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More than the Shadow of a Doubt: Dream Theory and the Impersonation of Saints by Angels¹

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Abstract: This brief article makes the case that the 'uncritical' acceptance of the real presence of saints in dreams by the participants of the Second Council of Nicaea did not reflect the usual attitudes of the Byzantine elite. It shows that earlier and later writers denied such presence through recourse to dream theory, which attributed all 'good' dreams to the agency of angels.

Keywords: Second Council of Nicaea, Angels, Impersonation, Dream Theory



Bir Şüphenin Gölgesinden Daha Fazlası: Rüya Teorisi ve Azizlerin Melekler Tarafından Kişilendirilmesi

Öz: Bu kısa makale, rüyalardaki azizlerin İznik'in İkinci Konseyine katılanlarca tartışmasız kabulünün Bizans soylularının normal tavırlarını yansıtmadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Durum gösteriyor ki önceki ve sonraki yazarlar tüm iyi rüyaları melek unsuruna atıfta bulunulan rüya teorisi yardımıyla böyle bir varlığı inkar etmişlerdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkinci İznik Konseyi, melekler, kişilendirilme, rüya teorisi

Narratives of dreams in which saints make an appearance are a common feature in Byzantine collections of miracles and hagiographical texts in general. The authors of such narratives usually take great care to establish the identity of the figures that the dreamers see. The most straightforward way to achieve this aim was to have the saints themselves state who they are. Nicholas of Myra, for example, is said once to have introduced himself to an emperor with the words: 'I am Nicholas from the monastery of Moliboton.'² More popular, however, was another method of identification. Dreamers recognise the figures that appear to them by comparing them with their icons, which they resemble in all respects. The saintly physicians Cosmas and Damian, for example, are claimed to have

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² Anrich (1913), 415-416: Ἐγώ εἰμι - φησὶν - Νικόλαος ὁ ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Μολιβώτου μονῆς. Moliboton was a Constantinopolitan monastery dedicated to Nicholas.

appeared to the suffering 'in the shape in which they are represented'.³ Implicit in all these stories is the belief that name and appearance establish unequivocally the saints' real presence.⁴ The possibility of alternative agents is not considered.

Narratives of this kind played an important role at the Second Council of Nicaea. They were quoted at length because they seemed to justify the veneration of icons. Indeed, the participants of the council did not simply voice their approval of already existing stories; they also contributed some of their own. The metropolitan of Myra, for example, told his colleagues that his archdeacon had seen a venerable elder in a dream. The archdeacon identified this elder as the patriarch. The metropolitan, however, was of a different opinion. He asked for a description of the dream figure and then concluded that it did not resemble the patriarch but rather an image of Nicholas, the patron saint of his diocese. Here, too, the narrator has no doubt that the dream figure is indeed the saint. He ends his intervention with the statement: 'From this I realised that the holy Nicholas had appeared to him, through the resemblance to the icons.'⁵

This particular story annoyed the author of the *Opus Caroli*, the Carolingian response to the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea, who called it called 'laughable and childish'.⁶ This statement has given rise to the stereotypes of a critical West and a gullible East. However, matters are not as straightforward as they may seem. The author of the *Opus Caroli* does not stop at a simple condemnation but explains why the story cannot be true. In this context he presents the following argument:

For as future things and accounts of hidden secrets, when they are intimated through dreams, are revealed through angels, so in turn when things that are harmful and devoid of any profit are shown in dreams, they are believed to be shown by demons. Therefore if the dream, which he recounted at the synod, was shown to the archdeacon by angel in order to confirm the veneration of images, it is profitable to venerate images; and if it is profitable to venerate images, it is profitable to venerate other mindless things. Yet the veneration of mindless things is harmful. Therefore the archdeacon's dream, which he related in order to confirm the veneration of images, has not been shown to him by an angel.⁷

³ Deubner (1907), 133.22-23: ἐν ᾧ ἐκτυποῦνται σχήματα.

⁴ On this topic there exists an extensive secondary literature. See Kazhdan (1991), 5-8; Dagron (1991), 30-31; Auzépy (1987), 157-165; Dagron (1985), 43, and note 24.

⁵ Lamberz (2012), 332.29-334.12: Ἐκ τούτου γοῦν ἐπέγνω ὅτι ὁ ἅγιος Νικόλαος αὐτῷ ἐφάνη διὰ τῆς πρὸς τὴν εἰκόνα ὁμοιώσεως.

⁶ Bastgen (1924), 158.17-19: ridiculose et puerilis. On the author Theodulf of Orleans, see Noble (2009), 158-206.

⁷ Bastgen (1924), 158.38-159.6: Nam sicut res profuturae et mysteriorum archanis comptae, cum per somnia innuuntur, per angelos revelantur, ita e contrario, dum res noxiae et omni utilitate carentes per somnia

Here it is simply assumed that only demons and angels, but not the saints themselves, can appear in dreams. This argument is based on the writings of Latin church fathers such as Augustine of Hippo who had already made a distinction between these two types of dreams.⁸ Such theorising, however, was not restricted to the West. We find similar statements in Eastern texts as well. The mystic Evagrius Ponticus, for example, showed great interest in the origin of dreams.⁹ In his treatise *De Malignis Cogitationibus* he explains how images are formed during dreams. His main focus is on demons as they pose the greatest threat to the monk. However, for the sake of completeness he also mentions other causes:

But there is also some simple movement of the memory which comes from us or from the holy powers according to which we converse with saints and speak and eat with them during times of sleep.¹⁰

Here a direct intervention of dead human beings in dreams is clearly ruled out. While figures appearing in dreams may look like saints the dreams themselves are shaped by angels.

In the East interest in dream theory continued into the 'Dark Age'. A classification of dreams is found in the *Quaestiones et Responsiones* of Anastasius of Sinai, which date to the late seventh or early eighth century. In *Quaestio* 72 we read:

Dreams often come from the deeds or thoughts that we have during the day: and they also come from demons; and they also come from the stomach; they can also come from God. For the angels often guide or frighten us through dreams.¹¹

Here, too, no mention is made of saints. Significantly, Anastasius also rules out explicitly that saints can appear to the living. In *Quaestio* 19 he states that 'all visions that happen in the churches or at the tombs of the saints are performed by holy angels at the command of God'.¹² At this point one might expect Anastasius to have recourse to dream theory in order to back up his

demonstrantur, a daemonibus demonstrari creduntur. Unde si somnium, quod ille in synodo retulit, ad imaginum adorationem stabiliendam ab angelo archidiacono eius demonstratum est, imagines adorare proficuum est; et si imagines adorare proficuum est, ceteras res sensu carentes adorare proficuum est. Est autem res sensu carentes adorare noxium. Non igitur archidiacono eius somnium, quod retulit ad imaginum adorationem stabiliendam, ab angelo demonstratum est.

⁸ See Waszink (1947), 500-503.

⁹ Evagrius' views about dreams have been studied by Steward (2001), 186-191; and Bravo Garcia (2000), 187. These authors, however, are only interested in dreams caused by demons.

¹⁰ Géhin (1998), 162-164.1-9: "Ἔστι δὲ καὶ κίνησίς τις τῆς μνήμης ἀπλῆ ὑφ' ἡμῶν γινομένη ἢ ὑπὸ ἀγίων δυνάμεων καθ' ἣν ἀγίοις τε συντυγχάνομεν ἐν τοῖς ὕπνοις καὶ ὁμιλοῦμεν καὶ συνεστιώμεθα.

¹¹ Munitiz (2006), 124.7-11: Συμβαίνουσι τὰ ἐνύπνια πολλάκις ἐκ τῶν πράξεων ἢ λογισμῶν ὧν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἔχομεν· γίνονται δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ δαιμόνων· γίνονται δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ στομάχου φαντασίαι· γίνονται καὶ ἀπὸ θεοῦ· πολλάκις γὰρ οἱ ἄγγελοι δι' ἐνυπνίων ὁδηγοῦσιν ἢ ἐκφοβοῦσιν ἡμᾶς.

¹² Munitiz (2006), 33.64-66: Πᾶσαι αἱ ὄπτασαι αἱ γινόμεναι ἐν τοῖς ναοῖς ἢ σοροῖς τῶν ἁγίων δι' ἀγγέλων ἁγίων ἐπιτελοῦνται κατ' ἐπιτροπὴν θεοῦ.

claim, just as the author of the *Opus Caroli* had done. This, however, is not the case. In *Quaestio* 19 Anastasius gives two other reasons why the saints themselves cannot appear in dreams and visions. Firstly, their look-alikes appear to have bodies whereas the saints are bodiless until the resurrection; and secondly their look-alikes appear at the same time in different places whereas the saints are bounded by time and place.¹³

Yet this does not mean that in Byzantium dream theory was never applied to actual dreams. At this point we need to turn to Nicetas the Paphlagonian, who flourished in the late ninth and early tenth century.¹⁴ Nicetas, a prolific author of hagiographical texts, wrote a *Life* of Patriarch Ignatius, which was highly critical of the Patriarch Photius and his backer, the Caesar Bardas.¹⁵ According to Nicetas, Bardas was shown a dream, which foretold him his imminent fall. The dream narrative, which is presented in the first person singular, contains the following sentence:

Suddenly looking around I see an old man sitting on the priests' bench of the sanctuary, who exactly resembles the image of the chief of the apostles, Peter.¹⁶

In the course of the dream this figure is then addressed as 'key-holder of the Kingdom of Heaven and rock on which Christ, the God, based his church'.¹⁷ It is evident that Nicetas has combined the two traditional strategies for establishing the real presence of a saint in a dream. Thus one might expect him to confirm that the figure sitting on the priests' bench was indeed the Apostle Peter.

This, however, is not the case. Before Nicetas lets Bardas tell his dream he has already given his readers an exposé of the different causes of dreams:

I will not leave unmentioned the dream of the Caesar. It would not be right. For even if most of them have their origin in the cares and thoughts that one has during the day and many are fashioned by demons for those who sleep, but they are sometimes also shaped by the angels at the command of God.¹⁸

Like Evagrius, Anastasius and the author of the *Opus Caroli* before him Nicetas recognises as possible 'shapers' of dreams only angels and demons but

¹³ Munitiz (2006), 33-66-75. For a discussion of these arguments see Dagron (1992), 59-68; and Krausmüller (1998-1999), 5-16.

¹⁴ On Nicetas the Paphlagonian see Flusin (1985), 119-131; and Flusin (1987), 233-260.

¹⁵ On this text see Dvornik (1970), 272-277.

¹⁶ Migne (1862), 536A: Ἄφνω δὲ περιβλεψάμενος ὄρω ἐν τῷ συνθρόνῳ τοῦ ἀδούτου καθήμενον ἄνδρα γηραλέον ἀπαραλλάκτως ἑοικότα τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ κορυφαίου τῶν ἀποστόλων Πέτρου.

¹⁷ Migne (1862), 536A: Κλειδοῦχε τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν καὶ πέτρα ἐν ἧ Χριστὸς ὁ θεὸς τὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκκλησίαν ἐστηρίξατο.

¹⁸ Migne (1862), 533C: Οὐ κατασιγήσω δὲ ἐγὼ τὸν τοῦ καίσαρος ὄνειρον· οὐδὲ δίκαιον· εἴ γὰρ καὶ οἱ πολλοὶ μὲν αὐτῶν ἐκ τῶν μεθημερινῶν φροντίδων καὶ ἐνθυμημάτων ἔχουσι τὰς ἀρχάς, πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ὑπὸ δαιμόνων καθεύδουσι ὑποτυπῶνται, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπὸ ἀγγέλων θεοῦ ἔστιν ὅτε προστάγματι σχηματίζονται.

not the saints themselves. After this introduction Nicetas' audience could only come to one conclusion: the figure in Bardas' dream that resembled Peter was not Peter himself but rather an angel who had taken on his guise. Thus the validity of the criteria that for the participants of the Second Council of Nicaea had guaranteed the identity of dream figures with saints was effectively denied. Indeed, one can argue that Nicetas drove this point home through the manner in which he describes the similarity between image and dream figure. He employs etymology, coupling the noun εἰκῶν with the participle εἰκῶς from which it is derived, thus mimicking a common Iconophile strategy aimed at establishing the necessary relation between image and archetype;¹⁹ and he uses the adverb ἀπαράλλακτως, which conjured up the formula ἀπαράλλακτος εἰκῶν that had traditionally expressed the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father.²⁰ This makes it all the more striking that the figure who looked like Peter was not Peter after all.

This does, of course, not mean that all belief in the traditional ways of establishing the real presence of saints in dreams had waned in Byzantium. They keep occurring regularly in hagiographical texts. In the tenth-century *Life* of Irene of Chrysobalanton, for example, we are told that the saint appeared in a dream and introduced herself with the words: 'I am Irene the abbess of the monastery of Chrysobalanton',²¹ and that she herself saw Basil of Caesarea 'in the same manner as the icons paint him.'²² However, the highly educated Constantinopolitan elite appears to have abandoned any such belief, seemingly without having to fear repercussions. This is at least suggested by the fact that the account of Bardas' dream in Nicetas the Paphlagonian's *Life* of Ignatius was never edited or excised.

Thus we can come to the conclusion that the difference between East and West was not particularly marked. The hagiographical accounts of dreams were partisan literature, and so were the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea in which they are quoted. Their point of view survived into later centuries as can be seen from tenth-century saints' lives, but it did not become a shibboleth of orthodoxy. The case of Nicetas the Paphlagonian's *Life* of Ignatius shows that in the late ninth and tenth centuries it was perfectly acceptable to have recourse to dream theory, which ruled out apparitions of the saints themselves, and possibly even to make fun of the gullibility of an earlier generation, which considered self-identification of dream figures and their identification through

¹⁹ Migne (1903a), 277B: Εἰκῶν δὲ λέγεται παρὰ τοῦ εἰκῆναι τῷ ἀρχετύπῳ εἶτε ὅσια ὀσίου εἶτε ἀγίου ἀγία. See also Migne (1903b), 368C.

²⁰ In a discussion about icons and the divine image in man Patriarch Methodius calls Christ the Word εἰκῶν ... ἀπαράλλακτος of God, cf. Gouillard (1987), 69.687. See also Georgiades 1882-1883, 300: κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ μὲν ἀπαράλλακτως τῆς οὐσίας ἔχοντα φῶς ἰδικὴν δὲ τὴν τῆς ὑποστάσεως ὑπαρξίν.

²¹ Rosenqvist (1986), 90.20-21: Ἐγὼ ἡ Εἰρήνη εἰμὶ τῆς τοῦ Χρυσοβαλάντου μονῆς ἡ ἡγουμένη.

²² Rosenqvist (1986), 56.9-13: τοιοῦτον οἶον αἱ εἰκόνες γράφουσι.

comparison with images to be incontrovertible proof of the real presence of saints. One gets the impression that the Byzantines themselves recognised that the position of the Second Council of Nicaea had been rather outré.

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