

TITLE: The etymology of the Germanic ‘dream’: a possible solution for an ancient problem

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The attested derivatives of PGm. **draumaz* exhibit a peculiar semantic plurality: ON *draumr*, OF *drām* and OHG *troum* mean ‘dream’; OE *drēam* means ‘noise, music, joy’ and alike nuances; OS *drōm* roughly accumulates all these meanings. This plurality is generally addressed in the literature by assuming two original forms **draumaz*, formally identical, but semantically different: **draumaz* ‘dream’ vs. **draumaz* ‘noise, music, joy’. As for **draumaz* ‘dream’, two etymology proposals are provided: according to the generally-accepted view (Pokorny, 1959; Kluge, 1967; Lehmann, 1986; Kroonen, 2013), the dream is conceived as an illusion and **draumaz* (< **draugmaz*) continues IE **dʰrouǵʰ-mo-s* ‘illusion’ (root **dʰreǵʰ-* ‘to deceive’), while according to Orel’s (2003) proposal, **draumaz* is a deverbal noun from PGm. **dreusan-* ‘to fall’. The other form **draumaz* ‘noise, music, joy, etc.’ is generally argued to originate from the IE root **dʰer-* ‘to rumble’ (Pokorny, 1959; Kluge, 1967).

In general, the assumption of two homophonous words is acceptable only if a reasonable semantic link between the two is not found; otherwise, one can think that a single polysemic word is addressed. In particular, exactly for semantic reasons, the etymology of **draumaz* ‘dream’ is controversial, because regarding the dream as an ‘illusion’ neatly contrasts with the old Germanic oneiric conception, according to which dreams were tightly related to the real waking world and represented truthful revelations of future events. Therefore, as also observed by Ehrensperger (1931), an attempt should be made to unify all the attested derivatives from **draumaz* by means of a shared semantic connection.

In this paper, the traditional etymology is further discussed and two alternative proposals are put forth; in the wake of Ehrensperger’s claim, the new hypotheses consist of unitary reconstructions, in the attempt to account for the observed semantic plurality.

As for the traditional etymology, it might be possible that the conception of dreams as illusions belonged to the IE heritage: the word may have been formed in the unitary IE phase, perhaps when dreams were actually conceived as illusions; later, in the common Germanic culture, the dream conception changed, but the word might have been preserved to denote dreams. However, an investigation on the literature of ancient IE languages shows that, although the oneiric conception shows variability, conceiving dreams as tightly related to reality appears to be the most common attitude.

The two new proposals follow the perspective suggested by Dick (1973), who regards as crucial the mutual relation and the resemblance of the concepts of ‘ecstasy’ and ‘dream’. The former, which continues Orel’s (2003) intuition, provides a possible semantic shift from an original meaning ‘fall’ to an innovative ‘dream’, throughout the intermediate ‘sleepfall’ and ‘sleep’, and accounts for the development of the meanings ‘noise, music, joy’; this proposal, though, is flawed by significative phonetic problems. The latter, formally unproblematic, consists of a unique semantic development of **draumaz* (< IE **dʰrou-mo-s*) from the original sense of ‘noise’, such that all meanings that are attested in the Germanic languages are explained in a consistent and organic way, as different stages of the same developmental path.

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