The Sanctuary of Sleep

This spell of sleep allows them to wait out centuries while a “pagan king” blockades the entranceway to the cave. Their peaceful slumber contrasts with the commotion outdoors, dotted by men holding swords and shields, and even an appearance of the Devil, shown to be leading the Roman Emperor at the top of the image. But the sleepers are kept safe in the dark cavern against a background that seems to echo an inky black sky.

This story appears in the Qu’ran, and it would have been added as a part of the appendix in the back rather than in the main texts. The reason this illustration was found in a book of omens is that it was used for bibliomancy, which was the practice of opening a book at random and using the image and text on the pages to determine a person’s fate. Diviners would often station themselves at marketplaces, like Tarot readers or other fortune tellers might do at a carnival today.

Sleep is revered in the Qu’ran and has been an important part of Islamic culture for centuries. Although sleep is a newer science in the medical field, texts describing the Companions of the Cave exhibit an advanced knowledge of sleep physiology for that time. For example, the text shows that the angel was careful to turn the sleepers from side to side (“We turned them on their right and on their left sides” [verse 18.18]), as it is good practice to do so with patients in comas. There is an understanding of circadian rhythm, which is understood as a sign of godliness (“And you might have seen the sun, when it rose, declining to the right from their Cave, and when it set, turning away from them to the left, while they lay in the midst of the Cave. That is one of the signs of Allah” [verse 18.17]), as well as an understanding that the men were asleep when they might have had their eyes open (“And you would have thought them awake, whereas they were asleep” [verse 18.18]) and, finally, care to keep them asleep by limiting noise and light stimulation (“Therefore, We covered up their (sense of) hearing (causing them to go in deep sleep) for a number of years” [verse 18.11]).

This story was an important one that held greater religious significance. The illuminations for the story were typically adorned with gold and lapis, and the calligraphy of the accompanying texts show that it was often in the same edition and, thus, may have been read alongside the Qu’ran. And although it was forbidden to make images of human figures in Islamic art, the practice was more accepted in Persia than in most other places. The size of this illustration, in particular, is much bigger than usual, indicating that it must have been a part of an even more valuable manuscript. Sleep was sometimes considered a sign of the greatness of Allah. This story held more significance for Shi’i Muslims who believed that the 12th Imam would return much like the Seven Sleepers did. Versions of this story have been found across both Islamic and Christian texts. The story appears to resonate throughout many eras and cultures. The heroes in the story are graced with what is found to be the most godly of gifts: the gift of sleep.
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