

Artistic Reawakenings of the Seven Sleepers' Myth (19th - 21st centuries)

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Abstract:

This study offers an extended overview of the many creations and reinterpretations by artists inspired by the shared myth of the Seven Sleepers (Christianity) and/or the People of the Cave (Islam). This survey is a continuation of the systematic collection undertaken in the 20th century by the Catholic Islamologist Louis Massignon (1883-1962), who is regarded as the main actor of the revival of the Seven Sleepers in the last century. Fifty years after his death, I have resumed this data collection, focusing here on the –potentially areligious– artistic reinterpretations of this myth that have inspired so many poets, writers, composers, playwrights, filmmakers, contemporary artists and so on. So much so that the story of the Seven Sleepers has become a myth “free of right” that anyone can appropriate and reinterpret freely, regardless of its religious or interreligious significance.

Keywords: *Seven Sleepers' Myth; Artistic creation; reinterpretation; heterochrony*

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Fig 1. *Les Sept Dormants*, by Laurence Sibille (2021) in the chapel of the Sept-Saints, Brittany, France © Pénicaud 2022

This chapter is a continuation of an extensive comparative study carried out over several years on the Seven Sleepers, and more specifically on the way in which the French Catholic Islamologist Louis Massignon (1883-1962) actively “awakened” them in the 20th century¹. Well known for his work on the Muslim mystic Mansûr el-Hallâj (858-922)², this scholar extended his research to other holy figures, such as Abraham, Elijah, Mary, Fatima or the Seven Sleepers. In the specific case of the latter, going beyond the strictly academic framework, this precursor of interreligious dialogue went so far as to initiate, from 1954-1955, a Christian-Muslim pilgrimage

1 Manoël Pénicaud, *Le réveil des Sept Dormants. Un pèlerinage islamo-chrétien en Bretagne* [The reawakening of the Seven Sleepers. A Christian-Muslim pilgrimage in Brittany], Paris, Le Cerf, 2016 (2014). For a biographical approach to L. Massignon, see Manoël Pénicaud, *Louis Massignon. Le “catholique musulman”* [Louis Massignon. The ‘Muslim Catholic’], Paris, Bayard, 2020.

2 Louis Massignon, *The Passion of Hallaj*, trans. by Herbert Mason, 4 Vol. Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 1982.

in Brittany (France), by inviting Muslim immigrant workers to take part in a modest Catholic pilgrimage (“pardon” in French) dedicated to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

After discovering this local patron saint’s festival through his ethnologist daughter (Geneviève Massignon), Louis Massignon saw in it –in a rather avant-garde way at the start of the Algerian War – an opportunity to encourage a “serene peace” in North Africa and to prepare for the reconciliation of the “children of Abraham”. In so doing, he was aiming for both a political (intramundane) and eschatological (at the end of time) reconciliation. Despite inevitable ups and downs, this interfaith pilgrimage is still going strong seventy years on, and is one of the first initiatives for dialogue between Christians and Muslims in France³. Its rich history is a subject in itself, but we will see that several of the artistic works presented in this study are directly connected to this shared pilgrimage, which was intentionally “invented” for this purpose.

An Islamologist and professor at the prestigious Collège de France from 1926 to 1954, Louis Massignon –in the second half of his life– listed and collected “the many ‘awakenings’ of Christian and Muslim artists to the ‘apocryphal’ theme⁴” of the Seven Sleepers throughout the world, he wrote, in order to “supplement textual criticism with the study of artistic monuments⁵”. He therefore attached particular importance to works of art inspired by this “myth”, in the anthropological sense of the term. What is particularly significant is that it is a myth shared by Christians and Muslims alike.

From the 1930s onwards, and especially after 1950, Massignon systematically sought out all the cultural, textual and artistic references to the Seven Sleepers. The aim of his long-term investigation was to “locate, geographically and iconographically, a legend that had until then been ‘uprooted’ and projected into unreality⁶”. This article is not the place to list the many sites (caves, cemeteries, places of worship, pilgrimages,

3 *Les dormants d'Éphèse, au Vieux-Marché et dans le Coran* [The Sleepers of Ephesus, at Vieux-Marché and in the Qur'an], Rennes, Editions Goater, 2024 ; Manoël Pénicaud, *Muslim Pilgrims in Brittany. Pilgrimage, dialogue and paradoxes*, in Richard J. Natvig / Ingvild Flakerud (eds.), *Muslim Pilgrimages in Europe*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 184-198.

4 Massignon L., *Les Sept Dormants d'Éphèse (ahl Al-Kahf) en Islam et en Chrétienté. Recueil documentaire et iconographique* [The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (ahl Al-Kahf) in Islam and Christianity. Documentary and iconographic collection], in “Revue des Études Islamiques”, Paris, Geuthner, 1959, p. 9.

5 Massignon, *Les Sept Dormants...*, 1961, p. 61.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

etc.) or the various religious practices (prayers, therapeutic invocations, prophylactic formulae, etc.).

Nevertheless, let's mention a few examples of religious works that he catalogued during his lifetime: Persian miniatures in the greatest collections (private or public), Ottoman calligraphies in Istanbul, Greek and Russian icons, incunabula in the National Library in Paris, a Rococo altar in a chapel in Bavaria, Muslim mural inscriptions in the Comoros, engravings in Florence, an ex-voto in Germany, an antique reliquary in Marseille, etc.⁷

On the strength of this heritage, I thought it would be useful to continue this investigation into the 21st century and to research the artistic creations and variations inspired by the Seven Sleepers in Christian and Muslim worlds, as well as in non-religious contexts. Although the veneration of the Sleepers has now almost disappeared in the Western Catholic world, with a few exceptions⁸, it has to be said that, paradoxically, a number of artists continue to make use of this “governing myth”⁹ –as the Franco-Lebanese poet Salah Stétié (1928-2020) put it– and to appropriate it in forms that are sometimes as unexpected as they are renewed.

This article is therefore the result of a careful review of the artistic occurrences collected during my ongoing work on the Seven Sleepers and the Companions on the Cave. From a methodological point of view, this collection has been enriched over the years by the reading of academic works, the systematic watch of the Internet and my work as an exhibition curator¹⁰. For the sake of coherence, it has been decided to classify them by category of work, covering theatre, literature, poetry, folk tales, plastic arts, music and audiovisual productions¹¹. This inventory does not pretend

7 Massignon, *Les Sept Dormants...*, 1954-1963. His eight articles are richly illustrated (photographs, engravings, icons, calligraphy, plans, miniatures, statues, etc.). Massignon has also listed numerous textual and/or vernacular versions of the Dormants, in Islam and Christianity, from the Atlantic Ocean (Brittany, Morocco) to Central Asia (Afghanistan, China) and the Indian Ocean (Comoros).

8 Very few devotional sites remain, as in Brittany (Pénicaud 2016). The Italian anthropologist Anna Tozzi has studied a Catholic cult in Angri in Italy. See Anna Tozzi Di Marco, *Agiografia e culto dei Sette Dormienti. Storicità e processi di mitologizzazione dell'agiostoria efesina nel Mediterraneo* [Hagiography and the Cult of the Seven Sleepers. Historicity and processes of mythologising Ephesian legend in the Mediterranean], Bologna, GRA Publishers, 2023, pp. 173-175.

9 Salah Stétié, *Passage des Dormants* [Passage of the Sleepers], *L'ouvrage*, Paris, 1995, pp. 25-73

10 I have curated several exhibitions featuring the Seven Sleepers: *La Méditerranée des Sept Dormants* (2011), *L'Oriente dei Sette Dormienti* (2011) and *Lieux saints partagés* at the Mucem in 2015 and subsequently in other museums.

11 This classification took precedence over a chronological approach. It should be noted that the many purely religious creations (texts, martyrologies, icons, painting charts, etc.) are not taken into account here.

to be exhaustive, as these creations are legion¹². It does, however, aim to demonstrate the great heterogeneity and connections of the themes raised by this shared myth. It should be noted that we will be discussing both works featuring the Sleeping Ones and works inspired by them, either directly or indirectly. The focus will be on works created in the 20th and 21st centuries, although some earlier examples will be mentioned where relevant to the issue of artistic reinterpretation. The aim of this study is not to provide an exegesis, or even to deal with the great Christian founding narratives (the Syriac homilies of Jacob of Sarug¹³, *De Gloria Martyrium* by Gregory of Tours, *History of the Lombards* by Paul the Deacon, *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine) or Islamic narratives (the Qur'an, Sura 18 known as the Cave). Similarly, this article does not aim to list ancient works of religious art (bas-reliefs, frescoes, paintings, icons, miniatures, etc.) but focuses primarily on contemporary creations.

Heterochrony of the Seven Sleepers and earlier heterochronic sources

Before presenting such an artistic panorama, it is crucial to mention the concept of “heterochrony” that is particularly well-suited to the Seven Sleepers. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, a specialist in medieval literature, defines this notion as “the co-presence, deliberately instituted and clearly marked by a writer, between distinct historical periods that are qualitatively distant and maintain a significant relationship¹⁴”. The simultaneity of different eras is central, and this is indeed the case with the “legend” of the Sleepers, so much so that Dunn-Lardeau considers it to be the first properly heterochronic narrative:

“Taking all narrative genres together, the oldest heterochronic story we have found is the legend of the Seven Sleepers [...]. As far as literary history is concerned, even if the precursor motifs of the long sleep have been around since Antiquity [...], it is the legend of the Seven Sleepers that is the source

12 The inventory is more extensive in the French-speaking world, due to the nationality of the author. For a closer look at Italian productions, see Anna Tozzi Di Marco, *Il mito dei Sette Dormienti nella produzione letteraria e artistica italiana attraverso i secoli*, in Nicola Maria Camerlengo (ed.), *Atti del convegno Storia e Miti*, Agrate Brianza, Edistorie, 2024.

13 See François Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants. Une rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans* [The tradition of the Seven Sleepers. A gathering between Christians and Muslims], Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001 (1983).

14 Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, *Le Voyage imaginaire dans le temps. Du récit médiéval au roman postmoderne* [Imaginary time travel. From the medieval tale to the postmodern novel], Grenoble, Ellug, 2009, p. 12 ; see also Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, *La légende des Sept Dormants ou la traversée du temps* [The legend of the Seven Sleepers or a journey through time], in Barbara Fleith / Franco Morenzoni (eds.), *De la sainteté à l'hagiographie. Genèse et usage de la Légende Dorée* [From sanctity to hagiography. Genesis and use of the Golden Legend], Geneva, Droz, 2001, pp. 227-252.

of heterochronic stories [...] thanks, on the one hand, to its dissemination and numerous rewritings and, on the other, to the fact that the motif of the crossing of historical time, detached from its original context, has spread to a number of works [...]¹⁵.”

In narrative terms, the story is peppered with elements that demonstrate the anachronism experienced by the seven characters, at least by the one who returns to Ephesus in hiding to supply his companions: the city has changed and he doesn't recognise it, the gold coin is no longer legal tender, no one believes or recognises him, his house is inhabited by other people, Christianity has become the main religion (the cross on the city gate), and so on. Whether written or told orally, these heterochronous events must have left a strong impression on people's minds over the centuries, with everyone imagining themselves in the place of the Sleepers. What would we do if we woke up two or three centuries from now? The Sleepers's story is therefore a kind of science-fiction story before its time, in the sense that it already contains the dramatic elements that many 20th and 21st century authors would come to appreciate, namely time travel.

As a preamble, we should mention other long legendary slumbers, in which the protagonists, after having slept for an inhuman length of time, wake up in a transformed society. A number of earlier stories pre-existed the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and may have inspired its development. Let's start with the story of Epimenides (6th or 7th century BC). Originally from Knossos in Crete, this young shepherd is said to have slept for fifty-seven years, as recounted by the philosopher Diogenes Laertius (3rd century BC):

It is reported of him, that when he was young, his Father sent him a field to fetch home a Wether; but that he in the heat of the day, turning aside out of the way entered into a Cave, and there falling asleep, slept on for fifty seven years together. When he awoke, he went to seek the Wether, as one that believed he had slept not above an hour or two; but not finding it, he returned to the Village. Where when he saw an unexpected change of unknown Faces, and found the Land in the possession of a stranger, he hastened to the City. At what time when he entered his own House, he was asked who he was, and what he would have? He began to be in a deep amaze, till being with much ado known by his younger Brother, who was now grown into years, from him he understood the whole Truth. Upon which his fame flying over all Greece, he was look't upon as one beloved of the Gods¹⁶. [...]"

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 17-18 et p. 66. Translated into English by the author, as the following quotes.

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *The lives, opinions, and remarkable sayings of the most famous ancient philosophers*, London, Brewster, I, 1688, pp. 85-86.

In his sleep, he is said to have acquired a certain amount of knowledge, so much so that when he returned to mankind, he was immediately recognised for his wisdom. Hence the proverbial expression “Epimenidean Sleep” is used when someone sleeps for extremely long time. This episode inspired Goethe to write his poem *The Awakening of Epimenides* (*Des Epimenides Erwachen*, 1815), and we will see later that he also dedicated a poem to the Seven Sleepers.

The myth of Endymion, also from Greek mythology, tells of another long sleep. Depending on the version, Endymion is either King of Elis or a simple shepherd. He was the lover of Selene –or Artemis (who was worshipped in Ephesus)– who put him to sleep in a cave so that he would keep his beauty for ever. In his study on the Seven Sleepers, François Jourdan adds a few details: “A shepherd of rare beauty, he lived on Mount Latmos near Milet (province of Caria), fifty kilometres from Ephesus. He fell asleep with his dog in a cave, sleeping eternally and never growing old, thus preserving his youth and beauty for ever¹⁷.” The presence of the dog, the cave and the proximity of Ephesus immediately bring to mind the myth of our Sleepers.

The same François Jourdan also relates the story of Abimelech, a character present in the third book of Baruch, a Greek Christian apocryphon from the 2nd century. He is said to have undergone “a long sleep of seventy years, which preserved him from the Exile (to Babylon) that took place at the same time¹⁸.” He also mentions the case of another Abimelech who is said to have slept for seventy years during Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem.

Let’s briefly mention the Jewish legend of Honi haMe’aguel, a Jewish scholar of Israel from the 1st century BC, recorded in the Talmud (*Mishna Ta’anit* 3; 8). This man, seeing someone planting a carob tree, pointed out to him that he would never have the usufruct of it since this tree, it is said, does not bear fruit for seventy years. Honi then went on his way. But God put him to sleep for seventy years. Once awake, he came out of his cave and measured the time by seeing the tree laden with fruit. But no one recognises him anymore, so he returns to his cave to die.

¹⁷ Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants*..., p. 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 116.

Theatrical works

Theatrical productions about the Dormants are not abundant. To date, the oldest date back to the 18th century. Anna Tozzi Di Marco places them in the context of a dramatic genre that had been in vogue in Italy since the late Middle Ages, a kind of popular religious theatre, in the vernacular with an apologetic aim. She mentions two works from the 18th century: *I santi sette Dormienti* (1718) by the Cortonese canon Sebastiano Zaccagnini and *Li sette dormienti* (1789) by Luigi Billi¹⁹.

In France, in the second half of the 19th century, there were several children's stories and a few plays published for schoolchildren, making it a particularly popular theme without becoming a theatrical success²⁰. Massignon mentions the satirical drama *The Seven who slept* (1919) by Arthur Kingsley Porter (1883-1933), published in Boston²¹. A specialist in Romanesque architecture and sculpture, this medievalist was influenced and inspired by the four magnificent stained-glass windows of the Rouen Cathedral, which are now part of the collections of major American museums²².

The most important theatrical work is the Arabic play *Ahl al-Kahf* (*The People of the Cave*, 1933)²³. Its author, Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1898-1987), is considered the most important Arab playwright, if not the creator of modern Egyptian theatre. Based on the legend of the Sleepers, he wove a drama in four acts, in which he allowed himself several innovations. Although his characters are presented as Christians, there are several elements of the Qur'anic version, starting with the number of Sleepers (three), the importance of the cave, the name of the dog (Kitmir) and the length of their sleep (309 years). Another variation is that the story is not set in Ephesus but in the city of Tarsus, in Cilicia, not far from which there is a Muslim site dedicated to the People of the Cave. Al-Hakim therefore composed between the Christian and Muslim versions. In his story, there

19 Tozzi Di Marco, *Il mito dei Sette Dormienti...*, 2024.

20 For example: J. M. Bouteloup, *Dormants ou les martyrs d'Éphèse,, mystère en trois actes et un prologue d'après la légende de Jacques de Voragine*, Nemours, Paris, A. Lesot ; A. Pages, *Les sept frères Dormants, drame historique (actes pour jeunes gens)*, Le Mans, Le répertoire des cercles ; *Les sept Dormants, mystère en un acte et deux tableaux, paroles et musique de La Bonne de Beuretour*, Nice, L'Éclaireur, 1910.

21 Arthur Kingsley Porter, *The Seven who slept*, Boston, Marshall Jones Company, 1919.

22 Massignon, *Les Sept Dormants d'Éphèse...*, 1960, pp. 110-111. As I write these lines in 2024, a controversy has broken out in France over the disappearance of these stained glass windows in Rouen at the beginning of the 20th century.

23 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *The People of the Cave*, Cairo, Elias Modern Publishing House & Co., 1989. See Bruce Fudge, *The Men of the Cave: Tafsīr, Tragedy and Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm*, "Arabica", 54, 1, 2007, pp. 67-93

are only three Sleepers: two nobles from the court of Diocletian (and no longer Decius), plus a shepherd and his dog. Once awake, one of them leaves for the city. But after warning his companions, all three set off for Tarsus. Then, realising that their world has disappeared, two of them return to their cave, while the last one chooses to stay with Priska, the king's daughter, who turns out to be a lookalike of his beloved of old. Al-Hakim has therefore included this love story to lengthen the narrative and spice up its dramatic dimension. Finally, the Companions of the Cave die again. It should be noted that one of them dies by losing his faith, which is the opposite of the legend's original purpose. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau comments: "The legend now reflects the eschatological doubts of its new audiences²⁴." The other Sleepers choose to abandon themselves to God, because even if the population has become religious (i.e. Muslim), they can no longer find their time or their place. This play has been a great success in several Arabic-speaking countries²⁵. Massignon was already familiar with it in 1938, when he quoted it in his first lecture on the Seven Sleepers at the Congress of Orientalists in Brussels²⁶. It is a famous example of a contemporary adaptation of the myth, in its Christian and Muslim versions²⁷.

Literary works

Many more literary adaptations feature the Seven Sleepers, each in its own way. Some are directly inspired by the great founding stories already mentioned (and which are therefore not considered here).

In 1869, the famous American writer, essayist and humourist Mark Twain (1835-1910) published *The Innocents Abroad*²⁸. In this novel, the young hero Samuel Clemens is asked by a newspaper to accompany the first tourist trip organised from America through old Europe, particularly the Mediterranean. The itinerary takes in Ephesus, and the author takes the liberty of telling the story of the Seven Sleepers in his own way, with the humour and offbeat outlook of a man from the New World.

24 Dunn-Lardeau, *Le Voyage imaginaire dans le temps...*, p. 53.

25 The play has been studied by several generations of students in many Arab countries. For example, it probably influenced the name of the theatre company *Ahl al-Kahf* directed by Toufik Kheznadar in Constantine (Algeria) in the 1950s.

26 Louis Massignon, *Recherches sur la valeur eschatologique de la légende des Sept Dormants chez les Musulmans* [Research into the eschatological value of the Seven Sleepers' Legend among Muslims], "Bulletin des Amis de Louis Massignon", 16, 2004, pp. 12-16.

27 In 2023, an Egyptian movie based on this play has been shot in Egypt and Morocco (see below).

28 Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad or The New Pilgrim's Progress*, American Publishing Company, 1869.

In 1905, the now forgotten French writer Jules Lemaître (1853-1914) published *La seconde vie des Sept Dormants*²⁹. Based on Jacobus de Voragine's version of *The Golden Legend*, he recounts their story with a clearly hagiographic intention, imagining the events that took place after their awakening in a world that had become Christian. Massignon does not seem to have known this version, even though he was a contemporary of it. However, a radio adaptation was broadcast on the national airwaves in 1959, at a time when the theme of the Seven Sleepers was well known thanks to the pilgrimage in Brittany. Nor did Massignon know the story by another contemporary, the Italian writer Nino Savarese (1882-1945), who published *I sette dormienti* (1922) in the literary journal *Rassegna Italiana*³⁰. Notoriously, there is also a dog in the story, named Kitmir, the name retained from the Qur'anic tradition.

In 1974, the French-speaking Swiss writer Jacques Mercanton (1910-1996) published the novel *L'été des Sept Dormants*³¹. It was through Louis Massignon that he learned of this legend. This former secretary of James Joyce met the French islamologist through the Protestant pastor Maurice Zundel. This was in 1955, at the height of Massignon's Ephesian period, and the two men were to maintain a rich correspondence³². The plot of this novel takes place in Germany, not far from the Chapel of the Seven Sleepers in Rothhof (Bavaria), which Massignon must have told him about. The story revolves around young teenagers in a house lost in the middle of deep forests, on a spiritual quest and a quest for sexual identity. Mercanton sprinkles a few Qur'anic (the divine rocking of the Sleepers) and Christian (the Dormition of the Virgin) references into the story, which he also takes from his readings of Massignon.

The short story *The Legend of the Sleepers* (1983)³³ by the Serbo-Croatian writer Danilo Kiš (1935-1989) offers the subjective point of view of one of the Sleepers as he wakes up. According to Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, the author "demonstrates his sensitivity to the Western and Qur'anic traditions

29 Jules Lemaître, *La seconde vie des Sept Dormants* [The second life of the Seven Sleepers], *En marge des vieux livres*, Paris, Société française d'imprimerie et de librairie, 1905.

30 Nino Savarese, *I sette dormienti* [The Seven Sleepers], in "Rassegna Italiana", Rome, September-October 1922, pp. 586-591. I thank Anna Tozzi for bringing this reference to my attention.

31 Jacques Mercanton, *L'été des Sept Dormants* [Summer of the Seven Sleepers], L'Âge d'Homme, 1980 (1974).

32 Dunn-Lardeau notes that Massignon "was one of the writers Jacques Mercanton admired most", *Le Voyage imaginaire dans le temps...*, p. 57.

33 Danilo Kiš, *The Legend of the Sleepers*, London, Penguin Modern, 2018 (1983).

of the Seven Sleepers, which he explores in a lyrical prose that is as spellbinding as it is expressive³⁴.” The son of a Montenegrin mother and a Hungarian-speaking Jewish father, he uses several Qur’anic elements: the three Sleepers, the 309-year sleep, the divine rocking, the name of the dog (“Qitmīr”). But the characters are indeed Christians. The setting is the same as that of Tawfiq Al-Hakim, from whom Danilo Kiš also borrowed the character of Priska. Moreover, his main character is also plagued by metaphysical doubts (like one of the Sleepers directed by Al-Hakim), and Brenda Dunn-Lardeau concludes: “Kiš shatters the certainties of the original story, replacing them with the doubts and fleeting flashes of hope of modern man³⁵.”

In 1996, Italian writer and director Andrea Camilleri (1925-2019) penned the crime novel *Il Cane di Terracotta*, translated into English under the title *The Terracotta Dog*³⁶. Here, the story is not about the Sleepers, but a detective mystery set in Sicily. The investigators discover a cave containing the bodies of two lovers in each other’s arms, with a terracotta dog at their feet, a bowl full of 1940s coins and a clay jug. One thing leads to another and Superintendent Montalbano, Camilleri’s hero, delves into the Christian and Muslim versions of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, and ends up arresting someone who had once written a research paper on them. Note that the writer introduces his character to the play by Tawfiq Al-Hakim, taking the liberty of “cleverly rewriting [the] sura” in the course of a dialogue, as Brenda Dunn-Lardeau puts it³⁷. Moreover, it was through the myth revisited by the Egyptian playwright that Camilleri’s idea for a novel was born, as he himself writes: “The idea of writing this story came to me while, as a courtesy to two Egyptian student directors, we were studying Tawfiq Al-Hakim’s *People of the Cave* in class.”

In 1999, the French author Alain Santacreu published the esoteric novel *Les Sept Fils du Derviche*³⁸, a title taken from a lost orientalist project by Gustave Flaubert. In a very personal and openly occultist reinterpretation, this literature teacher and theatre director weaves a mysterious initiatory story between Toulouse, Istanbul and Minor Asia. He sets the scene for two

34 Dunn-Lardeau, *Le Voyage imaginaire dans le temps...*, p. 53.

35 Ibid., p. 56.

36 Andrea Camilleri, *Il cane di terracotta* [The Terracotta Dog], Palermo, Sellerio, 1996 ; translated in English in 2002 by Stephen Sartarelli.

37 Dunn-Lardeau B., *Le Voyage imaginaire...*, pp. 60-61.

38 Alain Santacreu, *Les Sept Fils du Derviche* [The Seven Sons of the Dervish], Helette, Editions Curutchet, 1999.

caverns of the Seven Sleepers, one in Turkey and the other in “a certain place in France”, without revealing the location. The story concludes with an eschatological horizon that leads to the double ritual suicide/sacrifice of the two main characters.

In a completely different style, the novel *Je t'attends à Damas. Récit en écho à la légende des Sept Dormants* (2001) tells a very different story:

“A young film-maker wants to prove himself with a screenplay combining poetry, imagination and spirituality. He remembers a pilgrimage he went on as a child near Perros-Guirec [in Brittany]: the chapel built on an old dolmen, the big fire (‘tandad’), after Saturday evening mass. He decides to rediscover this pilgrimage and dreams of producing, scouting, extras, special places... Will he succeed?³⁹”

This story is interesting because it is rooted in Brittany, in the Christian-Muslim pilgrimage of the Sept-Saints founded by Massignon. A graduate of the École du Louvre, the author discovered the legend of the Sleepers through Muslim miniatures of the Ashab Al-Kahf.

In the Muslim world, the Sleepers are sometimes summoned freely, in one form or another. In 1988, a Moroccan author and ethnographer, Abdelkader Mana, established a metaphorical link between the People of the Cave of the Qur'an and a confraternity Sufi group from southern Morocco, the Regragas, known for having had seven founding Christian saints. This was an analogy made by the author and not by the members of this maraboutic confederation⁴⁰. A few years later, in 1994, another Moroccan author, Mustapha Akhmis, identified the Sleepers with another group of seven saints, those of Marrakech⁴¹. This author, who presents himself as an ethnologist, travels the city in search of its seven saints. However, the title is “misleading”, as it refers neither to the Seven Sleepers nor to the Ahl al-Kahf. This case is interesting because it shows how identification can be made at any time. The author gives no explanation for the choice of such a title.

In 2019, French writer Xavier Accart publishes *Le Dormant d'Éphèse*⁴², the story of a Breton man forced into a 40-year exile in 1903, leading him

39 Françoise Legré-Zaidline F., *Je t'attends à Damas. Récit en écho à la légende des Sept Dormants* [Waiting for you in Damascus. A story echoing the legend of the Seven Sleepers], Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001.

40 Abdelkader Mana, *Les Regraga. La Fiancée de l'eau et les gens de la caverne* [The Regraga. The Water Bride and the People of the Cave], Casablanca, Eddif Maroc, 1988.

41 Mustapha Akhmis, *Les Sept Dormants de Marrakech ou itinéraire fétiche* [The Seven Sleepers of Marrakech or a fetish itinerary], Casablanca, Dar Khotba, 1994.

42 Xavier Accart, *Le Dormant d'Éphèse*, Paris, Tallandier, 2019.

to Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Morocco... It is this long exile that recalls the long sleep of the Ephesians⁴³. Also in 2019, Loïk Le Floch-Prigent has written a thriller, *Le silence des Dolmens*, which begins in July 1962, in the hamlet of Les Sept-Saints, on the site of the Muslim-Christian pilgrimage. In this fictional account, the author recounts the creation of this event by Louis Massignon, before a detective story develops⁴⁴... Recently, Anna Tozzi Di Marco reported on the historical thriller *Il segreto del mercante di libri* (2020) by Italian author Marcello Simoni⁴⁵. In 1234, the hero sets off from Sicily to Spain in search of the mysterious Cave of the Seven Sleepers, hoping to find the key to immortality.

In addition, there are many literary works based on long slumbers, but without any reference to the Seven Sleepers⁴⁶. In other cases, it is the name or the toponym of the Seven Sleepers that is used, without any direct connection with the myth we are dealing with here⁴⁷.

With this in mind, let's mention a number of re-uses in children's literature, particularly Anglo-Saxon, and in comics. Susan Cooper's series *The Dark Is Rising* delves into Celtic and Arthurian mythology, as the Sleeping Ones are former knights of King Arthur who are awakened by a divine harp to fight a final battle, a barely concealed allusion to the Last Judgement. Another author, Gilbert Morris, has written the *Seven Sleepers Series*, featuring the adventures of seven characters in a post-apocalyptic world who must also wake up to fight evil.

On the comics front, a book by Sebastiano Ruiz Mignone entitled *Les sept dormants d'or* (2008) tells the story of pirates on a quest for seven

43 The author is well acquainted with Massignon's work and with the Seven Sleepers pilgrimage in Brittany, to which he devoted a chapter in his last book: Xavier Accart, *Tro Breiz, ma Bretagne intérieure* [Tro Breiz, my inner Brittany], Paris, Salvatore, 2023

44 Loïk Le Floch-Prigent. *Le silence des Dolmens* [The silence of the dolmens], Clermont-Ferrand, Ed. De Borée, 2019.

45 Marcello Simoni, *Il segreto del mercante di libri* [The book seller's secret], Rome, Newton Compton Editori, 2020. See Anna Tozzi Di Marco, *Il mito dei Sette Dormienti...*, 2024.

46 For example, *Rip Van Winkle* (1819) by the American writer Washington Irving (1782-1859), in which the hero falls asleep before the American War of Independence, under the reign of George III, and wakes up twenty years later under the presidency of George Washington; or *The sleeper awakes* (1910) by Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), which tells the story of a man waking up after a sleep of 203 years in the totally transformed city of London. The novel *Amours et aventures de Sindbad le Marin* (2010) by Algerian author Salim Bachi features a mysterious character, the Sleeper, who arrives in the port of Algiers. Armed with an old French passport, he knows nothing of the conflicts that followed independence in 1962, as if waking from amnesia or a long sleep.

47 In Francis Beeding's spy novel *The Seven Sleepers* (1925), the "sleepers" refer to a special German intelligence unit. There's also the crime novel *La Plage des Sept Dormants* (2022) by Cyril Dussuchaud, who created this toponym as the setting for the plot, and Gaël Aymon's dystopian story *La Planète des 7 Dormants* (2018), which recounts the adventures of a crew stranded in an unknown world.

solid gold statues. Another example: the comic strip by Daniel Bardet and Brice Goepfert: *Les 7 dormants* (2008), the penultimate in the series *Les chemins de Malefosse*, set in the heart of the 16th century. Jonathan Munoz also penned the comic *Les dormants* (2013), which tells the story of an insomniac with amnesia.

Folk tales

The myth of the Sleepers has undoubtedly influenced a number of folk and popular tales. Without explicitly referring to the Ephesian legend, the recurrence of long sleeps induced by a spell, and whose awakening serves as a happy ending, is particularly frequent, so much so that Brenda Dunn-Lardeau does not hesitate to speak of its “prodigious influence throughout Celtic and Irish stories, as well as in Arabic literature, in countless fairy tales and in the tales of the North American Indians⁴⁸.” Among the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales are *Die drei (trei) Telle*, which seems to go back to the legend of the Seven Sleepers, or *Die Sieben Schlafenden Männer in der Höhle*, taken from Paul the Deacon, who wrote a version of the Seven Sleepers in the 8th century ; or the famous story of Snow White, in which Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) increased the number of dwarves (beings from Germanic mythology living underground) to seven, no doubt under the influence of the Christian legend.

The famous *Sleeping Beauty*, by Charles Perrault (1628-1703), who wakes up after sleeping for a hundred years, is even more significant. Indeed, as François Jourdan points out, “the parallel with the Seven Sleepers is so striking that the publisher of 1883 published with this tale the French text of the Seven Sleepers from the Latin *Golden Legend*⁴⁹.” He also mentions several versions of the same tale, notably in operas and ballets (Tchaikovsky), to which we could add the famous animated film by Walt Disney. All in all, we can see how a founding and legendary tale is propagated and distorted as it is adapted and transformed by the arts.

Poetic works

The poetic field is also significant in this study, which focuses on artistic reinterpretations of the Seven Sleepers myth. Going back to sources older than the contemporary period proves instructive. In a recent chapter by Anna Tozzi Di Marco⁵⁰, I learned of two works that had already escaped

48 Dunn-Lardeau, *Le Voyage imaginaire...*, p. 63. She refers to Stith Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1966 (1922).

49 Jourdan, *La tradition des Sept Dormants...*, p. 115.

50 Tozzi Di Marco, *Il mito dei Sette Dormienti...*, 2024.

Louis Massignon's attention.

One is the first French version of the myth, a long poem of 1800 verses composed around 1200 by the Anglo-Norman poet Chardri (late 12th - early 13th century): *La vie des set dormanz*⁵¹. Brian Merrilees' remarkable edition suggests that this is above all "a free and intelligent adaptation. Chardri, an original mind, took full advantage of the dramatic possibilities of the legend and, by means of skilful interpolations, produced a colourful and lively narrative⁵²".

The other poem is *The Holy Seven Youth* (1925), by the Greek Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis (1863-1933), also known in English as Constantine P. Cavafy. Little recognised in his day, he is now considered one of the greatest Greek poets of the 20th century. When he died, the drafts of thirty unfinished poems were found, including the poem about the Seven Sleepers. Here are the last two stanzas:

*And the Holy Seven Youths rejoiced
for this beautiful world, and Christian,
sanctified with churches, and crosses.
But with everything that was so different,
and all that they had to learn and say,
(and such strong joy perhaps exhausts also)
the Holy Seven Youths quickly grew tired,
for they came from another world, nearly two centuries prior;
and they became sleepy amid conversation
and their holy eyes shut.*

In the course of my work, I identified other poetic references. In one of his first poems, *The good-morrow*, the English poet John Donne (1572-1631) mentions the Seven Sleepers, but in a romantic sense:

*I wonder, by my troth, what you and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then,
But sucked on country pleasures, childishy?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,*

51 Brian S. Merrilees (éd.), "*La Vie des set dormanz*" by Chardri, London, Anglo-Norman text society, 1977.

52 Jean-Pierre Perrot, Brian S. Merrilees, éd. "*La vie des set dormanz*" by Chardri, in "*Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*", 102, 1983, p. 194.

*Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee. [...]*⁵³

It is a love poem, in which the author evokes the time of youth when the two lovers only “sniffed” each other in the lair of the Seven Sleepers before experiencing true passion. So it’s just an allusion, with no mention of religion or resurrection, but rather of more frivolous matters.

Two centuries later, in his *West-Eastern Divan* (1819), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832) wrote the following poem, entitled *The Seven Sleepers*:

*[...] The tender youths light-sandalled gaily-vested,
Found reception of a shepherd,
Who concealed them in a cavern,
With himself, their entertainer.
Nor his dog would quit the shepherd,
Chased away his fore-foot broken,
Yet he pressed towards his master,
Joined them hidden in the cavern,
Joined the men beloved of Slumber. [...]*⁵⁴

It is indeed the Ephesian legend that Goethe takes up in this collection, which draws heavily on Persian poetry, of which he was a great admirer.⁵⁵ According to the recent interpretation of two Italian authors, Goethe was an Islamophile, knew the Qur'an and had studied Arabic. Even if he does not mention it, he was obviously aware of the dual version – Christian and Muslim – of this story, as is shown by the reference to the dog, which is an Islamic marker. Without calling this into question, it is certain that he was not unaware of the dual –Christian and Muslim– version of this story, which is doubly attested to by the explicit reference to the divine cradling of the bodies of the sleepers (as in verse 18 of Sura 18) and the presence of the dog, which is an Islamic marker. In his poem, the six Ephesians are joined by a shepherd and his dog. Anna Tozzi Di Marco sees this poem as a “synthesis” of the Christian and Muslim versions, but that would mean that Goethe knew them all, which is unlikely. On the other hand, in my opinion it shows a syncretic process that corresponds to the free interpretation of artists.

53 John Donne, *Songs and Sonnets*, Cambridge, London, Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 227.

54 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *West-Eastern Divan*, London and Toronto, Dent & Sons, 1914, pp. 190-192.

55 Francesca Bocca-Alda, Pietrangelo Buttafuoco, *Sous ses pas naissent les fleurs, Goethe sur le chemin de l'islam* [Flowers bloom in his footsteps, Goethe on the road to Islam], Paris, Editions Fenêtres, 2023. The original Italian work is *Sotto il suo passo nascono i Fiori. Goethe e l'Islam*, Milan, La Nave di Teseo, 2019.

Another poem written in the second half of the 20th century is directly linked to Massignon's works: *The Seven Sleepers*, by the American Herbert Mason (1932-2017). Mason was a student of Massignon's and became close to him, taking part in the Christian-Muslim pilgrimage in 1959. Then he composed the following poem:

*When the world was made
The sky, the sea, the land, the fire,
So also when this cave created
Where the Companions sleep.*

*Seven candles are set in a boat called Abandonment in God
In witness that this seven hearts
Refuse idolatry to Decius*

*They sleep in a circle of darkness
Until it is time to walk,
And then their faces glow like roses
Drawn to an opening for light.*

*When the world was made
The sky, the sea, the land, the fire,
So also was this cave created
Where the Companions sleep*⁵⁶.

In its confidential publication, a note specifies the author's three influences: "Based on Jacobus di Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, a Breton Gwerz [hymn], and Sura 18 of the Qur'an." These verses are therefore "Massignonian" and directly echo the pilgrimage, since the first and last stanzas are directly inspired by the traditional Breton hymn of the Sept-Saints: "You may ask me / when and how it (the chapel) was built; / and I answer: that I believe that when the world was created, / the sky, the sea, the earth, it was also built⁵⁷..." Herbert Mason's interest in the Seven Sleepers and this pilgrimage can only be understood through his loyalty to Massignon. He later became a professor in the United States and translated the Massignon masterpiece *La Passion de Hallâj* into English⁵⁸.

56 Herbert Mason, *The Seven Sleepers*, in "Bulletin de l'association des Amis de Louis Massignon", 8, 1999, p. 50.

57 Louis Massignon, *La crypte-dolmen des VII Saints Dormants d'Éphèse au Stiffel (en Plouaret, puis Vieux-Marché)* [The crypt-dolmen of the VII Sleeping Saints of Ephesus at Le Stiffel (in Plouaret, then Vieux-Marché)], "Extrait des Mémoires de la Société d'Émulation des Côtes-du-Nord", Les Presses Bretonnes, Saint-Brieuc, 1992 (1958), p. 17.

58 Massignon, *The Passion of Hallâj*..., 1982.

The French-Lebanese poet and diplomat Salah Stétié (1928-2020) has devoted several essays to the Seven Sleepers. This interest stems from the fact that he was also a former student of Massignon. In 1993, he published *Rimbaud, le huitième dormant*, an essay that is anything but a new biography. In preamble, he writes:

“At first I had wanted to title this essay: *Rimbaud, perhaps...* ‘The Eighth Sleeper’, in reference to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, stubborn young men guided by the Christ Star of the East, then powerful metaphysical sleepers and, equally, people of the Qur’anic cave who inhabited the nocturnal underside of the world only to better inhabit, when the day came, the eternal land of air - this title mysteriously imposed itself on me⁵⁹.”

In fact, Salah Stétié had already compared Rimbaud and the Sleepers in a first essay published in 1991⁶⁰. He modified it and added a documentary dossier, resulting in *Passage des Dormants* in 1995⁶¹. The Lebanese essayist then took a closer look at the Ephesians and their story, which he described as a “governing myth”, in the sense that it would pretend to universality. For him, the Sleepers “are hard-headed men of refusal. They do not agree to obey authority simply because it is authority and speaks loud and clear. They reject the principle of authority, at the risk, if need be, of their lives. They reject ready-made ideas, which are also idols [...]”. Here are a few more of the poet’s powerful lines:

“By their precipitous flight in the face of what Baudelaire would one day call ‘the stupidity in the bull’s forehead’, the seven marvellous adolescents, the *fitya* as the Qur’an says [...] and who will naturally take their place without the Golden Legend, bear witness and prove, in their own way, that the divine deposit, whatever type of divine one refers to, it is in the initial purity of the still intact being that it must be sought.”

The Christian-Muslim dimension is fundamental to him, so he does not hesitate to quote verses from Sura 18 or to think of the Qur’anic dog as “perhaps an angel, an archangel⁶²”. The depth of his approach is very much in the Massignonian tradition, where mysticism rhymes with poetry. As Brenda Dunn-Lardeau observes again:

“Salah Stétié’s essay thus offers, in the wake of Louis Massignon, a poetic and mystical meditation on the meaning of the myth and symbolism of the Seven Sleepers, each time linking the elements to ancient, Christian, Islamic and

59 Salah Stétié, *Rimbaud, le huitième dormant* [Rimbaud, the eighth Sleeper], Fata Morgana, 1993, p. 11.

60 Salah Stétié, *Les Sept Dormants au péril de la poésie* [The Seven Sleepers at the peril of poetry], Leuvense Schrijversaktie, 1991.

61 Stétié, *Passage des Dormants...*, pp. 25-73.

62 Ibid., p. 27.

Eastern philosophical, literary or mythological translations [...]”⁶³.

Let’s add three occurrences found recently: *The Seven Sleepers and Other Poems* (1944) by the American poet Mark Van Doren (1894-1972), a contemporary of Massignon’s but they did not know each other: “Then, orient, the islands, and at last, The cave, the seven sleepers. Who will rise and sing to you in numbers till you know White magic. Which remember. Do you hear⁶⁴?”

The second is *The Vision of the Seven Sleepers* (1979) by the Canadian Susan McCaslin, composed of seven long poems based on the hypothetical dreams of the Sleepers during their long sleep of here a hundred years. The third is *De zeven slapers* (1991) by Anton van Wilderode, a Dutch-speaking Belgian poet⁶⁵.

In January 2011, I came across the poem *La chasse au requin (The Shark Hunt)* by Tunisian poet Mohsen Lihidheb, which offers a political re-reading of the myth of the Seven Sleepers by depicting fishermen returning from the high seas to find their town transformed after the departure of the tyrant of the legend, none other than former Tunisian President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. Here, myth is freely invoked at the start of what would become known as the Jasmine Revolution.

More recently, the Tunisian poet Tahar Bekri (1951-) wrote this poem in the wake of the deaths of seven aid workers working for the World Central Kitchen NGO, on 1 April 2024 in Gaza. Here too he evokes explicitly the Seven Sleepers:

*Gaza Ils étaient sept
Dans trois voitures
Ils apportaient de la nourriture [...]
Ils étaient sept
Saints tués par des drones
Sept dormants d’Ephèse
Sans grotte la caméra témoin de la zone
Morts sous l’œil du cyclone
Ils étaient sept
A la solidarité humaine
Qui voulaient sauver des frères
ils furent abattus par la haine*

63 Dunn-Lardeau, *Le Voyage imaginaire dans le temps...*, p. 59.

64 Mark Van Doren, *The Seven Sleepers and Other Poems*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1944.

65 Anton van Wilderode, *Les Sept dormants / De Zeven slapers*, Louvain, Leuvense Schrijversaktie / Cahiers de Louvain, 1991.

*Brûlés par les maîtres de la poussière*⁶⁶

Plastic arts and contemporary art installations

The plastic arts are also concerned. Without going back to the many ancient pictorial productions (illuminations, miniatures, paintings, icons) that punctuate the history of art, I am focusing on “awakenings” dating from the end of the 20th century.

The first is particularly relevant because it was born of a clear Christian-Muslim intention. It concerns the series of frescoes painted in 1993 by the Italian painter Duccio Guidotti (1920-2008) at the monastery of Mar Mûsa al-Habashi in Syria. This work was commissioned by the Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio (1954-?), who was a spiritual disciple of Massignon⁶⁷. The theme of the Seven Sleepers was already very present in this monastery, which was refounded in 1983 and dedicated to Abrahamic hospitality and Christian-Muslim dialogue. In an ancient rock cistern in the monastery, the artist pictorially retraced the story of the Seven Sleepers, punctuated by a text in Arabic “that a Christian can read and a Muslim can read”, according to Paolo Dall'Oglio. What's more, he explained to me on site in 2010 that Muslims came to pay their respects in this singular space. Here, contemporary art has served to encourage the umpteenth relocation of the myth of the Seven Sleepers. (see Fig.02).



Fig. 02 Duccio Guidotti, Seven Sleepers Frescoes, Mar Mûsa Monastery, Syria, 1993 © Manoël Pénicaud

66 Bkz. <https://www.leaders.com.tn/article/35772-un-poeme-tahar-bekri-gaza-ils-etaient-sept>

67 Manoël Pénicaud, *Autres réveils des Sept Dormants* [Other reawakenings of the Seven Sleepers: case study in the Mediterranean], in “Revue science and Video. Des écritures multimédia en sciences humaines”, 4, 2013, <http://scienceandvideo.mms.h.univ-aix.fr/numeros/4/Pages/5.aspx>.

We should add that it was also in response to the Christia-Muslim vocation of this Islamophile priest that the Syrian iconographer Ossama Mossleh wrote a Christian icon of the Sleepers, incorporating a dog in front of their cave, an innovation that takes up an emblematic marker from the Qur’anic narrative (see Fig. 03).

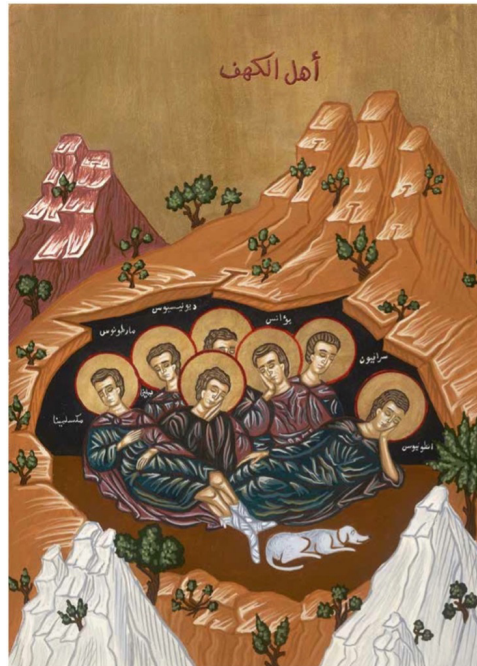


Fig. 03 Ossama Mossleh, Icon of the Seven Sleepers, 2010. Private collection.

The Sleepers have also resurfaced in the identification established with the seven monks of Tibhirine (Algeria), tragically murdered in May 1996 and beatified in 2018 in Oran. In 2004, the Franco-Algerian visual artist Rachid Koraïchi published a beautiful book entitled *Les Sept Dormants*. *Sept livres en hommage aux sept moines de Tibhirine*, comprising calligraphy and texts by seven different authors⁶⁸. The book is presented as a humanist testimony against religious intolerance, but the connection with the Sleepers is not developed. One can read: “The title ‘Les 7 Dormants’ refers to a popular Arab tale. It evokes withdrawal from daily life, sleep and resurrection”⁶⁹.

68 Rachid Koraïchi, *Les Sept Dormants, sept livres en hommage aux sept moines de Tibhirine* [The Seven Sleepers, seven books in tribute to the seven monks of Tibhirine], Arles, Actes Sud, 2004. On the identification with the monks of Tibhirine, see Pénicaud, *Le réveil des Sept Dormants...*, pp. 216 et 414.

69 Ibid., p. 9.

In the same year, the Tunisian artist Abdallah Akar produced another landmark work. Born in southern Tunisia in 1952, this artist has been familiar with the story of the Sleepers since childhood, thanks to his proximity to the Ahl al-Kahf Chenini site⁷⁰. In this work, he calligraphies on seven laminated glass steles an extract from sura Al-Kahf about the long sleep of persecuted young believers. It is worth noting that it was during the Seven Sleepers pilgrimage in Brittany that he was inspired to create this work. In 2013, he has created a new adaptation, calligraphing the same text on seven large tarlatan veils (see Fig. 04)⁷¹.



Fig. 04 *Les 7 Dormants* (2013), installation of seven banners by Abdallah Akar in Paris, 2017 © M. Pénicaud

In 2005, Egyptian artist Wael Shawky filmed himself reciting the same sura in an Istanbul supermarket. Built around a long tracking shot, *The Cave* (12 min) is an opportunity for him to talk about the economic exile of poor Muslim migrants in the age of consumer society⁷². Here, the interpretation is highly political.

70 Virginie Prevost, *Les Sept Dormants dans le Sud tunisien : de la légende au culte vivant* [The Seven Sleeper in southern Tunisia: from legend to living cult], in "Revue de l'histoire des religions", 1, 2020, pp. 5-36.

71 These two works have been exhibited at the Mucem in Marseille, the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris, as part of the *Lieux saints partagés / Shared Sacred Sites* exhibition (2015-2017).

72 Jacques Sapiega, *Scènes de croisades. Cabaret Crusades. The path to Cairo de Wael Shawky* [Scenes from the Crusades. Cabaret Crusades. The path to Cairo by Wael Shawky], Aix-en-Provence, PUP, 2013, pp. 32-33

At the end of the 2000s in Tunisia, a collective of young Tunisian artists and activists took the name Ahl al-Kahf. This name evoked the resistance and clandestinity under which they produced their protest Street Art in the public space, under the regime of President Ben Ali, like the Sleepers hiding in their cave, without denying their values. From then on, this initiative was a political initiative, not a religious or inter-religious one. This political awakening of the Sleepers can now be seen as one of the harbingers of the Jasmine Revolution in January 2011⁷³.

In 2014, the cultural association “La Chapelle des Sept Dormants” was founded in Autun, Burgundy (France). Shortly afterwards, those in charge took over a “deculturalised chapel-laboratory” to organise a Biennial of Sacred Art, bringing together poets, writers and visual artists⁷⁴. Their approach is one of inter-spiritual openness and universality, rather than a strictly religious one. The organiser is fascinated by the Seven Sleepers and has great admiration for Massignon. In 2018, he organised the conference “Les Sept Dormants de la Caverne d’Orient & d’Occident”, whose poster was created by a new work by Rachid Koraïchi (already mentioned). The following year, he will be striking to find the Seven Sleepers in the work *Quarterly Myth* (2019) by Thai Buddhist artist Pannaphan Yodmanee at the Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art. In 2023, I personally had the opportunity to present my own ethno-photographic work on *La Méditerranée des Sept Dormants* at the Autun Biennial, where I discovered Bernard Husson’s stone sculpture *Nef des Sept Dormants* (2023). Such artwork is remarkable because it features their dog at the prow of their boat. This work was commissioned for the Biennial, with a Christian-Muslim and Massignonian intention.

We could also mention the reinterpretation of the Seven Sleepers by visual artist Adel Abdessemed in his work *Moutarde* (2018), exhibited in France. This installation shows a noisy clockwork mechanism that does not disturb seven cats and the dog (taxidermised) lying or sleeping on the floor.

Last but not least, as a resident of the village of Vieux-Marché (Brittany), where the theme of the seven saints is very present, the French painter Laurence Sibille created the painting *Les Sept Dormants* in 2021⁷⁵. This painting (acrylic on canvas) depicts the seven bodies haloed and sleeping

73 The 2017 edition featured the aforementioned poet Salah Stétié.

74 The 2017 edition featured the aforementioned poet Salah Stétié.

75 This painting has been used as the cover for the collective book *Les dormants d’Éphèse...*, 2024.

one on top of the other, while their dog watches, eyes open, over their divine sleep. The painting was solemnly blessed during the Christian-Muslim pilgrimage on 24 July 2021. Since then, it has hung in the little chapel of the Sept-Saints (see Fig. 01).

Lastly, we should also mention a sculpture commissioned by the “Sources des Sept Dormants” association in Brittany, still in the context of the Christian-Muslim pilgrimage where, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the event, the artist-sculptor and stonemason David Puech designed a monument dedicated to Louis Massignon and the Seven Sleepers. This sculpture is a reproduction of both sides of a commemorative bronze medal produced by the Monnaie de Paris in 1975 and designed by the Franco-Hungarian artist William Schiffer (1920-2007). On one side is the effigy of Massignon, slightly in relief, and on the other are the bodies of the seven sleeping saints. This new bronze work has been set on a granite rock in the Place Louis Massignon in Vieux-Marché.

Musical works

The miraculous sleep of the young Ephesians has inspired a few rare musicians. The work of Italian musicologist Fabrizio Florian has revealed the existence of a little-known work by the German composer Carl Loewe (1796-1869). An organist, singer, theology graduate and choirmaster of the Jakobikirche Church in Szczecin, he wrote the oratorio *Die sieben Schläfer* (1835) for solo choir and orchestra, divided into three parts and based on a libretto by the poet and historian Ludwig Giesebrecht (1792-1873). The work recounts the reopening of the walled cave to bury the seven lost ancestors. But the shepherds who knock down the wall are surprised to hear voices coming from the cave, those of the sleepers awakened by the light of day. What follows is a series of events that Florian rightly describes as “transformations” to evoke situations and feelings characteristic of the Romantic movement⁷⁶.

In the 1950s, the composer Paul Le Flem (1881-1984), who lived near the Christian-Islamic pilgrimage of the Seven Saints, planned to write a cantata on the Seven Sleepers. He even kept up a correspondence with Massignon, but was never able to create such a work.

More recently, Dominique Joubert composed an *Oratorio des Sept Dormants* (2009), to a libretto by Yves Letort based on the text *Sept Stèles*

⁷⁶ Fabrizio Florian, *Carl Loewe e l'oratorio Die sieben Schläfer*, in Tozzi Di Marco, *Agiografia e culto dei Sette Dormienti...*, pp. 189-200.

pour les Sept Dormants by Sylvie Germain⁷⁷. But once again, despite its name, this work is in fact a tribute to the monks of Tibhirine. So we see a text already dedicated to the seven Trappists serving as the basis for this musical composition, and not the original story of the Sleepers. However, the first concerts (2009) followed meetings on the dialogue of cultures and religions.

In a completely different vein, there are other references, such as the song *Seven Sleepers Den* (1970) by the American singer-songwriter Garland Jeffreys; the album *Seven sleepers* (2006) by the indie rock band Feeder (Wales); or an American hard-rock outfit called *Awake the seven sleepers*. Without having investigated in depth, it seems that it is above all the name of the Seven Sleepers that is popular in these cases.

Created in 2011, the music and puppet show *Les sept dormants* is the fruit of a Franco-Indonesian collaboration between two groups of musicians, Léda Atomica Music (Marseille) and Gayam 16 (Yogyakarta), and is presented as a “hybrid creation [...] at the crossroads of styles and instrumental mixes (invented instruments, traditional instruments, gamelan, experimental lutheries) with contributions from voice, dance, video, theatre and puppets.” The plan is for each artist to take a sleeper’s dream and propose it to his or her companions.

In 2022, the live show *Sept Dormants*, created at the Abbaye Royaumont (France), brought this myth back to life, through the creation of composer and guitarist Camel Zekri, with dancer Jean-Paul Mehansio of Ivorian origin. The interreligious dimension is clearly underlined in the presentation: “Christians and Muslims have long shared this myth, which evokes life, death and eternity.”

Finally, for the 70th anniversary of the Breton Christian-Muslim pilgrimage in 2024, the “Sources des Sept Dormants” association has produced recordings of the Seven Saints hymn (Gwerz) in Breton and Sura 18 in Arabic, and *vice versa*, which is highly original. This recording is accompanied by a book presenting the Sleepers and this unusual pilgrimage to the general public⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ Sylvie Germain, *Sept Stèles pour les Sept Dormants* [Seven Steles for the Seven Sleepers], in Rachid Koraïchi, *Les Sept Dormants...*, pp. 233-295

⁷⁸ *Les dormants d'Éphèse, au Vieux-Marché...*, 2024.

Audiovisual works

In the cinema, the theme of the long sleeps is more a vehicle for time travel, which is popular in futuristic and science fiction films. Although not part of this genre, some films are directly or indirectly inspired by the story of the Sleeping Ones.

The film *Youcef ou la légende du septième dormant* (1993) by Algerian director Mohamed Chouikh is freely inspired by the myth of the Sleepers. It tells the story of a young combatant of the Front National de Libération (FLN), seriously wounded in 1960, who escapes thirty years later from a psychiatric hospital, convinced that he is still a prisoner of the French army. Through this journey through time, this work tackles the difficult issues of contemporary Algeria.

Several adaptations, including cartoons, of the Qur'anic version of the miracle of the People of the Cave can be found on the Internet. These include historical reconstructions such as the Iranian series *Ahl al-Kahf* (1999), directed by Farjallah Sallahshour, in which the story is told in 18 episodes. However, it is worth noting that the heroes are presented as persecuted Christians waking up after 309 years, which is a mix of Christian and Muslim elements.

Following on from Tawfiq Al-Hakim's play *People of the Cave* (1933), a major film adaptation *Ahl al-Kahf* is currently in production in Egypt. Adapted by Ayman Bahgat Qamar, it features several Egyptian stars. For some observers, the film is considered one of the greatest productions in the history of Egyptian cinema. It was shot in Egypt and Morocco.

On another level, Fakhri El Ghezal's short film *Companions of the cave* (2019) offers a distant evocation of the myth. Shot in black and white and super-8, it follows the clandestine emigration of two young rappers from Redayef (Tunisia) to Nantes (France). Here again, the theme of exile dominates.

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In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated the importance and contemporary vitality of the Seven Sleepers's myth in the plural and teeming world of the arts. This original approach differs from existing works on texts, cults and places dedicated to the Seven Sleepers in Christianity and Islam. The variety of works and artistic reinterpretations that this shared story has given rise to testifies to a great heterogeneity, in

terms of both content and form, as well as a certain dynamism. This is all the more remarkable given that the cult of the Ephesian Sleepers has all but disappeared from Western Roman Catholicism, whereas it is a very prominent theme in Muslim liturgical life. It is also worth noting that it has often been used by artists who are neither Christian nor Muslim.

Admittedly, a significant number of cases are French or Francophone, which is due to the prism of the author that I am, but we can also observe that many creations were initiated or inspired following the emblematic work of Louis Massignon, who is in my opinion the greatest actor of the revival of the Seven Sleepers in the 20th century. As a result, many later works are more or less directly linked to his work (both academic and spiritual) and/or to the Christian-Islamic pilgrimage in Brittany.

As stated in the introduction, this article has been limited to contemporary artistic production and does not include works that are exclusively religious or date from earlier periods. It should also be remembered that this study is not exhaustive, as there are still many cases that have yet to be identified and studied. Nor have we listed the political reawakenings that are frequent, particularly in the writings of journalists in the Arab press. There have also been also military occurrences in the Middle East, such as the pro-Iranian para-military group “Ashab al-Kahf” responsible for attacks in Iraq for example in 2021.

This overview leads us to a broader anthropological reflection on a myth that has gone to sleep, but which sometimes reawakens, here and there, thanks to an individual, a group or a political context. But these revivals are no longer strictly eschatological (like the original versions), or even religious. I have focused on artistic creations of a more areligious nature. What emerges is that the Seven Sleepers narrative is recomposed and updated to suit the present. Each era generates new interpretations. Tawfiq Al-Hakim’s play is an emblematic case, with Christian and Muslim elements intertwined, the addition of a love story by one of the sleepers and even the loss of faith by another, which at first glance seems to run counter to the eschatological *raison d’être* of the founding narratives. What is more, all these revivals and artistic reinventions are also encouraged by the heterochronic dimension of the Seven Sleepers miracle, which allows for the deployment of narrative devices (e.g. time travel) that are highly effective on the public imagination. Born in Ephesus, this story has unquestionably become a “rights-free” myth, a reserve of meaning and

symbols that anyone can appropriate and interpret, even if it means changing its eschatological original meaning. Both versatile and polysemous, it is no longer the exclusive property of Christianity or Islam, and can now cross religious boundaries and even be reused for non-religious and artistic purposes.

As a result, the story of the Seven Sleepers is part of a wider collective heritage (both tangible and intangible) and imagination, which is certainly of religious origin, but which in some cases is undergoing a process of secularisation of its initial meaning, as is the case in certain societies, particularly in the West. Every myth is a vehicle that each person is free to invest with the meaning of their choice. Artists have no hesitation in making it their own, subjectively and without fear of overstepping the political or religious boundaries. These re-uses and rearrangements can lead to a process of creative bricolage from which the eventual work of art is born, whether or not it is free of its religious roots.