Fear in Medieval Western Europe

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In psychological studies on emotions, fear is seen as one of the core emotions, alongside others like joy, surprise, anger, and sadness. Human emotions are considered to belong to two realms: nature and culture.

First, there is nature: emotions are part of our biological makeup. As far as emotions are rooted in our 'nature', they evolve slowly over time, making them seem constant and unchanging to us.

On the other hand, culture plays a powerful role: we interpret our emotions through the lens of our culture – that is, through a shared set of understandings passed down from one generation to the next. Every culture has its own vocabulary for describing emotions, a specific naming system, and a way of classifying them. There are also sets of values and norms that shape how emotions should be felt or expressed. Cultures evolve over time, and so too do the words, categories, and standards around emotions. This leads to significant variety – over time, between cultures that succeed one another, and even at the same time, between cultures that exist side by side.

Some emotions, like pure panic, are basic, unfiltered, and universal. Others are deeply influenced by culture – take certain kinds of melancholy that are considered fashionable in specific circles at certain times. Culture shapes how easily we feel emotions. There is a wide spectrum between what we perceive as purely natural emotions and those that are heavily colored by culture. The exact boundary between nature and culture is hard to pinpoint in certain eras and social settings. Culture affects how we experience emotions. There is a broad range between what we see as very natural and what we recognize as shaped by cultural influences. Where nature ends and culture begins is not easy to define.

Fear is a part of our biological makeup; it is universal and shared by all people, but it can focus on very different things depending on what's seen as dangerous. In every society, fear is used as a tool to maintain existing ways of interacting. This typically happens through a system of rewards and punishments, with fear playing a central part. If you do certain things, you will be rewarded; if you do not, you will avoid something unpleasant. Psychologically, this means that anticipatory fear is deliberately created.

Stirring up anticipatory fear is a way to preserve systems of interaction where conflicts of interest and power differences exist. In medieval Western Europe, the exercise of power often went hand in hand with inspiring fear. For example, Notker,

the bishop of Liège around the year 1000, was described as gentle with the humble, but terrifying – *terribilis* – to the proud. An eleventh-century northern Spanish count declared in a decree: those who disobey will face my wrath – *ira mea*. In that same region, knights would make a showy annual ride through the countryside to impress the peasants. When the abbot of the Deutz monastery near Cologne traveled down the Rhine around 1150 to collect dues in the Dutch riverlands, he brought a few knights along – no doubt encouraging prompt payment. On the flip side, the aristocrats harbored a subtle fear of the peasants, whom they regarded as unreliable, unpredictable, and capable of unexpected cunning or aggression – a potential threat. The elite protected themselves by keeping their distance, staying alert, and, as mentioned, using displays of power.

These are phenomena found in many societies with pronounced social divisions. Beyond the kind of fear shaped by social factors, people in medieval Western Europe also felt fear of natural forces and of supernatural punishments. Here, I will focus on fear in the face of both natural and supernatural dangers.

God, especially during the early Middle Ages, was seen as a just but extremely strict ruler. Any sin was met with automatic punishment. The saints, acting as intermediaries between God and people, were often seen as stern as well. Those who failed to show proper respect to a particular saint or dared to seize property dedicated to them could expect misfortune. There is a story of an aristocratic warrior who stole wine barrels from the Belgian abbey of Brogne to store his abundant harvest. At night, the abbey's founder, Saint Gislenus, appeared to him three times in a dream telling him to check his cellar, warning the wine would spill out. When he finally went down, the angels of darkness seized him. Many such tales circulate about miraculous punishments, where offenders met horrible ends or were struck with paralysis, blindness, or other afflictions.

Fear was everywhere, it seems - fear of one another, fear of God, fear of the saints. Now, let us look at some medieval accounts of fearful experiences and follow three main threads:

- Do the texts contain words that convey the concept of fear?
- Can contemporary psychological theories about anxiety shed light on medieval accounts of fearful experiences? I will explore that using psychologist Frijda's theory of emotions—more on that in a moment.
- Who is actually speaking in these texts—the authors, or the individuals whose anxious experiences are being described? Historians always encounter texts that separate them from what they seek to understand. Those texts come about in stages: first, the emotional experience itself, felt by one or more people; then, sharing that experience with others or others noticing someone is experiencing an emotion; and finally, a written record.
- It is often difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the emotions of the people being described from the emotional tone of the text—that is, the author's own influence.[1] That distinction is not a given; it needs to be demonstrated or at least

[1] The same challenge comes up when studying the dreams of medieval people. How much of what is described in medieval texts actually reflects real, individually dreamed dreams is still debated. I had an inspiring exchange of ideas about this with Jeroen Deploige: Rudi Künzel, 'Medieval dreams: a sample of historical and psychoanalytical criticism', in: J. Art

made plausible.

The first type of research – examining words that express fear – is standard in studies on emotions. The second and third types, drawing on psychological theories and seeking genuinely experienced emotions in texts, are less common. What follows here is a pilot study based on a small selection of medieval writings.

Now, I will share the words of a medieval author describing an emotional experience.

> About a nun who had long thought of leaving the convent
> There was a young woman, the daughter of Folculf, the parish priest of Leeuwarden, whose longing for the world burned within her. Incited by the Devil, it led her to constantly consider escape. When the chance finally arose, she fled in the night. On choosing a path that was impassable instead of a safe one, she encountered a monstrous ox, with flames coming from its mouth and nostrils, and which filled her with a gripping fear (*metum*). Seeing it coming towards her, she was, of course, stricken with fear (*expavit tota*). While having abandoned the thought of rescue, she hurried back. Having escaped death, as it were, by the man of God [Frederik, the first abbot of Mariëngaarde], whose aid she had called upon, she lived a life of great deeds of gratitude from that moment on. Since then, her mind was consumed by this experience.
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> Sibrandus, *Vita Fretheryci*, chapter 36.[2]

This biography of Frederik was written around 1230 at the Mariëngaarde monastery in Friesland province. Frederik founded the monastery and served as its first abbot from 1163 to 1175. In the story, he appears as the man of God who rescues the girl.

First, I follow the path of word analysis. In my translation, I have inserted the terms expressing the fleeing nun's emotion: *metus*, fear, anxiety, and *expavit*, the perfectum form of *expavescere*, to become afraid, with a nuance of sudden fright. So, fear is the emotion the author attributes to the girl.

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and F. Geerardyn (eds.), *The Sublime Object of Religion. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Psychological History, Ghent Nov. 23-24 2000, Psychoanalytische Perspectieven* 20 (2002) pp. 215-233; Dutch version: 'Middeleeuwse dromen. Een proeve van historische en psychoanalytische kritiek, in: *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 116 (2003) pp. 44-58.
Jeroen Deploige, ' Bertulf or Galbert? Considerations regarding a sample of historical and psychoanalytical criticism of medieval dreams', in: The Sublime Object of Religion, Psychoanalytische Perspectieven 20 (2002) pp. 235-253; Dutch version: 'Bertulf of Galbert? Kanttekeningen bij Rudi Künzels middeleeuwse droomduiding', in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 116 (2003) pp. 59-72.
Rudi Künzel, 'Reply to Jeroen Deploige', in: The Sublime Object of Religion, Psychoanalytische Perspectieven 20 (2002) pp. 255-260.

[2] *Vitae abbatum Orti sancte Marie. Vijf abtenlevens van het klooster Mariëngaarde in Friesland*. Inleiding Introduction, edition and translation by H.Th.M. Lambooij and J.A. Mol with contributions from M. Gumbert-Hepp and P.N. Noomen (Hilversum and Leeuwarden, 2001) pp. 132-241, specifically pp. 196-199.

Now let us follow the theoretical path: can modern psychological theories about fear help us interpret medieval accounts of frightening experiences? The emotion theory I am drawing on here is, as mentioned, the one developed by Nico Frijda. He laid out his views in his book Emotions; the English edition was published in 1986, and the Dutch translation followed in 1988.[3] One of the strengths of Frijda's approach, as noted by his fellow psychologists, is how it weaves together a variety of research angles and perspectives. He identifies several key aspects:

- the situation – when there is already some tension, it's easier for emotion to surface;
- sudden change;
- there is something at stake – emotions always connect to something that matters to the person experiencing them;
- 'appraisal' – often an unconscious, intuitive weighing of the pros and cons of certain responses;
- in the context of danger and fear, this means assessing the threat and evaluating your own ability to cope – a coping process: What's the best way out? Stand your ground? Fight back? Make yourself small and hope not to be noticed? Curl up to protect yourself? Run away to get to safety? Accept that nothing can be saved?
- Then there is the physical side; strong emotions always come with bodily reactions, making us feel deeply affected and signaling that something serious is happening—racing heart, blushing, shivering, freezing up, and so on;
- a shift in our tendency to act: when we're emotional, our impulses and actions change.

This is illustrated in the text as follows:

- The *situation* that makes the emotion arise here is: the girl is alone at night, she is fleeing, and already feels threatened. She might also be struggling internally with guilt.
- A *sudden change* sparks an even more intense emotional reaction: the sudden appearance of the ox.
- Here, the *stakes* are the girl's safety, her life, or her spiritual well-being. The phrase 'as if snatched from death' suggests she was in danger of dying, at least in a spiritual sense, with her soul at risk.
- *Assessment*: the girl decides to run away and calls on the founder of the convent for help.
- A *physical component*. There is no mention of this in the current text. In some other medieval writings, you do find things like trembling with fear or turning alternately red and pale.
- *Changed behaviour*. The fear drives the girl back to the convent. And in a

[3] N.H. Frijda, *The emotions* (Cambridge, 1986); Also: *De emoties. An overview of research and theory* (Amsterdam, 1988). An excellent summary, with a particular focus on historical research into emotions; idem, 'De structuur van emoties', in: R.E.V. Stuip and C. Vellekoop (eds.), *Emoties in de Middeleeuwen* (Hilversum, 1998) pp.9-28.

> more lasting way, ever since, her state of mind has been focused only on life in the convent.

You can clearly see that the aspects of fear described by Frijda come through quite convincingly in the text.

Now for the third research question: whose emotions are expressed in this text? Are they the feelings the author wanted to convey to the audience, or the emotions of the individual described – the fleeing girl? The main idea – the author's intent – is that a supernatural punishment is triggered when the religious order is broken. If you take this as the starting point, every detail in the text fits effortlessly. The girl has lost her way, putting herself at risk of falling under the devil's influence. The fire spewed by the ox is devil's fire. Abbot Frederik steps in as her saviour. Afterward, the girl never tries to run away again – or at least, that's how the author tells it.

When it comes to medieval religious texts, descriptions of emotions are often shaped by a cultural lens – the author's moral and religious perspective. In the passage we are examining, this cultural coding by the author is especially clear. The author's goal is to instil a sense of anticipatory fear in the monks and nuns, encouraging them not to leave the monastery. By doing so, he promotes a particular way of behaving that aligns with the values of the monastic community, ensuring that those who are part of this culture continue to uphold it.

Yet, the author's approach and his account of the fleeing nun's emotions are so closely linked that it is impossible to tell what she truly felt or how she interpreted those feelings. You might even wonder if the event actually happened at all. The author may have invented the story or transformed a small real occurrence into the tale we know today. Regardless, the story still holds its significance as a reflection of the monastic worldview.

The following passage tells of a vision.[4] Speaking is Godschalk, a farmer from Holstein in northern Germany, at the end of the twelfth century. Godschalk recounted his vision to two priests, who each wrote it down. They described him as simple and uneducated, but devout and sincere. Godschalk experienced this vision while he was struck by a severe illness. It feels almost like a fever dream. One image leads to the next in a sequence of frightening, suffocating events. Godschalk imagines himself on a journey through the afterlife. His travels begin at a sturdy linden tree whose branches are covered with shoes – just like, Godschalk says,

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[4] Edition: E. Assmann (ed.), *Godescalcus und Visio Godeschalci* (Neumünster, 1979: Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins 74) and partly in P. Dinzelbacher (ed. and trans.), *Medieval Visionary Literature: An Anthology* (Darmstadt, 1989) pp. 112-123. Analysis: P. Dinzelbacher, '"Verba hec tam mystica ex are tam ydiote glebonis". Statements of the people about their faith, with reference to revelation literature and the Gottschalk vision', in: P. Dinzelbacher and D. Bauer (eds.), *Volksreligion im hohen und späten Mittelalter* (Paderborn, 1990) pp. 57-99 and Aaron Gurevich, 'Oral and written culture of the Middle Ages: two "peasant visions" from the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries', in: Idem, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1992) pp. 50-64. I discussed this text as an example of syncretism in 'Het christendom van boeren en stedelingen', here on pp. 86-88 and p. 90.

shoemakers hang shoes from long poles. Godschalk and a crowd of recently deceased pass by the tree. A kind angel hands out shoes to some, but not to others. Those without must cross a heath full of thorns. Here is the account:

> There was a land that produced thorns and thistles, an inhospitable heath that stretched for two miles. This heath was stiff with thorns that were thin, stiff, and pointed; the points could not be blunted and were close together, like the tool used to clean flax from 'work' The heath would quickly tear apart those who tried to pass it. To accomplish this, it hardened itself further against those who approached and became even more sharp, like a dog, poised to pounce and devour an approaching wolf, unleashes its innate fury: all over its body, the bristles seem to stiffen, it gnashes its teeth, utters a howling bark, and all its limbs are tense to the utmost.
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> *Visio Godescalci, c. 4.*

Godschalk likely drew his image of the heath from his everyday experiences. Yet, it also carried a spiritual significance: in North Germanic pagan beliefs, thorny heathland was seen as part of the afterlife, where the deceased were punished. The shoes that provide protection from the thorns also come from this tradition. The linden tree, where the shoes are hung, was the place where justice was served. This image is not religious, but reflects the legal practices of that era. At first, the angel does not give Godschalk any shoes, but when he fails to cross the heath, he receives them after all. He is not punished, since he is still among the living, but he is shown what will happen if he does not change his ways. Returning to the passage about the heath – let us follow the trail of the words. The text never directly mentions fear. Instead, a sense of fear emerges indirectly, through descriptions of danger. The thorny terrain is first painted as desolate and impenetrable. But its inaccessibility grows more active and menacing when we are told the heath will quickly tear apart anyone who tries to cross and that it becomes harder. Even more threatening is the comparison to a dog ready to attack.

Analyzing the text through the lens of Frijda's theory, you notice the following:

- Sudden disruption: Godschalk's illness shatters his everyday life, making him much more emotionally sensitive. He begins to hallucinate.
- The stakes for him: the vision centers on a source of deep uncertainty and fear—what will become of him after death? For Godschalk, facing the threshold of death, this is an urgent question. The word 'stakes' sounds rather clinical here, almost unemotional, but for Godschalk and those around him, belief in life after death was deeply heartfelt and likely a source of real concern.
- His 'assessment' of the danger: he believes there is no escape from it unless he leads a less sinful life.
- His new behavior: he repents for his sins and tries to encourage those around him to do the same.

The elements of Frijda's theory are clearly reflected in this text.

Finally, we need to consider whose emotions are actually being expressed in

this text: were the authors trying to convey feelings to their audience, or are these the emotions of the individual described? Is it Godschalk himself speaking, or the priests who recorded his vision? For the most part, it seems that Godschalk is speaking for himself. I have three reasons to support this view.

1. The vision was written down twice, each time by a different person. These two accounts do not depend on each other; both authors independently recorded Godschalk's testimony. Each version tells the same story in different words, which suggests that the original account comes from Godschalk himself.
2. The text is rich in specific details. For example, it mentions shoes hanging in the linden tree "like cobblers hang shoes on poles." That kind of detail is not easily invented – it sounds like an accurate description of a real dream.
3. Another point is the presence of *circumstantial evidence*. The vision's content is a blend of Christian and non-Christian beliefs. It is unlikely this mix was invented by the clerics documenting the vision; rather, they seem to have accepted it as genuine. Their openness makes sense, considering the texts were produced during a transitional period between paganism and Christianity.

These are convincing reasons to believe that these texts preserve an authentic account from a simple, uneducated farmer – albeit translated into medieval Latin and somewhat rephrased in clerical language – but at its core, it is a genuine voice, a unique blend of beliefs reflecting a personal way of coping with a major source of fear at the time: the belief in life after death.

The man from Holstein, in 'translating' his emotions through his vision, drew on imagery from his own culture. As is often the case, it is hard to say exactly where nature ends and culture begins.

My final piece is about the fear of a natural disaster:

> As the year of our Lord 1249 had just begun(...), on the day of John the Evangelist [27 December 1248], Zephyr, the west wind, stirred with a fury that defied its usual gentle nature, roaring like Boreas, the north wind, and raged fiercely after vespers. In the stillness of night, the wind grew so wild that no one could remember hearing such a storm before. Roofs were ripped from houses, and some homes – even sturdy, newly built ones – collapsed. Everywhere, there was nothing but sorrow and grief.
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> Around midnight, a flickering glow was seen in the sky; some said it was lightning, though no thunder followed. Others claimed it was a dragon, as Isidore wrote in his Etymologies that dragons are fiery by nature and tend to appear during storms. But since dragons are said to come from the very warm lands of Ethiopia, where they usually remain, we prefer to stay humbly uncertain rather than assert anything about this light. However, it was clear that everywhere in Friesland where the glow appeared, people thought it was just a crossbow shot away and saw it descend toward the earth.
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> At the first crow of the rooster, Zephyr gave way to Circius, Boreas's western neighbor, and the swirling waters destroyed the dikes, overflowed them, and submerged the land; everywhere, grief and weeping filled the air, for the Lord had multiplied his blows.

> Menko, *Chronicon*, written in Wittewierum (province of Groningen), 1249–c. 1275.[5]

Some believed it was lightning, but Menko notes there was no thunder that followed. He therefore finds this natural explanation questionable.[6] Others, he says, thought it was a dragon. But what kind of dragon? Menko does not make the obvious connection—to the dragon in the Book of Revelation, defeated by the archangel Michael at the end of days, the devil's dragon, Satan. He also doubts the pseudo-scientific explanation from Isidore of Seville (seventh century, Spain): Ethiopia is just too far away. In an earlier study, I concluded that this dragon represents a pre-Christian belief, a symbol of the forces of nature.[7] This belief was widespread throughout the ancient Near East and all of prehistoric Europe. In this text, the dragon embodies fear of the powers of nature.

Let us start again by following the trail of word analysis. The text does not use words for fear. Instead, it describes expressions of grief: 'everywhere, nothing was heard but sorrow and sadness.' And at the end of the quote: 'All around, there was sadness and sighing.' The latter appears in the sentence where Menko names God as the cause of the violent storm, punishing those who have strayed from the right path—a traditional Old Testament idea—and because of that, they are sorrowful. Menko does not say whether those who thought they saw the dragon were emotionally affected. Is there anything to add about that?

I will compare this with Frijda's theory. Here are the elements we find:

- The situation is intense: the west wind is unusually strong.
- Then, the trigger: the wind shifts to the north, bringing truly severe weather – a second, unexpected break from what was anticipated.
- What is at stake: survival.
- 'Assessment': a major danger that cannot be turned back; it is symbolized by a gigantic, all-consuming beast. Escape might still be possible, but resistance is not. Yet, imagining the dragon here could be, in two ways, an attempt to defend oneself.

First of all, even though it is frightening, it may have served as a way to cope with a deeper fear. Psychologist Barendregt suggests that some people – often through intuitive, even unconscious emotional responses – prefer a specific phobia, like a fear of open spaces, to an overwhelming, all-encompassing anxiety.[8] In this sense, the fear

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[5] H.O. Feith and G. Acker Stratingh, (eds.), *Kronijken van Emo en Menko, abten van het klooster te Wittewierum, met het vervolg van een ongenoemde* (Utrecht, 1866: *Werken van het Historisch Genootschap* Nieuwe Reeks 4) pp. 196-197. Translation: *Kronieken van de abdij Bloemhof te Wittewierum loopende over de dertiende eeuw, door de abten Emo, Menko en een ongenoemde.* Translated by Willem Zuidema and J. Douma with contributions from C.D.J. Brandt (Utrecht, 1939) pp. 191-192; H.P.H. Jansen and A. Janse, (eds. and trans.), *Kroniek van het klooster Bloemhof te Wittewierum* (Hilversum, 1991: *Middeleeuwse studies en bronnen*) pp. 372-375; I cite this last translation.

[6] That was most likely the Northern Lights.

[7] Rudi Künzel, 'Een vurige draak in Menko's kroniek', in: *Volkskundig bulletin* 5 (1979) pp. 97-118. On the psychological theory I applied in that article, see here pp. 116-117.

[8] J.T. Barendregt, 'Fobiën en verwante angsten,' in Idem, *De zielenmarkt. Over*

of the dragon can be seen as a phobia: all-encompassing anxiety gets channeled into fear of something concrete.

Secondly, the dragon may have been seen as a sign of even fiercer storms to come. It appeared around midnight, and by morning the storm worsened and the dikes broke. Similar dragon omens are known from early medieval England: first a dragon is seen, then disaster follows. The belief in omens arises from the desire to anticipate dangers that people face and cannot avoid. It is an effort to get ahead of the threat. Research has shown that after traumatic events, people sometimes develop the belief that warning signs had been present – omens they missed; if only they had noticed, they might have evaded danger.[9] So, belief in omens can be seen as a shared effort to recognize these important warning signals in time.

Now for the third research question: who is actually speaking here? Not Menko. He prefers to leave the nature of the phenomenon open, choosing to distance himself from those who thought they saw a dragon. His view – see the references to punishment at the end of this fragment – is that the flood was God's punishment, clearly reflecting a different interpretation.

Additionally, he notes that some people saw a flash of light, while others saw a dragon. It seems likely that, in the thirteenth century Frisian region, after centuries of Christianization, only part of the population still held pre-Christian beliefs. Yet, these individuals were separate from Menko, the chronicler.[10] It is not Menko speaking here, but rather 'some' in Friesland. And it is their emotion, captured in a tradition that reaches back to prehistoric times.

Now, let's move on to some conclusions. They are provisional, since they're drawn from a limited set of evidence.

Looking at the language used: we only found words for fear in the *vita* of Abbot Frederik of Mariëngaarde. In the other two texts analyzed here – the vision of Godschalk and Menko's storm flood account – fear is not directly mentioned, but is felt in other ways, through describing the situation. Of course, three examples are far too few to draw sweeping conclusions. Still, these findings do echo what other researchers in this field have observed – and they also align with the way emotions are portrayed in contemporary literature. In both modern and older literary works, authors often prefer to depict a scenario that stirs up emotion, rather than naming the emotion outright. Is this because an author believes that readers or listeners are more deeply moved when their feelings are engaged indirectly, almost in passing?[11]

What did applying Frijda's theory to these texts reveal? It allowed me to ask questions of the material that I had not, or had not as systematically, considered before – questions about the circumstances where fear arises, the events that trigger it, and the interests involved when fear comes into play. More broadly, I believe historical research into emotions benefits from a blend of careful, thorough historical-philological study and innovative theorizing. On that front, historians can

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psychotherapie in alle ernst (Meppel and Amsterdam, 1982) pp. 163-180, esp. p. 171.

[9] Leonore C. Terr, 'Children of Chowchilla: A Study of Psychic Trauma,' in: A.J. Solnit et al. (eds.), *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 34 (1979) pp. 547-623. With thanks to Frits Boer for bringing this publication to my attention.

[10] See also, 'Farmers Speak Out,' pp. 49-50.

[11] A suggestion from Frits Boer.

certainly learn a thing or two from psychologists.

Now for a third line of inquiry: who actually spoke in the quoted texts? Naturally, it was first and foremost the clerics who wrote them down. But in the vision from Holstein, the layman Godschalk spoke, and in Menko's account, several people expressed their emotional experiences in images that were uniquely their own. In both cases, these were experiences encoded using imagery that did not fit the dominant repertoire of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christianity. At this time, the Christianization of people's emotional lives was not a finished project – it was still very much in progress.

Yet, there is something that unites the clerical authors and the laypeople cited here: the talent to express emotions through imagery – through vivid, apt interpretations of situations seen as emotionally significant. Take the fire-breathing ox from the clerical *Vita Fretheryci*, the thorny heath from the illiterate Godschalk's vision, or the dragon seen by some in Frisia. The ability to convey emotion through images may have been a hallmark of medieval culture as a whole, though it certainly did not have an exclusive claim to it.

This link between imagery and emotion brings us back to my earlier point about the influence of nature and culture on feelings. Images suitable for expressing emotion belong to the realm of culture. So culture does not just provide words for emotions and the concepts to classify and evaluate them – it also supplies the imagery.