

**MEDIEVAL DREAMS:  
A SAMPLE OF HISTORICAL AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL  
CRITICISM<sup>1</sup>**

Rudi Künzel

*Introduction and questions*

Dreams serve as sources of very special material for historical research. In his article on the dreams of people in the Third Reich, Reinhard Koselleck (1979: 286) notes that dreams can come from layers of the world of human experience that even diaries do not get to. Dreams can provide information about the preoccupations, obsessions and desires of individuals and groups and indeed of entire cultures. Despite the fine pioneering efforts of Dodds (1951) and Besançon (1971) in this field, very little attention has traditionally been devoted to the dream in historical research. Thanks to Le Goff (1977; 1985; 1999), Schmitt (1985), Burke (1997) and Wittmer-Butsch (1990), this is changing.

The research conducted on dreams in the past inevitably came upon two phenomena, the ideas about dreams and the dreams themselves. A sharp distinction needs to be drawn between the two. Ideas about dreams, or so cultural anthropology research has taught us, differ from one culture to the next. Dreams can be conceived of as actual interventions of supernatural powers in the experiential worlds of individuals ("a divinity appears to someone in his sleep"), as active communication between the dreamers and another world, as autobiographical documents and thus as information from the dreamers about themselves, or as pointless nocturnal cerebral activity (Tedlock, 1992a). In some cultures, dreams are a common topic of conversation; in others they are not spoken of at all. There is a vast diversity in the attitudes people have to dreams.<sup>2</sup> It does not however

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1. I presented earlier versions on 9 June 2000 at a seminar in Amsterdam for Ph.D. students on psychoanalysis and culture organized by Solange Leibovici at the Cultural History Institute and on 14 September 2000 at the "Schaamteclub" (Shame Club), a group of psychoanalysts, life scientists and social scientists founded by Louis Tas.

2. See e.g. the contributions in Tedlock (1992).

warrant the conclusion that dreams themselves differ from one culture to another. This is something that can only be determined by way of research.

Deep into the Middle Ages, in Western Europe a small group of clergymen, mainly monks, had a monopoly on recording dreams in writing. In addition, there was an oral mode of dealing with dreams within this clerical elite as well as outside of it. This oral mode can only be researched to the extent that clergymen left some evidence of it in writing.

The medieval religious authors' ideas about dreams exhibit clear traces of Judeo-Christian traditions from the Bible and the writings of early Christian intellectuals and some of the traditions of Ancient paganism. The medieval clergy believed that supernatural powers could intervene in the experiential worlds of individuals by way of dreams. According to them, God and the saints sent dreams to people, but so did the devil and the demons. The resulting uncertainty about the origins of dreams made many early medieval clerical authors wary. There was very little evidence of the notion that people themselves could also be the source of their own dreams which comes up now and then in Ancient paganism. Special attention was devoted to dreams viewed as divine messages. The main example was the God of the Old Testament who addressed a few chosen individuals such as the patriarchs in dreams. This is why medieval clergymen believed that divine orders could be given in dreams. The saints were similarly attributed with this capacity. There was also the notion – primarily pertaining to Ancient paganism – that some dreams contained predictions.

Much of this is hard to reconcile with the view held by Freud and many others after him that the dream is an autobiographical document that is produced by the individual dreamer and can only be comprehended on the basis of his individual experiential world.<sup>3</sup> This is why my first research question is: Are there dreams in the writings of these medieval clergymen that we would view as authentic, in other words that are autobiographical testimonies about the internal psychological world of the individuals who produced these dreams in their sleep? And following naturally from this question: How can this be determined or made plausible? Is it possible to formulate criteria for testing the medieval material? In the course of this article, I will make a few proposals in this connection.

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3. In Freud's days and in subsequent periods, there was the belief in dreams as signs predicting the future. However, dreams that make the impression of being authentic autobiographical documents were already being registered in the early Middle Ages. So we are not dealing here with successive stages, but with traditions that existed side by side to differing extents in various eras and settings.

If a description of a dream has come to be part of a written text, it might be the final result of a process consisting of three stages. The first stage is the dream itself, the second a story or stories about the dream, and the third the written version of the dream. Thus there is successively the dreaming, the story telling and the writing.

In the year 874 the East Frankish empire was struck by famine followed by an infectious disease that spread like wildfire far and wide. Many of the nuns at Brunshausen Convent near Hildesheim fell ill and died. Their abbess Hathumoda played an active role in nursing the ill. She had a dream at the time that she and a few of the other nuns were tied to the huge wheel of a water mill. She was afraid the movement of the mill-wheel would propel her into the rapid current of the mill-race. However, she did not fall into the water, but wound up on the shore (*the dream*). She woke up shaking. Hathumoda recounted this dream to a relative of hers (*the story*). A few years after her death, the monk Agius of Korvey (*Vita Hathumodae*: ch. 11; Pertz, 1841: 170) included this dream in his biography of Hathumoda (*the written registration*).<sup>4</sup>

At each of the three stages, certain mechanisms go into effect that can serve to preserve a dream, but they can also distort the contents of the original dream or eliminate them altogether. Since selection during the transmission process determines whether or not a dream reaches an author and whether or not he records the dream in writing, it is important to know the mechanisms that play a role in selection and transmission.

Up to now, historical research on dreams has mainly focused on two subjects, ideas about dreams and the contents of dreams. Less attention has been devoted to the mechanisms that play a role in preserving dreams or failing to do so. Thus my second research question is: What are these mechanisms and do we find any evidence of them in the medieval texts?

I would like to address each of the three stages. Since we always have to work with written texts, I will start with the third stage, the writing, and work my way back through the story telling to the dreaming itself.

### *The writing*

A specific dream can be recorded or not recorded in writing, depending on the attitude of the author and the aim he has in mind. An author selects the dreams he writes down from all the dreams he has conceivably known based on the function they can serve in his text. This function is "desired" by the author. Since as I have noted, virtually all the authors way into the

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4. Agius might have been the relative Hathumoda told about her dream.

Middle Ages were clergymen, the dreams most apt to be recorded in writing were probably the ones that fit into the religious mind set.

The reason Agius of Korvey registered a number of Hathumoda's dreams was to demonstrate how she approached her imminent death like a real saint. In addition to the dream I just referred to, she had a dream about an open grave that she recognized as her own (Agius of Korvey, *Vita Hathumodae*: ch. 12; Pertz, 1841: 170). Sometimes an author explicitly states why a dream is recorded. Shortly after the year 1000, Thietmar of Merseburg relates in his chronicle how he dreamt that an elderly fellow clergyman whom he had sorely neglected in his lifetime came to him in a dream and reproached him for it (Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*: book VII, ch. 33; Trillmich, 1974: 388-391). Thietmar records this dream in his own words because this form of negligence was widespread. So he wanted to issue a word of caution. In the diary Galbert of Bruges kept after the murder of Charles the Good, he explores the issue of whether the murderers repented before their death. In the framework of these explorations, he notes that God sent three omens to warn Dean Bertulf, one of the most important conspirators. A house where Bertulf was paying a visit collapsed and he just managed to escape. Then the same thing happened in his own house, when the ceiling fell down at precisely the spot where he usually sat, though he was not at home at the time. The third and last omen, according to Galbert, was a very graphic dream Bertulf had about the garrotte he was to die on soon afterwards (Galbert of Bruges, *De multro, traditione, et ocissione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandriae*: ch. 84; Rider, 1994: 135-136; Ross, 1967: 256; Demyttenaere, 1999: 225). In his examination of the innermost emotions of the murderers, Galbert formulates the following interpretation. Bertulf had ignored the divine omens, even the dream that was a warning, and this all goes to prove his sinful blindness. In the three texts I have referred to, dreams are depicted from a religious and moralizing perspective. With Hathumoda's dreams, Agius wants to show how she was preparing for her death, Thietmar sees his dream as a warning not to be negligent, and Galbert wants to demonstrate how blindness can make someone ignore a divine warning issued in a dream. Agius, Thietmar and Galbert thus had a clear intention when they included certain dreams in their writings. The purpose of the dreams is to illustrate this intention, this message.

For reasons that I will go into, they might well have been perfectly authentic dreams that these people really dreamt. Many descriptions of dreams are not however based upon dreams that were really dreamt, but on literary examples. In the lives of saints, dreams with a saint playing the leading role are not uncommon. These dreams often follow fixed literary

patterns. A common type is the dream where a saint reveals to the dreamer the spot where his mortal remains are buried at the time, and urges him to dig them up and rebury them at a better spot, for instance in an important church (one of the numerous examples is Einhardus, *Translatio et miracula sanctorum Marcellini et Petri*: book I, ch. 9; Waitz, 1887: 243). Authors have been known to rewrite each other's texts of this kind after changing Saint A into Saint B. Texts like this do not refer to actual dreams.

Most of the dreams described in medieval historical texts consist of stereotypes of this kind and would not serve any useful purpose in the study of the contents of medieval dreams.<sup>5</sup> This is why a distinction needs to be drawn between the literary stereotypes and the authentic dreams.

I think a useful criterion would be: (a) *If a description of a dream in text B refers directly to a description of a dream in an earlier text A, then the dream described in text B probably is not a real dream.*<sup>6</sup> In cases like this the first stage, the dream itself, and the second stage, the original story about the dream, have not occurred. This does not necessarily mean the dream in the earlier text A could not have been a real dream.

The ideas people have about dreams undoubtedly influence whether or not they write them down. In her book *Zur Bedeutung von Schlaf und Traum im Mittelalter* (1990), the historian Maria Wittmer-Butsch presents the most comprehensive collection of dreams up to now, which I have been grateful to be able to consult. It is not surprising that most of her material should date back to the period from 1200 to 1500. It was in the course of the twelfth century that the clergy's ideas about dreams changed (Le Goff, 1999: 960-965; Wittmer-Butsch, 1990: 115-126; Kruger, 1992: 64-82). Fewer dreams were attributed to the devil, according to Le Goff, and more of them to God. More importantly though, more dreams were viewed as coming from man himself, as messages about his physical and psychological disorders and desires. As a result of these changing conceptions, there was a greater willingness on the part of clerical authors to register dreams. Two early twelfth-century monks, Otloh of St. Emmeram (*Liber visionum*; Schmidt, 1989) and Guibert of Nogent (*Autobiographie*; Labande, 1981), included numerous dreams in their autobiographical writings.

There was undoubtedly a change at the time, but how far did it go? Statistical research might be able to show how many dreams were

5. Of course these texts do reveal us something about the ideas of the authors and their readers about dreams.

6. This criterion is in keeping with the research experience of the authors who addressed this topic. See for example Schmitt (1985: 291-292) and Wittmer-Butsch (1990: 198, 223-225).

recorded before and after this change and how many of them were literary stereotypes and how many authentic dreams in each of the periods. After all, I also view some of the dreams recorded before the change as authentic. If that is indeed the case, it would follow that the ideas about dreams apparently exerted a great deal of influence on whether or not dreams were recorded, though they were not always decisive. I will get back to this point.

### *The story telling*

Someone who has had a dream and remembers the contents the next day tells his dream to himself as it were. He creates a story for himself about his dream. This first story is already an interpretation. Waud Kracke (1992), a psychoanalytically oriented anthropologist, sees it as follows. Dreams mainly consist of images. The images come one after the other in a blending sequence. There is often a strong sensation of spatiality and movement. The next day, what was a sequence of images and spaces in a dream is translated into an interior monologue in a sequence of words; it becomes a story. The question is to what extent the visual power of the dream is still perceived. This is even more so as regards later versions of the dream reported by the dreamer himself or by others.

What is more, someone may have told a story about a dream for reasons of personal interest. Dreams are attributed to several medieval rulers announcing that they are to rule over a certain region in the future (Braet, 1975: 75, 125; Gurjewitsch, 1994: 103-106). In these cases, it seems only reasonable to consider the possibility of deliberate propaganda. This is why I propose the following criterion: (b) *If a person could have recounted a dream to promote some personal interest of his own, the possibility should be considered that he might have made up or distorted the dream.* Dream texts with political contents were also deliberately constructed by clerical authors wishing to influence a monarch (Dutton, 1994).

There can be various numbers of links in between this first story and the final written version. The first possibility is that the author is describing a dream he himself has actually had. The second possibility is that the person who had the dream tells the author about it, and the author then records it. The third possibility is that the person who had the dream tells someone else about it, after which that other person tells the author about it. The chain of oral transmission between the original story about the dream related by the dreamer himself and the written version can also

consist of even more oral links. Each link can distort the original story in much the same way as with any orally transmitted story.

Every authentic dream that is recorded in writing begins its peregrinations as an orally transmitted story. It is not until afterwards that the story is written down. For research into the authenticity of dreams in texts from the past, this means you have to be able to demonstrate or make it plausible that the origin of the story is oral. That is why the following criterion is: (c) *Does the text have features indicative of the oral transmission of the contents of the dream?*

Some authors describe their own dreams in a markedly narrative manner. Others are more analytically oriented and solely relate the bare contents of their dreams. I have the impression that Otloh of St. Emmeram has narrative leanings and Guibert of Nogent more analytical ones. Further research might make it clear how productive this perspective could be. A fourth criterion derived from the third one might be useful now and then: (d) *Does the description of the dream in the written text have a certain colloquial sound to it, so that it is likely to have originated from an oral source?*

The account of Bertulf's dream in Galbert's diary is an example of this colloquial sound: "[...] When the provost was passing through Ypres near the gallows in the market, where he was later hanged, he said to his knights: 'Almighty God, what did I dream last night? For I saw in a dream that I was fixed to that very gallows!' And he joked about this vision and made nothing of it" (Galbert of Bruges, *De multro, traditione, et ocissione gloriosi Karoli comitis Flandriae*: ch. 84; Rider, 1994: 135-136; Ross, 1967: 256; Demyttenaere, 1999: 225). The spontaneous swearing the dean starts the quote with certainly has a colloquial sound to it. Maybe there are other texts about dreams that have the same colloquial sound so obviously filtering through the Latin of the authors.

A dream can be interpreted in the course of the transmission process. As was often the case in the Middle Ages, it can be seen as a portent of coming events or a warning to change one's behaviour. If an interpretation confirms the values of a group, it is all the more likely that members of the group will pass the dream on to others and thus preserve it. In the social circles of Guibert of Nogent, some dreams were viewed as divine instructions and used as instruments for teaching religion. Guibert once wanted to leave his monastery. His mother dreamt that Mary disapproved of his leaving. She related her dream to Guibert, resulting in his reconsidering his decision (Guibert de Nogent, *Autobiographie*: book I, ch. 16; Labande, 1981: 128-131). Based on very personal interests, by recounting a dream individuals can also turn the values accepted in their

group to their own advantage. One Cistercian lay brother was so exhausted from the heavy labour that he overslept and did not attend the nocturnal vigils. He dreamt that Mary kept him from getting out of bed and attended the prayers in his stead (Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*: book VII, ch. 51; Strange, 1851: vol. II, 71-72). It is quite understandable that at a time and in circles where the veneration of Mary was so prevalent, this lay brother was not apprehensive about telling this story. On the other hand, people will have refrained from recounting certain dreams that they realize are not in keeping with the values of their group (Herdt, 1992: 76-77). What is more, stories about dreams are stylized in the transmission process and made to coincide more and more with the values and expectations of the group they are passed down in. Schmitt (1985) notes that the accounts of the dreams of Guibert of Nogent and the people in his immediate vicinity were less influenced by the usual religious literary models than the accounts of the dreams of people further away from him that Guibert had been told about. The longer the transmission chain, the greater the chance of stylizing (Herdt, 1992: 64).

Groups with the common custom of relating dreams play an important role in the transmission of dreams. Analogous to the concept of *narrating communities* used in research on oral transmission, one might call them *dream-narrating communities*. The narrating community is a collective that preserves certain stories by telling them and listening to them (Dégh, 1962: 51-55). The narrative material of the group is selected from the totality of available stories in accordance with the purposes it wants the stories to serve, for example to entertain, educate or warn its members. The same holds true for dream-narrating communities. They similarly preserve certain dreams in accordance with whatever purposes are relevant to the group. In contemporary cultural anthropology dream research, ample attention is devoted to collectives of this kind (Tedlock, 1992a: 20-30; Kracke, 1992; Herdt, 1992; Tedlock, 1992b). A good medieval example of a dream-narrating community is the small social circle Guibert grew up in, consisting of Guibert himself, his mother, his tutor and an administrator. Jean-Claude Schmitt (1985) has given an excellent analysis of this social circle.<sup>7</sup>

What we have here is a relatively long-term dream-narrating community. In addition, there are more spontaneous, incidental chains of transmission. One example of this type of chain is how the story about Dean Bertulf's dream was transmitted in the flow of rumours in the

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7. Other examples include Hathumoda's fellow nuns, who dreamt just as she did about her end drawing near, and the Cistercian narrative community around Caesarius of Heisterbach, where numerous stories were told about dreams (McGuire, 1980: 180, 190, 206-208).



turbulent times after the murder of Charles the Good. Future research could address these dream-narrating communities and transmission chains. An appropriate criterion might be: (e) *Does the text to be examined contain indications of how the dream was transmitted?*

### *The dreaming*

In their dreams, dreamers always use the material they have at hand, whatever is available, the people, animals and objects from the world of their day-to-day experiences, and the images and thoughts they are familiar with.

Ever since Freud, the point of departure in psychoanalytical research has been that from this material, first the latent dream contents are formed and then the manifest dream. The latent – literally the concealed – contents of the dream remain unconscious; in principle, the manifest dream is accessible for the conscious part of our mind. This is the dream the dreamer can remember the next day.

The latent dream contents are turned into the manifest dream by way of what Freud calls dream work (*Traumarbeit*), the processing of the original dream which remains latent. Certain mechanisms, condensation, displacement and the use of images, play a role in this processing (Freud, 1900a: 284-512). Condensation: someone appears in a dream with the face of A, but he also bears a resemblance to B and in the dream he is C. In condensation, one element from the manifest dream thus stands for various elements from the latent dream. Displacement: a direct reference is replaced by an allusion and there can be a shift in emphasis so that whatever was the major issue in the latent dream now becomes only a minor issue in the manifest dream. The use of images: visual images come to replace mental concepts, representations and words. Sadness that a person can not cope with might be replaced in a dream by rainfall with no umbrella around. These mechanisms distort the latent lasting contents of the dream. This is where a culture makes itself felt by way of what Freud calls the censor. Desires that we do not wish to admit having are depicted in such a camouflaged fashion that they would seem to be acceptable to the conscious part of our mind. In psychoanalytical therapy, the path from the latent to the manifest dream is taken in the opposite direction. The patient tells the analyst the contents of a manifest dream. The analyst asks the patient what comes into his mind in this connection. The associations that generate from the manifest dream show the way to the latent dream. In very simple terms, this is the essence of the dream theory in classical psychoanalysis. After Freud, quite a few very different opinions were

expressed in this respect by psychoanalytically oriented researchers from other disciplines as well as by psychoanalysts. I will not go into these opinions here, but I do want to say that I am only selecting the parts of classic Freudian theory that I feel are useful to historical dream research.

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from Freud's ideas about dreams that are relevant to this research. Firstly, during the dreaming, enormous displacement of the original dream thoughts can have taken place. Secondly, as far as I know texts from the past only contain manifest dreams and not the contents of latent dreams. It is no longer possible to ask medieval dreamers about their associations. This is why the latent dream thoughts always or virtually always remain outside our field of vision. Sometimes we can formulate a more or less well-founded assumption in this connection.

It is mainly the dreams of Guibert of Nogent that arouse the interest of psychologically oriented historians. This is quite understandable. Guibert tells us so much about his youth and about the dreams he had at the time that we can not help wondering how the circumstances of his life influenced these dreams. He came from the middle echelons of the aristocracy. His mother was dominant and extremely religious; she probably had an anti-sexual attitude. The marriage Guibert was born from was not consummated until after Guibert's future father had fathered a child with another woman. Guibert was predestined to join the clergy. His father died when he was eight months old. Later in Guibert's life a tutor, a strict man with violent tendencies, served as a father substitute. Guibert's mother was ambivalent about his deceased father. If we can believe Guibert, she was glad to have been released by his death from her conjugal duty, sexuality, but at the same time she was concerned about the punishment her husband would have to undergo in the hereafter for his extramarital affair.

Guibert writes the following account of the dreams of his youth: "He [the Devil] presented to my gaze in sleep many visions of dead men, especially those whom I had seen or heard of as slain with swords or by some such death" (Guibert de Nogent, *Autobiographie*: book I, ch. 15; Labande, 1981: 114-115). He then very expressively describes the effect of these frightening dreams. It does not matter whether he has someone with him or not. He can not control his fear and becomes afraid to fall asleep.

Death figures prominently in these dreams. If it is true that he himself has seen people die by the sword, it is understandable that this should have left him with nightmares. But if it is not true, the fact still remains that he was brought up among the aristocracy, and thus in circles of professional

warriors. Death by violence was always a possibility, and consequently a source of fear. It is not surprising that this fear should have emerged in the dreams of the child Guibert.

Schmitt (1985: 311-313) tries to give an explanation that goes even further. He wonders whether Guibert's deceased father comes back in the images of the dead. This seems quite plausible. The father died young, and this is something a child can easily start fantasizing about. Will he die young too, just like his father? What is more, Guibert's mother's ambivalent feelings about his father can have confused him. In his writings, however, Guibert does not draw any link between the contents of his dreams and his father. Since we have no access to his associations with the dreams, there is no way of knowing for sure whether there was any link. Even in a case like this with ample information available about someone's youth that is psychoanalytically relevant, it is still impossible to arrive at a strictly psychoanalytical interpretation of his dreams, in other words a precise connection between the autobiographical information and the contents of the dreams.

It is possible though to establish a somewhat less precise connection between the atmosphere in the circles Guibert grew up in and the contents of his dreams. It is very probable that these dreams are authentic. They are not stereotype and they are psychologically plausible, in other words they are very much in keeping with the circumstances and problems of the dreamer. In this case, the manifest dreams and the auxiliary information supplied by the texts provide enough leads to make the dreams psychologically comprehensible.<sup>8</sup> This brings me to a psychological criterion that can be used to test accounts of dreams in historical texts: (f) *If the contents of a dream are in keeping with what we know about the preoccupations of the dreamer, if they are psychologically plausible, then the dream can have been dreamt.*

Besides Guibert's dreams, we have come across several other examples of dreams that are psychologically plausible. Abbess Hathumoda's dream about the water mill was probably evoked by her fear of the epidemic. Thietmar's dream about the elderly clergyman reproaching him was probably aroused by his guilt about neglecting the man. Bertulf's dream about the garrotte was probably evoked by his anxiety due to the risk he ran as a conspirator. And lastly, the Cistercian lay brother's dream was probably inspired by his desire to skip the vigils, and he was calling upon Mary to help him out.

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8. This is an argument supporting the standpoint defended by some authors that more significance should be attributed to the manifest dream; cf. Spanjaard (1969).

A criterion like this was clearly formulated from a very specific perspective on the material to be researched. As anthropologists say, it is *etic* and not *emic*, in other words it is viewed from the culture of the researcher and not the culture to be researched.

With the criterion of psychological plausibility, I have tried to expand and enrich the historical criticism options. The following psychoanalytical criterion has the same aim: (g) *If the description of a dream has features indicating that dream work has been done, it is all the more probable that the described dream is authentic.* The features I have in mind are the presence of graphic, non-stereotype images, tangibility, and displacement.

There are various examples of graphic, non-stereotype images in the dream about the water-mill in the *Vita Hathumodae*, including the wheel, the water and the shore of the brook. The wheel is gigantic, there is the threat that it will start moving, there is the rapid flow of the water, falling into the water seems inevitable and lastly, the dreamer does indeed fall on the shore.

As to its tangibility, the concrete setting of the dream consists of scenery, animals and objects probably known to the dreamer. My example is from the historian Rodulfus Glaber's account of the dream of Leutard, the Burgundian religious dissident. "About the end of the year 1000 a poor man called Leutard, from the village of Vertus in the county of Châlons in Gaul, became famous. [...] One day when he was working alone on an agricultural task in the field he became tired and fell asleep, and then he dreamt that a great swarm of bees entered his body through nature's secret orifices. They came out of his mouth buzzing loudly and stinging him many times, but when this had gone on for a while they spoke, ordering him to do things impossible for human kind. Eventually, very tired, he got up ..." (Rodulfus Glaber, *Historiarum libri quinque*: book II, ch. 11; France et al., 1989: 88-92). Glaber goes on to describe how Leutard launched his programme of religious innovation. He sent his wife away, shattered a crucifix, opposed the payment of tithes to the church, and qualified the authority of the Bible.

Since this is a significant text in the research on medieval heresies, numerous authors have already pondered the meaning of the bees in this dream. Studious efforts were made to discover parallels in other medieval texts, but all in vain. The least contrived, most obvious interpretation would seem to be the following. During his afternoon nap, Leutard was disturbed by insects. The disturbance was magnified and dramatized in his dream. The actual disturbance of his nap was mixed via an unconscious link with the sense he must have had of enduring the weight of an incredibly heavy job. In the languid heat of the Burgundian countryside,

insects would buzz around a peasant taking an afternoon nap – isn't this a very tangible and authentic scene?

As to displacement, in the example I give here, an image from the Bible might have been used in a dream to allude to a matter that is urgent for the dreamer. When Ansgar, the Bishop of Hamburg in the middle of the ninth century, was preparing a mission to spread Christianity to Sweden, he had a dream that he viewed as evidence of divine approval. In a building that was part of a large monastery complex, he came across Adalhard (the man who was the Abbot of Corbie when Ansgar was there as a young monk). The abbot quoted from the prophet Isaiah, where God announces that all humankind will turn to him: "Listen, O isles, unto me and harken ye people from far" (Isaiah 49:1), in the Vulgate: *Audite insulae et attendite populi de longe* (Rimbertus, *Vita Anskarii*: ch. 25; Waitz, 1977: 55). According to Wittmer-Butsch (1990: 235-237), it is the word *insulae*, literally islands, that enabled Ansgar to see the quote from Isaiah as related to Scandinavia, which a ninth-century man could have thought consisted of islands. She thinks this link was not made until after the dream, as might well be the case. I think it also could have occurred in the dream or even earlier, in an unconscious daytime link that was then incorporated into the dream.<sup>9</sup> It does not really make much difference though. If displacement did indeed take place from the Mediterranean coast of the days of Isaiah to ninth-century Scandinavia, it was surely evidence of dream work.<sup>10</sup>

I would like to mention two research options that enable the researcher to make use of his own emotional responses. These options were suggested by several psychoanalysts with regard to a number of medieval dreams that I had submitted to them.<sup>11</sup>

Firstly: (h) *The account of the dream contains recognizable aspects that arouse empathy.* They wondered whether authentic descriptions of dreams would evoke a more emotional response in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western Europeans than texts in which the descriptions of dreams are derived from literature. Of course this is related to the psychological plausibility I referred to before, but it differs from it in that the emphasis is on the

9. Did he read Isaiah and unconsciously link this passage to his Scandinavian plans?

10. The possibility can not be completely ruled out that Ansgar made up this dream. After all, he did want to go to Scandinavia (cf. criterion b). I still think though that this dream can be authentic. Not just because of the displacement, but even more so because of the roaming about – so characteristic of many dreams – on the monastery grounds. And because he came across an emotionally important person from his past, Abbot Adalhard of Corbie, who had been responsible for his training. Ansgar put the key text of the dream in the abbot's mouth.

11. In the "Shame Club" referred to above in note 1. I would like to thank Dries van Dantzig and Regina van Gelderen for these suggestions.

emotional response of the researcher and because in the first instance, this reaction only pertains to the dream itself and only in the second instance to the information around it.

Secondly: (i) *Ideas come into the mind of the person reading the account of the dream that are comparable to the associations people have during psychoanalysis.* It was suggested that this is probably less the case with literary stereotype texts than authentic dream texts. This bears a close resemblance to the recognizable aspects that arouse empathy that I have just referred to, but it goes a step further. The underlying idea is that authentic "dream thinking" in texts stimulates "dream thinking" on the part of the reader.

I mention these two research possibilities with some hesitation. In this context, testing against the texts using the fine check of historical research will often be unfeasible. The risk of researchers projecting their own feelings onto the medieval texts is not inconceivable. It is true though that everyone who studies dreams from the past is consciously or unconsciously using his own dream experiences; the two criteria I referred to before can be seen as explicit formulations of this fact. What is more, the intersubjective opinions that emerge within the community of researchers counter the overly individual, subjective interpretations. This is why I still think it would be a good idea to experiment with these research options. That is the only way to find out what these experiments might produce.

### *Conclusion*

Which recounted medieval dreams are probably authentic and which ones probably are not? Using the criteria I have formulated here, there is no way to prove a dream was dreamt one way and not another.<sup>12</sup> In some cases it can be made plausible though that a dream can have been dreamt a certain way. The more criteria are applicable to a certain case, the more probable that it is a reliable account of an authentic dream.

My list of criteria is a proposal. Future research will undoubtedly lead to some of the criteria being altered or eliminated and others being added.

One might expect dream research in the field of the physiology of the brain for example to influence historical research. Physiological factors appear to influence dreams where people are moving in space and dreams

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12. If only because of the obvious fact that the dreamer is the only witness to his dream (Stewart, 1997: 877). This encouraged Dutton (1994: 24-27) to deny that we would be able to determine whether or not a text contains an authentic dream in his astute but somewhat blunt discourse on remembering, recounting, and writing down dreams. Later in his book (*Ibid.*: 256) he does retract this in part.

in which they see other beings appear (Tedlock, 1992a: 14 and the literature cited there). It is conceivable that in combination with dream scripts being available to medieval dreamers, this fact has produced numerous dreams that make a stereotype impression on us but might nonetheless be authentic dreams that were really dreamt.<sup>13</sup> In medieval texts there are numerous examples of dreams about moving as well as dreams about seeing beings appear. Apparitions were especially apt to occur in dreams that were "sought" during incubation rituals, when people went to sleep near the graves of saints in the hope that they would appear to them and cure them of their diseases. As regards the Middle Ages, further research should be conducted on dreaming in accordance with scripts that were already there in the minds of the dreamers, which we are familiar with from anthropological studies. The possibility should be taken into account of dream scripts in the form of orally transmitted stories or – in literate clerical circles – written accounts of dreams.

At every stage of the transmission process from the dream to the text, distortion or selection can occur. It is significant in this connection whether a dream has been recounted, passed on and recorded, and how this has been done. Familiarity with the mechanisms that play a role can help us realistically assess whether and to what extent a text goes back to a dream.

At every stage, one or more interests of an existential, social, cultural, religious or some other nature can serve as the engine driving the process. Someone dreams about something because it is important to him. He tells his dream to other people because it interests or intrigues him or because he is afraid of it or because he expects them to be interested. If the other people pass on the dream, the same holds true. And the author has his own reasons for recording a dream in writing. At the various stages of dreams being passed down, they are indicative of what was important to the people who played a role in the transmission process. This is the value of dreams as historical sources.

As I have noted, manifest dreams and the information around them provided by the texts are what give us psychological insight into a number of dreams. This is also the case with a number of dreams that the recording authors do not view as autobiographical documents. As I have noted, the common views among medieval clergy were that dreams were often sent by supernatural powers, that they sometimes contained orders from these powers, and that they sometimes contained predictions. It would seem that these views did not distort the contents of a number of

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13. In the course of the discussion, Josine Blok rightly pointed out the possible effect of scripts on dreams and the possible consequences for dream research.

the dreams recorded in writing to the extent that we can no longer understand them or have an emotional response to them. This also holds true for some of the dreams recorded prior to the twelfth century, in other words in a period when the clerical conception of the dream left little space for man himself as the source of his dreams, and when dreams were virtually always viewed as signs that came from outside powers. Four of the accounts of dreams that I cited go back to this period; the dreams of Hathumoda and Ansgar date back to the ninth century, and the dreams of Thietmar and Leutard to around the year 1000. In my opinion, these dreams might well be authentic.<sup>14</sup>

How can we explain that some dreams were resistant as it were to the ideas about dreams prevailing at the time? Ideas about dreams are part and parcel of a culture. This is why they change in the course of history. Dreams, at any rate if they are authentic, are documents of a deeper level than ideas about dreams. In my opinion, dreaming as an activity of the psyche has remained unaltered throughout history. The capacity to express ourselves in our sleep in images, in spatiality, in movement, the interaction between the unconscious and conscious layers of the mind – all this is part of man's biological equipment, it is part of our nature, it is a historical constant.

However, even if the capacity to dream is part of the nature of man, there is still a link between the contents of our dreams and the culture we live in. People dream about things that are important to them, and this is where culture comes in. This is why the things people focus on in their dreams have undergone various extents of change in the course of time.

The easiest way to illustrate these various extents of change is with an example. On several occasions, we have come across the fear of death as the subject of dreams. Abbess Hathumoda dreamt about death and so did Dean Bertulf and Guibert of Nogent. In the first instance, the fear of death seems to be a given throughout the ages. Hathumoda however had a very specific reason to think about death at that particular point in time, an epidemic. Bertulf was afraid of dying in a very specific way, by the instrument of torture he could see every day at the market square, and there was a very specific reason for his fear, since he was an accomplice to

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14. The discrepancy between the predominantly disapproving stance of early medieval theologians *vis à vis* dreams and the sizeable number of dreams registered during the same period in monastic circles continues to be intriguing. According to the study by Moreira (2000), the tolerance on the part of the clergy towards the dreams of laymen in the Merovingian period sometimes appears to have been greater than was previously assumed. One consequence of all this is that if any efforts are to be made to research the status of the dream in various periods and settings, an analysis of the explicitly formulated views of prominent intellectuals will not suffice. It will have to be followed by the systematic registration of dreams in narrative historical texts.



the murder of the Flemish Count. In Guibert's case, the circumstances under which he came to know and fear death were similarly specific, inherent as they were to the aristocratic military circles he grew up in. So a problem was addressed in these dreams that is universal, but at the same time characteristic of certain circumstances or certain circles.

Dreams are also very specific in another way. A dream can be an expression of the emotional world of the group the dreamer belongs to, but it is still always an expression of an individual's personal emotional world (Stewart, 1997). In addition to the constant of dreaming as an activity of the psyche, this is a second constant. In his dreams, man often remains involved with the people close to him, with the world around him, the problems of his age and the problems that have been the same throughout the ages, but in his dreams he always sees everything with his own eyes and from his own perspective. If they are preserved, dreams can become documents. At the moment they are dreamt, they are no more and no less than ego documents.

**Rudi Künzel**

Linnaeusparkweg 79 boven  
NL-1098 CS Amsterdam

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#### **Summary**

##### *Medieval Dreams. A Sample of Historical and Psychological Criticism*

Accounts of the contents of dreams in medieval texts can be the result of a process that occurred in stages: first the dreaming, then the narrating and finally the recording. First, someone dreams a dream. He remembers it and tells it to himself as it were; then he tells someone else what he dreamt. The other person writes it down. Occasionally other oral links occur in this chain between the dreamer and the transcriber of the dream. Each stage of this process contains elements that can affect whether the dream is preserved or not and can also have a distorting effect on the original contents of the dream. The mechanisms involved in this process are the subject of this study.

Medieval texts also frequently contain passages that *appear* to describe dreams but do not really do so; rather they are pure literary creations or clichés. In this article a number of criteria for analyzing texts containing dreams are developed using insights and techniques from historical philology, cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis.

The standpoint I am defending is that although ideas about dreams change in the course of time and from culture to culture, the mental activity of dreaming is part of man's biological baggage and is thus a historical constant.

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**Key words**

Medieval Dreams, Recording of Dreams, Explanation of Dreams.