text included in the temple's archive²³.

There are also records on the marble votive plaques (*iamata*) which show that god Asclepius used to perform certain surgeries through the dream. Regarding this fact, there are two main points of view. The first regards the sayings of the early Christian apologists (Athenagoras, Justin the Martyr, Tertullian) who adjudged these miracles to a work of demons, as a result of practicing the magic in those temples²⁴. Secondly, modern critics believe that the alleged miraculous surgery took place due to an intervention "behind the scenes" of the temple's medical staff. Some scholars believe that the patients were driven into a trance

²⁰ H. VON EHRENHEIM, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

²¹ F. GRAPH, *op. cit.*, p. 247-248; H. VON EHRENHEIM, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

²² F. GRAPH, *op. cit.*, p. 247-248.

²³ Gábor KLANICZAY, „Dreams and Visions in Medieval Miracle Accounts”, in William A. CHRISTIAN, Gábor KLANICZAY (eds.), *The Vision Thing. Studying Divine Interventions*, Collegium Budapest, Budapest, 18, 2009, p. 149. The votive inscriptions from Epidaurus date from around 350 BC and reveal 70 healings attributed to the god Asclepius, see Helen ASKITOPOULOU, Eleni KONSOLAKI, Ioanna A. RAMOUTSAKI, Maria ANASTASSAKI, „Surgical Cure under Sleep Induction in the Asclepieion of Epidaurus”, in *International Congress Series*, MCCXLII (2002), p. 11-17.

²⁴ N. ACHIMESCU, *op. cit.*, p. 407; F. GRAF, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

state (*enkoimesis*), similar to general anaesthesia, by consuming narcotic doses (probably opium) during the preceding rituals. Subsequently, the surgical operations took place in optimal conditions in the *adyton* where patients were sent to dream²⁵. Otherwise, this theory could be associated with the idea that pagan iatromancies are based on the induced/ self-induced cathartic dream²⁶ or on the *placebo* effect²⁷ which activates a specific set of genes (*placebome*) in the body, genes that under the influence of faith secrete a larger quantity of endogenous opioids with role in relieving pain²⁸.

4 The incubation practice in the Church History: Christian healing dreams

Christian incubation was born in the East of Late Antiquity in places like the churches of St. Cosmas and Damian from Constantinople and Cyrrhus, the church of St. Dometius the Persian (Antioch)²⁹, church of St. John the Baptist known for the relics of St. Artemios the Martyr (Constantinople), St. Michael the Archangel of Anaplous³⁰ (Constantinople), St. Cyrus and John of

²⁵ H. ASKITOPULOU et al, *op. cit.*, p. 16-17.

²⁶ See note 4 and Henry REED, „Dream incubation: a Reconstruction of a Ritual in Contemporary Form”, in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, XVI (1976), 4, p. 54-55, 63-65.

²⁷ A. PANAGIOTIDOU, *op. cit.*, p. 79-80.

²⁸ Adrian RESTIAN, „Credința ta te-a vindecat”, în *Practica Medicală*, XIV (2019), 3, p. 219.

²⁹ Gil H. RENBERG, *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Sanctuaries in the Greco-Roman World*, Brill, Leiden / Boston, 2016, p. 756, 778.

³⁰ It is worth mentioning that Michael, an incorporeal saint (an angel), produced healings at *Hestiae* (suburb of Anaplous/ Sosthenion in Constantinople), see SOZOMEN, *The Ecclesiastic History, Comprising a History of the Church from AD 324 to AD 440*, II, 3, transl. Edward Walford, London, 1855, p. 53-56. Moreover, we find similar miracles attributed to Michael in his churches found in Egypt, H. VON EHRENHEIM, *op. cit.*, p. 253. The church of Anaplous/ Sosthenion was build after

Menouthis (Alexandria), the church of St. Thekla (Seleucia ad Calycadnum) and the church of St. Demetrius (Thessaloniki)³¹, then it spread to the West of Europe.

We cannot ascribe a pagan emergence to the Christian ritual because many of the incubation temples, which were later converted into churches, did not inherit an iatric cult at all³². At the same time, most dream divinations are forbidden by imperial decisions in the middle of the 4th century (by emperors such as Constantine I³³ and Constans). Also, the first Christian incubations appear in the middle of the 5th century, so that we can speak of a solely practice born within the Church³⁴.

Christian incubation is based on several essential aspects: Christ is the supreme healer of bodily and mental diseases, the development of healing dreams based on the saints' holy relics and the emergence of hospitals in the 4th century AD as a Christian-philanthropic institution³⁵. In Eastern Christianity a church is regarded as a spiritual hospital - a vision that fueled the

Constantine the Great had a dreamlike vision in which Archangel Michael revealed to him in the 320/ 330s AD, see John MALALAS, *The Chronicle*, IV, 13, transl. Elizabeth Jeffers, Michael Jeffreys, Roger Scott, Melbourne, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies Byzantina Australiensia, 1986, p. 38.

³¹ Pierre MARAVAL, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient: Histoire et géographie de origins à la conquête arabe*, Paris, Les Éditions du CERF, 1985, p. 224-225, H. VON EHRENHEIM, *op. cit.*, p. 254-264.

³² R. WIŚNIEWSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 204. For example, the spring used for incubation rituals in the Athenian Askelepon was used by Christians to practice the mystery of Baptism, H. VON EHRENHEIM, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

³³ Christopher WEST, *Saint Michael the Archangel in Late Antiquity*, Undergraduate Honor Thesis, Boulder, University of Colorado, 2014, p. 57; F. GRAPH, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

³⁴ G. RENBERG, *op. cit.*, 751-753; F. GRAPH, *op. cit.*, p. 254; R. WIŚNIEWSKI, *op. cit.*, p. 204. Theory formulated by F. Graf and R. Wisniewski. However, some pagan iatromancies (such as those in Aigai, Cilicia) continued during the reign of Julian the Apostate (361-363), F. GRAF, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

³⁵ Ildikó CSEPREGI, *The Compositional History of Greek Christian Incubation Miracle Collections: Saint Thekla, Saint Cosmas and Damian, Saint Cyrus and John, Saint Artemios*, PhD Thesis, Budapest, Central European University, 2017, p. 20, 82.

emergence of Christian incubation. Also, one can accredit a Jewish influence on the Christian ritual inspired by the revealing, prophetic and charismatic dream found in Old Testament literature (e.g.: Solomon's dream at Ghibeon, see 3 Kings 3, 4-15.)³⁶.

Usually, the healing effect of the Christian incubation occurred due to the mysterious intervention of the holy martyrs (known as 'holy unmercenary doctors'), next to whose relics the ill pilgrims chose to sleep overnight inside the church³⁷. There are three categories of healing dreams: the corporeal one (in which the saint touches the body of the sleeper), the medical one (subdivided into: pharmacological, prescriptive and surgical dreams) and the allegorical one (in which the saint tests the patient's faith by proposing a paradoxical treatment for the purpose of healing which apparently has nothing to do with medicine)³⁸.

Of course, not all patients would be healed in a dream. Usually, Christians and pilgrims who came to sleep near the tomb of the saint did not expect to have a dream, but just a simple cure. Unlike the Greco-Roman practice, where iatromancies took place in a building separate from the main sanctuary, Christian incubation took place inside the church³⁹.

³⁶ Cf. G. RENBERG, *op. cit.*, p. 66-70; Shaul BAR, „Incubation and Traces of Incubation in the Biblical Narrative”, in *Old Testament Essays*, XXVIII (2015), 2, p. 243-246.

³⁷ Pierre MARAVAL, „The Earliest Phase of Christian Pilgrimage in the Near East”, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, LVI (2002), p. 73.

³⁸ See details in Stavroula CONSTANTINOY, „The Morphology of Healing Dreams: Dream and Therapy in Byzantine Collections of Miracle Stories”, in Christine ANGELIDI, George T. CALOFONOS (eds.), *Dreaming in Byzantium and Beyond*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing House, 2014, p. 26-33.

³⁹ Robert WIŚNIEWSKI, „Looking for Dreams and Talking with Martyrs: Internal Roots of Christian Incubation”, in *Studia Patristica*, LXIII (2013), p. 204. Usually, the Christian incubation was taking place in the side or central naves within the church or in the inner porticos of the atrium, P. MARAVAL, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

In other cases, healings took place in the believers' dream when they were praying and sleeping at their home, without being in a church or on a pilgrimage route. Moreover, there is another type of miracles in which healings occurred in the absence of any dream. For example, in the East we have the church of St. Thekla of Seleucia, a place with a high frequency of pilgrimages. Here, the hagiography called *The life and miracles of Saint Thekla* (ca. 470s) indicates only 20 healing miracles out of a total of 46 miracles⁴⁰; only 12 of the 20 healings take place in a dream, but only two of them take place inside the church⁴¹.

The Medieval West has a much lower rate of healing dreams than those recorded in the Eastern Christianity. For example, G. Klaniczay claims that out of a total of 2050 healings extracted from hagiographies and testimonies originated from 5th-12th centuries, when healings took place at the tombs of martyrs, only 12% of them (a number of 259) take place in dreams. Of these 259 dream miracles, only 42 occur within a church that housed the saint's relics, and 121 healings take place when the sick slept at their homes⁴².

Indeed, in other churches dedicated to the holy martyrs, miracles occurred exclusively through the dream as is the case of St. Cyrus and John Church from Menouthis, whose relics are brought here in 429 by St. Cyril of Alexandria to prove that the holy healers of the True God are more effective than the tricks attributed to pagan gods like Isis and Serapis⁴³.

Quite interesting is an atypical typology of the collective dream often found in Egyptian and Byzantine hagiographies. Saints such as Cyrus, John, Artemios, Cosmas and Damian used to

⁴⁰ Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON, *Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Liturgical Study*, Cambridge (MA)/ London, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 121.

⁴¹ F. GRAPH, *op. cit.*, p. 258-259.

⁴² Gábor KLANICZAY, „Healing with Certain Conditions: The Pedagogy of Medieval Miracles,” in *Journal of Medieval and Humanistic Studies*, XIX (2010), p. 238.

⁴³ Despoina LAMPADA, *The Cult of Martyrs and Politics of Sainthood in Patriarch Cyril's Alexandria*, in M. FERRARI (ed.), *Saints and the City*, FAU University Press, 2015, p. 54-55.

appear in their "medical rounds" in a dream lived simultaneously by several patients sleeping together next to the coffin of these unmercenary doctors. The sufferers observed each other present in the same dream where the saints walked among them to offer a total healing or a specific treatment for ill persons and even a prediction of death for some pilgrims⁴⁴. Also, the miraculous dreams occurred in the Church History are often framed into a *do ut des* category. The saints were healing the sick in their dreams with the condition of a sacrificial act: perfecting their own life, conversion to the true Christian faith, a pilgrimage to the relics of the holy healer or a foundation/ gift in honour of a certain saint⁴⁵.

Conclusions

Taken as a whole, pagan iatromancy and Christian incubation differ significantly. First of all, the presence of holy relics in Christian incubation attests to the validity of miracles because the martyrs were historical figures, while the pagan iatric cults invoked the support of mythological deities. Also, the "overnight" healings that took place in the pagan shrines occurred in fact due to some hidden interventions by the physicians from the sanctuary who healed the patients in a state of trance possibly caused by the use of opioids in the preceding rituals. Regarding the background of the mysterious ambiance from the temple, those divinations could be induced either by hypnagogic states, manifestations of the cathartic dream and *placebo* effect, or by the subtle works of demons if we pay attention to the sayings of the first Christian apologists.

Also, there is much evidence to rule out a pagan emergence in the Christian incubation practices because many churches - which were once pagan healing sanctuaries - did not acquire an iatric cult. Secondly, we have evidence about an adversity

⁴⁴ I. CSEPREGI, *op. cit.*, p. 217-218.

⁴⁵ G. KLANICZAY, *op. cit.*, p. 238-239.

manifested by some iatric churches (like the church dedicated to St. Cyrus and John from Menouthis) against the pagan iatric cults found in their vicinity. Moreover, it is quite interesting to note that those people who were to be healed in a dream by the holy martyrs had to pass the test of a double conversion: of faith and of righteous living. Last, but not least, the hagiographies which mention a simultaneous presence of the holy healers in the collective dreams of certain ill pilgrims bear witness to a true Christian revelation. Despite the suffering of those pilgrims, they were in a state of holy hope and continuous prayer that allowed them a real access to the spiritual world because humbleness brings the holy grace within a man's soul.

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