

## Preface

*This issue and the following issue of EJOSS host a comprehensive editorial project. It stemmed from a panel presented at the IUAES<sup>1</sup> Congress on "Identity, Separation, and Belonging", which took place in Istanbul in 2023. This project consists of two monographic issues of EJOSS dedicated to the Seven Sleepers legend and cult in both Christian and Islamic world. The tale of the Seven Sleepers, *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (Companions of the cave) in Islam, represents a trait d'union among the three Abrahamic faiths. It deals with the Christian legend dating back to the V century in Asia Minor, which has some antecedents in the Jewish tradition such as the Abimelech's and Maccabees' stories. Then it flowed in the Holy Koran with original innovations, precisely in the first part, verses 9-26, of the sura *al-Kahf* (The cave). The legend scattered in both Eastern and Latin Christendom, permeated the collective imaginary of the Mediterranean populations and of inland regions, spreading eastwards to China following the Nestorian Christian missionaries on the Silk Road. The fundamental message is the truth of the Resurrection and the belief in the life after death.*

*The legend tells that seven Ephesian youths, escaping from the persecutions during the Roman emperor Decius' reign in the 3rd century, took shelter in a grotto in the mountain surrounding Ephesus. Here they miraculously fell asleep for about two centuries and woke up during Theodosius II's reign. After the miracle they died in front of the Ephesian citizens and authorities, hence a liturgical commemoration was established in their memory and a basilica was built over the cave. Over times the cave was visited by a multitude of pilgrims returning back from the Holy Land, as an Austrian archaeological mission revealed at the beginning of the last century. The related cult has partially faded away in the Catholic Christianity but is still widespread in Orthodox one and is very much alive throughout the Islamic world. The evidences of this devotion where it is no longer in force are still visible nowadays in material culture, i.e. in objects (talismans, icons, frescoes, reliefs, miniatures etc.) as well as in ancient texts (manuscripts, liturgical codes, hymns, synaxaries etc.).*

*In the past some renowned scholars such as Louis Massignon and Ignazio Guidi and more recently scholars such as François Jourdan, Ernst Honigmann, John Koch and Paul Peeters studied the origins and the diffusion of the Seven Sleepers tale. They examined it from different points of view, from the historical to philological and eschatological perspectives and so on. This editorial project aims to give new data and informations and a fresh ethnological perspective of analysis on the today cult sites. In this first monographic issue, which consists of four articles, the topic is addressed from textual to iconographic, artistic and anthropological scrutiny, through the methodologies of various disciplines.*

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<sup>1</sup> International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences.

*Therefore, the first article, written by the EuTradOr<sup>2</sup> interdepartmental research unit of University of Florence, deals mainly with ancient textual Christian and Islamic traditions. The director of the unit, the academic Paolo La Spisa, and his team of researchers deal with the production and related investigation of ancient manuscripts, each one from a very specific area, from Portugal to Ethiopia, and in some cases they provided a critical edition of unedited material. The EuTradOr research unit studies the Seven Sleepers legend in all its aspects - religious, cultural, and anthropological - and traces the basis for its reconstruction, circulation and reception in both the Christian and Islamic literatures. Their research work constitutes a great and good theoretical frame for the anthropological surveys in the popular religiosity of both the believers.*

*The second article deals with the Islamic version of the myth, in particular with the innovative element of the divine dog *Qitmīr*, which God placed at the entrance of the cave to watch the asleep youths. Firstly the author, the cultural anthropologist Anna Tozzi Di Marco, analysed its role and symbolism in various religious texts and in the scientific literature as well as in the folk tale collection *One thousand and one night*, in pilgrims' travelogues and Eastern hagiographical texts. She also recorded and compared the presence of the supernatural dog in pre-Islamic civilizations like the Egyptian god *Anubi* and the Greek-Roman psychopomp monster *Cerberus*. During her fieldwork at the Tarsus cave she observed the pilgrimage to the *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*, then she analysed the agency of *Qitmīr*; which is manifest in the healing and lithoherapeutic rituals related to the dog in a small cavity of the holy cave.*

*The third article deals with the tangible heritage referred to the Seven Sleepers in Old Rus' during the Grand Principality of Vladimir between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. This specific subject has been very little investigated by European scholars and in general by the Western studies. The Russian academic Alexander Lapshin made a survey of the related objects discovered in three cities, Suzdal', Yuriev-Polski, Vladimir, which are located about 200 km far from Moscow in the north-east. They are the hystera-amulet, a relief of the western facade of the Saint George Cathedral and a stone carved icon. The author describes and reconstructs the history of these materials and he pinpoints they are part of the tangible, intellectual and visual culture of North-Eastern Rus' during the Middle Ages.*

*The fourth and last article deals with the artistic re-awakenings of the Seven Sleepers' myth between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its author, the visual anthropologist Manoël Pénicaud, aims to continue the work of the main actor of the renewed interest in the Seven Sleepers in Europe during the last century, Louis Massignon, and to demonstrate the current vitality of the myth in the world artistic panorama. Following this scholar in collecting and examining a lot of primary artistic productions of the legend such as the*

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2 Cultures, Texts and Traditions of the Christian East in Dialogue with Europe and Islam.

*Persian miniatures, the Ottoman calligraphy etc. Pénicaud provides a more amplified and updated overview. He recorded the creations which have been produced by painters, writers, poets, playwrights, film makers who interpreted the tale such as Jules Lemâtre, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Laurence Sibille. He also extended his research to the artistic works which are indirectly influenced by the Seven Sleepers such as Andrea Camilleri's The terracotta dog and Loïk Le Floch-Prigent's The silence of the Dolmens.*

*This issue is supplemented by a valuable article and an accurate review of an interesting book. Both concern the old Soviet political space and perfectly harmonize with the Eurasian vocation of our journal.*

***The editor-in-chief Prof. Fabio L. Grassi, PhD***

***The coordinator of the two monographic issues freelance anthropologist - Anna Tozzi Di Marco***