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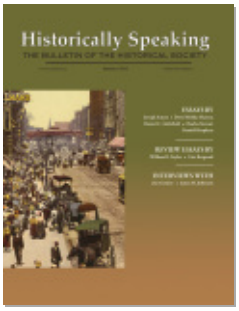

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Dreaming and Historical Consciousness

Charles Stewart

Dreams are curious specimens of temporality. Evolutionary psychologists consider dreaming to have developed as a virtual mode in which our distant ancestors could practice their response to potential dangers such as sabre tooth tiger attacks.[1] Even though life has become much more secure, a large proportion of dreams vestigially simulate threats; the majority of dreams, in this view, are incipient nightmares. The influential dream researcher J. Allan Hobson, on the other hand, considers dreams to be offline rehearsals for the mundane present; preparations for the assumption of everyday consciousness, much like a pilot testing systems before pushing back from the gate.[2] Supermarket books on dream interpretation, by contrast, assume that dreams predict the future, thereby carrying on a tradition of dream interpretation popular since ancient times. And then we come to the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic traditions. Freud thought dreams concerned emotions from the past, stored in the unconscious and still troubling the present in disguised forms. While Jung saw dreams as emerging from an individual's present, serving as guides to self-integration and personal fulfilment. Which are they then: the past, the future, or just the present?

The prophesied church at Argokoíli near the village of Kóronos nearing completion in 2011, with the non-whitewashed 1851 church in the left foreground. Courtesy of Charles Stewart.

In my view, they are often all three at once. In this respect, dreams model the temporality of human consciousness as existentialist thinkers going back to Heidegger have described it. We exist in a situation of uncertainty and angst in relation to the future, yet this is necessarily the position in which decisions must be made. According to contemporary experts, anxiety is the most common emotion underlying dreaming. Existence involves operating in the face of this anxiety, emerging, as the etymological roots of the word "existence" (*ex-sistere*, "stand forth") suggest, from the past into the future. As Foucault expressed it in his very first publication, a substantial preface to Ludwig Binswanger's tract *Dream and Existence*: "In dreams he [a person] encounters what he is and what he will be, what he has done and what he is going to do, discovering there the knot that ties his freedom to the necessity of the world."[3] This is not the form or foundation of every single dream, but it does have particular relevance for the analysis of dreams at moments of crisis.

Consider, for example, the dream had by the nine-year-old Crow Indian Plenty Coups. In the mid-1850s, as the Crow came under increasing pressure from the Sioux and settler expansion, he experienced a dream in which buffalo poured out of a hole in the ground and disappeared. Then cattle came out of the same hole and stayed, lowing on the plains. The tribal elders debated the meaning of this dream, and it played a role in making them realize that they would not be able to withstand the white man in the future. The dream thus supported what became a beneficial Crow strategy of cooperation with the U.S. government over the coming decades.[4] As Yeats wrote: "In dreams begin responsibilities." One must imagine the future in order to plan action in the present. Dreams are a source for agency, except when they cannot picture a future.

The dreams of German Jews during the first years of the Third Reich, like the dream of Plenty Coups, show that dreams may diagnose the present situation before waking consciousness fully comprehends it. During a period of increasingly restrictive laws a doctor dreamed that he was reading a book when suddenly he became aware, to his horror, that the walls of his apartment had disappeared, as had the walls of all the neighboring houses. Private space had ceased to exist. The invigilation of the totalitarian state extended even to dreaming itself. A woman dreamed that she attended a performance of *The Magic Flute*, and when the lines "that is the devil" were sung, the police burst in and arrested her. The words "the devil" had evoked a mental image of Hitler for her, and the police had been able to detect her innermost subversive thoughts.[5] Existential dreams involve anxiety mixed with a spectrum of responses from pragmatic action to resignation. Agency, in the sense of making decisions and acting on them, is not always possible, and dreams in profound crises may spiral deeper into anxiety, frozen in a nightmarish present.

My *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece* (Harvard University Press, 2012) studies the dreams of villagers from the mountain village of Kóronos on the Cycladic island of Naxos to illuminate this relationship between crisis and dreaming. Around the time of Greek independence at least five villagers began to dream that the Panagía (Virgin Mary) was speaking to them and instructing them to dig up an icon of her buried on a nearby mountainside. After extensive tunneling, they found three icons in 1836. Incredulous state authorities accused them of charlatanry and brought a criminal case against them. When this case collapsed, officials confiscated the icons in the attempt to stop local people from continuing to dream and dig for yet more icons. The villagers did not, however, renounce their newfound saint. On the contrary, they petitioned the young king of Greece, Otto, for permission to build a pilgrimage church at the site. Although that application was refused, the state did eventually allow a makeshift church to be consecrated in 1851. The pilgrimage to the Panagía of Argokoíli has continuously attracted pilgrims ever since.

During the course of the 19th century the community forgot that the state had confiscated the original icons. Then, in 1930, while lodging in the port town of Naxos, a girl from Kóronos dreamed that one of the original icons was in her landlady's icon stand. She found it there: a small icon, approximately 3 inches by 3 inches executed as a relief in wax and mastic depicting the Annunciation of the Virgin. The landlady released the icon to be taken back to the pilgrimage site. The exaltation in Kóronos led to an outbreak of dreaming among fourteen-year-old schoolchildren, age mates of the girl whose dream had instigated this chain of events.

The children's dreams announced that another

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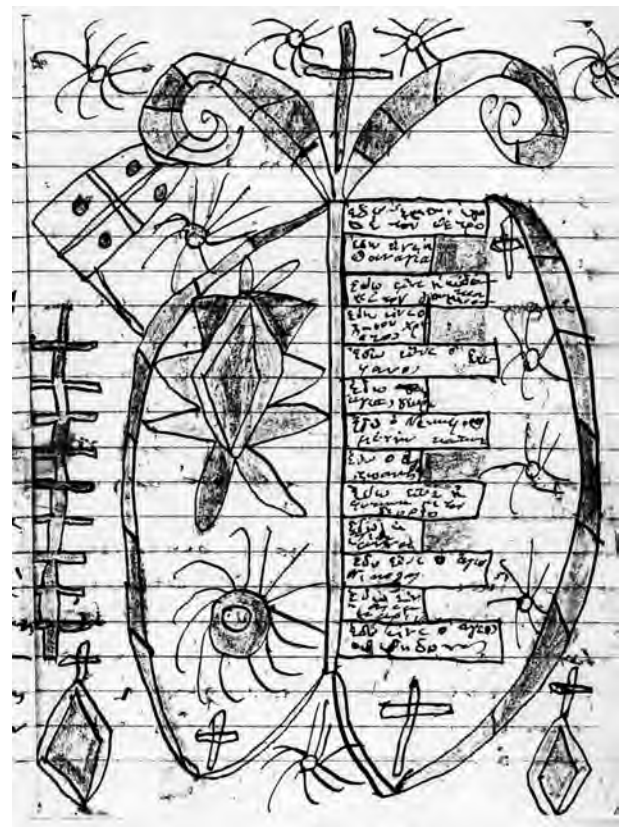
icon still lay buried at the pilgrimage site where the first icons had been unearthed a century earlier. This icon of St. Anne, the mother of the Panagía, appeared recurrently in their dreams. When one sees a saint in Greece, one sees the image of the saint as it is depicted on a particular icon. In this case, as in the 1830s, a buried icon was speaking from within the earth calling for its own excavation. As miners of the heavy stone emery, the villagers were skilled at digging. Over the summer of 1930 they opened a wide terrace at Argokoíli searching for the icon.

They were spurred on by the dreaming children, who recorded and illustrated their dreams in school exercise books and read them aloud to the assembled village on a daily basis. The dreams urged the faithful (not everyone subscribed to the dreams) to keep digging and to undertake regimes of fasting and prayer. Discovery dates were set, but the prophecies failed one after another. As the number of followers dwindled, the dreams announced quasi-millenarian scenarios that would follow upon discovery of the icon of St. Anne: the faithful would be blessed and skeptics damned; a church large enough to hold the whole island would be built; valuable buried treasures would be dug up with proceeds going to build the monastery; in short, as one old timer told me: "Kóronos will become Paris." Ultimately, no icon was found.

In 1995 I went to Kóronos to gather general ethnographic data for what I imagined would be a diachronic study of dreams in Greece from antiquity to the present. I knew that Kóronos had a strong tradition of dreaming dating back to the foundation of the pilgrimage, so I supposed that people would be happy to talk about dreaming. Otherwise, Kóronos was an arbitrary location selected to yield a snapshot of contemporary ideas. I had no idea about the events of the 1930s until a cache of over forty dream notebooks kept by Marina Mandilará came to my attention. Villagers subsequently handed me dream notebooks belonging to two other individuals. Some of the child dreamers were still alive at that time, although they could remember few details. Marina said that she never again had any dreams worth mentioning.

The village's concern with dreaming, excavating, and finding objects—its own indigenous archaeological tradition—had already persisted subliminally for a century after the initial dreams of the 1830s. When the dreamers of 1930 dispersed in the wake of their failed prophecies, the myth-dream of excavation and redemption again receded into the village imaginary. The buried icons sat within a larger framework of hidden yet findable objects. Known as *vresímata* in local parlance, these findables extended to a wide variety of valuables, including the abrasive stone emery, antiquities such as Cycladic artifacts, treasures buried for safety in the face of pirate raids or the wartime occupation by Axis troops, and even one's bride-to-be. The villagers inhabited a cosmology of discovery presided over by St. Phanoúrios, the revealer of lost objects, whose church stands facing the village perched on a hilltop in the middle of the emery mines.

When I began work on the book, not only was relatively little known about the events of the 1930s, the same was also true of the events of the 1830s briefly narrated above. This also changed, again unexpectedly, during the course of my visits to Kóronos. A new bishop arrived on Naxos in the early 1990s and he set his archivist the task of organizing the episcopal archives. In the process he came across documents indicating that there had been correspondence in the 1830s between the bishop of Naxos and the Holy Synod over confiscating the Argokoíli icons and sending them to Athens in order to extinguish local fervor. The villagers—most notably the village diaspora in Athens and abroad—now discovered that the removal of their icons had been an act of state theft. Counting several prosperous and highly educated professionals in their ranks, the Kóronos community demanded a thorough search of the Metropolitan church on Naxos and the Holy Synod in Athens for their icons and any pertinent documents. From these archival sources the story of the confiscation of the icons emerged.



Entry for September 11, 1930, in the dream notebook of Marina Mandilará. During the increasingly millenarian phase of dreaming, this drawing lists the dreaming children interspersed with the saints on what resembles a stairway to heaven. Courtesy of Charles Stewart.

The villagers quickly resolved to act on their newly established historical knowledge. They demanded that the magnificent pilgrimage church requested by the Panagía in the earliest dreams (and blocked by the administration of the Catholic King Otto) should be built. The new bishop now supported them and released funds. Ground was soon broken to build one of the largest churches in Greece on the remote hillside at Argokoíli, "the new Hagia Sophia," as proponents referred to it. After more than a decade of steady construction this church is now nearing completion. In 2005 the largest bell in Greece was installed in fulfillment of a 19th-century prophecy that the bells of the church would be audible in England. Several television channels covered the event, and observers pointed out that some of these channels could be received via satellite in the UK thus fulfilling the prophecy. Whereas previously the miraculous inhered in awe-inspiring dreams that revealed hidden objects, now it inheres in the ability of historical research to identify uncanny coincidences, frame the continuation of interrupted or forgotten plans, and link current events with past prophecies. The new miraculous emerges from awe at the poeticality of history, itself a function of increasing historical consciousness.

This instance of historical consciousness arose from conventional historical research. To understand the relationship between dreaming and historical consciousness it is necessary to look elsewhere. Unlike the majority of European Catholic pilgrimages, which sprang from images and words communicated in visions, the Naxos dreams led to the discovery of tangible objects. These objects stimulated historical questions. Who brought them to Argokoíli, and why? The Panagía answered these questions in a dream of 1835. She appeared to a humble shepherd named Christódoulos and told him that the icons had belonged to an Egyptian family that fled to the remote mountains of eastern Naxos to escape persecution during the period of iconoclasm. When their enemies closed in on them they prayed to God to be swallowed by the earth along with their icons. Together with the icons, the villagers of 1836 reportedly found bones, which they treated as the relics of martyrs.

As in the case of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who dreamed of a buried book that detailed the previously unknown history of the settlement of the New World, dreaming on Naxos also produced narratives about the past that informed local historical consciousness. Like the Book of Mormon, these were not "memories" but novel "histories," previously unknown episodes from the past. The story of the Egyptians was discussed in waking life, and extended in further dreams, and even tested on occasion. In the course of survey work for building the new church, geologists drilled soundings to see if there were caverns beneath the site. The features of the Kóronos case fit the anthropologist Kenelm Burridge's model of the "myth-dream" in which collective aspirations connect diverse events (such as old prophecies, contemporary emery mining, or the visit of a stranger) in states of consciousness revolving between dreaming and conscious articulation: "[a] communal daydream" as Burridge describes it, which "attempts to express relations between past, present and future."[6]

In the decades preceding Greek independence the mountain villagers of Naxos had autonomous control over the mining and sale of emery. As soon as the war broke out, the revolutionary government

An ancient marble koúros statue sculpted in situ and left in a marble quarry on Naxos, a reminder to present inhabitants of the eventful past buried beneath the surface. Courtesy of Charles Stewart.

expropriated their revenue, and upon independence, the state wasted no time in nationalizing the mines. At the time of the first dreams then, the villagers were in a downward spiral of dispossession. The dreams of buried icons expressed the proprietorship of their land in spiritual terms that transcended the jurisdiction of the state.

Another way of understanding these first dreams is as existential statements formed in the face of crisis, as the future of the village came under threat. This is why the dreams were dreamt collectively and serially, and also why they reveal so clearly the frantic tacking between past, present, and future characteristic of existential crisis. The villagers looked forward to a future church and pilgrimage and back to analogous, persecuted forebears on the way to formulating action in their present. To the extent that existential dreams throw up images of the past, they may instigate the formation of histories, which, in turn, fund historical consciousness.

The dreams of 1930 also occurred during crisis, as the force of the Great Depression broke upon Kóronos, a village exceptionally dependent on industrial production. The community endured what the Italian anthropologist and historian of religions Ernesto de Martino, called a "crisis of presence" in which the ties between present and future came undone.[7] Taking the presentist philosophy of history of his mentor Benedetto Croce seriously, de Martino conceived of this as leading to "de-historification," since to lose the present is to lose the historical accumulation built into that present. Religious rituals often come into play in such situations in order to overcome the passivity brought on by alienation. Dysphoric fixations such as lethargy, depression, or catatonia can be overridden by prescribed ritual actions, like strapping the feet of a hemiplegic stroke patient onto a stationary bike. As one leg pedals, the other is taken through the motions in a rote repetition intended to get the body's neural circuitry and proprioception to reintegrate. The involuntary falling out of history, de Martino theorized, could be countered by an even larger, ritual-induced step out of history into a meta-history—archetypal, sacred time.

In the face of economic crisis, the villagers resorted to old but also to new rituals, such as the daily recitation of dreams to the assembled village, and the communal digging using tools provided by the church. In their dreams they conversed with the icons they had not yet found. Their ecstatic journeys into the world of the saints energized a present of hope, confidence, and self-assertion; the opposite of what one would expect in an economic crisis such as that besetting Greece today, where suicide rates have increased dramatically. The children of 1930 had independently derived their own version of the saying attributed to Franklin Roosevelt: One man must dig a ditch, even if another comes along and fills it in. In Kóronos this was not an absurdity, but a religiously ordained mission that sustained human dignity in the face of risk.

The study of dreams in island Greece yields a history of dreaming, including dreams about past dreams–a diachronic tradition of dreaming in all senses. It also furnishes a case study for an emerging new field between anthropology and history, "the anthropology of history." It is not the case, even in our own society, that people resort exclusively to the output of recognized historians (amateur or professional) in order to understand the past. The anthropology of history focuses on the various alternative means and forms that might be used to represent the past, much as the anthropology of religion assembles and compares the various forms that religion might assume in world societies. The anthropology of history is concerned with the epistemological economy of history in a given society. In island Greece a considerable proportion of historical consciousness derives from dreams, a method of historicization that does not necessarily require intention—or even consciousness—as a condition of possibility. In other places histories are acquired through spirit possession, ghost visitations, symptoms of illness, or dancing. Ethnographers and historians are now collaborating to understand how and why societies produce histories in such various, heretofore unrecognized forms, and how such histories may compete with, or complement, one another.

Charles Stewart is professor of anthropology at University College London and author of Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece *(Harvard University Press, 2012).*

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