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Dreaming and the Symbiotic Relationship Between Christianity and the Carolingian Dynasty

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“AND JACOB WAS LEFT ALONE; AND THERE WRESTLED A MAN WITH HIM UNTIL THE BREAKING OF THE DAY. AND WHEN HE SAW THAT HE PREVAILED NOT AGAINST HIM... HE SAID, LET ME GO, FOR THE DAY BREAKETH. AND HE SAID, I WILL NOT LET THEE GO, EXCEPT THOU BLESS ME. AND HE SAID UNTO HIM, WHAT IS THY NAME? AND HE SAID, JACOB. AND HE SAID, THY NAME SHALL BE CALLED NO MORE JACOB, BUT ISRAEL: FOR AS A PRINCE HAST THOU POWER WITH GOD AND WITH MEN, AND HAST PREVAILED.”¹ (Genesis 32.24-28)

Jacob wrestled with an angel of God and came away with a new name. He emerges from the dream a different man with a different designation: “He who rules with God”, or according to some translations, “He who struggles with God”. Through his sleeping encounter with God, Jacob’s position in the world changes. This change in character occurs through a dream.

Many documents from the eighth and ninth centuries refer to events that occur in dreams and visions, a continuation of a biblical tradition as seen above.² Secondary literature addressing dreaming in the Middle Ages has focused overwhelmingly on defining, and drawing distinctions between, ‘dreams’ and ‘visions’, a project which Raoul Manselli identifies as admittedly problematic due to the “relationship between dream and vision that is extremely narrow and, yet, at the same time, dangerously equivocal.”³ However, perhaps with respect to the Carolingian period, with relatively fewer texts than the later Middle Ages, it is less meaningful to debate the phenomenology of dreams and more fruitful to attempt to understand why references to dreams and visions appear so regularly and what purpose they serve. Dreams from the Carolingian period can represent a turning point in a story, as in the biblical tale of Jacob and the angel. They can also serve as warnings foretelling the consequences of not changing one’s behaviors. In both of these capacities, dreams and visions reinforce the symbiotic relationship between Christianity and the Carolingian dynasty.

Setting out to understand the role of dreams during the Carolingian period it is important to note that the dreams to which we have access are those that have been recorded and survived as physical documents for approximately twelve centuries. The analysis necessarily excludes all dreams that were never written down and thus the present collection of literature is certainly not representative of Carolingian dreaming culture as a whole. “We do not know if ‘average’ people dreamt differently than we do now, whether they discussed their dreams over breakfast, or how they responded to particularly portentous dream images.”⁴ We are out of touch with how dreaming as a whole was perceived in Carolingian culture and must realize the limitations of our sources. For this reason, it is useful to think about dreaming as a literary genre.

Although written records of dreams are intrinsically linked to the upper echelons of society, not all dreamers are emperors. Several people among the Carolingian sources who have visions and dreams are, for example, servants of Einhard⁵ or the “Poor Woman of Laon”.⁶ Raoul Manselli’s description of dreams of people from “inferior classes of society” (“*gli strati inferiori della società*”) attempts to invest the dreamers with social significance. He claims that “by virtue of their dream they emerge from the mass and express that which they dreamed, placing themselves within either individual or collective psychology.”⁷ This approach, aside from being anachronistic, does not seem meaningful for the Carolingian era given our examples. The Poor Woman of Laon, as immortalized in the account of her dream, does not appear as a representative of individual or collective psychology, but merely as a depersonalized vessel for the issuing of a message. She does not appear as breaking off from the “mass”, but rather she is a symbolic embodiment of the common-person. There is nothing that sets her apart as an individual, nor do we have evidence that the vision is even hers. Einhard’s dreaming servants, although more personalized (they have names) are also not meant to be spokesmen for their social group; they are messengers for the saints. Everything we read from the Carolingian era comes to us through the filter of the literate elite. Paul Dutton admits, “a king-centered view of Carolingian history must certainly be inaccurate, as we have been repeatedly warned, but we need to remember that the writers of the ninth century were royalists.”⁸ Non-elite dreamers may often appear in the texts, but they appear as characters in a story composed by the elite, not as their own agents.

Carolingian dreams should be divided into two categories: (1) dreams

that provide an explanation for a decision and (2) “travelogue”⁹ dreams, in which the dreamer is transported to a different place, usually hell, in order to influence a decision that should be made. Rimbert’s *Life of Anskar* details many dreams and visions “which admonished him [Anskar] to turn his thoughts away from things on earth and to keep his whole heart open to heavenly ones.”¹⁰ At five years old, Anskar’s mother died leaving Anskar to the “foolish talk and jests” of boyhood, until he receives a vision during the night that convinces him to devote himself to a life of piety and learning. The transformation of his personality was immediate. “His companions were amazed that his manner of life had so quickly changed.”¹¹ In this biographical account, Anskar’s personal transformation is due to a dream.

Stories from The Life of Saint Leoba provide further examples of explanatory dreams. Leoba’s parents, Aebba and Dynno were barren, but “after many years had passed and the onset of old age had deprived them of all hope of offspring, her mother had a dream.” This dream indicated a change in course of the story; Aebba had conceived a daughter like Hannah of the Old Testament.¹² Leoba also has an explanatory dream in which there is a purple thread coming from her mouth which she works tirelessly to roll into a ball. An aged nun interprets the dream stating that Leoba “will profit many by her words and example, and the effect of them will be felt in other lands afar off whither she will go.”¹³ Leoba’s dream is an explanation of the direction her life will take.

These examples carry on the tradition of explanatory dreams and visions that are found in the Old Testament. The story of Jacob and the angel is only one such biblical example among the forty-three that Jacques Le Goff identifies in the Old Testament and the nine in the New Testament.¹⁴ Dreams used as a literary device to explain change is part of the Christian literary tradition. An abundance of Carolingian dream literature in Christianity strengthens Rosamond McKitterick’s argument that Christianity “was envisioned from the fourth century onward in terms of texts and more particularly, of the writings containing the fundamental ideas of Christian faith and practice.”¹⁵ This is not to say that dreams and visions are one of the “fundamental ideas” of Christianity standing alongside the Trinity and the sacraments. However, the literary nature of Carolingian Christianity predisposes it to value not only physical written texts,¹⁶ but also the literary methods used to present ideas within the text. Dreams and visions as a literary device for explaining change trace their origins to the Bible and reappear written in Carolingian sources.

Dreaming as a literary device is not used only in religious biographies and hagiographies. Einhard in his *Translation and Miracles* uses this technique extensively. Einhard's assistant's notary, upon arriving in Rome, fell ill and had a vision in which he learns that "[Events] will not turn out as you think [they will], but quite differently."¹⁷ The storyline of the tale changes from its obvious path, and this change is indicated through a vision. Later, when the saints Marcellinus and Peter have been brought to Michelstadt, the man guarding the saints falls asleep and hears a voice tell him to inform Einhard that "these holy martyrs of his do not want their bodies to rest in this place, because they have selected another place to which they intend to move very soon."¹⁸ When Einhard does not follow the instructions of the saints, another of his servants has a dream and following the second warning, "it happened that for twelve straight days no night passed in which it was not revealed in dreams to... our companions that the bodies of the saints should be transferred from that place." In these examples, dreams are the catalyst and justification of an action; they explain the change of the location of the saints. Although this story is about saints, it is not a hagiographical account and thus shows the use of explanatory dreams within other literary contexts.

Dreams are not always used to explain a sudden change in the course of a written account, they also can take the shape of a warning. Jonathan Shepard describes these dreams as "travelogues", following in Gregory the Great's tradition of creating an image of the world to come. Travel reports of journeys to the world to come filled in a landscape, left vague in theology, with images of dragons, fires, and unbearable torments.¹⁹ Shepard further identifies visions of the next world as "a feature of ninth century political discourse."²⁰ Paul Dutton identifies almost thirty dreams from the ninth century containing political material.²¹ This type of "travelogue" vision occurred to Charles the Fat, and to other non-elite persons such as Anskar and the Poor Woman of Laon. In both personal and political contexts, dreams bringing the dreamer to heaven or hell could recommend a moral course of action by presenting the dreamer with a moral decision and showing the possible consequences of continuing upon a particular course.

The Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon politically relates to the aftermath of the *Ordinato Imperii* with which Louis the Pious divides his kingdom among his sons. In the *Vision* a poor woman was "seized by a state of ecstasy" in which she was led by a monk into the world to come where she saw Charlemagne and other famous people in states of punishment and

glory. The woman's guide also shows her Queen Ermengard being tormented. The guide takes her finally to a wall inscribed with golden letters marking the entrance into terrestrial paradise for all those whose names appear on the wall. There, "the name of King Louis was so faint and almost obliterated that it could scarcely be seen." She learns that prior to the murder of Bernard, no name had been clearer, and her guide commands her to bring this news to Louis's attention.²² This woman's vision is a critique of Louis's decision with respect to Bernard and the reorganization of the empire and indicates the consequences to Louis (an eternity of torment) of not changing his actions.

Anskar's travel vision represents a similar scenario to that of the Poor Woman of Laon. Anskar, shortly after his tonsure, began to be corrupted by human weakness and his early resolve to live justly was weakening. One night he has a vision that as he was about to die he was approached by Saint Peter and Saint John who led him to purgatory and left him there for three days where he "suffered much and seemed to have experienced the blackest darkness and the most enormous pressure and choking." After three days, the saints came to him and brought him to heaven before the Almighty who commanded him to go back to earth and return to heaven crowned with martyrdom. "As a result of this vision... the servant of God was both terrified and comforted, and in the fear of the Lord he began to live more carefully."²³ Anskar exemplifies what Augustine teaches about dreams: that the dreams themselves did not represent a moral judgment on the dreamer, but that they allowed for "human beings [to] use, for good or ill, the knowledge they gain in dreams."²⁴ Anskar, being given a taste of the worlds to come, rights himself on the path to heaven and proceeds to lead a virtuous life.

The *Vision of Charles the Fat* is a slightly different genre than the previous two travel visions, because it is a dream with a political purpose, supposedly written not by an outside critic like the Woman of Laon, but by Charles himself. One evening, following religious services, Charles the Fat proceeds to bed, when he hears a voice telling him that his spirit will leave his body. As in the story of Saint Leoba, Charles is given a ball of thread to hold and led into "the deepest fiery valleys, which were full of pits burning with tar, sulphur, lead, wax, and oil" where he finds the bishops of his father and uncles "burning in infernal punishment." The bishops call to Charles, urging him to be sure that his clergy do not lead their parishoners astray, or they too will suffer in the next world. As Charles progresses further into this purgatory he finds other acquaintances submerged in boiling metals;

these men are the magnates of his father and brothers. They advise him against pride and greed for indeed “the powerful suffer powerfully in punishment.” Charles and his guide proceed on to find kings of Charles’s line suffering in a “valley aflame with every kind of fire.”²⁵

Finally, Charles arrives at a vat of boiling water with Louis the German (Charles’s father) immersed in it. Louis tells Charles that because of the prayers of Saint Peter and Saint Remi his punishment has been greatly lessened. Louis pleads that the ecclesiastical order come to his assistance with “Masses, offerings, psalms, vigils, and charity” for through these modes he can be freed from his punishments and allowed to progress to God’s paradise as Lothar and Louis II had already done. Charles and his guides then travel to heaven where Louis II tells Charles that by hereditary right Louis, the son of Ermengard, should inherit the empire and that this was “according to the design of God.”²⁶

Charles’s dream journey through purgatory exemplifies the use of dreams as political texts. The vision justifies a transfer of power in the kingdom through a literary medium, the dream. In the dream Charles is presented with a moral decision: to continue ruling greedily and bring about the end of his empire or to appoint the child Louis as God wishes. The outcome of the dream, Charles’s decision to transfer power to Louis, brings with it God’s approval.

One of the distinct characteristics of the Carolingian dynasty is its tradition of appealing to Christianity to validate itself. According to Einhard, when the last of the Merovingian kings was deposed, Pope Zacharias established Pippin as the new King of the Franks.²⁷ Lacking a royal pedigree, Pippin sought a new source of legitimacy: God, and more specifically, the God of Christianity. He accesses this God’s approval through the authority of the bishop of Rome, the Pope. Later, Charlemagne follows Pippin’s model and has himself, and later his son Louis the Pious, anointed emperor. Through the *Admonitio generalis* of 789, in which Charlemagne introduces himself as “king and *rector* of the kingdom of the Franks,” Charlemagne further establishes the central role of Christianity within his kingdom and his role presiding over the secular and religious affairs of the kingdom.²⁸ Christianity is not only the religion of the state, it is also the framework for society and the language of discourse.

Following in this tradition, it makes sense that ninth-century rulers would borrow a Christian literary device such as dreaming in order to increase their legitimacy. Carolingian writers reinvented a literary genre, which they then

adapted to their own times.²⁹ Charles the Fat's dream asserts at once the supremacy of God and God's approval of the Emperor's agenda. Charles uses Christianity to help validate his reign, just as his predecessors had done. The vision portrays a society in which religious adherence promotes a civil administration, but in turn, that civil authority must reciprocate through its support for Christianity. In the dream, Louis the German tells Charles to purchase Masses for the dead and contribute to charities in order to free the deceased from purgatory and send them to God's realm in heaven. Urging the sponsorship of Masses "enhanced the mediating role of the clergy, and above all, monks."³⁰ In the *Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon*, Charlemagne's eternal security is similarly assured, "if the Emperor Louis, his son, fully provides for seven memorial services on his behalf."³¹ The Carolingian dynasty uses the authority of Christianity and reinvests some of that authority in ecclesiastical structures. Both the authorities of Christianity and the monarchy gain from visionary literature depicting the world to come.

Mayke De Jong describes the visionary literature of this era as warnings to kings and "thinly-veiled criticisms" of their activities.³² This is the case in the *Vision of Charles*, but dreams are not only used to level criticism on rulers. They were also used by rulers to reinforce the position of the monarchy and the ecclesiastical role in securing that position. In return for testifying to the Carolingian's legitimacy, the *Vision of Charles* requests support for ecclesiastical institutions, such as monasteries, that will continue to benefit the dynasty even after death. As hagiography "lead the forces of the sacred into well-defined channels connected with political power, be it Episcopal, royal, or both,"³³ Christians and their rulers similarly harnessed literary dreaming as a form of political communication.

The previous discourse leads one to question the perceived veracity of these dreams in the era in which they were received. Dutton recognizes that for historians today there is no "acid test with which to distinguish between the real and fictive dreams of the past."³⁴ *The Vision of Charlemagne* is an account of political dreaming, composed possibly more than half a century after his death. The story tells of a dream in which Charlemagne is given a sword with an inscription predicting the end of the Carolingian reign. The presence of Old High German words within the text is an indication that the dream did not actually occur³⁵, but nevertheless it supports Shepard's claim about the widespread use of dreams in political discourse. Historians today can occasionally determine dream stories to be true or false, but for contemporary recipients of Carolingian dream texts, were these dreams per-

ceived as authentic? Were Carolingians simply relying on the significance of physical books as “symbols of [the] authority of the Church and of God,”³⁶ or was there a true belief in what the dreams revealed? The answer is a combination of these two options. Charlemagne’s condemnation of the use of “*somniatorum conjectores*”³⁷ for “predictive or magical purposes” reflects at least a perceived culture of belief in dreams and their interpretation in the Carolingian empire.³⁸ Combine this with the literary tradition of Christianity and the role of dreams as a literary device within that tradition, and there seems to be evidence that these dreams would be imbued with import, if not unquestioning belief.

The Carolingian dynasty constantly sought legitimacy while simultaneously struggling to maintain a vast and diverse empire. Beginning with Pippin, Carolingians have had a history of turning to Christian traditions as a source of validation of their dynasty. Dreams, as a literary device, would have resonated with Carolingian writers as a method for communicating this social agenda. Dream literature shows visions and dreaming as explanations for changes. Borrowing from these explanatory dreams, “travelogue” dreams take the dreamer to heaven or hell as an impetus for the dreamer to change his behavior. Carolingian writers adapt this literary device to ninth century political discourse, offering criticism of rulers through dreams. However, this dreaming tradition, borrowed from the Christian Bible as well as hagiographies, also creates an opportunity for the Carolingians to reinforce the importance of Christianity through its eternal salvation of souls through Masses for the dead. The literary culture of dreaming is yet another method by which Christianity and the Carolingian dynasty mutually reinforce each other. The Carolingians did not fight with God’s angel as Jacob did, but rather chose to embrace him to the benefit of both parties. The kingdom of the Franks, as a self-proclaimed “New Israel”, chose to accept the translation of the Hebrew, *Israel*, as meaning “he who rules with God” rather than “he who struggles with God”.

¹ *The Holy Bible, King James Version*. Designed and Illustrated by Barry Moser. Penguin Group: New York, 1999. (33)

² For a quantitative discussion of the occurrences of dreams in the Bible and a discussion of the continuity of dream culture through antiquity until the seventh century see: Jacques Le Goff, “Le Cristianisme et les Rêves (II^e-VII^e siècles).” In *I Sogni nel Medioevo*. Ed. Tullio Gregori. Papers from the Seminario Internazionale in Rome, 2-4 October 1983. Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1985.

- ³ “rapporto tra sogno e visione, che so estrapolatamente stretto e, nello stesso tempo, pericolosamente equivoco.” Manselli, Raoul. “Il Sogno come Premonizione, Consiglio e Predizione nella Tradizione Medioevale.” In *I Sogni nel Medioevo*. Ed. Tullio Gregori. Paper from the Seminario Internazionale in Rome, 2-4 October 1983. Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1985. (221)
- ⁴ Kruger, Steven F. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. (4)
- ⁵ Einhard. *The Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter*. Edited and translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*. (71)
- ⁶ *The Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon*. Edited and Translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. (203)
- ⁷ “in virtù del loro sogno escono dalla massa ed esprimono ciò che hanno sognato, ricollegandosi alla psicologia individuale o collettiva.” Manselli, Raoul. “Il Sogno come Premonizione, Consiglio e Predizione nella Tradizione Medioevale.” (220)
- ⁸ Dutton, Paul Edward. *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. (4)
- ⁹ Shepard, Jonathan. “Europe and the Wider World.” In *The Early Middle Ages*. Ed. Rosamond McKitterick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. (212)
- ¹⁰ Rimbart. “Anskar and His Mission to Scandanavia.” Edited and Translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. (402)
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Rudolf of Fulda. “*The Life of Saint Leoba*.” Edited and Translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. (279)
- ¹³ Ibid. (280)
- ¹⁴ Le Goff, Jaques. “Le Cristianisme et les Rêves (II^e-VII^e siècles).” (172)
- ¹⁵ McKitterick, Rosamond. “Perceptions of the History of the Church.” In *Reading Images and Texts: Medieval Images as Forms of Communication*. Ed. Mariëlle Hageman and Marco Mostert. Papers from the Third Utrecht Symposium on Medieval Literacy, Utrecht, 7-9 December 2000. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2005. (208)
- ¹⁶ Ibid. (209)
- ¹⁷ Einhard. *The Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter*. (71)
- ¹⁸ Ibid. (79)
- ¹⁹ Shepard, Jonathan. “Europe and the Wider World.” (212)
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Dutton, Paul Edward. *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire*. (2)
- ²² “The Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon.” (203-204)
- ²³ Rimbart. “Anskar and His Mission to Scandanavia.” (405)
- ²⁴ Kruger, Steven F. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*. (39)
- ²⁵ “The Vision of Charles the Fat.” Edited and Translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. (537-538)
- ²⁶ Ibid. (538-540)
- ²⁷ Einhard. *The Life of Charlemagne*. Edited and translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1998. (18)
- ²⁸ “*Admonitio generalis*.” In P.D. King, *Charlemagne: Translated Sources*. Lancaster:

University of Lancaster, 1987. #14. (209)

²⁹ Dutton, Paul Edward. *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire*. (2)

³⁰ Shepard, Jonathan. "Europe and the Wider World." (212)

³¹ "The Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon." (204)

³² De Jong, Mayke. "Religion." In *The Early Middle Ages*. Ed. Rosamond McKitterick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. (154)

³³ *Ibid.* (149)

³⁴ Dutton, Paul Edward. *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire*. (24)

³⁵ "The Vision of Charlemagne." Edited and Translated by Paul Edward Dutton. In *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. (456)

³⁶ McKitterick, Rosamond. "Perceptions of the History of the Church." (209)

³⁷ Lea, Henry Charles. *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft*. Ed. Arthur C. Howland. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1939. (137)

³⁸ Kruger, Steven F. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*. (11)