

# Commentary on *Journal of Cognitive Historiography*, Issue 1

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**Keywords:** ancient history; human cognition.

The first issue of the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* was designed to continue a dialogue between students of ancient religion and cognitive scientists.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps not a coincidence that contributions bunch around a specific range of phenomena. Two treat the technique of healing through induced dreams, supposedly of divine origin, known as incubation. Another (that by Aleš Chalupa) discusses prophecy at Delphi, and concludes that the Pythia's trance is an instance of Patterned Dissociative Identity. Cognitive science did not exist in 1951 when E. R. Dodds published *The Greeks and the Irrational*, and cognitive scientists would doubtless not be flattered to be seen as heirs to the Society for Psychical Research of which Dodds was a lifelong member and eventually President. But Dodds' interest in psychical research was rigorously rational, and his classic work ought certainly to be recalled in this context for its ambitious attempt to explain many aspects of ancient religion through what he calls "the promising recent alliance between social anthropology and social psychology".<sup>3</sup> With incubation and trance we are firmly in Doddsian territory, and I see little difference between his understanding of the Pythia's trance and Patterned Dissociative Identity; the phenomenon had already been identified in Dodds's day, and what cognitive science is perhaps contributing is a better understanding of the underlying neurology. We can also be grateful to Chalupa for re-stating the view that the Pythia's trance has its origin in the Pythia's mind, primed by preliminary rituals, and not in any external source; the

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1. Robert Parker is Wykeham Professor of Ancient History at the University of Oxford. His most recent book is *On Greek Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

2. Begun, e.g. in Whitehouse and Martin (2004).

3. Dodds (1951: Preface). Another corpus of work to compare with CSR would be that of H. S. Versnel, culminating in Versnel 2011.

view already popular in antiquity that she was intoxicated by gases seeping up from underground was revived on the basis of supposed new evidence in the early 2000s, but Chalupa points out that the new gases have proved as evanescent as the old. The phenomenon is therefore one for the cognitive scientist to explain, not the pharmacologist.

How dream-therapy worked, or at least how it was that cults offering dream-therapy enjoyed extraordinary popularity in antiquity, is the issue addressed by Olympia Panagiotidou in relation to Asclepius and Panayotis Pachis in relation to Greco-Egyptian healing deities. Both allow the possibility that the god's advice in dreams might be backed up by assistance from human doctors present in the sanctuary, but it should be stressed that any such role for doctors is extremely uncertain – a little advice perhaps on how to translate the obscure contents of a dream into a coherent dietetic prescription (but there is no trace even of this in the earliest documents, the “Cures”<sup>4</sup> inscription from Epidaurus); one certainly should not envisage, say, surgical interventions occurring within the sanctuary, except those supposedly conducted by the god himself on dreaming patients. Panagiotidou's main argument, if I understand her, is to insist on the interaction between cognition and culture: the patient at Epidaurus was exposed within the sanctuary to an environment, an ethos, and a set of traditional practices which will have decisively influenced what he or she experienced in the sleeping-room: a person parachuted in, per impossibile, from the modern world to spend a single night there would have had a quite different experience. “The Asklepios cult could be conceived of as a *particular cognitive governance system* which used various means in order to influence, manipulate and modulate the *normative cognition* of its supplicants”. This recalls the insistence in a fine old study of the “Cures” that “the aim and tendency of the collection is not primarily propaganda and advertisement directed outwards [*still a very popular view*], but it is intended initially to affect those to whom it is presented to read, i.e. the pilgrims who throng there to be healed” (Herzog 1931: 59): a recent essay speaks of a “construction of hope” (Martzavou 2012). One wonders whether Panagiotidou would agree with Dodds' famous argument that “culture pattern” can affect “dream pattern” (Dodds 1951: 102–34), not just in the trivial sense that no ancient could dream of spaceships, but rather in the sense that the whole shape of a dream can be culturally determined: whereas our dreams are fluid and inconsequential, ancients sometimes dreamt of authority figures who stood at the foot of their beds and issued them with clear instructions. Dodds came to doubt his own theory, suspecting that the difference

4. For which see e.g. LiDonnici (1995).

might lie not in dream experience but in conventions for reporting and interpreting it (Dodds 1965: 39), but William Harris in his study of ancient dreaming has given cautious support to Dodds' original position (Harris 2009: 57–62).

In slight contrast to Panagiotidou, Pachis thinks of the dreams of incubating patients in terms of Altered States of Consciousness (ASC): not normal dreams, therefore, however much shaped by distinctive culture patterns, but waking visions provoked by extreme stress or exhaustion or illness. He quotes a striking instance from a text in praise of the Egyptian healer Imuthes-Asklepios: the god appeared simultaneously in bodily form to a mother, watching exhausted by her fevered son, and as a dream to the son, who had “lapsed half-conscious into sleep”; the son awoke cured. No doubt some incubatory dreams were of this character; in the typical narrative, however, it is a simple matter of falling asleep in the normal way.

The experience just described of the man cured by Imuthes-Asklepios is not hard to rationalize: fevers do reach a crisis, from which the patient may recover. But many, perhaps a majority, of the cases recorded in the “Cures” inscription of Epidaurus pose a much greater challenge to credulity. It begins with the story of a woman, Kleo, who

came to the god as a suppliant having already been pregnant for five years, and performed incubation in the inner sanctuary; as soon as she came out of it and was outside the shrine, she gave birth to a boy, who straight after birth washed himself at the fountain and ran around with his mother.

The “Cures” play with their own incredibility, introducing characters who wander around the sanctuary making fun of the narratives there displayed but eventually receive a comeuppance which cures them of their disbelief. Such stories, however fantastic, fail of their function if they are not believed – or is the role of the extreme cases to make the more moderate acceptable by contrast? The willingness, or will, to believe accounts of strange events, and the conditions that promote or obstruct that willingness or will, are themes that CSR has addressed (Barrett 2004: 39–60); the miracle narratives of the ancient world and early Christianity would provide rich data for further such enquiry. The historian would welcome a handle with which to grasp such material; at the moment it is hard to do more than pass it by with an embarrassed smile. But, as always, context would be important. In the 19th century, Catholic clergy alert to the danger of rationalist scorn subjected supposedly miraculous occurrences to critical scrutiny; the Asclepius of the second century CE works wonders, but wonders much less wondrous than he had worked in the fourth century BCE (though the

earlier records were still on display in the sanctuaries). One needs to consider the historically variable constraints upon credulity.

The remaining contributions to the volume treat, respectively, the symbolism of a mystery cult (that of Mithras), the role of memory in that cult, the role of memory in two groups of late antique monastic communities. So the themes of the whole volume can be summed up as incubation, trance, Mysteries, memory. The first three are among the most dramatic aspects of ancient religious experience, and the last relates directly to an enormous psychological literature on memory. Only phenomena of a certain type are treated in this inaugural volume, therefore. The humdrum daily business of ancient religion – sacrifice, dedication, non-trance divination, purifications, processions, and so on – is not here considered, though there are observations and even theories relating to some of these ritual practices in the CSR literature. Then there is the matter of gods, further absentees from this volume. A strength of CSR is, one might say, its belief in gods; where Clifford Geertz in offering what is probably the most quoted definition of religion in recent times chose to omit such entities, for CSR religion is, to quote Todd Tremlin's title, all about *Minds and Gods* (Tremlin 2006). But for the historian a weakness of CSR is its brash indifference to the kind of god it believes in: ancestors, nature spirits, anthropomorphic deities with myths, high gods, God – all are grist to the mill. If this indifference is inherent to the enterprise, then it marks a topic which historians must continue to investigate – for they certainly cannot forgo it – by their own lights.

Alison Griffith in her contribution reports on something very unusual in the study of ancient religion, an experiment; its grounding in experimental data is one of the sources of the appeal of CSR to scholars of religion, and her adoption of the experimental method a tribute to its influence. (I cannot resist recalling Dodds' report [Dodds 1951: 73] of an earlier experiment, W. F. Oesterreich's test of the hypothesis that the Pythia's trance was laurel-induced: "Professor Oesterreich once chewed a large quantity of laurel leaves in the interests of science, and was disappointed to find himself no more inspired than usual".) The point at issue is that of how initiates understood the iconographic image around which the Mysteries of Mithras revolved, "a vivid image of the god sacrificing a bull while surrounded by numerous figures (human and animal) and objects, all of which are universally agreed to be multivalent symbols central to the cult's beliefs and teachings". No text explained it, but did senior members of the cult provide verbal exegesis, or was it left to participants to make their own sense of the scene? Griffith tests, through an experiment with modern students, how well details of the scene are remembered when presented to the viewer with and without explanation: it emerges that exegesis causes the central

meaning of the icon to be better recalled, but those who simply contemplate it without commentary remember more individual details. Commentary, it emerges, focuses but also restricts our perception of images; one may wonder whether that suggestive conclusion also applies to commentary on texts. But, though rewarding, the experiment does not provide a certain answer to the historical question which was its point of departure.

In the other memory-related study, Lundhaug describes the regime of forced memorization of scriptural texts in certain Egyptian monastic communities of the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Learning of approved texts had as its correlate strict censorship of unapproved; and Lundhaug analyses the two processes as the creation, by direction from above, of collective memory. The interpretation of “collective memory” in terms of collective memorization is unusual, and the monks surely had other collective memories, of events in the life of the community for instance, in addition to what they read in their Bibles. The thought control exercised in the monasteries is vividly described by Lundhaug; but I must confess to not seeing what the theoretical superstructure from theory of memory adds to what he elicits from the primary texts themselves.

The volume concludes with a spirited treatment by Slingerland of what he calls “some general theoretical and methodological issues”. For Slingerland the appeal of CSR is as an alternative to post-modern Anomie, a situation in which young scholars “go out into the world and say apparently anything we like about the texts we study, depending upon the theoretical bent of our advisers and the particular sub-field we end up entering”. For Slingerland, it allows us the possibility of reconnecting the sciences and the humanities. (I note that of late network theory has been acclaimed by Irad Malkin as offering the same possibility of bringing the two fields back together, though Malkin does not start from the same pessimism about the state of the humanities [Malkin 2011: Introduction].) My own much more superficial reading of a few classics of CSR has been driven rather by a sense that the grand theorists of religion of the 19th century, for all their errors, were preoccupied with the big truth that religion is in some sense a universal of human societies, a big truth that we moderns with our detailed monographs on particular religious systems have chosen not to deny but to set on one side. Though attention to the specific has always seemed to me the only defence against banality and error, it nonetheless has left me with a bad conscience. CSR brings the 19th century questions into the 21st century; indeed one might caricature it as “animism plus experiments”. The attempt to show how minds are capable of harbouring religious conceptions, and in particular that those conceptions are not products of a kind of special religious sensibility but of ordinary cognitive processes,

is an exciting one. At the same time the gap between such very general propositions and the kinds of problem that confront anyone working with a specific religious system can be a daunting one (as I briefly noted above in relation to gods). Roger Beck, I should mention in qualification, sees the contribution of CSR as central to his groundbreaking study of a particular cult, that of Mithras (Beck 2006, with an interesting chaser in the *JCH* volume). But the two “dividends paid by the cognitive approach” which he isolates – that it allows for contradiction; that it refuses to separate the religious understandings of “the wise and the vulgar” (Beck 2006: 94–98) – are paid also, if in less theoretical terms, by many other approaches.<sup>5</sup>

Slingerland bracingly insists that the exchange between CSR and traditional history of religions should be two way: whereas contemporary experiments have in the main access only to WEIRD minds (Western Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic), history lays out humanity in all its diversity. The principle is a good one; the problem is to identify historical case studies sufficiently well-documented to provide a basis for useful comparison. The Delphic oracle illustrates the difficulty: the world’s most famous oracle, its operations are nonetheless so surrounded in uncertainty at almost every point, as Chalupa’s study candidly shows, that the direction of argument has to be from better documented divinatory phenomena to Delphi rather than vice versa. A different oracle, that of Dodona, is much better known in one regard, since tablets recording the actual questions posed survive in good numbers (Eidinow 2007: 72–138); but we do not know how delicate questions such as “Is the child Annyla is pregnant with mine?” were answered. The situation is not hopeless, however: among topics already mentioned, the cult of Mithras and incubatory cults can count as well enough attested to provide a solid foundation for study; one might add, for instance, epiphanies and (particularly interesting, because so far from the experience of WEIRDs) cults of living and dead rulers. The question scholars of ancient religion need to ask themselves in this context is “What observations and conclusions are sufficiently secure to be worth offering for more general use?”

In the Epidaurian story mentioned above, Kleo’s newborn boy-child rushed of his own accord to the sanctuary spring. The alliance between CSR and the study of ancient religion is, predictably, not yet as robust as that; it is the work of humans, not gods. Time will tell whether it grows to maturity, or perishes *ἄωρος*, untimely.

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5. But his book engages with several related theories and problems (“biogenetic structuralism”, the possibility of symbols functioning as a language); so perhaps the pages I cite in fact sell his debt a little short.

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