

Article

Dream Divination in a Context of Social Disruption: Julian's Vision of the Two Trees

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Abstract: The late Roman discourse on divinatory dreams and their interpretation reflects a context of cultural fragmentation. The political turbulence of the 350s to 360s was due partly to the ongoing external war with the (Persian) Sasanians, but also to the internal struggle between the heirs of Constantine for rule over the Roman empire, still undergoing a process of Christianization when Julian was acclaimed Augustus in 360. A third arena of fragmentation was religious beliefs and practices during the 350s and 360s. The contested transformation of Rome in the religious sphere was the context of Julian's dynastic vision of the two trees, received in late 358 or 359.

Keywords: Constantine I; Constantius II; divination; dream interpretation; Julian; emperor; later Roman empire; neo-Platonism; revelations

1. Introduction

Dream narratives and their interpretation played a distinctive role in classical Greco-Roman culture as well as early Christianity and still exert a strong influence on many people, albeit a covert one. In the emerging Christian culture of the fourth century, the discourse of dreams and their interpretation was a useful tool for Roman emperors who wished to create and maintain religious conflict. Hesiod recorded practices of divination, including dream interpretation, among the very earliest Greeks (*Theogonia* 211–212). Classical scholar William Harris lamented the proliferation of these in the second and third centuries CE as evidence of a Greco-Roman culture that was increasingly susceptible to superstition, under the degrading influence of Christianity (Harris 2009). This kind of reaction has been questioned by various scholars, most notably by Gregor Weber (2000) and Juliette Harrisson (2013). Revealing the complexities, Driediger-Murphy and Eidinow (2019) offer an extensive and up-to-date bibliography on the various types of divination and experiences that proliferated in classical Antiquity, while Neil et al. (2019) have shown how Greek and Roman theophanies were adopted and adapted by monastic Christians of the neo-Platonist tradition in one significant Late Antique province: that of Egypt. The last three researchers highlight that a major purpose of dream narrative interpretation was to give leaders and their followers a sense that their destinies were divinely controlled, in the context of widespread social disruption. This purpose served the providential approach to history adopted both by Julian and his opponents. In this paper, I adduce the Platonist and Judeo-Christian practices of dream divination as a context for understanding one of Julian's earliest recorded visions, received after he was acclaimed as Caesar by the Gallic troop in 355 CE, but before his troops acclaimed him as Augustus in 360, culminating in his becoming sole ruler on the death of Constantius in November 361.

We will be arguing that Julian's dynastic dream is suggestive of cultural hybridism, combining the ancient Greco-Roman practices of dream divination and Judeo-Christian dream motifs. It is well known that, as a young Caesar, Julian had a vision of two trees, which he recounted in a letter (Epistula 14), written shortly before he became sole Emperor. Although the Greco-Roman tradition of dream interpretation could be used to reinforce



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a unified Christian identity (Neil 2015), such as that shared by the supporters of Emperor Constantius II, it was also used to predict imperial appointment by non-Christians, like neo-Platonist Julian and his physician Oribasius (*Oxf. Class. Dict.* [1979] 2003, p. 1046). Both groups regarded dreams as a tool of Providence and divine revelation, although dream divination was condemned by Christian thinkers from the second century and by emperors from the time of Constantine I. Following eminent anthropologist Anthony Wallace, I read narrated dreams and visions as symptomatic of cultural fragmentation. In this reading, dreams indicate an attempt to revitalize Christian or pagan religious cultures “by reinterpreting its myths, rituals and symbols, which are deeply embedded in individuals”. Wallace calls this phenomenon “mazeway reformulation” (Wallace 2003, pp. 19–29). After introducing Julian’s vision briefly, I examine three reasons for Julian to attempt mazeway formulation through a dynastic vision: (1) the crisis of succession, (2) the ongoing conflict between Christianity and supporters of traditional Greco-Roman religion, and (3) the ongoing war with the Sasanians.

2. The Vision of Two Trees (*Epist.* 14)

Julian’s letter about the vision of two trees starts by acknowledging a divinatory dream had by his physician. It was to this trusted advisor that Julian then revealed his vision of the two trees. Letter 14 dates to late 358 or 359, based on its mention of the recall of this advisor, named Salutius or Sallust[ius] (see *Epistulae, leges, poematia et fragmenta varia* [eds. Bidez and Cumont], 385D [using 4th ed. as *Oeuvres*, p. 23]), to whom Julian dedicated his fourth oration. Julian, then in Paris, wrote to his doctor Oribasius in Vienne. This was a time of great uncertainty for Julian, only a year or two before he was proclaimed Augustus in 360, when he was about to engage Constantius II in a conflict that lasted until the latter’s unexpected death in November 361 (Bleckmann 2020).

Julian opens his letter with an allusion to the Homeric tradition of dream interpretation (English translations are my own unless otherwise specified):

The divinely inspired Homer says of dreams that there are two gates, and that they are not equally trustworthy with regard to future events. But I think that this time, you have seen wisely what is to come, now if ever; for I myself today saw something of the same kind.

Τῶν ὄνειράτων δύο πύλας εἶναι φησιν ὁ θεῖος Ὅμηρος, καὶ διάφορον εἶναι αὐτοῖς καὶ τὴν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀποβησομένων πίστιν. ἐγὼ δὲ νομίζω σε νῦν, εἴπερ ποτὲ καὶ ἄλλοτε, σαφῶς ἑορακέναι περὶ τῶν μελλόντων· ἑθεασάμην γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς τοιοῦτον σήμερον. (*Epist.* 14 [384A-B] [pp. 20–21])

The twin dream gates were common knowledge for any educated Greek, as we see from frequent allusions to the distinction between unsubstantial dreams that pass through a gate of ivory, and those which will come to pass and travel through a gate of horn (Homer, *Odyssey* 19.560–69). In the Homeric *Iliad*, dreams were entities that came from Zeus (1.63–65). Julian then narrated a special kind of dream, the dynastic vision. This is the clearest example of Julian’s understanding of himself as providentially ordained to rule. It is worth quoting his account of the dream-vision at length:

I thought that a tall tree had been planted in a certain very spacious room, and that it was leaning down to the ground, while at its root had sprouted another tree, small and young and very flourishing. Now I was very anxious on behalf of the small tree, lest someone in pulling up the large one should pull it up as well. And in fact, when I came close, I saw that the tall tree was lying at full length on the ground, while the small one was still erect, but hung suspended away from the earth. Now when I saw this I said, in great anxiety, “Alas for this tall tree! There is a danger that not even its offspring will be saved.”

δένδρον γὰρ ὤμην ὑψηλὸν ἔν τινι τρικλίῳ σφόδρα μεγάλῳ πεφυτευμένον
εἰς ἔδαφος ῥέπειν, τῆ ῥίζῃ παραπεφυκόςτος ἐτέρου μικροῦ καὶ νεογενοῦς,
ἀνθηροῦ λίαν. ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ τοῦ μικροῦ σφόδρα ἠγωνίω, μὴ τις αὐτὸ μετὰ
τοῦ Ἐμεγάλου συναποσπάσῃ. καὶ τοίνυν ἐπειδὴ πλησίον ἐγενόμην, ὄρῶ τὸ
μέγα μὲν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἐκτεταμένον, τὸ μικρὸν δὲ ὀρθὸν μὲν, μετέωρον δὲ ἀπὸ γῆς. ὡς οὖν
εἶδον, ἀγωνιάσας ἔφην· “Οἴου δένδρου! κίνδυνός ἐστι μὴδὲ τὴν
παραφυάδα σωθῆναι” (384B-C [p. 21])

Here, the flourishing small tree was the future Augustus Julian, and the apparently felled larger tree suggested a neo-Flavian dynasty or a return to traditional Roman imperial values. Julian identified his guide to dream interpretation as “one who was altogether a stranger to me”, possibly a circumlocution referring to the divine messenger Hermes, similar to the reference to “the stranger” in *Oration 7*, addressed to Heraclius the Cynic (430C-D; cf. 204A [ed. Wright, vol. 2]). In that oration of 362, Julian presented himself as the infant son of Helios and Athena (*Orat.* 7.230A) and Hermes as his guide to safety on the path that had killed his half-brothers. Their deaths had introduced a period of social disruption such as had not been seen since Constantine attained the imperial office. In *Letter 14*, the stranger interprets Julian’s vision thus:

Then one who was altogether a stranger to me said: “Look carefully and take courage. For since the root still remains in the earth, the smaller tree will be uninjured and will be established even more securely than before”.

καὶ τις ἀγνώως ἐμοὶ παντελῶς: “Ὅρα, ἔφησεν, ἀκριβῶς καὶ θάρρει· τῆς ῥίζης
γὰρ ἐν τῇ γῆ μενούσης τὸ μικρότερον ἀβλαβὲς διαμενεῖ καὶ βεβαιότερον
ἰδρυνθήσεται”. (*Epist.* 14 [384C] [p. 21])

Julian ended his dream account with a disclaimer: “So much then for my dreams. God knows what they portend” (τὰ μὲν δὴ τῶν ὄνειράτων τοιαῦτα, θεὸς δὲ οἶδεν εἰς ὅτι φέρει) (384D). It was hazardous to put in writing that one had dreamt of the death of an emperor, and especially a blood relative. Seeking out the time of an emperor’s death by any form of divination was an act of treason punishable by death, a penalty enforced by Constantius on several occasions.

3. A Succession Crisis for the Constantinian Dynasty

Constantine’s son Constantius II was to die of fever on 3 November 361, leaving no children as his heir but the small tree, Julian. Julian himself had no living heirs, his wife Helena having suffered several miscarriages and borne a son who died soon after birth. That Julian was particularly sensitive about his lack of progeny was clear from the conspiracy theories that were circulating around the court, blaming Constantius’ wife Eusebia for the death of Helena’s baby, in the account of Ammianus Marcellinus’ *Res gestarum* (16.10.18–19 [using Rolfe ed.]; with Helena’s burial is described in 21.1.5; see [Matthews \(2008\)](#)). The fact that Helena was Constantius’ sister only complicated matters. The internal crisis of Julian’s challenge to the rule of Constantius II in the years after he was proclaimed Caesar had been accompanied by religious turbulence and the external crisis of war. War with the Sasanians had erupted again in 359, and Constantius was fighting on the eastern front. When Julian wrote to Oribasius, Constantius was busy reinterpreting cultural symbols in his own way, as we see in the silver *Missorium of Kerch* [Figure 1], where Constantius is depicted as a soldier on horseback preceded by victory. The continued use of Greco-Roman deities such as Victory (Latin *Victoria* or Greek *Nike*) on the coinage of Christian emperors up to Theodosius I is also testament to the use of mixed religious messages in the later fourth century.



Figure 1. The Triumph of Constantius II; the *Missorium of Kerch*.

The context of war increased the pressure on the sole emperor. Constantius travelled east in 360 to restore stability after the loss of several border fortresses. His mixed results in battle with the Persians made him hesitant to withdraw to Antioch for the winter (Hanaghan 2017, pp. 445–52). It was in this context of uncertainty that Constantius received several dreams and other omens regarding his own future and the threat posed by Julian. His attempts to persuade Julian to back down failed. When Julian claimed the rank of *Augustus* in the spring of 360, perhaps bolstered by the message he received in his vision of the two trees, war erupted between the two. Contemporary sources Libanius of Antioch and Ammianus (see *Res.* 16.12.64) were at pains to stress that the troops' acclamation of Julian in Paris had not been his own idea (Kaldellis 2005, pp. 652–53). Eunapius' biography of Oribasius of Pergamon—the same Oribasius who was the recipient of *Letter 14*—described him as one of Julian's accomplices in his attempt to “overturn the tyranny of Constantius” (in *Vitae sophistarum* [eds. Miles and Baltussen (Loeb)] 488.35–489.36, Eunapius using this clause twice in one passage).

Constantius II also enjoyed limited success in trying to shut down pagan divinatory practices with his laws prescribing the death penalty for those who performed or watched animal sacrifices. These naturally included haruspicy. Some pagan temples were shut down, but Constantius kept the role of *pontifex maximus* for himself and was deified after he died, just like his father Constantine I (Milner 2015, p. 196). He did not disband priestly colleges and ordered the election of high priests for the imperial cult in Caria and North Africa (Leone 2013). The *Roman Calendar of 354* is evidence that many traditional religious festivals were still being openly observed, or at the very least remembered by some officials in the 350s (Salzman 1991, pp. 227–28). The context of religious disruption is reflected in laws dating from the 350s that prescribed the death penalty for those who performed or attended Roman sacrifices, or worshipped “idols”, the statues in Roman temples (Dijkstra 2021). Some temples were shut down, following edicts later collected in the *Codex Theodosianus Liber XVI*, with 25 laws in Book 16.10 alone. Under Constantius II, the Altar of Victory was removed from the Roman senate in 357, only to be restored by Julian (see *Relatio Symmachi* 5; cf. 3 (*Patrol. Lat.* vol. 18, col. 1008b; cf. 1007b)). Ordinary Christians engaged in the destruction, pillaging, and desecration of Greco-Roman temples, tombs, and monuments (Hahn 2011). However, many governors and magistrates maintained passive resistance to such policies, reflecting the continued popularity of traditional religion among the general populace. In the surviving books—covering the reigns of Constantius, Julian, and Jovian—of a larger Roman history, Ammianus recorded the worship of the traditional gods with sacrifices as still occurring in Rome and Alexandria in his own day, as did

Eunapius in his *Lives of philosophers and Sophists* (486-7.33-34). Ammianus and Eunapius shared Julian's belief that divine agency enabled prophecy through dreams, augury, and other kinds of omens. This was a very traditional Roman perspective, and one shared by Roman Christians.

A debate over the relationship between the members of the Trinity plagued the heirs of Constantine, who had convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 to condemn the so-called "Arians", who refused to confess that Christ was "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) as God the Father, instead insisting that Jesus was of a different substance altogether. Constantius introduced a new element to the ongoing Christological controversy by his adherence to a non-standard form of Christianity, known as Homoiousianism or semi-Arianism. In opposition to the Anomoean Creed which had emerged from the Council of Sirmium in 357, Constantius accepted the Homoiousians' proclamation that Jesus Christ was "like in substance" (*homoiousios*) to God but not of the same substance as his divine parent. Internal strife over doctrinal issues like this could be countered or mitigated by efforts to restrict non-Christian religious rites, which in this era included astrology and dream divination.

4. Conflicting Views on Providential Dreaming

At the same time as the empire was being Christianized, Julian was "Romanizing" (Den Hengst 2010). Divinatory dreaming was popular in pre-Christian Rome, at least from the first century BCE, and grew in the first to third centuries of the imperial period. From the adoption of Christianity by Constantine, prophetic dreams featured regularly in providential narratives of Roman history by late-antique panegyrists and historians. Such visions were harbingers of major events in the military, religious, and familial spheres of the Flavian dynasty (69–96 CE), particularly under Vespasian. Births, miscarriages, acclamations, and deaths rarely took place without being marked by some sort of prognostication (Weber 2000). A major purpose of dream narrative interpretation was to give leaders and their followers a sense that their destinies were divinely sanctioned and controlled, in the context of widespread social disruption.

The legend of Constantine's vision on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, and his subsequent triumphant entry into Rome under the sign of the cross, was celebrated in the accounts of the earliest church historians, Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* and Lactantius' *History of the Persecutors*. It was a dream that allegedly led Constantine I to seek out the bishop of Rome, Silvester, and to dedicate a large portion of Roman real estate to the church of Rome, a legend preserved in both Latin and Byzantine sources as the "donation of Constantine" (e.g., Kedrenos, *Synopsis Historiōn* or *Historiarum Compendium*. 302.1 [ed. Tartaglia, vol. 2]). These visions of Constantine were recounted unquestioningly by the sixth-century chronicler John Malalas and repeated by George Kedrenos in his eleventh-century Chronicle (Scott 2018, p. 197). Kedrenos, a mediaeval collector of earlier sources, reported that Constantine saw his vision of the cross twice: first in the eighth hour of the day and again at night (301.2); and also that a dream inspired the newly Christian emperor to convert the temple of the Argonauts into a church (135.1). Other pious emperors received similar divine messages in dreams on the eve of battle, such as Theodosius before the Battle of Frigidus in 394, but Christians were careful to distinguish these from non-Christian oracles. Significantly, Julian received a prediction of his death in Phrygia through an oracle (Ammianus, *Res*. 25.3.9).

A Christian by upbringing but a Hellenist by preference, Julian found it useful to reinterpret cultural symbols and myths to deal with the public relations disaster of his dispute with Constantius. When he was proclaimed Caesar in 355, Julian was fresh from his studies of Plato and Stoicism, undertaken first in Athens and then in Pergamum. The Platonic tradition was far more open to the possibility of prophetic or mantic dreams than the psychobiological modelling of Aristotle, which was followed by Artemidorus, the famous third-century Ephesian dream interpreter closer to Julian's day (*Oneirocriticon* [eds. Harris-McCoy, pp. 35–36]). In his writings on the soul's relationship with the body,

Aristotle had regarded dreams as natural phenomena. Only rarely did events in the world coincide with the soul's perceptions in dreams. Plato, by contrast, had emphasized the natural sympathy between the soul, whose origins were divine, and cosmic forces, which allowed the virtuous to train their souls to glimpse the future in dreams. In adopting a Platonist view of the value of dreams and divinatory practices, Julian followed the lead of the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus (d. ca. 325), the founder of the school that Julian had attended in Pergamon (Athanassiadi [1992] 2015, pp. 7–13; Elm 2012, pp. 92–133). In 358, Julian had not yet embarked on any religious program of his own, but we can see the seeds of change in *Letter 14*.

There are several references to Providence and the gods in Julian's early letters to his friend, the philosopher Priscus, which makes it easier to understand his dream of the two trees. In *Letter 11*, he writes that he is recovering from a bad illness "by the grace of the one who sees all things" (τῆ τοῦ πάντα ἐφορῶντος προνοίᾳ) (425b [p. 18]). In *Letter 13*, he refers to the outcome of his illness again as under divine control:

This, however, will turn out as the god sees fit; but I swear to you by him who is the cause and saviour of all my good fortune that I desire to live only that I may be some use to you. . . . May divine Providence keep you safe for many years, my dearest and most beloved brother!

ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν ὅπως ἂν ἡ τῷ θεῷ φίλον γενήσεται, ἐγὼ δὲ ὄμνυμί σοι τὸν πάντων ἀγαθῶν ἐμοὶ αἴτιον καὶ σωτῆρα, ὅτι διὰ τοῦτο ζῆν εὐχομαι, ἵν' ὑμῖν τι χρήσιμος γένωμαι.... ἐρρωμένον σε ἡ θεία πρόνοια διαφυλάξειε πολλοῖς χρόνοις, ἀδελφὲ ποθεινότατε καὶ φιλικώτατε. (*ll.* 7–23) [p. 20])

The recognition of the hand of Providence in Julian's life and that of his closest friends is clear from these two letters, which dated to the period just prior to *Letter 14*'s composition. The terms "the one who sees all things" (*Epist.* 11) and "the god" (13) could refer equally to the Christian God or to a pagan deity and may have been deliberately chosen for their ambiguity. While it is risky to read back into pre-361 sources on Julian's eventual rejection of Christianity, it is certain that divine Providence was a view shared by Christians.

5. Ammianus' Praise for Dreams and Other Forms of Divination

The positive value that Julian accorded to his dream in *Epist.* 14 is supported by passages from Ammianus, whose account of how Julian came to power was laudatory. Writing in the 380s, Ammianus focused his readers' attention on the dreams and visions of both Constantius and Julian to a singular degree. We could call Ammianus a historian of crisis, most particularly in his Julianic books (16–26), or even a biographer writing from the perspective of loss, as Michael Hanaghan has suggested (Hanaghan 2023). Sean Williams has shown the many ways in which Ammianus' account of Constantius as a tyrant sought to counter the Christians' polemic against Julian, including their criticism of his practice of augury, divination, and other forms of "sorcery" (Williams 2009, pp. 25–31). Ammianus, for example, describes how Constantius II had arrested people solely on the basis of their reported dreams (*Res.* 15.3.5–6; see Den Boeft 2006, pp. 43–45). He also relates that Julian's desire to attack Constantius was inspired by a dream "and from many prophetic signs, in which he was an adept, that the emperor would soon die" (*Res.* 21.1.6). In a long and approving digression on divinatory practices (*Res.* 21.1.7–14), Ammianus seeks to explain how human knowledge of the future worked. He attributed the arts of divination to the control of the goddess Themis. Augury and auspices were controlled not by birds but by the god who directed their flight and allowed the character of the future to be known (21.1.10). The minds of Sibyls, who foretold the future under divine inspiration, were prompted by sparks of the sun, called the "mind of the world" (21.1.11). Thus, natural phenomena such as voices from the heavens, various signs, thunder, lightning, thunderbolts, and falling stars, were accorded great significance (21.1.11).

Dreams were, for Ammianus, a sometime unreliable tool for telling the future, but he agreed with Aristotle that they could be trusted as portents, if the perception of the dreamer was not distracted:

the belief in dreams would be strong and undoubted if the interpreters of them were never deceived; and sometimes, as Aristotle asserts [cf. *De Somno et vigilia* (*Parva Naturalia*) 3], they are fixed and stable when the eye of the person, being soundly asleep, turns neither way, but looks straight forward.

Somniorum autem rata fides et indubitabilis foret, ni ratiocinantes coniectura fallerentur interdum. Quae (ut Aristoteles affirmat) tum fixa sunt et stabilia, cum animantis altius quiescentis, ocularis pupula neutrobi inclinata, rectissime cernit. (Ammianus, *Res.* 21.1.12)

The variable results of divination were due to human inability to read signs correctly, not the fault of the gods (21.1.14). Ammianus cites Cicero's warning: "The gods show signs of coming events. With regard to these, if one errs, it is not the nature of the gods that is at fault, but man's interpretation" (see Cicero, *De Natura deorum*, 2.4.12; *De Divinatione* 1.52).

Towards the end of his life, Constantius also saw signs of his rule being about to end and linked them to "the changing of the times (*permutatio temporum*)", according to Ammianus (Bks 20–21). In 360, the emperor saw an abundance of rainbows fill the sky, which filled him with dread, since he recognized in them ill omens sent from heaven by the goddess Iris (20.11.30; and see Hanaghan 2017, pp. 447–48). Shortly afterwards, Constantius suffered a nightmare, in which his father placed in his lap a boy who took a globe from him (Ammianus, *Res.* 21.14.1). The globe represented the world and Constantius' power over it; the boy was his half-cousin, Julian. These visions did nothing to calm Constantius' state of mind. Fortunately for Julian, the impending battle was averted when Constantius became ill in Mopsuestia and died of fever on 3 November 361, allegedly naming Julian as his rightful successor before his death.

The need for secrecy drove Julian to seek reassurance for his own prospects through traditional methods of divination, such as augury and haruspicy or hepatoscopy—the study of the details of the innards of sacrificial animals, especially their livers, as Ammianus related:

While Fortune's mutable phases were causing these occurrences in a different part of the world, Julian in the midst of his many occupations in Illyricum was constantly prying into the entrails of victims and watching the flight of birds, in his eagerness to foreknow the result of events; but he was perplexed by ambiguous and obscure predictions and continued to be uncertain of the future.

Dum haec in diversa parte terrarum, Fortunae struunt volubiles casus, Iulianus inter multa, quae per Illyricum agitabat, exta rimabatur assidue, avesque suspiciens, praescire festinabat accidentium finem, sed responsis ambiguus et obscuris haerebat, futurorum incertus. (*Res.* 22.1.1)

Ammianus claimed that Julian knew about Constantius' death before anyone else, and cited this poetic revelation that Julian received in a dream at Vienne:

At dread midnight a certain gleaming form appeared and recited to him plainly, as he lay not awake, the following heroic verses, repeating them several times; and relying on these, he believed that no difficulty would come upon him:

"When Zeus the noble Aquarius' bound shall reach /
And Saturn come to Virgo's twenty-fifth degree /
Then shall Constantius, king of Asia, of this life /
So sweet the end attain with heaviness and grief".

horrore medio noctis, imago quaedam visa splendidior, hos ei versus heroos modo non vigilanti aperte edixit, eadem saepius replicando, quibus fretus nihil asperum sibi superesse existimabat:

Ζεὺς ὅταν εἰς πλατὺ τέρμα μόλη κλυτοῦ ὑδροχόοιο,
 Παρθενικῆς δὲ Κρόνος μοίρη βαίνη ἐπὶ πέμπτηεἰκοστῆ,
 βασιλεὺς Κωνστάντιος Ἀσίδος αἴης
 τέρμα φίλου βιοτοῦ στυγερόν καὶ ἐπώδυνον ἔξει. (*Res.* 21.2.1)

The prompt demise of Constantius on 3 November allowed Julian to be crowned in the same month and so Julian's vision proved reliable. We turn now to a closer analysis of the symbols of the two trees in Julian's vision and their dynastic associations in the literature and dream dictionaries of Greece and scriptures of the ancient Near East.

6. The Greek and Near Eastern Traditions of Trees in Dynastic Dreams

The origins of the arboreal symbolism in Julian's dream of the two trees may be found in Greece and the Near East. The classical Greek literary tradition of dream interpretation associated arboreal imagery with dynastic aspirations. In Sophocles' play *Electra*, Clytemnestra dreamt of a flourishing limb, a symbol of Mycenaean power. While her husband Agamemnon was away in the Trojan War, she had taken his cousin as her lover. Electra's brother reports the vision that inspired fear in his mother Clytemnestra (Euripides, *Electra* 417–25). The flourishing limb here is Aegisthus, who would take power from Agamemnon when Clytemnestra killed her husband on his return from the war. The context of war is one of social disruption, and so this vision is analogous to the setting in which Julian's vision of the two trees occurred.

The spreading vine or flourishing tree as a portent of a great future leader appeared in another period of military conflict, documented in Herodotus' *History of the Persian Wars*. The vision provided an origin story for the Persian king Cyrus the Great (d. 530 BCE). The king of the Medes, Astyages, had a daughter, Mandanes, who married the Persian prince Cambyses. Astyages dreamt that his daughter had a vine spreading from her womb, one that took over the whole earth (Herodotus, *Historiae* 1.108 [ed. Wilson]). This was later read as presaging the fall of the kingdom of the Medes to Cyrus.

Another frightening dream was delivered on the eve of war to another eastern king; Xerxes I employed the same arboreal image, this time a spreading olive tree: "After this Xerxes, being now intent on the expedition, saw yet a third vision . . . Xerxes thought that he was crowned with an olive bough, the shoots of which spread over the whole earth, and presently the crown vanished from off his head where it was set". (ibid., 7.19.1). This vision was characterized as an "oriental" dream by Christopher Pelling (1996, p. 69), "both because of the familiarity with such symbolism as portending success and salvation and because of the frequency of the vine as an Achaemenid royal symbol".

The other source of wisdom concerning trees and the fall of dynasties came from the tradition of dream interpretation practiced in Babylon and Assyria, which was passed down in Jewish scriptures, such as in the book of the prophet Daniel. The book stems from a context of crisis for Jews in Judaea, under Seleucid attack in the second century BCE, led by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, although the text purporting to describe much older events (from the mid-sixth century BCE). We can safely assume that Julian, raised in the Christian court of Constantine I, would also have been familiar with "Daniel's" account of the dreams of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar. In that legend, the young interpreter Daniel identified the strong and lofty tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream as the king, whose greatness had grown and reached to heaven, and whose dominion reached to the ends of the earth (Dan 4:19–22). The dream then took a downward turn for Nebuchadnezzar:

The king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, "Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let

him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him". (Dan: 4:23 [ESV])

Based on the dream, the young prophet Daniel predicted that the king would "be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. . .till you know that the Most High rules the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes" (4:24–25). Daniel's reluctance to interpret the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is obvious in this re-telling, four centuries after the alleged events. Any omen that prophesied the death of a king was likely to redound negatively upon the interpreter. In spite of the prediction, Nebuchadnezzar's reign lasted for 43 years, until his death in 567 BCE. It was under his son that the neo-Babylonian empire was conquered in 539 BCE by the Achaemenid king, who established the First Persian Empire. Julian cited other Old Testament books, especially Genesis and Isaiah—the first book of prophets—in his tract against Christianity, *Contra Galilaeos*. Together with this knowledge of Christian scriptures, he even attended church on Epiphany to cover up his antipathy to Christianity (Ammianus, *Res.* 21.2.5; see [Bowersock 1978](#), p. 56). Whether or not he had Nebuchadnezzar in mind, Julian's knowledge of the spreading vine or felled tree of classical Greek accounts of the Achaemenids would have given him an intellectual apparatus for interpreting his dream of the two trees.

7. Tree Symbolism in Ancient Greek Dreambooks

A third source for the symbolism of trees in dreams—along with classical Greek literature and Judeo-Christian scriptures—was the pagan tradition of dreambooks. These were prognostic tools that addressed "universal human uncertainties such as birth, health, dreams, weather and harvest" (see [Liuzza 2010](#), p. viii). They enjoyed great popularity among Greeks and Romans, especially Artemidorus' *Oneirocriticon*, which hailed from second-century Asia Minor (using eds. Harris-McCoy). Artemidorus' commentary in five books, based on his professional experience as a dream interpreter, became the model for later dreambooks in the Byzantine era, which were slightly Christianized but maintained their amoral character, as [Mavroudi \(2002\)](#) and [Oberhelman \(2008\)](#) have conclusively demonstrated. The symbol of the withered vine or tree, from which a new shoot sprang, had dynastic associations in this rather secular tradition. In Book 2 of his major work, Artemidorus analyzes the meanings of various tree types that may be seen in dreams, from the olive—which may prophesy a wife, an athletic context, a public office, or freedom, but not for slaves—to box trees and rose laurels, which signify women who resemble prostitutes and are ill-groomed (*Oneir.* 2.25 [pp. 194–97]). For the remainder where the genus cannot be identified, the principle of similarity may be applied, forming an interpretation "based on the previous examples, always identifying properties that are similar to their outcomes. For in fact the interpretation of dreams is nothing other than the juxtaposition of similarities" (*Oneir.* 2.25 [pp. 196–97]). The principle of similarity is at work in Julian's interpretation of his vision and the unexplained vision of Oribasius, both of which were read as signaling that the demise of his rival Constantius was imminent. Artemidorus cautions that some trees are inherently good omens and others portend evil in the dreamer's future: "But when they [i.e., 'good' trees] are withered or upturned at the roots or struck by lightning or otherwise burnt by fire, they signify the opposite. And those that signify something grievous with respect to their outcomes, when they wither and are destroyed, bring about relatively profitable things" (*Oneir.* 2.25 [pp. 196–97]; cf. 2.10 [p. 169]).

In Julian's vision, the larger tree, Constantius, could be interpreted as a tree that was grievous in outcome. Its death foretold a profitable outcome to Julian and his supporters, at least. In Book 4, Artemidorus returns to interpreting the dream symbol of long-lived trees with the remark: "And those [trees] that live for a long time, in the case of appointments, are significant of delay, and in the case of illnesses are salubrious. This is likewise the case for those that sprout and grow slowly. And those that are the opposite are significant of opposite things" (*ibid.* 4.57 [pp. 350–51]).

We find similar treatments of trees in dreams in the *Dreambook of Daniel*, a simplified dream dictionary based on Artemidorus and ascribed to the Hebrew prophet Daniel, which may date as early as the fourth to seventh centuries and was translated into Latin. For example, “If you dream of trees being uprooted or being cut down, this means wars and the falling of animals and people”. (*Dan.* 123, in Oberhelman 2008, p. 75). The later *Anonymous Dreambook* (*Anon. Oneir.* 57, in Oberhelman 2008, p. 170) echoed Artemidorus’ interpretation. In the dreambook ascribed to Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (ruled 1391–1425), we find the same association: “very large trees are interpreted as noble and well-born men, and their falling down signifies death for such as man”. (*On. Man. Pal.* 14, in Oberhelman 2008, p. 203). Within this well-attested web of oneiric associations of trees with worldly success, Julian’s reading of his vision makes perfect sense: the little tree’s survival, after the larger tree with which it shared a common root was felled, seemed to portend his future appointment as Augustus. However, the smallness of the tree and its uprootedness may also suggest that Julian felt a certain reluctance to embrace the sole rule that he insists was thrust upon him by the acclamation of his soldiers and accepted only unwillingly. Did the death of the big tree, who shared a common ancestor with him in Constantine I, cast some sort of shadow on Julian? Constantius died without an heir in 361, so there were no brothers or cousins to share rule with Julian. After the death of Julian’s wife Helena in c. 360, leaving no living children, an heir of his own was less than likely. It may be justifiable to discern in his dream of the two trees a degree of early diffidence which is not usually associated with Julian’s later actions.

8. Conclusions: The Significance of Julian’s Vision of Two Trees

I have suggested that the discourse around dreams and visions, in which Julian participated for years before he was proclaimed emperor in 361 on the death of Constantius II, was a symptom of cultural fragmentation. I have interpreted Julian’s dream narrative, preserved in *Letter 14*, as indicative of an attempt to revitalize religious culture by reinterpreting myths and symbols from the Hellenic past for a present that was characterized by chaos and conflict, due to external and internal imperial conflicts as well as the processes of Christianization that were transforming the Roman Empire in Julian’s day. The practice of dream interpretation offered Julian an opportunity to shape his own destiny in the context of social and cultural disruption before the death of Constantius, and this practice was to become more common in the decades and centuries after Julian’s demise in 363.

This reading of Julian’s vision adduced three contexts that may have influenced Julian’s interpretation of his dream of the two trees: the literary legacy of Homer, Herodotus, and Sophocles; the reading of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in the book of Daniel; and the popular heritage of late-antique dreambooks. Like the Babylonian king’s dream, Julian’s dream of the large tree that bent to the earth foretold a living emperor’s capitulation to a rival—in this case, Constantius’ death before potential engagement in battle with Julian. Julian had not appointed a successor when he died from wounds sustained in battle in June 363. His successor Jovian ruled for only eight months and did not even make it to Constantinople. Ammianus attributed the election of Jovian to the blind goddess Fortuna (*Res.* 25.5.8). With his description of the raising of Jovian as if by chance, Ammianus implies that Providence was not on the side of the Roman Empire under Jovian as it had been under Julian, even if modern commentators such as Jan Willem Drijvers (2022) justifiably disagree.

An important literary feature of Julian’s fourteenth letter is its circumlocutory style, which allowed Julian to relate the dream without any identifiable reference to its protagonists. The emperors Constantine and Constantius II are not mentioned by name, nor does Julian identify himself as the “little branch” that grew up to replace its ancestor. Under Roman law, any attempt to foretell the death of a ruler in the fourth century CE by dreams, casting horoscopes, or another form of divination was proscribed. Such attempts were deemed treasonous and had to be transmitted with extreme caution.

This brief overview of key texts on dreams and omens during the brief reign of Julian and the years leading up to it has shown that dream narratives and their interpretation

played a major role in the political decision-making of both Constantius and Julian. In the contested intellectual world of Rome in the mid-fourth century, dreams were taken seriously as omens for the future and indications of divine blessing by both emperors, just as by their predecessor Constantine I. With roots in both classical Greco-Roman culture as well as early Christianity, the practice of oneirocriticism exerted a strong influence on many others in the Later Roman empire, including hagiographers, biographers, and historiographers. In the contested religious culture of the fourth century, the discourse of dreams and their interpretation was a useful tool for emperors who wished to create and maintain religious conflict, while representing their own election as providential. Julian may well have believed that he had been singled out for greatness in a dream. The discourse of personal revelation in dreams increased the sense of power of the individual but alienated those who fell outside the scope of the revelation. In this way, a discourse that aimed towards social cohesion instead caused more cultural fragmentation and religious conflict.

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Acknowledgments: Figure 1 is used from www.hermitagemuseum.org, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. Bowl, The Triumph of Constantius II. Eastern Mediterranean, mid-4th century. Silver, gilded and nielloed. Diameter, 24.9 cm, height 3.9 cm. Inv.no. 1820-79.

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